

# UW-Stout: Room & Board furniture design competition carries UW-Stout students' work from classroom to catalog

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*Decade-long partnership with Minneapolis furniture retailer creates real-world production possibilities for industrial & product design seniors*

Menomonie, Wis. – A decade-long partnership with [Room & Board](#), a national furniture designer and retailer, has helped University of Wisconsin-Stout [industrial and product design](#) majors refine their skills under professional mentorship. Now, for the first time, a piece of furniture designed as part of the annual competition is available from Room & Board, creating a possible path for more Blue Devil creations to reach the retailer's catalog.

The competition is the brainchild of 2010 **UW-Stout graduate Brian Linehan**, a Room & Board merchandise and design manager. “The design competition started as an experimental exploration and turned into a pathway for future interns, full-time design hires, and a great way to stay connected to the community,” Linehan explained.

Originally envisioned as a group project, the program evolved into an individual competition that tapped into students' growing awareness of – and passion for – the Room & Board brand. Winning designs have continued to improve as the competition has focused on specific product categories, ranging from lighting and storage to organization, media and bedroom furniture.

“These days it seems like all the students know exactly who they are designing for,”

Linehan said. “Students come to the project kick-off with concepts already in their heads and questions they’re eager to get answers for. It’s really been an amazing transformation.”

This year’s competition was particularly special because it came as [Room & Board was adding a coffee table designed by 2024 industrial and product design alum Micah Loder](#) to its catalog.

Loder, now a research and development engineer at Dura Supreme Cabinetry in Howard Lake, Minnesota, said it was “incredibly surreal and rewarding” to see his class project, which he called Carver, become a real piece of furniture.

“I was really just overjoyed Room & Board saw the same vision I did when they saw the table next to their line of products,” Loder said. “Knowing any customer could walk through a Room & Board showroom and think the same thing I did when I first mocked it up: ‘This would look sweet as an accent in my living room.’”

### **Competition bookends winning student’s experience**

The competition is part of the capstone course for soon-to-graduate industrial and product design majors. In keeping with UW-Stout’s polytechnic approach — which encompasses applied learning, industry collaboration and career-focused experiences — the competition poses the real-world challenge of designing a piece of furniture that not only looks good but could potentially be manufactured and sold.

“Most capstone projects are geared towards inventing a new idea, creating something that changes the world, or embraces an exciting new manufacturing process,” Linehan said. “This project is really about form development, rather than re-invention. It definitely requires students to flex a less familiar muscle and stay within a tighter set of parameters.”

Industrial and product design **senior Porter Christenson** of Minneapolis said figuring out which conceptual risks to take with his design was the biggest challenge of the project.

“I spent a lot of time studying furniture trends and trying to understand how those trends could fit within Room & Board’s visual brand language,” he said. “Large companies usually have a very established design language that they stick to pretty

strictly, so there's always a balance between respecting that identity and pushing it forward."

So, Christenson did his homework, interviewing Room & Board salespeople as well as staff from other furniture showrooms. "One of the decisions I ultimately made was to introduce rounded corners into the design," he said of his dresser, which he named Bellevue. "That was a bit of a risk, because Room & Board is well known for their more defined, sharp-cornered forms."

The risk paid off: Earlier this semester, the Room & Board team chose Christenson's design as the winner. He received a \$2,000 cash prize in exchange for Room & Board reserving the right to manufacture his design. Two other students were also honored: **senior Loyal Prach** of Milwaukee received \$1,200 for his design, Edmond, while **senior Aaron Hoyt** of Menomonie got \$700 for his design, Alberg.

"I was most excited about the possibility of the furniture actually being produced," Christenson said. "One of the first things I wanted to do was tell my mom, because she loves Room & Board furniture. Being able to share that moment with her made it even more meaningful."

In fact, Room & Board has bookended Christenson's UW-Stout experience. As a high school student touring UW-Stout with his mother, he was introduced to industrial and product design seniors working on the Room & Board project. He also learned about the university's partnerships with firms such as Milwaukee Tool. As someone with a childhood desire to be an inventor, the possibility of designing tools strongly appealed to him.

"Four years later, things came full circle," he said. "I completed two internships at Milwaukee Tool, accepted a job offer at my dream job designing outdoor power equipment there a year before graduation and won first place in the Room & Board project. There's even a possibility that the piece could make it into their catalog, which is incredibly exciting."

