

How do design programs differ?

Article by [Juliette Cezzar](#) November 01, 2017

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Illustration: Able Parris

The [number and variety of programs](#) where students can study graphic or communication design has exploded in the last 20 years, making it harder than ever to tell whether or not a particular program can truly offer what a design student needs to know in order to enrich their practice. Choosing between two programs can be like comparing apples and oranges. Almost all programs promise professional competence, but vary greatly in their length, cost, accreditation, method of delivery, intended purpose, and institutional type.

Degree titles

Another confusing factor is that unlike fields like anthropology or architecture, the titles of design programs vary depending on the attitude of the institution and when the program was established, but the titles don't fully describe meaningful differences between the programs. Degree titles may include, but are not limited to:

- Graphic design
- Communication design
- Communications design
- Visual communications
- Visual communication design

- Interaction design
- Advertising design
- Multimedia design

According to [a joint statement by AIGA and the National Association of Schools of Art and Design \(NASAD\)](#), “this diversity is healthy as long as students make informed decisions about the match between their own educational goals and what programs deliver in actual preparation for performance in the field.” The statement goes on to assert that “the presence of graphic design content in college courses or curricula, or even its designation as an area of emphasis or concentration, does not automatically indicate that the degree program adequately prepares students for professional practice.”

Below is a breakdown of different degree types, methods of study, accreditation levels, and institutions to help decode the language of these programs and how they differ. From there, it's essential to review the curriculum of each program, point of view, and faculty. Is there a curriculum, or in other words, a sequence of courses that build on each other to deepen knowledge in an area? If so, what proportion of courses will teach what you intend to learn? Would you want to take those courses? Is the definition of design and proposed methods of teaching consistent with your goals and learning styles? Are the faculty contributors to the field, either through current practice or continuous scholarship? (You can read more about these considerations in [How to Select a Design School](#).)

Degree types

For those with a high school diploma:

BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts), BDes (Bachelor of Design)

A BFA in graphic design, communication design, or interaction design is the most commonly recognized professional degree. BDes has similarly high standards, but is tailored towards design practice.

65–85 percent of the coursework in these programs is design-related, with a large portion specifically committed to pre-professional study in graphic or communication design, and the remainder devoted to liberal arts courses.

BA (Bachelor of Arts), BS (Bachelor of Science)

While the difference between a BA and a BFA differs depending on the institution, a BA typically has fewer required courses in the field, and fewer studio courses overall. The BA is commonly understood to be a general degree, while the BFA is often regarded as a professional degree.

AAS (Associate in Applied Science), AA (Associate of Arts), AS (Associate of Science), AFA (Associate of Fine Arts)

Two-year associate degrees are often offered at community colleges and technical schools, and a good program will either prepare a student for employment in technical support services or lay the groundwork to continue on to a four-year degree. Programs that promise both will usually fail to deliver on either.

For those with a Bachelor's degree:

MFA (Master of Fine Arts)

The MFA is widely recognized as a terminal professional degree, meaning that it qualifies a designer to teach in a professional-oriented university and to work at the highest levels of practice. For almost all schools, it's the minimum qualification for teaching. For someone with a BFA in graphic design or the equivalent, an MFA program will span two to three years and 60–90 credit hours, and may extend an additional year for someone who has a degree from another field. A strong program will value research, theory, method, and critical thinking, and conclude with a project or thesis that demonstrates independent thought and inquiry, holding itself to the same standards as MFA programs in other disciplines.

MDes (Master of Design), DMBA (Design Master of Business Administration)

The MDes designation is popular outside the United States and depending on the institution, may resemble either an MFA or MA/MS degree. It generally requires two years of full-time study. Programs that focus on a specific subdomain such as information design or interaction, or that are interdisciplinary in nature, will often have the same intensity as an MFA but will be as general in scope.

The DMBA is a design-focused MBA, and usually involves applying design thinking to business problems. Some schools offer dual MDes/MBA or MFA/MBA degrees.

MA (Master of Arts), MS (Master of Science), MPS (Master of Professional Studies)

These alternatives to the MFA are generally much shorter (12–18 months) and require far fewer credit hours (30–45), making them more flexible in terms of residency (whether study takes place on campus). Because the period of time is abbreviated, these programs often focus on a particular application or subdomain within graphic or communication design.

MA and MS programs in graphic or communication design may be very similar to one another, but may be regarded differently in the marketplace, since there are marked differences between these degrees in other disciplines. MA degrees are usually general and liberal arts-oriented, and wouldn't be expected to include a thesis or terminal project during the course of study. MS degrees, on the other hand, are usually scientific or technical in nature, concluding with a thesis. MPS degrees are exclusive to applied arts and courses that are interdisciplinary in nature, and therefore more easily customized to a short course of post-baccalaureate study in design.

For those with a Master's degree:

PhD (Doctor of Philosophy), DDes (Doctor of Design)

There are a handful of PhD and DDes programs that include study in graphic and communication design in the United States and abroad. A PhD is [research-based rather than practice-based](#), and unambiguously aims to expand knowledge in the field and share it across institutional boundaries. A DDes is also research-based, but specifies the activity as applied design research.

