



The Grad School Question

To go or not to go?

Christine Brooks was at the perfect point in her design career to consider graduate school. She had six years of professional experience behind her, no kids, some time, much ambition and a yearning to push herself to the next level.

“I had always thought about going back to school,” she said. “I really wanted to learn from other designers.”

After much consideration, Brooks whittled her choices down to one Boston-based school. She set an appointment with the

dean to learn more about the program, but what the meeting revealed surprised her.

“With my experience, he basically said I wouldn’t learn that much,” she said.

The dean’s description resembled Brook’s BFA coursework at the Art

Institute of Boston. Students learned through design-based projects and ultimately built a portfolio. Brooks wanted a more academic setting that would push her design to new levels.

After the interview, Brooks rethought her plan. Ultimately grad school wasn’t for her. Years and a baby later, Brooks, a senior designer at TR Design in Massachusetts, doesn’t regret her choice. Upon reflection she admitted, “I’m sure I would have learned, but I’m not sure [the schooling] would have made me a better designer.”

The big decision

Whether or not to return to the classroom is a question many designers wrestle with at some point in their careers. According to the 2005–2006 National Association of Schools of Art and Design’s (NASAD) Higher Education Arts Data Services (HEADS) summaries, 366 students graduated with design/art schools MAS or MFAS compared to 293 in 1985–1986, marking a meager 25 percent increase. The study surveyed almost 250 schools/institutions nationwide to compile aggregate figures

of institutions participating in the given year’s survey. While throngs apply for the many coveted spots in America’s top design schools, few get in. For example, according to Yale graduate program director Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, Yale receives about 200 applications yearly for 10 desirable slots in the 2-year program.

Analysis of the HEADS data revealed that over the past twenty years the number of schools offering design or design-related master’s degrees has grown only about seven percent. And according to research, only a handful of schools now offer design-related doctoral programs.

In comparison, the summaries indicate an interesting increase in baccalaureate design study over the past twenty years. The numbers show that 16,221 students enrolled in the fall of ’05 to study the subjects of ad design, graphic design, design and communication design. That same year 3,722 students graduated from the very same institutions. Twenty years ago 11,780 students signed up to study the above mentioned design majors, and 2,453 students graduated with BA degrees. These figures mark a 38 percent increase in enrollments and a 52 percent increase in graduates from undergrad programs.

The numbers are telling and beg the question, with many flocking to study design why aren’t more designers acquiring higher educations? And if you do become one of the select chosen for one of these prestigious programs, what’s the benefit to acquiring a graduate-level design degree?

Answers

The answers depend entirely on whom you ask and then partly on when you ask them.

If you ask Carolyn McCarron, a designer and writer based in Princeton, New Jersey, grad school provided exactly the experience she needed. “It’s about learning how I can be better—a better designer, a better thinker, a better professional...With the field getting more and more complex, and [with designers] collaborating with other fields such as engineering and the sciences, designers are required to know and do more...” McCarron said.

After several years working at Houghton Mifflin upon grad-

design issues

uating from RISD, McCarron applied to the now retired Independent Study Master's Degree Program at Syracuse University. The program resembled many graduate business school models. Students were required to be working professionals. They attended classes on weekends and by using vacation time for nine mandatory residencies. Emphasis was placed on creative problem solving through sketching, brainstorming and developing complex solutions to business problems through deeper thinking and case studies in a team environment. The course culminated with an extensive graduate thesis.

"My graduate education at Syracuse gave me the professional development I needed. Besides being pushed to think, I learned to work collaboratively, and how to best present creative ideas to business clients," McCarron added.

Gaining assets

Elena Grossman, a designer at The Yale Center for British Art in New Haven and a Yale master's graduate, echoed McCarron. Grossman meandered from job to job as an editor then Web producer upon graduating from Columbia University. After several years of working with designers, she discovered she was "more interested in doing the work than managing the work." Despite her lack of training, Grossman landed a junior designer position. But though she was doing the work, she felt insecure with her ability. "I always felt like a fraud," she said. "You can't just go out and practice medicine. You need the training... It's the same in design."

Then the dot-com bubble burst. Grossman was laid off providing precious time to reflect. She researched a handful of programs and set her sights on Yale.

The Yale Graphic Design MFA Program boasts of being the oldest program in a major U.S. university. According to its Web site, Yale's tuition tabs in at \$26,000 per year. Its faculty reads like a design Who's Who including Pentagram's Michael Bierut, Winterhouse's Jessica Helfand and typographer Matthew Carter. The program builds skills through focused projects, which concludes in a personal, investigative thesis.

