

Grad School Confidential: How to Choose the Right Degree?

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Joey Orr

Not sure if admissions counselors are telling you the whole story? Here's some advice from someone who's been there. Although these tips focus on the arts, they speak to students in almost every field applying to programs throughout the U.S.

About a year ago I participated in a portfolio review for Café MOCA, an arts program for high school students at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia (MOCA GA). When asked where they were thinking of applying to college, almost every student said either the Savannah School of Art and Design (SCAD) or the Art Institute of Atlanta. I thought it was curious that almost everyone had chosen the same two. And right here in Atlanta, no less. It's not because SCAD and the Art Institute were necessarily the best fit, though they might have been for some students. The problem is that, even when we can see beyond our own backyard, we often don't believe we can conjure up the resources to reach further.

At a very crucial moment in my own life when I was coming to understand that Atlanta only has so many interesting positions for people working in contemporary art, a very good friend challenged me with a question that I will pose to you now:

What would your life be like if you could create it without restriction?

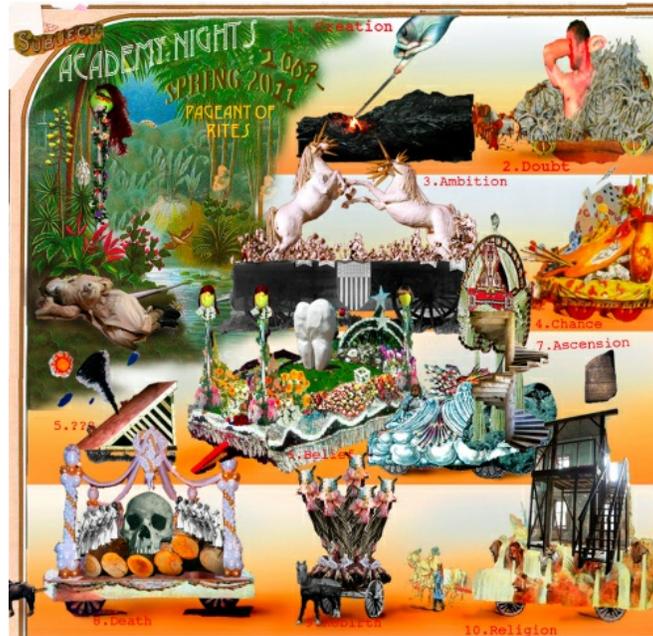
Of course, the restrictions in our lives are generally the things that spark our creativity and make our projects unlike the work of others. But the spirit of the question means to reduce the privilege of our boundaries and imagine our lives beyond them. One of my favorite quotes by Lao Tzu: "When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be."



Graduate school is hard. It's also really expensive. But if you're actually going to invest the time and money to do it, make it count for yourself. If you need a good graduate school to be able to do the things you want to do, aim high. You can go online and check the [U.S. News and World Report rankings](#), of course. And there are some damn good schools on that list. But if you choose a graduate school based on the institution's reputation alone, you may find yourself in a discipline or among peers that simply don't suit you. The thing nobody tells you is that you go to graduate school to make relationships with mentors who are doing some of the things you are dreaming about doing. Institutions authorize people, but it's the people within these institutions (if you make the right choices) who can really challenge you and add greater depth and scope to your inquiries and practices.



What will Mom and Dad say about your dreams of becoming an MFA graduate superstar? Art by Truett Dietz.



Artwork © Ben Fain.

Research and consider all the options, including not applying

Going to graduate school is very personal. Sometimes relationships are sacrificed, and when they're not, sacrifices are made within them. Depending on your course of study, you might have to read so much that your spine gets locked up, and you have to go to a chiropractor just to be able to walk again. This is not a joke, and it's far more common than you would guess. I believe this is because traditional scholarship eliminates the body and material practices from the criteria for authorization, harking back to the idea of a disembodied intellect that has caused all kinds of problems for sensual knowledge throughout history.

But this is changing, or at least there are other ideas afoot. See: **practice-based scholarship, artistic research, and performance-as-research**. These things have greater circulation in Europe, but there are already visual studies programs in the U.S. that encourage creative practices in conjunction with critical inquiry. And **studio-based PhDs** are also a reality these days.

Education is about stretching yourself, which, granted, doesn't have to happen within the halls of higher education. But if you are considering graduate school, you want to actually learn something you don't already know. This kind of work is generally uncomfortable. You will feel implicated by critical theories that you will try to use and fail. You will get bumped and bruised, but you will also be cared for and loved.

The most important thing to keep in mind is the reason you're going in the first place. Then, find a program that describes itself like that. It's like online dating in all its ugliness and glory! The only way I discovered that I wasn't an art historian was by trying to fit into that mold, which didn't fit me. I've learned several things that way.

When I began looking at art history graduate programs in the U.S. several years ago, I was surprised to discover how conservative most of them seemed. Even ones with contemporary art as their focus. That's when I discovered that art history and studio programs are not the only games in town. In fact, they aren't always even separate and distinct categories anymore. Where to begin? **Cultural Studies. Visual Studies. Visual and Critical Studies. Arts Administration. Film Studies. Digital Arts and New Media. Social Documentation. Visual Ethnography. Curatorial Practice. Museum Studies. Design Strategy. Urban Studies. Public Practice. Social Practice. New Genres.** The list goes swimmingly, swirlingly on

Try including some of these key words as you search for programs online. You might be surprised at the possibilities these fields will open.



They say practice makes perfect, but don't stay in a situation if it's a bad fit. Art by Truett Dietz.

