Tim Haas considers himself more than a little fortunate. He was, he says, in the right place at the right time—and with the right group of people. The right place was Ridgewater College, the right time was 2002 when he was 39, and the right group of people consisted of Ridgewater’s instructors. Haas, who earned two Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.) degrees in 2004, one in Multimedia and Design Technology, the other in Web Design Technology, today owns and operates Haas Consulting, a Hutchinson-based marketing firm.

With so many career choices available to students today, it can be difficult to identify those that offer the potential of being professionally satisfying and financially rewarding, while at the same time offering a good long-term outlook. Haas found what he was looking for in multimedia and Web design. Other grads have found great careers as drafters, computer publishers, and educational assistants—and they credit Ridgewater’s programs and faculty with laying the foundation for their success.

Multiple choice
In 1986, Haas earned a degree in photography from...
Ridgewater (when it was still named Willmar Vocational/Technical School). After working as a portrait photographer for three years, however, he decided it wasn’t what he wanted to do. He went on to work at a series of jobs before he identified his real interest. “Ridgewater had the programs I was looking for,” he says. “It was a great experience; I was very impressed with the quality of the instructors—they’re top notch.”

One of those instructors was Amy Jo Maher, who has been with Ridgewater’s Multimedia Design program for eight years. Earning a degree in Multimedia Design, she says, opens up job opportunities in various types of illustration, including animation used on Web sites, and in interactive training programs. “3D is really popular now, because gaming is so hot,” Maher says. “The Web Design degree is more programming, more technical, learning to do graphics and how to make Web pages from scratch. Many of our students like to earn both degrees.”

Jobs are plentiful for students who earn either or both degrees and involve a myriad of industries. “I have a student who graduated last year and who is now working for a company that creates online training for the medical industry,” Maher says. “We also share a degree with our Marketing Department—a Marketing and Design degree—because in a lot of small companies, people are responsible for marketing and Web design.”

Starting wages for graphic designers, Maher says, range from $20,000 to $30,000 a year, while starting wages in Web or multimedia design are closer to $40,000. “This is just developing,” she says. “There are good opportunities.”

In just three years, Haas has grown his company from a one-person, home-based business that focused on Web development to a five-employee marketing firm. “We do marketing and marketing development, which includes graphic design and developing and managing marketing plans for businesses,” he says. “We develop Web sites, design logos, and do graphics for direct mail and brochures. Most of our clients are local businesses, but we also have a client in Germany.”

## Computer and Graphic Design Programs at Ridgewater

Ridgewater offers several design programs that can get you started on a variety of computer publishing and/or Web-related career tracks.

### Computer Publishing/Computer Art & Publishing

Students can choose from multiple options, including a nine-month, 32-credit program on the fundamentals of desktop and computer publishing. The college also offers Computer Art & Publishing–Creative Emphasis and Computer Art & Publishing–Technical Emphasis programs, which have A.A.S. degree and diploma alternatives. For more information, go to www.ridgewater.edu, click on “Programs and Courses,” and then click on “Computer Publishing” or “Computer Art & Publishing.”

### Multimedia Design Technology

Two options: a 65-credit A.A.S. degree and a 52-credit diploma alternative. Students work with sophisticated computer equipment and such programs as Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator; Macromedia Director, Dreamweaver, and Flash; and 3D Studio Max, among others. Future careers include multimedia development, video editing, Web site development, 3D design and animation, and more. For more information, go to www.ridgewater.edu, click on “Programs and Courses,” and then click on “Multimedia Design Technology.”

### Web Design Technology

This 66-credit A.A.S. degree program covers Web site design and implementation. Students learn how to develop Internet business applications and master HTML, PHP, MySQL, Javascript, Flash, Macromedia Dreamweaver, and Adobe Photoshop, among other programs and languages. For more information, go to www.ridgewater.edu, click on “Programs and Courses,” and then click on “Web Design Technology.”
Back to the future
Like Haas, Kate Tucker earned A.A.S. degrees in both Multimedia Design Technology and Web Design Technology. And, like Haas, she was a nontraditional student, having enrolled at Ridgewater when she was 40, married, and had grown children. Unlike Haas, however, she has found a successful career working for someone else.

