Interior Design Professional Mentors:
How Do We Retain Them in a Difficult Economy?

BACKGROUND

Once interior design students receive a degree they are required to work 3,250 hours under an interior design professional mentor before they can sit for the interior design qualification exam that allows admittance into the profession. With the economic downturn in 2008 adversely affecting interior designers, mentors are decreasing in number. At the same time, state legislatures have begun exerting pressure on publicly funded universities to be accountable for dollars by providing "proof" that student degrees will lead to future employment. Redesigning internship programs to retain and expand professional mentors is imperative for the existence of our profession, and we also know that it leads to job opportunities for students.

METHODOLOGY

After reviewing best practices internship programs, five from publicly funded universities and five from related outside industries, a survey was prepared and administered to professional internship providers from all areas of the country. Respondents numbered 116. The survey, administered through Qualtrics, was designed to answer the questions: what factors influence professional interior designers to provide mentorship experiences to university students; and how should university internship programs be redesigned to accommodate mentor expectations, resulting in continued or expanded mentor relationships?
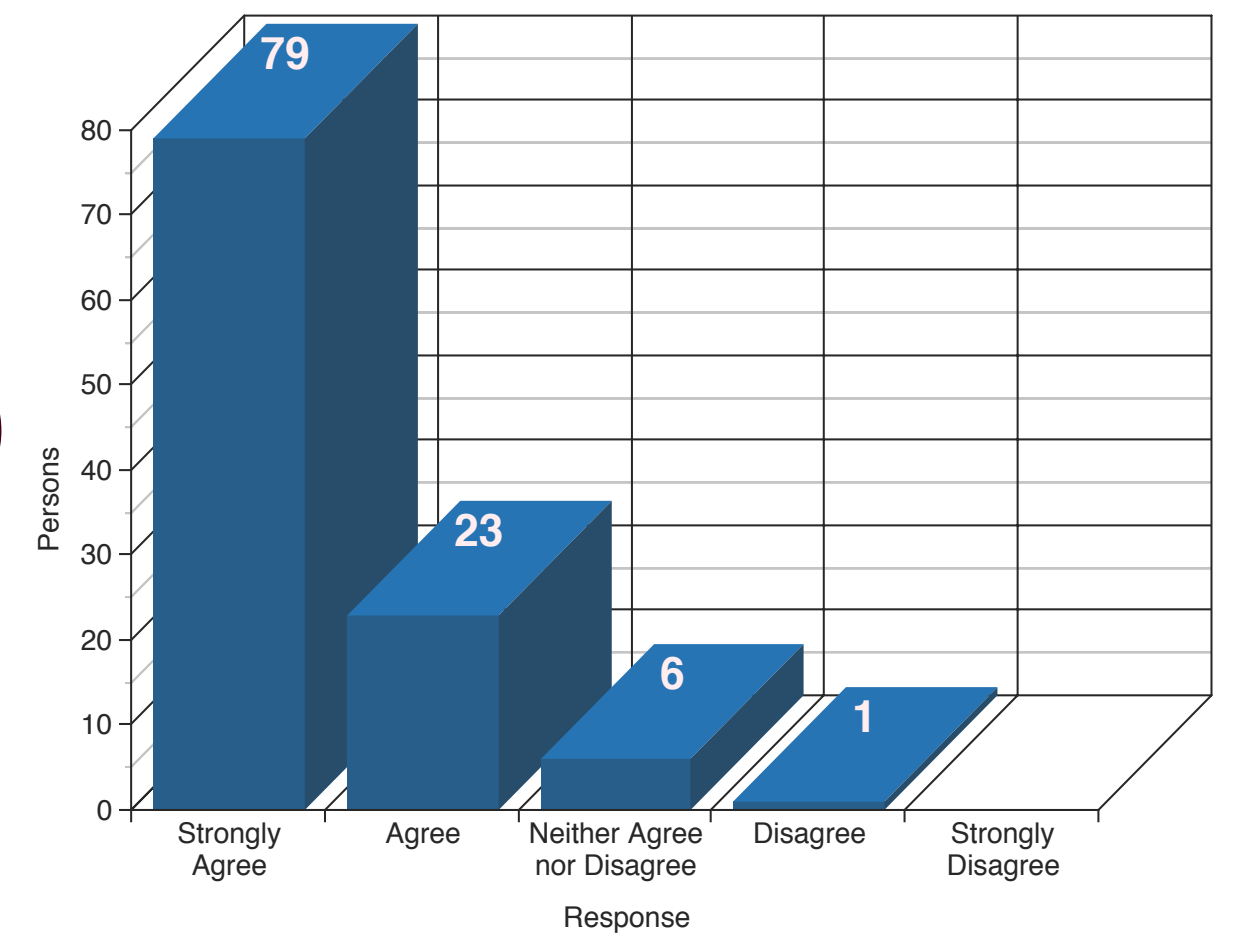
OBSERVATIONS

