



## Campfire tales: Education start-up aims to transform learning

*Founded by 3 design educators, Aether Global Learning wants to boost the soft skills and broaden the horizons of tomorrow's workforce*

By Robert Grace

Design educators Tom Gattis, John McCabe and Owen Foster see a lot of problems with America's current educational system. Current curricula may provide workforce-bound college students with important technical knowledge and computer skills — but not necessarily with other vitally types of important knowledge needed to succeed in today's global economy.

"Nearly every college or university is facing the same challenges — costs are rising while aid is declining, government interference is increasing, our accreditation systems are 15 years behind the curve and schools are limited by outdated models and modes of delivery," Gattis said. "As a result, most focus on skill development, but often what is left out is real collaboration, especially across disciplines, lack of true cultural awareness, business acumen and real leadership abilities.

"Most employers are now demanding these 'softer' skills. Additionally," he continued, "few schools address the deeper concerns of students, which include entrepreneurial education and a focus on solving social problems."

As a result, this trio decided to do something about it. Their current efforts — marked by the August 2016 launch of an initiative they call Aether Global Learning ([www.aether-learning.com](http://www.aether-learning.com)) — has the potential to have an impact well beyond the design world.

"Our desire," the group explains on its website, "is to locate, inspire and nurture the world's future leaders in engineering, business, social science and design." Named after the classical fifth element of ancient times, which binds all the elements together, Aether describes itself as a think tank for transformational learning and leadership.

So what, exactly, is this all about? And who are these guys? For starters, they are all Auburn University graduates, each of whom taught for many years at Georgia's Savannah College of Art & Design. Tom Gattis, a 1988 Auburn graduate, taught at SCAD — in both Savannah and Hong Kong — for 13 years. For the past four years, he has been Dean of the School of Design Arts at the Columbus College of Art & Design in Columbus, Ohio. He remains in that role, even as he serves part-time as Aether's chief operating officer.

**aether**  
TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING & LEADERSHIP

Owen Foster is a 2006 Auburn grad who served as chair of SCAD's industrial design department for six years. He stepped down last year to help found Aether and serve as its chief student affairs officer. After earning "Young Educator of the Year" honors from the Industrial Designers Society of America in 2015, Foster took the tough decision to leave SCAD. "I tell my students all the time — follow your dreams, and do what it takes to get there." He said that when he had an opportunity to practice what he preaches, he took it.

John McCabe, a Florida-born architect and designer with three degrees from Auburn, is Aether's chief academic officer. He taught industrial design at SCAD for nine years, until he also resigned last year to embark on this project. He followed in Foster's footsteps by earning IDSA's "Young Educator of the Year Award" for 2016.

Aether Global Learning has three primary platforms, which the firm says "are aligned and organized into unique experiences and opportunities for participants at all levels to interact with one another":

- **SHiFT Design** targets high school and college students, and is typically a week-long excursion into the woods of northwest Alabama. The program uses the design process, along with campfires and conversations, to connect students and professionals through workshops and community projects — far removed from cell-phone signals and online connectivity.



(L-R): Owen Foster, John McCabe and Tom Gattis are heading the launch of Aether Global Learning, with a view to adapting teaching to the changing needs of employers and goals of students.

- **META** is described as a "co-curricular experience for college graduates and professionals who desire to enhance their understanding of the world, how they fit into it, and how through collaboration they can impact people's futures." Aether has strategically organized its studios to include a mixture of disciplines from social science, business, engineering and design.



- **PRSM** is intended to help mid-career professionals and executives enhance their own skills and learn how to drive innovation within their organizations. Aether says that "by partnering with futurists, artificial intelligence scientists, social innovation entrepreneurs, and advanced manufacturing experts, we will develop and facilitate workshops to involve, inform and inspire change within organizations."



"Colleges and universities today are based on a system that's hundreds of years old," noted Gattis. Times have changed, and our approach to preparing students for the real world needs to change, too, he suggests.

He cited a report done by Ologie, a branding, marketing and digital agency in Columbus, Ohio. The agency surveyed 1,500 "Generation Z" students, age 15 to 20, in all 50 states, to better understand their motivations, preferences, aspirations and attitudes, and the reasons why they ultimately select a college or university. The study

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— [www.ologie.com/gen-z](http://www.ologie.com/gen-z) — revealed a changing set of beliefs for this age group.

For example, he noted, many are driven by the concept of social enterprise, and by a desire to solve problems and help others. Roughly three-quarters of respondents to Ologie's study said they are concerned about humans' impact on the planet, and said they believe that businesses should make "doing good" central to their mission. These individuals are extremely interested in doing volunteer work — both for the way it makes them feel and for the added benefit of the experience. They will expect the ability to study and collaborate with diverse communities in diverse locations around the world, Gattis said.

Additionally, more young people now — after seeing their working parents get laid off by corporations — want to be entrepreneurs and control their own destinies. Some 74% of the survey's respondents said they would rather work for themselves.



**Aether aims to get students out of the classroom and into the real world. Its SHiFT Design platform involves taking up to 50 students and professionals out into the woods for a week or so at a time, where they need to listen, learn, interact, collaborate, and solve problems -- far removed from their cell phones and the Internet. This is one of the group's campsites, where participants can hone their leadership abilities and other "soft skills." The founders plan to extend these experiences abroad, Gattis says.**

So Aether is adding a strong entrepreneurial component to its programs. Having such skills is useful even for those who may choose instead to go work for an employer.

