Why are graphic design professionals with perfectly good jobs and perfectly excellent undergraduate credentials going back to school to get their MFA’s? And does this decision make sense in a challenging economic time?

Based on interviews with MFA students over the course of the past couple of years — and discussions with educators at major art and design institutions in the past month — the answer to these questions becomes clear. Though each graduate program has unique content, perspective and approach, they all offer a valuable experience that impacts professional and personal lives, not to mention the broader society in which we live and work.

The following are comments by several leading graphic design educators. While they agree about the value of an MFA or other advanced design degree, their emphases differ somewhat and help shine light on the many purposes for going back to school.

John Waters
CHAIR OF GRAPHIC DESIGN AT SCAD

The mission of an MFA is to prepare for an increasingly complex and challenging design world.

"In the past 20 years the scope of graphic design has greatly expanded. The important areas today include strategic frameworks, systems design, service design, design for sustainability, data visualization and design elasticity. Each of these areas brings higher value to a design practice, and each requires a year or two of graduate study. At SCAD, graduate students in graphic design have the opportunity to explore all of these areas. Frequently collaborating with students from design management, industrial design, motion media, interior design, and other departments, often working with real world clients, designing for the challenges of tomorrow."

Ellen Lupton
DIRECTOR OF MFA GRAPHIC DESIGN PROGRAM AT MICA

Central to the MFA experience is sharing a social experience with a gifted, dedicated group of peers.

"I am fascinated to see the friendships that quickly emerge within each new MFA group. In contrast with the diffused social setting of a typical undergrad education, the MFA environment is up-close and personal. Many people return to school because they are hungry for some truly rewarding and challenging interactions with other designers. Many of these relationships last a lifetime."

Phil Hamlett
DIRECTOR OF GRADUATE GRAPHIC DESIGN AT ACADEMY OF ART UNIVERSITY

Thesis development is a means to hone skills and display excellence in a particular area.

"Academy of Art University’s MFA Graphic Design program provides students the opportunity to develop thesis projects specific to their chosen area of interest. This enables the creation of focused portfolios that demonstrate high levels of expertise and professionalism, an approach that has won our grads positions at well-known companies and highly respected design firms around the world."

Steven Heller and Lita Talarico
CO-CHAIRS OF DESIGNER MFA, SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS

The MFA offers a rare chance to raise the bar on both content and execution.

"Why an MFA? It really depends on goals. MFA Designer as Author at the School of Visual Arts will increase the confidence level by transforming a designer from a service provider into a content provider. But content is nothing without execution. This MFA provides an intense program of study that exercises the creative muscles and enables designers to do feats of design entrepreneurship that they never conceived before."

Dan Boyarski
DIRECTOR OF GRADUATE STUDIES AT CARNEGIE MELLON UNIVERSITY

School of Design

CMU offers a Master of Design degree, rather than an MFA, that seeks a balance between theory and practice. Dan Boyarski sees a graduate design degree as an opportunity to change the trajectory of one’s career. "Students attend our master’s programs to enhance or redirect their careers. Those with traditional design backgrounds seek to complement their knowledge and skills with a broader approach to design, which may include situated research and user evaluation, or new knowledge in areas like design for sustainability, service, or interaction. Those from other fields are immersed in design thinking and practice, augmenting their areas of expertise."

Mike Welkert
DIRECTOR, MASTERS IN SOCIAL DESIGN PROGRAM, MICA

Welkert, himself an MFA graduate at MICA, focuses on the role of design in the larger society. "Each MFA offers a unique approach or perspective, but graduate study in general encourages and empowers designers to investigate their role in society, collaborate with a variety of knowledge bases and viewpoints, and explore the relationship of the designer to problem solving. These experiences provide powerful utilization tools integral to broadening the overall understanding and significance of design. In this spirit, we have introduced a new Masters program in Social Design, which focuses on the designer's role and responsibility in society.

Don Larson
PROGRAM DIRECTOR - MEDIA DESIGN, MFA AT FULL SAIL UNIVERSITY

Full Sail University’s Media Design MFA program is a unique, 12-month series of courses in which students learn the principles of effective visual and verbal communication through the development of a multi-media branding campaign. Critical evaluation is provided through instructor feedback and peer review so that students are equipped to work in the ever-expanding global workplace for today and in the future."