Grossman was accepted to Yale's three-year program. (The first year hones basic design skills for students who didn't study design undergrad.) While the program felt grueling at times, it proved worthwhile. Her higher education yielded an important asset: The ability to communicate, not just with her design, but with the client. "An MFA gives you a leg to stand on. Whether you work in-house or at a design firm, you are bound to work with clients who do not understand what designers do," Grossman said. "You have to constantly work for it, and there's always a new person coming along who has no sense of the value designers provide. So in a

sense, all that education provides one key skill: the ability to educate clients rather than just listen to their suggestions and be the person who knows how to make the computer do the thing non-designers want it to do."

Self-development

Both McCarron and Grossman discovered a benefit to furthering their design higher studies—self-development. Grad school might be described as a design supplement helping students work on the areas they were previously lacking or

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deficient in. It's a safe haven to work on your skills and passions free from the pressures of the marketplace and agenda-imposing bosses.

It's a gift to yourself of time and influence," added Levrant de Bretteville. "You refresh your attitude to your profession."

Jessica Helfand, who received both her BA and MFA at Yale and is now senior thesis critic in the master's program, fully agreed: "There's no better investment than an investment in yourself," she said. "A higher education is not about making more money or getting a better job. It's about feeding yourself. You have to want to do it for more than professional gain."

Helfand returned to school after a few years off the design track. She had graduated from Yale with a combined bachelor's degree in graphic design and architectural theory (she'd taken all three of the undergraduate design courses offered at Yale at the time). After graduating she found herself drawn to the theater and to television, and for a while was writing more than designing. (In fact, Helfand was a daytime television scriptwriter for several years.) Then she boomeranged back to design, working for her father's friend for ten dollars an hour. During that eighteen-month stint, Helfand discovered her three courses weren't enough. "I felt like I had never done it right," she said.

She returned to Yale to build her repertoire. During this time she discovered the true value of her post-grad design education. "You work so hard, that when you get through it you can't help but realize you've become a stronger person... It's not the degree that's important," Helfand added, "It's what you get out of those two years of pushing yourself that really matters."

The graduate cliché

Grossman's, McCarron's and Helfand's stories aren't uncommon. The weary, soul-searcher is a bit of a cliché in design academic admissions. According to Levrant de Bretteville many students return to school when at a career crossroads. The average student enrolled in the Yale grad

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program has at least five years professional experience and a mounting dissatisfaction with the field, she said. “There’s something more they want.”

Despite the pluses, a graduate degree isn’t for everyone. In some cases, the real world is the best course.

Usually it’s something that can’t be attained punching the clock. It’s a need for deeper knowledge. It’s dissatisfaction with the status quo. It’s a desire to change society. And it’s a need for growth in life and work.

Don Arie, chair at Pratt Institute in Manhattan, recalls the journey of one student whose student portfolio captivated him.

Arie remembers speaking to the student after the end-of-semester critique. He learned the student’s undergrad degree was in biochemistry, but his love was design. The student studied science to satisfy his family but after years in the workforce, he grew increasingly unhappy with his life. Then he applied to Pratt.

“In the brief time that the student had been in our program, he attained a level of competence that was truly noteworthy,” Arie observed.

Pratt (which rings in at \$36,800 yearly) offers two master’s of science courses in communications design and packaging design with an optional concentration in digital design. Both programs focus on creative problem solving through a pragmatic, industry-oriented curriculum. The programs accommodate the working learner by offering classes from 4–10 p.m. weekdays. Each year Pratt graduates between 90–120 students who have been mentored by design gurus such as Alisa Zamir of Taylor & Ives, Antonio DiSpigna of ITC and Chava Ben-Amos, TK.

Building on its successes, Pratt plans on introducing a master of fine arts degree in communication design within the next five years.

Other options

In addition to the above-mentioned programs, Pratt was the first in the country to offer a two-year Masters of Professional Studies in Design Management. The program launched in 1994 to help design managers elevate their business in an environmentally and socially conscious manner. The program also requires enrollees to be working professionals.

“Students apply to this program to learn the language of the business they work in—to learn to ‘speak suit,’” said Mary McBride, chair of the Design Management Graduate Program

and partner at Strategies for Planned Change International.

Other schools are also offering alternatives. Two years ago Stanford received a gift for the creation of the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford—informally called the d.school. The d.school isn’t your typical design school. Its curriculum builds multi-disciplinary teams from graduate programs across campus to develop “design thinking” and build solution-based prototypes. A d.school class might include an architect, a doctor, an anthropologist and a designer. A student earns a degree in their area of study (MBA, MSE, MFA, MD, etc.) and if the graduate took three or more d.school courses, they earn a d.school certificate.

