

How to Select the Right M.F.A. Program

By Matthew Daub

There are several reasons why a studio artist might want to obtain an M.F.A. Besides wanting to further one's knowledge and ability, the degree is pretty much essential if you aspire to teach studio art at the college or university level, even as an occasional adjunct (refer to *A Guide to Adjunct Teaching*, June 2009, **Art Calendar**, and *Navigating the Higher Ed Academic Job Market*, October 2010, **Art Calendar**). It is not, however, the degree needed to teach art in public school grades K-12. That is a completely different course of study leading to a B.S. in art education with teaching certification. The M.F.A. is the terminal degree in studio art; at present, there is no universally recognized Ph.D. in studio art, although there have recently been more discussions about this in academic circles. The number of schools offering graduate studio programs and the amount of legwork necessary to research which ones may be appropriate for you might seem daunting at first and leave you wondering, "Where do I even begin?" Knowing what questions to ask is a good place to start, so let's look at some important considerations.

Reputation

Is the program that you are applying to well-regarded? Just because a school is highly respected in one discipline does not necessarily mean that it is strong in another. Find out as much as you can about your specific area of study. You can get some idea of your school's general reputation on the [U.S. News and World Report Web site](#), but keep in mind that this is only a basic tool and gives a very incomplete picture. Your best information may come from your undergraduate professors and artists/alumni you know.

Location

Where is the campus located? Is it in an urban or rural setting? Many of the nation's top M.F.A. programs are located in urban centers, but if you are

looking into a school that is not located in a city, you may want to be sure that it at least offers reasonable access to major cultural centers, including galleries and museums. A location in an urban art center will undoubtedly have its advantages, but there could be certain disadvantages too, such as increased housing costs or possible safety issues. Consider the pros and cons of the campus environment and the surrounding community as important factors in your decision. You will be spending the next two or three years there.

The trend toward fast-track degrees has also led to an increase in low-residency programs that enable students to interact with their professors via the Internet and require only minimal time on campus. Personally, I am not at all a fan of low-residency M.F.A. programs, in spite of any cost savings or convenience they might seem to offer. Nothing can replace the one-on-one mentoring that ideally takes place in a graduate art program, and the relationships formed with other grad students can last a lifetime and are the beginning of your professional network.

Length

The M.F.A. is typically completed in either two or three years, with the standard recommended by the College Art Association being a 60-credit hour course of study. If you should opt for a program of less than 60 credit hours, it might present problems for you in meeting requirements at certain institutions when you seek promotion to a higher rank. A number of my colleagues and I agree that a three-year M.F.A. is ideal and offers some distinct advantages. During your first year in a new location, you are primarily getting settled, establishing relationships and processing a lot of information. In your final M.F.A. year, you may be busy sending out job applications, not to mention preparing for your thesis exhibition, which includes presenting an oral and written defense. The second year of a three-year program is often the most productive.

Faculty

Nothing is more important than a school's faculty. Find out as much as you can about who you will potentially be studying with. Go beyond simply

searching the school's Web site, where every professor looks like a rock star. Of course, the faculty members' own Web sites will also present them in the best light possible, but you should at least be able to view several examples of their work and get some idea of their professional activity. Do not stop there; keep searching the web to see what others are saying about the faculty, but remember that not everything you read may be reliable. Try to find unbiased, third-party references as opposed to blogs that may be written by friends or enemies. Look for reviews, publications and exhibitions. Where are they showing and when have they shown? Take note of the dates. It should not be too hard to tell which members of the faculty are currently active in their field and on what level.

The depth of your graduate professors' professional involvement is especially important, as they will be mentoring you on this next big step in your career. There is one caveat; some of the most prominent professors, particularly in heavy research institutions, may have very minimal teaching loads. You may not have nearly as much opportunity to interact with them as you might hope. Some of the better-known faculty may only be on campus briefly or not at all during some semesters. Be sure to inquire about this if you desire to work with a specific professor. As long as your professors are professionally active, I would not be unduly swayed simply because you may never have heard of them. It is a big art world out there. You will find surprises, both good and bad, on every faculty. An active visiting artist program is also a plus and should be considered an important factor in judging the quality of the program.

Studio Space and Facilities

Virtually all graduate programs provide at least some sort of studio space for its students, but these spaces vary, so you will want to check out the facilities. For painters and drawers this may not be too critical; nearly any secure, large, well-lit space will do. But for particularly tech-heavy disciplines, such as photography and digital media, or for sculptors who may require special equipment, the studios and shop facilities should weigh heavily in your decision.

Tuition Costs and Financial Aid

According to the National Center for Education Services, tuition and fees for an M.F.A. program now average around \$6,900 per semester at public institutions and just over \$18,000 at privates, making the potential cost for a three-year M.F.A. degree as much as \$100,000 or more. This is before figuring in the cost of your art supplies or living expenses! Before you immediately give up on the idea of attending grad school, remember that most institutions offer extensive financial aid packages. These come in the form of fellowships, grants, paid assistantships and tuition waivers, as well as subsidized loans, so the actual cost may be far less than the statistics indicate. Some schools may actually *pay you* to attend. Inquire to find out what is available at each institution you are considering.

Graduate fellowships are very competitive and come with tuition waivers and potentially generous stipends. They are meant to provide top graduate students with support and require no outside work in return.

Graduate assistantships usually come with a tuition waiver and a stipend as well, but assistantships require you to work.

Research assistantship involves non-teaching responsibilities such as working in the studio of a faculty member, or shop maintenance.