### **Professional mentors give in-classroom critique**

This year, the project kicked off with a class visit from Linehan and fellow **UW-Stout alum Reid Guse**, a designer at Room & Board. A couple of weeks later, in mid-February, the pair returned to the UW-Stout classroom for a critique of the students' in-progress designs. With them this time was another Room & Board

designer, **UW-Stout alum Andrea Meisner.**

Founded in 1980, Room & Board is 100% employee owned and has 1,100 employees at its Minneapolis headquarters and at stores and delivery locations nationwide. The company focuses on timeless design and sustainable production, and more than 90% of its furniture and décor are created by American manufacturers.

During the on-campus critique, the three professionals offered feedback on the full-scale cardboard prototypes and digital renderings the students had created. The critiques focused not only on aesthetics but on practicality and cost: Simplifying a construction process or swapping metal elements for lighter-weight wood, for example, may make the difference between a design being feasible or not.

“As a team, we intentionally split up, to ensure we are giving a range of feedback. Design is subjective, and there are no right answers,” Linehan explained later. “We don’t hold back in the critique and make sure we don’t sugar-coat our feedback.”

The process helps reinforce a critical skill in the young designers, Linehan said: Learning to believe in your own decisions and stand by them.

Christenson mixed his own instincts with feedback from the professionals. At the mid-project critique, he recalls, Meisner asked him to try standing like his dresser, which at the time had relatively stocky legs. He found himself with his feet wide and planted, like he was braced for an incoming tackle. It was a funny moment, he said, but it made him recognize that the mid-century modern aesthetic called for a design that was less heavy and defensive.

“After that realization, I pulled the legs inward, made them slimmer, and refined the proportions so the dresser felt lighter and more consistent with the aesthetic I was aiming for,” Christenson said.

### **Opportunity to grow as designers**

Prach, whose media cabinet design won second place, also found himself making significant design changes throughout the project. Room & Board’s design language, he said, was more minimalist than his own approach. The process taught Prach to be adaptable and pushed him outside his comfort zone.

“Early on, I had to consciously step back from over-designed concepts and refine

the piece down to one or two intentional focal features,” Prach said. “Instead of relying on surface complexity, I explored proportion, material breaks and subtle detailing to create visual interest. That shift pushed me to grow as a designer and better understand how restraint can strengthen a product.”

The mid-project review helped Hoyt refine the details of his modular shelving system, which took third place. “(The designers) encouraged me to explore different configurations of the base design,” he said. “This led to me coming up with a tall shelf, media shelf and coffee table trio.”

**Lecturer Andy Janetski**, who teaches the capstone course, said hearing directly from professional designers is valuable for students. “There’s a massive amount of creative energy thrown at it,” Janetski explained. In return, he said, the students receive “feedback that’s not academic in nature.”

For the Room & Board designers, the competition provides an enduring connection to their alma mater, where their design passions were first fueled. In fact, Guse, a 2018 alum, said taking part in the Room & Board competition as a student helped pave his own professional path.

“My interest in furniture design really solidified in the last two years of undergrad, which ended with the Room & Board competition and an internship at Room & Board the following summer,” Guse said.

### **Competition culminates in site visit**

Just a week after the mid-February critique session, the 17 students’ designs were transformed based on feedback and sometimes feverish work. On Feb. 19, a busload of UW-Stout seniors carried posterboard displays and one-eighth scale 3D-printed models of their designs into the Room & Board headquarters in Minneapolis. There they presented their designs to a cross-section of the company’s staff, including their three UW-Stout alumni mentors.

Once their presentations were concluded, the design students received a behind-the-scenes tour of the headquarters, where among the products displayed was the coffee table designed by Loder. Seeing a fellow Blue Devil’s design brought to life provided inspiration to the soon-to-be graduates.

“Winning this competition reminded me that I truly love what I do. It reaffirmed that

the craft itself is what I enjoy most: the thinking, making and the constant refinement of ideas,” said Christenson. “In design, craftsmanship is really about the care and attention you bring to solving problems and shaping details.”

Such details are evident in the Carver coffee table, made in New Hampshire from sustainably sourced wood. The table is [available on the Room & Board website](#).

The fact Room & Board is producing one of the UW-Stout competition’s designs is encouraging for the future of the partnership, Linehan said.

“We are excited about the opportunity to present Micah’s 2024 project as part of our assortment this year, and I am optimistic we can find another path forward with future designs,” Linehan said.

*UW-Stout’s [industrial and product design](#) program is part of the [School of Art and Design](#), one of the largest public art schools in the Midwest. It also offers bachelor’s degrees in [animation and digital media](#); [fashion design and development](#); [game design and development-art](#); [graphic design and interactive media](#); [illustration](#); [interior design](#); [studio art](#); [arts administration and entrepreneurship](#); [fashion design and development](#); [game and media studies](#); and [video production](#), as well as an [M.F.A. in design](#).*