

APPLYING TO MFA PROGRAMS

JOSEPH MEYERHOFF CENTER FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT

If you are considering graduate school, or have already decided to apply, there may be many factors influencing such an important decision. Whatever your reasons for exploring graduate study, it is important that you carefully examine your own needs, values, goals and capabilities to determine which programs are a good fit for you.

WHY SHOULD I GET AN MFA?

- To focus exclusively on your work for a significant period
- To receive critical feedback in a serious environment and expand your critical vocabulary
- Get credentialed to teach at the university level and potentially gain teaching experience
- Join a community of artists/designers
- Get exposure to a profession
- Have the opportunity to network.

WHY SHOULDN'T I GET AN MFA?

- Don't get an MFA out of pressure from parents, family or friends.
- Don't get an MFA assuming that you can easily get a full-time teaching job afterwards. These jobs are hard to come by and highly competitive.

Don't get an MFA without considering the debt you will be taking on. Calculate how much your monthly loan payments will be after graduation and determine if working to pay back your student loans will leave you with enough studio time and a standard of living you are comfortable with.

ALTERNATIVES TO AN MFA

If you aren't interested in teaching or the actual degree, but want the experience of an artistic community and the time to focus on a new project, consider residency programs. Some very competitive programs offer stipends and/or room and board. Other programs expect you to pay for housing, your day-to-day expenses and travel costs. A residency program may provide some of the same networking opportunities as an MFA program without the cost of tuition. If your main goal is to get a behind the scenes view of the art world and to learn the business of art, consider working for a well-known artist, museum, gallery, or other arts related business. Living in an area with a vital art scene and working independently can also spur personal growth and generate opportunities.

WHEN TO APPLY

There is no best time to apply for graduate school. This will differ for each person. Graduate School for Art is an intense experience requiring discipline and a deep commitment to artistic growth. Some applicants do not get accepted to any programs on their first try. Be prepared to adjust your timeline to reapply if necessary. The average age in MFA programs is in the mid to late-twenties. While some people go on to graduate school immediately to maintain their momentum and focus, most people benefit from gaining real world experience through working in the industry, exhibiting their work, participating in residencies, or applying for grants. Since graduate school is typically centered on independent study and individual feedback, an artistic career outside an academic setting for one or more years can be valuable experience before embarking on an MFA.

WHERE TO APPLY

Choosing a graduate program is all about finding a good fit for you. Consider the following factors when conducting your research:

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TYPE OF PROGRAM

Some MFA programs are still strongly rooted in the fundamentals and techniques of traditional art making while others emphasize research and theoretical and conceptual study. Some separate out by discipline while others offer just a studio art concentration and encourage cross-disciplinary experimentation. When looking into MFA programs, think about the type of experience you would like to have and your specific goals for your art career. The MFA is usually a terminal degree (there are some PhDs offered in the Fine Arts) and so you should make sure that you get as much as you can out of the experience.

REPUTATION

You can view the USnews + World Report's annual "Best Graduate School" ranking of MFA programs. Keep in mind that this list is determined by a survey of academics who may or may not be working in the industry. Unlike undergrad programs, graduate programs can differ greatly in reputation depending on your specific focus. Ask faculty members in your discipline or professional artist/designers that you admire which schools they believe to have strong reputations for your area of interest. The CAA Directory on Graduate Programs in the Visual Arts is another useful resource for evaluating programs.

FACULTY

Strong programs have faculty members that are active in the art world as working artists, critics, and curators. If you are looking forward to working with a specific faculty member, research to see if they will actually be teaching and not on sabbatical while you are in school. Schools will list notable faculty on their website that may not be on campus regularly. Find out how much input students have in bringing visiting artists to speak.

ALUMNI + CURRENT STUDENTS

Another way to see if a school would be a good fit is to research the alumni. While many schools list their notable alumni, you should dig deeper and research the less notable alumni. What are they doing now? Are most of them on a career path that interests you? Current students can also be a great resource. If feasible, take the time to visit the campus and speak with students in the program.

FACILITIES

Try to visit the campus to see what resources are available. Will you have access to the printmaking, woodworking, metal fabrication, or other equipment that you will need to make your work? Are you able to rent cameras, laptops, or other digital equipment? Make sure the studio spaces are large enough to accommodate your way of working and that you can access them when you need to. Not all programs provide 24-hour studio access.

COST

Consider the cost of the program. Do not assume you will receive a tuition waiver, scholarships, or a stipend. Ask the department what scholarships they offer that you may be eligible for. Some programs offer teaching assistantships to offset tuition or to give the student extra income. You will need to find out if this is available, if you have to apply, and how competitive the process is. In most cases you will need to find outside sources of funding. Begin researching potential scholarships as soon as possible. See "Financial Aid Resources Online" at the end of this document to start your search.

SIZE

While some programs admit fewer than 10 artists/designers per year, others admit 50 or more. A smaller program may allow you to work more closely with the faculty or have more time with visiting artists. A larger program may have a more diverse community and bring in visiting artists more frequently. It may be easier to develop a sense of community in a smaller program but a larger program means more people review and comment on your work.