84%

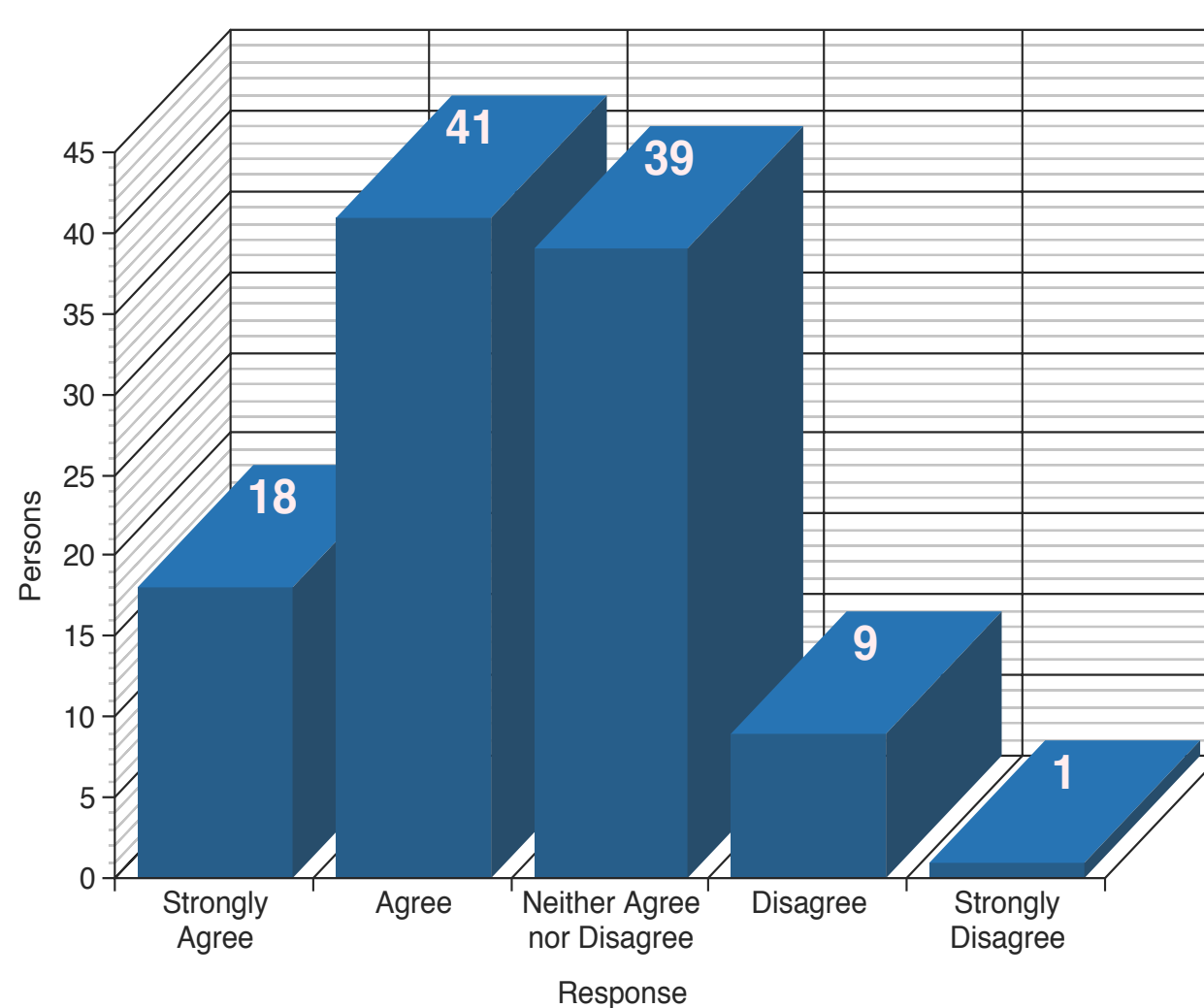stated that they gave hiring preference to students who have interned for them.
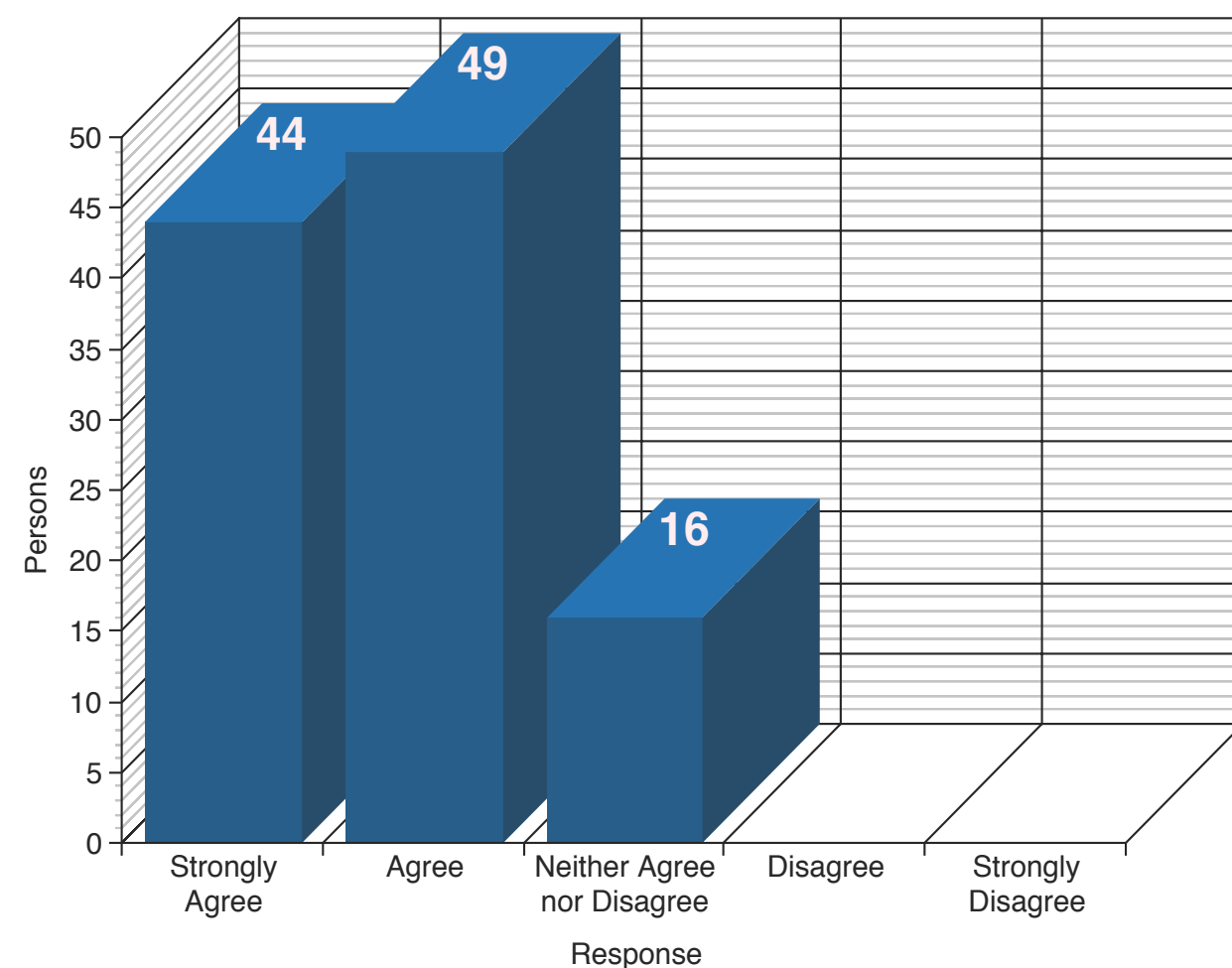
94%