Tucker’s interest grew out of a personal Web site she had designed, combined with the need to find a new job when the company she was doing administrative work for downsized and she found herself out of a job. “Everyone said, ‘Go back to school,’” she says, and so she did, enrolling at Ridgewater in 2003 and graduating two years later.

Shortly after graduation, she landed a job with the same company that had let her go two years earlier: Marketing Concepts, a marketing and Web hosting firm in Spicer. This time around, however, she is putting her new skills to work, handling such duties as Web and graphic work, and earning a better paycheck. “If I hadn’t gone back to school, I don’t know what I’d be doing,” says Tucker.

“Our students learn to lay out pages, do graphics, and work with printing processes,” says Duane Ryks, an instructor in Ridgewater’s Computer Art & Publishing program. “They can earn a diploma or an A.A.S. degree with either a creative emphasis or a technical emphasis.”

Many students who turn to the technical emphasis find good careers in the manufacturing industry. “Everything manufactured today comes with instructions on how to use the product—and almost every large company has a publication department, as do churches, hospitals, banks, and school districts,” Ryks says. “Also, printing is a huge industry—the second-largest manufacturing segment in America. Minnesota ranks in the top five of all states in printing production, and many of our students find jobs working in some sort of printing-related business.”

In general, the outlook for design and computer publishing jobs is good—and growing. “The number of jobs exceeds the number of grads,” Ryks says. “One of the job titles our students find is graphic designer. In looking at employment from 2002 to 2012, the number of designers is expected to grow by 29 percent in Minnesota and by 21.9 percent nationally. From 2004 to 2014, employment growth for desktop publishers is expected to be 23 percent nationally, graphic designers 15 percent, and multimedia and animation 14 percent. Entry-level salaries tend to be between $30,000 and $35,000 a year. There are many people at the top of the industry who make well over $100,000 a year. It’s a very exciting area.”

One reason for the increasing demand: rapid growth in the information and video entertainment markets—which encompass everything from Web sites and video games to cell phones, personal digital assistants, and other forms of technology. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), graphic designers with Web site design and multimedia- and animation-related experience will be the people in the highest demand.

Another point to consider: In recent years, some computer, printing, and publishing firms have outsourced basic layout and design work to overseas design firms. While the BLS predicts that the outsourcing trend will continue to take some work away from lower-level graphic design workers, it also notes that most high-level graphic design jobs will remain in the United States. One reason why, according to the BLS: Design clients will continue to need communication strategies—or “strategic design,” as it’s often termed. While offshore designers can crank out inexpensive (and often very good) designs, strategic design work requires close proximity to customers to identify and target their needs and interests.

In short, the more versatile you are, the better off you’ll be. Matt Woltjer can attest to that. Woltjer, who earned a degree in Computer Art and Publishing from Ridgewater in 1999, is a technical illustrator/3D artist with Graco, a Minneapolis-based manufacturer of fluid-handling systems and components. In fact, the company was so enamored with him that it hired him even before he had finished his Ridgewater coursework.

“My main role is to support the technical writers with illustrations for our manuals,” Woltjer says, adding that he also creates animation and videos for the company’s training department.

Woltjer is pleased, both with the work he is doing and the salary he is making. “When I graduated, Ridgewater’s job
placement office said I was one of the highest-paid people—if not the highest-paid person—to graduate and get a job in this field,” he says with justifiable pride.

That is particularly impressive considering the fact that he enrolled at Ridgewater while he was still a senior in high school. “I had more than enough credits to graduate from high school” he says, explaining that he enrolled at Ridgewater through the college’s Post Secondary Enrollment Option, which meant that he received his first year of college at no cost to him or his family.