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LOCATION AND COMMUNITY

Think about where you would like to live after you finish your graduate program and if the community and network you build during your studies will still be valuable if you relocate. Art centers like NYC will give you more exposure and better networking opportunities but are expensive to live in. Schools in dense urban areas tend to provide smaller studio spaces. Proximity to art openings and museum shows may draw you to a certain city, or may be a distraction from focused studio time. If traveling and being someplace new appeals to you, consider getting your degree abroad. This requires a great deal more research as application requirements and deadlines vary greatly from country to country. Considering the high cost of graduate education in the United States, you may find that a program elsewhere may be more affordable. Keep in mind that you may not be able to borrow federal loans for some international programs.

REQUIREMENTS AND LENGTH

Some programs are structured more rigidly than others. Certain programs require you to take art history classes or a writing workshop. Some programs expect you to meet with faculty once a week. In another program you might only meet with faculty once a month but do weekly group critiques with other students. Certain programs emphasize theory and research that require strong writing skills. Other programs focus only on what is being produced in your studio. Typically MFA programs last two-three years. Low-residency programs that require you to be on site only for the summer semester and intermittently throughout the year may last up to 4 years. These usually require independent work throughout the year and intensive summers spent on campus.

HOW TO APPLY

Submit only the materials requested by the school. Do not submit additional documents, folders, or physical samples of work. In addition to an application form and transcripts, most applications require the following:

PORTFOLIO

Your portfolio is the single most important aspect of your application. Top graduate programs receive hundreds of applications and will run through images quickly and reject applications without looking at other materials. They expect to see a mature and cohesive body of work that reflects your commitment to your work. Students may be accepted based solely on their portfolio, so the quality of the work is critical.

Be sure that you have strong digital images. While your work may look amazing in person, the only way the jury will view your work is through your documentation of it. Give yourself enough time to photograph your work or pay a professional to do it. Follow instructions. Be sure to format, title, and size images exactly as the application suggests. If the program asks for 10 images, do not submit 11. Read the instructions carefully to see if you are allowed to submit details and if those are included in your maximum number. Do not submit unnecessary detail images. Consider attending a Graduate Portfolio Day to get feedback on the your portfolio from participating programs. Graduate portfolio days usually take place in San Francisco, Chicago, and New York City. Visit www.portfolioday.net/content/view/98/50/ to learn more.

Statements, resumes, and letters of recommendation may play a role only if there are two candidates with equally strong portfolios. That's not to say that you can ignore those components, every school is different and you may be applying to a school that carefully reviews everything.

RESUME/CV

Follow instructions. One program may want a short one-page resume, another may ask for a 10 page CV. A resume should show: your education, solo exhibitions, group exhibitions, press and publications, honors and awards. If you have space left, you may provide relevant work experience and skills.

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STATEMENT

Be concise. Admissions committees want to know that you can speak or write about your work in an engaging way and that you can locate your work in an art historical context. The prompt for the statement will also ask why you want to attend their program. This is another reason that it is important to do your research. Is there a faculty member that you really want to work with? Does the program focus on a particular aspect of professional development that you are interested in? Think about what makes each program unique. Do not write that you want to attend graduate school so that you can teach. Even if teaching is one of your future goals, competitive programs want to graduate working artists focused on studio practice.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Ask for recommendations from faculty or professional artists/designers who know you and your work well. Choose a recommender that can elaborate on why you would be a good fit for a specific program. A letter of recommendation from someone who knows you well is preferable to a letter from someone famous or well connected. Alumni of the program or current faculty may be good recommenders, however, they still need to know you well. You should also be sure that the program views that person positively. Be sure to ask recommenders at least a month in advance, and always follow up with a thank you card, or even a small gift.

HOW MANY SCHOOLS SHOULD I APPLY TO?

Apply to as many schools as you can afford to that you actually want to attend if accepted. This could be as few as 3 or as many as 10. A typical application fee can range from \$50 to \$150. It is a good idea to apply to a diverse range of schools since your situation may change in the time it takes to be accepted. Keep in mind that the more schools you apply to the more recommendation letters you will need. Plan for this in advance.

PLANNING AHEAD: SAMPLE TIMELINE

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This is the ideal timeline for managing the application process. By gathering your information early, you will stay ahead of the game and keep your nerves in check. Application deadlines range from early January to late March, but it is always in your best interest to submit applications well before they are due. This allows sufficient time for a follow-up call to determine if each component of the application process has been properly received.

Begin these projects...

6-8 months before application deadline (Junior Year / Post-Bacc)

- Research areas of interest, institutions, and programs.
- Register and prepare for appropriate graduate admission tests, if necessary.
- Investigate national scholarships and other sources of graduate study support.
- Start thinking about people who you might ask to write letters of recommendation.

4-6 months before application deadline (Summer before Senior Year)

- Take required graduate admission tests.
- Write, call, or email for course catalogs and application materials and check on deadlines.
- Visit institutions of interest, if possible, and work on writing application essays.