“We believe there’s a larger movement in the world related to innovation. This movement represents a shift from design to design-thinking. Design used to be considered a creative act by a lone genius, often related to the development of new products. These days innovation requires a collaborative effort across multidisciplinary teams...” said George Kembel, executive director of the Stanford University Institute of Design. “Our primary focus... is to shape future innovators to be breakthrough thinkers and doers...”

A piece of paper?

No matter what the program, higher ed can translate into many bonuses.

“A graduate degree is more than just a piece of paper,” said Arie. “Our graduates are more attractive candidates for jobs because they succeeded in their pursuit of an advanced degree, and in that process became better educated, more competent and more skillful than their competitors. In addition, an advanced degree has an undeniable cachet that makes that individual stand out.”

Is there a doctor in the house?

If this is true, you could certainly say Jay Melican’s résumé rises to the top. He studied at Brown as an undergrad. He mastered in semiotics (the study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative behavior) at RISD and became one of the trailblazers in designing multimedia. In 2000 he was among the first to graduate from the Illinois Institute of Technology’s (IIT) PhD program, where he extensively researched the process of creative problem solving in group conversation.

Before going back to school Melican worked at a San Francisco studio designing interfaces. He found designing wasn’t enough; he wanted to understand people’s behavior in utilizing products. After some contemplation, Melican discovered he needed PhDs to break into this work. As he considered a career shift, a former RISD advisor called. She invited him to study with her as part of a grant. Melican jumped at the offer.

IIT offers three graduate degrees at about \$38,000 per year: a

Master of Design, Master of Design Methods and a PhD—acclaimed as the first design-related doctoral program in the U.S. The Master of Design is a two-year program targeted at students wishing to master one of four tracks: communication design, product design, design planning or design research. The Master of Design Methods is either a nine-month or two- to three-year part-time executive program, concentrating on robust design methods in areas including prototyping and creating systems of innovation among others. The Doctor of Philosophy degree is a research program yielding a dissertation expanding knowledge about design theory and process. The school graduates about 40 students a year, the majority of whom are from the masters programs.

Having some distance from school, Melican realizes the program's worth may not have been what he initially thought. "The value [of a grad degree] is not that you're smarter than you used to be. It's that you have a credential that gives you access to different things," said Melican, now a research scientist/design researcher at Intel. "The process of getting a PhD is really about jumping through hoops. It's about joining the club of people who have PhDs... A graduate degree doesn't necessarily give you added value as designer, but it does give you a different set of opportunities."

For Melican one of those opportunities has been being invited to teach. It's also meant access to funding for meaningful work. For example, Melican earned a grant in 2002 to study issues of privacy management in different cultures and how these issues played out in cell phone use. His findings resulted in ideas for the design of future mobile technologies.

Currently there are a handful of PhD programs around the country including those at Carnegie-Mellon University, Arizona State University and North Carolina State University.

Changing perceptions

In today's climate many believe an advanced degree is needed to move forward. The thinking is on-the-job experience isn't nearly enough to earn designers a seat with the movers and shakers. Anyone can design a flyer or a T-shirt. Apple, Adobe and other such companies have put designers and the common man on the same page, giving everyone access to the same tools. Some believe education now more than ever, sets us apart from the twelve-year-old protégés at home with Print Shop.

"The world of work has changed since the self-made men of the 1960s and 1970s rose to the top of the field. At one time, offices had time to treat beginning designers as apprentices, but the number of graduates from professional bachelor's programs and the current economics no longer encourage this..." said Meredith Davis, director of graduate programs, department of Graphic Design, and director of the PhD in Design, College of Design at North Carolina State. "These

programs develop an understanding of the discipline as well as the practice. In chemistry, for example, there is the knowledge about how molecules interact that is quite different from the application of that knowledge in designing an experiment. The same is true of design; there are things to know and ways of knowing them that are not solely about application and I don't know how you get to that information through the typical workday." NC State's PhD program resembles IIT's. It

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is a non-studio, research degree aiming to generate new knowledge in design. NC State offers one of the lowest tuitions ranging from \$5,000 to \$15,000 depending on resident status.

Our desire for better work is forcing business to pay attention. Many claim graduate programs are changing the perception of designers from visual technicians to communication strategists and inventors because if someone has devoted time, expense and study to a subject, they have valuable insight to share. Perhaps credentials give designers more clout. And maybe higher ed gives us more confidence in our work and ability to articulate. Our field has known its share of revolutionary thinkers who have shifted the role of the designer and helped seat designers at the big table. But perhaps education (whether through higher ed or self-ed) will help ensure our place there because of the true innovation we know it can offer.

