



AIA Best Practices: How to create an in-house university

by Russell Boniface, excerpted and adapted from an AIArchitect article

Summary

When Hixson Architecture, Engineering, Interiors revamped its professional development program, the result was an active in-house university. Below, see how Hixson University works and how it fulfills the learning and training needs of the firm's associates, regardless of experience or career goals, while also providing continuing education credits authorized by the International Accreditors for Continuing Education and Training (IACET).

A new format

With more than 100 associates, Hixson focuses on fashion retail, office, and industrial processing (e.g., food and beverage) markets. The Cincinnati-based A/E firm had had an in-house training program for nearly 20 years when it switched to a "more formal, university-type format," says Hixson Senior Vice President and University Director Rick Hampton, who led the development effort. Hixson University, launched in 2001, comprises five colleges, each with its own dean:

- Fundamentals and Orientation
- General Business Skills
- Professional Development
- Leadership and Management
- Personal Enrichment

The structure also includes a support services group. Different curricula are set up in six learning tracks that cross all five colleges:

- New Associate
- Discipline Lead
- Industry Specialist
- Manager
- Other

- Discipline-Specific

University structure

Hixson University expands on many of the office learning strategies suggested by Marvin J. Malecha, FAIA, 2003 Topaz Medallion recipient, in his book *The Learning Organization and the Evolution of Practice Academy Concepts*. The exemplary aspect of Hixson University is that it offers knowledge development to a large staff within a structured, organized capacity.

The firm's previous in-house training program had been focused on internal information sharing but was not organized or structured. Hixson relied on staff to initiate the process of passing down knowledge. Hixson officers realized that this approach was not as effective as it could be.

A staff team evaluated the original program and proposed a new one: an internal university with staff-led courses and a structured curriculum. The goal of the new program remains the same: more-experienced staff sharing knowledge with less-experienced staff in specific areas. Now, however, information is passed down in a disciplined learning environment.

Cross-discipline learning

Hampton introduced outside resources and evaluation forms to the firm's program, but his most important strategy was the course organization. "The original program was organized by information topics," Hampton notes. "Now we are organized into colleges and learning tracks, and there is no one track in one college—tracks cut across all colleges. Individuals, such as new associates, can sit down with their manager and select training from our intranet learning-track matrix."

Hixson's continuing education courses offer certification and contact hours. Classes follow IACET guidelines, in particular, Hampton notes, and incorporate the Bloom's Taxonomy teaching method, which increases difficulty levels of exercises to measure knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. "We felt that was the appropriate next step since most professional licensing [boards] at the state level for architects and engineers accept IACET credits," Hampton says.

Hixson University courses are voluntary and presented during lunch or after work. Most of the instructors come from within the firm and have expertise in the course topic area. Courses are videotaped and made available as DVDs.

The university also requires an individual evaluation, such as a test, panel discussion, or homework, as per IACET requirements. Hampton emphasizes that courses are well prepared and presented. "It's not just, 'We give you a test, now you are accredited.'"

Sharing knowledge

Hampton stresses the importance of offering professional education to both new staff and those looking to advance, adding that the university will evolve as professional needs change.

"It's amazing how professional people want to continue to learn, especially the younger people coming in," he says. "But, at the same time, when looking at the people attending the seminars there is probably more gray

hair in there than young people. It's great to have expertise to share with everyone. When I walk out of these doors, I want the university to be my legacy."

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