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2 months before application deadline (Fall of Senior Year)

- Ask for and obtain letters of recommendation and take graduate admission tests again, if necessary.
- Prepare supplemental materials (slides, DVDs, writing samples) as required.
- Gather input on your application essays from faculty, a career counselor, and mentors.

Two-weeks before application deadline (Winter of Senior Year)

- Send in completed applications.
- Call institutions to verify that your application file is complete.

After submitting your application (Spring of Senior Year)

- Visit institutions for interviewing, or after they have accepted you.
- Send the deposit to the institution of choice and notify other institutions of your decision.
- Send “Thank You” notes to people who wrote your recommendation letters.

ACCEPTANCES AND REJECTIONS

It is very common to have to apply several times before you are accepted. Don't be discouraged if you aren't accepted to your dream school (or any school) on your first try. If you are accepted to more than one school, choosing the program can be just as difficult as the application process. If possible, visit schools to meet faculty and students or speak with alumni to make an informed choice. Schools will set a deadline for you to accept or reject an offer of admission and pay a deposit to reserve your spot. This deadline generally falls in mid-April. In some cases you may be placed on a waitlist. Depending on where you fall on the list, you may be offered admission if an accepted student declines to attend. Schools vary greatly on how long they will keep an applicant the waitlist. The Grad Café (www.forum.thegradcafe.com) is an online forum where you can discuss schools, the application process, and results. You can join MFA or even discipline specific groups. This is a great way to find out when acceptance or rejection letters are sent out and how long people remain on a waitlist.

RESOURCES

ONLINE RESEARCHING PROGRAMS

- College Art Association (www.collegeart.org)
- Council of Graduate Schools (www.cgsnet.org)
- GradSchools.com (www.gradschools.com)
- Graduate Guide (www.graduateguide.com)
- National Association of Graduate-Professional Students (www.nagps.org/NAGPS)
- Peterson's Graduate Schools Guide (www.petersons.com/graduate/gsector.html)
- Saatchi Online: Art Colleges Around the World (www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artcolleges/)
- U.S. News & World Report Rankings (www.usnews.com/rankings)
- GradView (www.GradView.com)

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ONLINE FINANCIAL AID RESOURCES

Art School Financial Aid (www.artschools.com/financial-aid/)
FastWeb Scholarship Search (www.fastweb.com)
Financial Aid Calculators (www.finaid.org/calculators)
Government-Funded Graduate Loans (www.gradview.com/articles/financialaid/govt_loans.html)
Jack Kent Cooke (www.jkcf.org/scholarships/graduate-scholarships/jack-kent-cooke-graduate-arts-award/)
Jacob K. Javits Fellowship Program (www2.ed.gov/programs/jacobjavits/index.html)
Metropolitan Museum of Art History Fellowships (www.metmuseum.org/education/fellowship.html)
National Gallery of Art Fellowships (www.nga.gov/casva/fellowships.shtm)
National Association of Fellowship Advisors (www.nafadvisors.org/scholarships.php)
Paul and Daisy Soros Fellowships for New Americans (www.pdsoros.org)
Types of Graduate Fellowships (www.gradschools.com/article-detail/graduate-fellowships-1676)
U.S. Department of Education (www.ed.gov/fund/landing.jhtml)

ADDITIONAL ONLINE RESOURCES FOR OPPORTUNITIES, GRANTS, FELLOWSHIPS, AND SCHOLARSHIPS:

Art Deadlines List (www.artdeadlineslist.com)
Foundation Center (www.foundationcenter.org) *see “Other Resources in the Career Center” section
Re-title (www.re-title.com)
InLiquid Art + Design (www.inliquid.org)

BOOKS AVAILABLE IN THE CAREER CENTER LIBRARY

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| <i>Graduate Admissions Essays – What Works, What Doesn't</i> | <i>Graduate School Guide</i> |
| <i>Graduate Programs in Art History / The CAA Directory</i> | <i>Graduate Schools in the U.S. / Peterson's Guide</i> |
| <i>Graduate Programs in Arts & Architecture / Peterson's Guide</i> | <i>GRE Exam</i> |
| <i>Graduate Programs in the Visual Arts / The CAA Directory</i> | <i>UK Universities, Colleges and Schools Handbook</i> |
| <i>Graduate School Admissions Adviser</i> | <i>Worldwide Graduate Scholarship Directory</i> |

OTHER RESOURCES IN THE CAREER CENTER

Foundation Center Grants and Fellowship Database

The Foundation Center is a national non-profit service organization that connects non-profits and individuals with grant makers. The Career Development Office subscribes to the Foundation Center's Grants and Fellowships Database. Visit the office to access the online database that allows you to search for grants and fellowships based on individualized search criteria.

Make an appointment to meet with a counselor.

Career Counselors can provide a variety of services, including but not limited to:

- Graduate Program and Funding Search
- Resume/Cover Letter Reviews
- Statement/Proposal Reviews
- Mock Interviews