"If these programs had not existed it might not have crossed people's minds to have a designer on the team..." Melican said. "People are beginning to realize that the whole process is design. We're not hired to just make things pretty. We're now hired to be part of the team. I'm hired because I have a certain perspective."

Something more

Or maybe the purpose of higher ed is even more basic. "It lets us treat design like it's something more than a profession," expressed Grossman.

Maybe education allows designers to understand *how* we can make a difference. It's a petri dish for ideas that fertilize the minds who potentially go out and design a better ballot or invent a more usable packaging solution for prescriptions. Higher ed can lead ambitious designers to a depth of thinking that might not be encouraged in a nine-to-five.

"It is important to have programs [PhDs in particular] because (grad school) is the best and most economical place for design research," said Patrick Whitney, director of the Institute of Design at IIT. "Research is too time intensive to be affordable

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by professional firms. All mature fields rely upon... research for developing new methods and theories.”

The working man

Despite the pluses, a graduate degree isn't for everyone. In some cases, the real world is the best course. Case in point: Blake E. Marquis, a self-employed designer in his twenties with such notable clients as Banana Republic, Extra gum and the *New York Times Magazine*, still believes life experience is

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more important than a diploma. Marquis studied briefly as an undergrad at Pratt. After accepting an internship with a Los Angeles firm the summer after his second year, he never returned to school and has been working ever since.

Marquis appreciates the exposure school gave him but says higher education may be better for “someone who learns from having more

structure...I've been happy with my decision. I find that working pushes me faster and harder than school ever did... I go through phases where I think it would be fun to go back to school, but I think the time would be better spent traveling, or even studying with someone. I don't feel like having a degree will make me any more of a designer.”

Chris Piascik, designer at Boston's Alphabet Arm Design seconds Marquis. Piascik tossed around the idea of grad school at RISD or SVA as he was finishing his undergrad at The Hartford Art School at The University of Hartford. Upon receiving his BFA in visual communication design, two offers landed on his doorstep. He accepted one with a New Haven design firm and quickly rose through the ranks from junior designer to designer to senior designer within a single, challenging year. “The experience I crammed into that one year could not be recreated at any school,” he said. “I was thrown into situation after situation where I had no other choice but to learn and adapt.”

The daily grind and his undergrad provided schooling enough for Piascik. “A solid undergraduate program and real-world experience is more than enough for a talented designer. I say talented because I do believe that talent is the key to being a good designer and that is not something any degree can create.”

World-renowned designer Stefan Sagmeister of Sagmeister, Inc. agrees—in part. Sagmeister flowed directly into graduate school at Pratt after earning his undergrad at the University for Applied Arts, Vienna. “In my heart I felt I should have

gotten a job instead, but was thankful for the opportunity to mess around for another two years without care.”

Though he credits his education for giving him many opportunities, you'd be surprised to know what he thinks of the end product of his efforts. “The diploma itself is not worth much (unless you want to teach). In twenty years not a single client ever asked me about it or given me an opportunity to show off my grades. It truly is all about the work and the experience... Some of my favorite designers, like Tibor Kalman or James Victore, never went to art school at all, let alone earned a higher degree. So there are obviously many different ways to go about this.”

For Sagmeister, the benefit of his degree was finding “the time to experiment without a particular job in mind,” he said. “Many, many ideas I am still utilizing now were developed during that time.”

Your choice

The truth is the decision to return or not is personal. With tough competition for a few spots and the high cost of tuition, there are many factors to consider including what do you want, what contribution do you wish to make and where do you envision your future, among others. Whichever path you choose you'll encounter different opportunities.

But if you decide grad school is for you, heed this advice from someone who's been there. “You're better off assessing what you want,” Grossman said. “You should have a very good sense of what you're going to get out of (grad school) before going.”

You should also consider what you might be missing. “When people ask me if I think they should do their PhDs, I make sure to tell them to think through the opportunity costs. What else would you have been doing with, four, five, six or more years of your professional life?,” asked Melican. “I don't regret my decision, but I don't know that I was aware at the time I made it, of what the opportunity costs would be.”

Interviewing different schools and programs can help shape your decision advised Levrant de Bretteville. “It's like going to the doctor. You get multiple opinions before you get any work done. It's the same when choosing a grad program.”

But whatever you decide, the goal for all designers should be the same. “At the end it truly is all about the work,” Sagmeister said.

How you achieve it is up to you. **CA**

Editor's note: TK