Teaching assistant usually teaches undergraduate classes, normally under some form of supervision from a regular faculty member. A teaching assistantship is very desirable if you plan on seeking a career in college teaching because it provides you with experience prior to entering the job market. You may be granted either a quarter-time or half-time position with commensurate compensation. Greater than half-time positions are universally frowned upon as being an interference with a graduate student's studies.

I nearly always advise my students to go where the money is. It simply does not make economic sense in most cases to incur a mountain of debt to obtain an M.F.A. If a school with a somewhat lesser reputation offers a substantially better economic package than a more highly regarded school, I say take it! I have served on many university hiring committees and can tell you that we have never

hired based solely on where the applicant went to school. All else being equal, a top-ranked school may be an advantage, but an exceptional portfolio and exhibition record carry more weight in the hiring process.

The Application Process

Graduate school applications require a minimum of 10, and usually between 15 and 20, images of your recent work. When you apply to graduate school, you are not only seeking entrance to the program, but you are trying to get as much financial support as possible. You are essentially in competition with all other applicants, so you obviously want your application to be as strong as possible. Some applicants may be accepted into a program, but will be offered much less institutional support than other top candidates. For that reason, I advise my students to wait until they have amassed a body of work large enough to enable them to be selective in what they include in their application. You want to have a consistent theme and focus to the work you submit. If you find yourself having to include older, differently-themed or less-successful pieces in your application portfolio, it is a good indication that you are not quite ready. Be patient; a couple of years can make a huge difference. M.F.A. candidates tend to be a bit older, so taking some time after finishing your undergraduate degree can be a plus.

Should I make a campus visit?

Most definitely, yes! Many schools will require an interview for finalists as part of the process, but you may be wise to arrange a campus visit early on. Consider contacting a professor in your discipline and asking to meet with them at their convenience. This could bolster your application later on in the process if you make a good impression during an informal visit.

Applications also commonly ask you to include a statement of purpose in order to judge your writing and critical thinking ability. If you are currently an undergraduate and have a mentor on your faculty, it might be wise to ask him or her to help you with this, even if you aren't applying right away. Do not be afraid to ask your professors to tell you what they perceive as your weaknesses.

Preemptively addressing some of these issues in your statement of purpose will only serve to strengthen your application.

In addition, you will likely also be asked to provide three reference letters or recommendation forms. Unless you have been out of school for a long time and have already made other professional contacts, at least a couple of these should come from professors with whom you have worked closely. Those of you who are still undergraduates should start thinking about this now. Try to develop good relationships with more than just one or two professors. It is very important that you not only develop respectful working relationships while you are in school, but that you stay in contact with your professors after you graduate. E-mail them occasionally. Send them JPEGs of your new work and announcement cards when you have an exhibition. It is nearly impossible for a professor to write a timely and enthusiastic letter if they have not heard from you in years. You will also need to pay an application fee with each application. This can get fairly expensive if you are applying to several schools. Even so, it may be a good idea to adopt an approach similar to that taken by many undergraduates: apply to several programs, with some being more of a “stretch” than others.

Never Too Late

Hopefully, this article will help point you in the right direction. No doubt there are other questions you may have. Don't be afraid to ask for advice and to carefully consider the different perspectives you will receive. Applying to graduate school is an important step, so don't be in a hurry. Do your homework and most importantly, don't wait to start your professional career. You don't need an M.F.A. to work in your studio or to exhibit what you make. Building a strong body of work and bolstering your professional resume can only help when you are ready to apply. Some artists apply too early, but it is never too late.

On the Art of Selecting a Graduate Program

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Choosing a Program Now that You've Received Your Acceptances

1) Consider your funding package carefully

There are a variety of issues to consider when figuring the actual value of your funding package that may not seem obvious at first. As a completely random example, consider that Michigan State University offers you a stipend of \$13,000 a year, and UCLA offers you a stipend of \$18,000. Though the \$5,000 more that UCLA offers you may sound great, the difference in the cost of living between Los Angeles and East Lansing probably makes the real value of the UCLA stipend less than that offered by MSU. Then again, the University of California schools offer graduate students the opportunity to register as “in absentia” during quarters spent researching away from the university, meaning that students living abroad can maintain their status as an enrolled graduate student and keep their university-provided insurance for nearly no cost. These factors affect the overall cost of attending graduate school, and are well worth taking into account when picking a program.

2) Consider the university's location

Though I don't think that a university's location should determine where you apply, I think it is a valuable way to break a tie between places you've been accepted. I say this for two reasons. First of all, there are a number of perks that come with attending a university that is located in a major metropolitan area, or is close to other research universities. These include access to multiple libraries, and the expanded opportunities that come from collaborative universities. Second, you're not just picking a school, you're picking a place to spend several intense years of your life. If cold winters and gray skies get you down, you should probably choose University of Texas-Austin over Northwestern. If you hate crowded urban spaces and traffic, you might want to pick IU-Bloomington over the University of Southern California. Though this may seem superficial, enjoying

the place where you live makes it much easier to take the stresses that come with daily life as a graduate student.

3) Visit the universities

One of the best parts about being accepted to graduate programs is that departments often provide accepted students with the financial means to attend recruitment events. Attend all of these that you can. These are great events that provide you with a chance to meet your potential advisor and colleagues, to get to know those who may be in your cohort, and to see the town in which you may soon live. Though this may end up doing little to change your personal rankings, the experience will almost certainly make you feel much more secure about your decision to attend that graduate school. In some cases, however, a visit will make you realize just how bad an idea it would be to attend that program.