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LEADERS OF THE PACK

Gay program chairs at Charlotte Art Institute talk school, local art, culture

Above: Ron Crider, Charles Easley and Richard Witham.

Photo Credit: Art Institute of Charlotte

by Matt Comer :: matt@goqnotes.com

It's not uncommon to see LGBT people involved in art. We are, after all, a creative bunch. Take just a quick glance at the art world: in every genre, we're there. And, you can't really have a good art school without some gays, can you?

Ron Crider, Charles Easley and Richard Witham have each worked with the Art Institute (AI) of Charlotte or at other AI locations for several years. Each chairs a particular program area, having worked their way up from faculty. In all, four of the school's seven programs find these three gay men at their helm. Crider heads up the school's fashion marketing and management program. Easley chairs the digital filmmaking and video production program. Witham leads two: graphic design and web design.

The Art Institutes, a system of more than 45 arts

schools nationwide, specializes in several focus areas ranging from fashion and culinary arts to advertising and TV and film media. The Charlotte school was founded in 1973 as the American Business & Fashion Institute; in 1999, it joined AI and changed its name. It now has about 1,200 enrolled students each year.

The three program chairs each say AI is unique in its almost singular focus on career and success.

"The number one difference between our school and traditional four-year campuses is that we have a much more blended program of theory plus practicum; by that I mean we have a much more hands-on approach to learning," says Crider. "Graduates from our programs leave with a portfolio that evidences they actually know how to create industry-standard material."

Witham agrees that AI has a unique difference with traditional colleges.

"We are an arts school," he says. "That's our demographic. That's our people. That's our faculty. It's about the fine and applied arts. We're all like-minded people; you're not going to find a cheerleader or a football team here. If you do find an Arts Institute with a sports team, you let me know."

Like Crider, Easley thinks AI's nature is specifically beneficial to students.

"We don't have a liberal arts education," he explains. "We're specifically career-based, in that students who come here will learn specific skill sets

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