Woltjer has high praise for Ridgewater’s program and its instructors, who work as a team and are very accessible to their students. “I got to know them, and they got to know me,” he says. “That was a big advantage.”

Putting skills to work
Drafting is another intriguing career that offers a range of potential employment options. In a nutshell, drafters create the technical drawings and plans that are used to build everything from toys to household appliances to industrial machinery, office buildings, and oil and gas pipelines. According to the State of Minnesota, there are nearly 5,000 people employed in the profession in the state. Entry-level wages start at around between $15 per hour, and top-level drafters earn more than $30 per hour.

“There are a lot of good opportunities in Minnesota, because it’s big in manufacturing,” says Stacey Nass, an instructor in Ridgewater’s Computer Aided Drafting and Design program. Students can earn either a diploma or an A.A.S. degree and go on to successful careers. “Our placement rate is pretty much 100 percent,” Nass says. “There are jobs everywhere, even in small towns in Minnesota. Some of the things our graduates will be doing include designing products, processes, equipment, and tooling. If you’re making a molded plastic part, for example, someone has to design that part and the mold the plastic is injected into.”

Sri Schweikert will graduate in May with an A.A.S. degree in Computer Aided Drafting and Design and already is using her skills at Hutchinson Technology Inc., a disk drive suspension manufacturer. She started working part time in that company’s production area
eight years ago but decided to earn a degree in hopes of improving her position and her salary. She did both.

Late last year, Hutchinson Technology promoted Schweikert to phototool design tech. “I went back to school so I could get a higher salary and be more professional,” she says, adding that Ridgewater was appealing because of its location to her home and her work and because of the quality of its program. “Drafting is an exciting program with a good career future. I am pleased with the education I got at Ridgewater and, because of this education, I got a better job.”

Learning matters
Lisa Page turned to Ridgewater because she wanted to work in education. While her husband was at work and her two children were in school, she was earning her A.A.S. degree as an educational paraprofessional, a goal she achieved in 2000. “I wanted to work with kids with different needs,” she says. “I’ve worked at Hutchinson Middle School for five years in the Alternative Learning Center with grades six through eight. It is challenging and invigorating.”

As an education assistant, Page works closely with the classroom instructor. “Whatever he decides the lesson plans are, I find something the kids can do that’s hands-on,” she says. “We teach math, reading, language arts, social studies, and science. I branch off from the lesson plans to see what else we can do, something other than a worksheet.”

Page has high praise for Ridgewater’s program. “It really prepares you well for what to expect in the school,” she says, noting that she’s now taking online courses through Grand Canyon University in Arizona as she pursues a teaching degree. “I love what I do—I love my job and the people I work with. I don’t mind waking up in the morning.”

Joyce Evenski, an instructor in Ridgewater’s Education Paraprofessional Program, has seen many changes in that program and in the field. The program offers two degrees: an A.A.S. for education assistants and a Title I A.A.S. for education paraprofessionals. The latter, she says, is the result of federal No Child Left Behind legislation.

Career opportunities also have evolved over the years, growing to include a variety of options. “It’s a pretty open market,” Evenski says. “With the Educational Assistant degree, you can work in preschool or daycare as an assistant teacher or operate a licensed day care/school. As a paraprofessional in K-12, you can work in a regular classroom, in special needs, or on one on one, or in Title I. Yet another career option is that of job coach, working with adults in a sheltered workshop environment.”

According to the Minnesota Department of Education, almost 29,000 paraprofessionals are employed in the state. “There are tons of jobs in preschool, and you can work up to the head teacher position, or you can work with adults with varying abilities,” Evenski says. “Wages vary by environment. Daycare would probably be $8 an hour, while the Department of Education says the medium wage in the public schools system is $21,760. Special education in the [Twin Cities] metro area is $20 to $22 an hour, and working with adults is $12 an hour.”

Vicki Stavig is a Bloomington-based freelance writer.