of respondents indicated that universities should require internships

RESULTS

54%

agreed that interns should be paid, but **36%** neither agreed nor disagreed, an indication that the academic emphasis on internship might be giving way to the "paid part time job" use of interns.

• Most respondents stated in open ended questions that they offer internships to help further the profession and give students a start, but when work tapers off they reduce their involvement.
• There were also answers that indicated it was important that students benefit the firms they interned in, indicating less than altruistic reasons for internship provision.
• For redesign of internship programs it was notable that technology skills brought by students are the most important credential a student could bring to a mentor.
• The "soft" skills such as dealing with people, organization, professional behavior and time management, were the areas mentors felt students were lacking in.
• Universities must market the skills of their students if they want them to get internships, which means curriculum development changes.

PANEL PRESENTATION

Based on survey and a best practices study, the researcher gave an hour-long invited panel at the regional Interior Design Educator's Council conference held this fall in Atlanta. Five questions were designed for in depth discussion by the researcher as moderator and 5 university internship coordinators. A transcript was made of the proceedings and sent to all attendees and panelists.

It was generally discussed and agreed upon that:

• More administrative support is needed to improve programs
• A change in curriculum to meet provider needs is needed for retention
• Although there are still available internships, the quality of providers has changed to include less professional mentor locations. This underlines the need to determine how best to retain professional providers.

GOING FORWARD

The next step is to begin creating curriculum for internships that will result in better mentor retention. On-line hybrid courses will be developed as an avenue. A manual will also be produced to provide a blue-print for best practice internships in a publicly funded university, based on this research. Further, the existing FSU interior design internship program will be redesigned and changes put in place over the next 3 years, based on this research. This "pilot" will allow review of changes and their efficacy in an actual program environment.

Department of Interior Design
Assistant Professor Kenan Fishburne, IDEC, Fl. Lic. # 000081
The Florida State University