The Savannah College of Art and Design is the only art and design university in the U.S. that offers an equestrian program.

“Art and design focus at SCAD is a perfect complement to equestrian studies because classic horsemanship is an art,” said Kelly Theisen, associate chair of equestrian studies. “The horse is the canvas. The horse is our design; it is living, breathing art.”

Theisen said that guiding horses through a course of jumps or the movements of a dressage test is comparable to the work of students pursuing performing arts. Just as dancers practice daily to perfect their form and craft, so must riders train and push themselves to become better horsemen.

SCAD is also home to a championship-winning equestrian team led by coach Ashley Henry. The team competes in the Intercollegiate Horse Show Association (IHSA) and has won the IHSA National Championships for three consecutive years. They train at SCAD’s state-of-the-art, 100-acre Robert C. Waranch Equestrian Center.

“To stay at the top, you have to have that desire to be there,” Henry said about her outlook for the year. “You have to have that passion. We see the other riders, we see the other teams. They are working as hard as we are, so we have to work harder. The second that we let our guard down, and we stop shooting for that shining star, is the moment that it can slip away. Big hopes, big dreams are the plan.”

Just as the SCAD equestrian team has big hopes and plans, so do the equestrian studies students. The program offers courses in equestrian facility and show-jumping-course design. Much like
class teaches students to consider everything from efficient layout to materials, location, soil, footing, and more. SCAD’s Collaborative Learning Center (CLC) offers opportunities for students from various majors to work on specific projects with real business applications. In 2016, Theisen supervised a CLC team of students on a product-development project for high-end equestrian retailer, Equis Boutique. Cesar Hirsch, Equis Boutique’s chief operating officer, was referred to SCAD by his friend Eric Straus, a SCAD professor emeritus and fellow FEI steward.

Theisen put together a diverse team to work on the top-secret Equis Boutique design project. Included on the project team were students from equestrian studies, graphic design, fashion design, industrial design, and accessories design.

“We had people from China, Venezuela, and different parts of the world—both undergrad and graduate students.” Hirsch said. “They worked together as a team, and it was so beautiful. I went there every month, and we communicated weekly.”

The SCAD team designed a product which, after slight tweaking, is now in the manufacturing stage. “The Equis Boutique project allowed students to gain real-life business experience with an actual company,” Theisen said.

SCAD students often combine their horse-loving lives with course projects. M.G. Taylor is a fourth-year student who has been an equestrian competitor, a fourth-year student who has been an equestrian competitor, and a fourth-year student who has been an equestrian competitor.

As a project for her industrial design course, Taylor strove to design English riding stirrups that were an improvement on the typical heavy, bulky design, and to create them in a polycarbonate material. She also wanted to add the benefit of foot placement at a 45-degree angle to increase heel depth and to position the toe slightly outward to improve equitation. Access to SCAD’s Waranch Equestrian Center helped her develop her project.

“I got to go and see how it worked on the horses,” Taylor said. “I took my foam prototypes to test how they would hang from the saddle.”

She attributed her commitment to her design projects to basic tenets she learned as an equestrian. Working with horses helped her consider what factors need to go into designing products that best fulfill the consumer’s needs. At SCAD, the sensibilities of the equestrian pair perfectly with the creative.

“Their are many parallels between my art and my riding life,” Ferris said. “The horse is my muse, my focus, my passion. I have such an appreciation for them and what they’ve done for us. We’ll never know what business experience with an actual company, Taylor said. “I took my foam prototypes to test how they would hang from the saddle.”

She attributed her commitment to her design projects to basic tenets she learned as an equestrian. Working with horses helped her consider what factors need to go into designing products that best fulfill the consumer’s needs. At SCAD, the sensibilities of the equestrian pair perfectly with the creative. ‘There’s a lot to be said for spending time with animals when school is stressful,’ Taylor said. ‘To be out there in nature with the horses—that does so much for the soul.'