Not only have the desires and motivations of Millennials and Gen Z youth evolved, so have the practical needs of companies today. For starters, Gattis noted, the process of hiring and training new employees is incredibly time-consuming and expensive. He cites research showing that the total process — including advertising, screening, interviewing, training, etc. — costs 30 to 50% of an entry-level design or engineering employee's salary; for a mid-level employee — which might also involve relocation and other benefits — the process can cost 150% of that salary.

Aether's plan, Gattis explained, is to bring U.S.-based students to campus for three 12-week semesters. Each term will be broken down as follows:

- First, an intensive two-week "sprint," during which time Aether will bring in professionals from various backgrounds to work with the students on a project and teach them new methodologies and approaches;
- Then during the next nine weeks, "we'll have project-based learning — some commercial in scope, some social in scope, and some will be entrepreneurial."
- And the final week will be a time to reflect, and celebrate and publish, etc.

"In that mix," Gattis explained, "will be several opportunities to take the students somewhere else. We're building relationships with partners that will allow us to take them to foreign countries to solve problems, or find companies that have interests in foreign locations where we might help solve problems for them. We want to give them those study-abroad experiences in a meaningful way."

Ideally, Gattis said, "we'd like be able to take the students, say, to Africa, to help build a school or deliver clean water, or into a factory in China, to see how manufacturing works, or across the border to Hong Kong to see how real commerce works." These would be fee-based projects with real client companies, during which the students will build relationships and gain invaluable problem-solving experience.

And some of these projects could be domestic in nature, as well. For instance, Aether has a connection with an Indian population in the Western U.S. that has had some significant struggles and Gattis feels his group could help them to solve some problems.

"We want to give students a glimpse" of the real world, to see how business works, he added.

Gattis said that most SHiFT sessions have taken place in Alabama, east of Tupelo, Miss., "in the middle of nowhere"

— on the 6,000 acres owned by Owen Foster’s family — though one camp has been held in Tennessee, and another will take place next July in Wales, in conjunction with Radley College, a British boarding school based near Oxford, England. He said he expects Aether’s META campus eventually to take root in Chattanooga, Tenn.

The response so far has been “really positive.” He said they have no desire to threaten what traditional colleges and universities are doing, but rather to “enhance” the good efforts of those institutions. Aether wants to help students gain the soft skills they need to interact and collaborate with multidisciplinary teams on a global stage — and then celebrate the success.

Aether is looking for partners — both corporate and educational.

“Fund-raising is at the top of our mind now,” Gattis said in a mid-November telephone interview. “This is what keeps me up at night. But we’re determined, and we’re working our tails off, and we’ll figure it out.”

Eastman Chemical Co., the Kingsport, Tenn.-based Fortune 300 materials company, is a founding sponsor of Aether, and is supporting the project via its Eastman Foundation. Eastman has been a long-time supporter of design education via the IDSA.

Farrell Calabrese, creative manager of the Eastman Innovation Lab (and an Aether board member), suggests that Aether will help participating students — regardless of whether they are studying design, engineering or management — to take what they learn in college and be better prepared to apply that knowledge on Day 1 in the real world.

“That summer camp experience is also a way of developing leaders for tomorrow,” she said, citing how Aether helps participants to develop empathy as well as hone their team-building and exploration skills. “The kids have to come up with solutions on their own as teams, and then they present out as teams at the end of the night, so they also work on their presentation skills. All those things are going to help give them a better experience when they do come back to the classroom and/or when they are leaning to work together in a professional environment.”

Additionally, noted Maranda Demuth, Eastman’s global public affairs and community relations manager, “We really

are supportive of how they [Aether’s leaders] are approaching problem-solving from the angle of diversity — across different geographies, cultures, disciplines and ages — in terms of camp attendees. If you look at the roster [of attendees], it’s pretty impressive.”

Several other leading corporations — from Dell and General Electric to Home Depot, Procter & Gamble Design, and Reebok — also are behind the initiative. And Gattis says Aether expects more plastics companies to come on board soon.

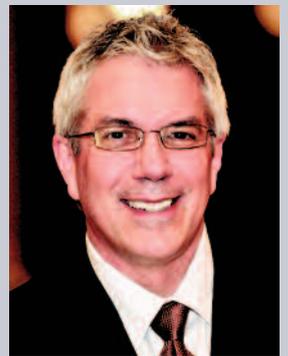
Gattis stressed that the needs and challenges are no different for engineering or business schools than they are for design schools. Students need good jobs, and companies need skilled, collaborative, entrepreneurial, globally aware and culturally diverse employees.

A key task for Aether is to continue to get its message and objectives out in front of companies and schools. The founders are working hard to be disrupters and positive change agents to help make this dream of theirs happen.

Those interested in learning more or joining the cause can contact Aether Global Learning via email at [hello@aether-learning.com](mailto:hello@aether-learning.com) or online at [www.aetherlearning.com](http://www.aetherlearning.com).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A 36-year B2B media veteran, Robert Grace was the founding editor of *Plastics News* in 1989. An ardent design advocate, he struck out on his own in 2014 and founded RC Grace LLC ([www.rcgrace.com](http://www.rcgrace.com)), a consultancy through which he offers a variety of services – from content creation, freelance editing, marketing and PR, event organizing, and business development. He also now serves at managing editor of *Plastics Engineering*.



**Q:** What are your thoughts about the challenges facing tomorrow’s graduating students, and the companies that hire them? If you have questions or comments for Aether Global Learning, login to The Chain online forum and join the discussion in Industry Exchange at: <https://thechain.4spe.org/industryexchange>