Research the faculty and draft your statement of purpose

Once you find the kind of program that seems to fit your manner of working, study the professors in that department. Look at, listen to, read their work. My advice is never to sign up with a department unless there are at least two specific people you would like to work with. Many graduate students have matriculated into a two-year master's program only to realize that the one person they came to study with was on sabbatical for one of those years and largely unavailable the other. It's sad, but it happens. The other reality is that sometimes, when you meet someone whose work you admire, you simply don't admire them as a person. Be prepared for this possibility.

While you're doing all of this research, you should begin drafting a statement. All applications are going to ask you for something like a "statement of purpose." This statement is a chance for you to speak beyond your resume or curriculum vitae and beyond your academic records. The statement enables the selection committee to understand what

your commitments and philosophies are and what kinds of things you see yourself doing in the context of that particular program. It's the one chance you get to explain why you and the program, among all of the applicants and all of the programs available, are best for each other. And writing these kinds of documents will help you understand your own projects better, so no matter where things go, it's a great exercise.

Make an introduction and visit the school

When you've researched possible departments and professors, and you've come up with a draft statement, email the department administrator for information. Then email the director of graduate studies. This is the faculty member whose job it is to manage graduate students in the program. This person is also teaching, conducting research, working on their own projects, and advising students who are already part of the program, so be polite and succinct (*don't send lengthy emails!*). Let them know, briefly, why you are interested in the program and which professors' work you are attracted to. I would also advise you to then email the professors you think you might want to work with. Again, be polite, brief and succinct.

There are different opinions on this, and there are many reasons why emails don't get returned. But my personal take is that, if someone cannot return at least a polite initial inquiry and a brief follow up, you should take this as a sign of unfortunate organizational skills or, at worst, bad faith. Don't judge an entire program based on your experience with one individual, though, and keep in mind a motto I hold close to my heart: It is often difficult to disarticulate work from the spirit in which it is accomplished. There are lots of interesting projects in the world. Don't strap yourself to people who are ungenerous or unavailable. Trust me. That's not what you're looking for.

If it is at all possible for you to visit the school, college, or university, then DO IT. Here's the scary news: most good graduate programs receive anywhere from 70 to 120 or so applications, all attempting to grab anywhere from five to 12 spots. If the professors you want to work with know your name and something about your work, your odds increase. Don't accomplish this at the risk of being pushy or patronizing, but work the system to your advantage the best you can given the particular circumstances.

One good way to do this is to simply get a professor's permission by email to sit in on a class. If they can meet for coffee, great, but at least a little chat before or after class will mean they have a face and personality to match to your application. This is an advantage in a tight race. Meet with graduate students who are currently in the program, if that's possible, and get the skinny. Graduate students tend to be mercilessly frank about their departments. The department administrator can generally make these kinds of meetings happen.

Complete the application and keep your cool

When applying, fill out all of the federal aid forms, and if you need further support, be clear about this. There may be one or two funded spots in some master's programs, and some good doctoral programs fund their students entirely. But there are lots of people going back to school in this economy, so stay sharp. No softening it: It's a competition.

After all of this is done, and you've completed your applications, take on a project in your life and try and forget about it until word arrives. Don't drive yourself crazy or ruin the quality of your life waiting for word. You will, but I'll still advise you not to. If you're serious about this level of study, apply to several (five?) different programs. I have found that "safety schools" often can read that they're not a good fit, so use your time and application money to apply to schools you really want to attend.

You might not get in your first round. That will hurt and make you feel bad. There's a lot of that in the graduate school process, unfortunately. But, if studying in an institution is what you need to do, get more professional experience, take post-baccalaureate courses at a local school to bolster your intellectual chops, communicate with your programs, and apply again and to different schools, too.

Stay focused and learn to laugh!

Above all, remember that if you are going to apply to a graduate school, it should work for you. Everything won't work for you, of course. No administrative process functions perfectly, and some don't function at all. And if you're proposing an experimental or nontraditional project, even if you're applying to schools that have the intellectual and technical capacities to nurture you, they still won't know how to administer your path. In these cases, work with the programs, build a committee of professors who appreciate and honor your work, and get on with it. If going through the entire process ends up illustrating to you that graduate school is not your path, you've still had the chance to learn about yourself and about the work of some really cool people. Your paths may cross again.

Good luck to everyone considering graduate school. Breathe. Stretch. Try to stay healthy. Most importantly, don't lose your sense of humor. I should probably have started with that one!

Suggested links:

Art&Education is an invaluable listserv for those interested in emerging higher education programs: artandeducation.net

You can find the **Visual Culture Caucus** through the College Art Association, or look them up here: theasa.net/caucus_visual

The newly launched **Journal of Artistic Research** is breaking ground with this online, peer-reviewed format (disclosure: I'm an associate editor): jar-online.net

The **International Visual Sociology Association** is always great for seeing how the visual plays out in sociological investigation. They also have a great listerv: visualsociology.org

And because it's quirky, and I want to see where it goes, **Audio Visual Thinking**: audiovisualthinking.org

Also, for those of you right here in Atlanta, the fledgling Emory effort, **Visual Scholarship Initiative**: emoryvsi.wordpress.com

Joey Orr is an artist, writer, editor, curator, and former instructor in Visual and Critical Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is currently a doctoral student in Emory University's Graduate Institute of Liberal Arts and a member of [John Q](#), the Atlanta-based art collective that recently won a fellowship from Artadia: The Fund for Art and Dialogue ([click here](#) for BURNAWAY's 2010 interview with John Q).