Post-academic research residencies and fellowships

Selective institutes and foundations both in and outside the United States provide research residencies and fellowships. These programs are often interdisciplinary, pulling from an international community of scholars and practitioners, and span one to two years.

Accreditation

What's the difference between an accredited program and an unaccredited program? Programs accredited by [NASAD](#) are reviewed against its [standards](#). These programs are listed on their website along with useful (and sometimes hard to find) information about further regional accreditation, type (for-profit private, non-profit private, public), institutional profile (art or design college, affiliations, or locations with or within universities, museums, or other institutions) that can be found through their [search](#). The website also has a helpful, if somewhat technical [FAQ](#).

Because graphic design practice is unlicensed and educational programs are mostly unregulated, unaccredited programs, both online and offline, are plentiful. Some are experimental or tightly focused in nature, and most are directed towards adult learners rather than recent high school graduates. Before enrolling in such programs, know the difference between them and accredited programs, and do the research to find out if the learning is worth the cost by talking to current students and recent alumni.

No program or institution can promise employment in exchange for enrollment. And now, with so much learning available online for free, a student can assemble a course of study that rivals or even exceeds most mid-level programs. However, as with accredited on-campus programs, the commitment to that course of study is often the most challenging aspect of a design education, and making relationships with peers and mentors is one of the most essential and least quantifiable aspects.

Institutional types

Another important factor is understanding how a school is funded and who's in charge. School funding and governance is complex. Almost all universities receive public and private money, and influence over budget and curriculum can come from multiple sources. While these topics don't easily break down into a series of absolutes, understanding the broad outlines, or at least the terms, is helpful.

Public universities and colleges are largely supported by state and city funds, and part of a public university or college's mission is to serve the people of the state by offering its constituents affordable access to education across a wide spectrum of disciplines. The people, through their elected representatives, can also put pressure on a university or college to change what it does or where it spends its money. At the same time, art or design schools at public universities are free from having to raise a portion of their money from tuition and alumni, and guidelines for hiring faculty may be more strict. A program at a public school may be better funded, better staffed, and more autonomous than programs at private schools.

A private, nonprofit university or school may have profits, but it has no owners. Nonprofits do not pay taxes, and donations to the nonprofit are also tax-exempt, so they're also partially publicly supported. In order to get and maintain nonprofit status, a school needs to have a publicly stated mission, and any profits must go towards that mission. It must also make its finances public on an annual basis. A nonprofit is usually governed by a board of directors, governors, or trustees who are responsible for carrying out that mission and complying with state regulations and reporting.

A for-profit university or school has owners. Any profits from the school go to those owners, who then determine what to do with that money, whether to reinvest it in the school or pay out dividends. It may be privately owned by an individual or family, or publicly owned by shareholders. In order to maintain eligibility for federal student aid, for-profit schools must [maintain specific ratios of debt-to-income for graduates, and publicly disclose information about program costs, debt, performance, and outcomes of their gainful employment programs](#).

If you're considering a program at a for-profit institution, take advantage of these reporting requirements, especially if you're making a big investment in your course of study. If you're unable to find a link on their website, simply search for the name of the institution and program and "gainful employment data" to access the information.

Many of the most prestigious private or public schools have an **endowment** that can have a profound impact on school pricing. An endowment is a pool of money, collected over time, that generates interest, relieving the school from the need to collect tuition to cover its expenses from tuition, government funding, donations, and grants. Schools with large endowments are also usually need-blind, meaning that they don't have to consider a student's ability to pay for school when making admissions decisions.

Institutional contexts

It's important to take a school's genealogy into account and how it aligns with an individual student's educational goals. Some art schools stem from the first courses of study in graphic design that began in art schools in the early 1900s to educate the thousands of young women who were working in industries such as textiles and communication. Others grew out of art or architecture departments at public and private universities looking to expand their offerings and increase the employability of art school graduates. The remainder cropped up as additional offerings at trade schools that promised employment in a number of fields after a short course of study.

Different contexts attract different kinds of students and faculty. A program within a freestanding art school, for example, will have a more cohesive culture and ideology that attracts successful practitioners in the field who are unencumbered by the priorities and rules of a broader institution. However, access to courses or facilities outside of the discipline will be limited, and when offered, it's unlikely that those courses will be taught by accredited scholars in those disciplines.

A program within a university will offer broader access to learning and scholarship across disciplines, but what is offered within the program will be subject to university-wide objectives and guidelines. Also, for many universities, a substantial part of the mission is the creation and dissemination of knowledge as well as public service—not simply preparing students for work in the industry. That can be startling if a student is expecting all of the school's resources to be devoted to the marketability of individual students.

Knowledge of different kinds of institutions, degrees, accreditation, and contexts before enrolling is critically important when making educational decisions.

Continue reading excerpts from [The AIGA Guide to Careers in Graphic and Communication Design](#).

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