

Robert R. McComsey Career Development Center



GRADUATE SCHOOL IN THE ARTS

Alfred University
Alfred NY 14802

Phone: 607-871-2164
Fax: 607-871-2791
www.alfred.edu/cdc - cdc@alfred.edu

Hours: 8:30-4:30 Monday-Friday
Walk-in hours: 1:00-4:30 Tues., Wed., and Thurs.

Graduate school is an important next step in your life or career. It is an intensive two to three year art experience in a concentrated environment. Specific degrees include the following:

Master of Fine Art (MFA) – the primary studio and performance degree. An MFA requires 64 or more credits of study that includes primarily a studio concentration in one area. Additional course work outside the concentration might include art history, drawing, and design. The MFA is the terminal degree for college teaching jobs in studio and some performing arts areas. In other words, it is considered the highest possible degree in the field.

Master of Art (MA) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) – for study in art history, art education, museum studies, criticism and other non-studio degrees. The PhD is the terminal degree for teaching art history, some performing arts areas, art theory, museum studies, dramaturgy, and other non-studio courses at the college level.

Other graduate art degrees include the Masters of Professional Development (MPD), or a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT), both for Art Education, although there are many more. Most AU students go on to MFA or MA programs.

We will assist you in preparing your graduate school applications whenever you choose to apply. Many AU students go straight on to graduate school. However, you may want to consider sitting out for at least one year.

Advantages:

- Gives adequate time to photograph work from your senior show and include that with your application.
- The application process will not conflict with creative and hectic work done in your senior year.
- Provides at least seven months to research graduate schools and get materials together.
- Allows time to visit schools.
- Allows time to earn money.
- Gives time to get over "undergraduate burn out" and become eager and excited about art school again.
- You may audition and "strike gold" in the first few weeks.

Disadvantages:

- May lose artistic momentum.
- May be swayed by the enticements of the "real world," such as earning money and having freedom from getting up early and making art on a schedule.

- You will probably lose access to a studio, unless you rent space or have generous parents.

Write to at least 10 graduate schools to begin your search

How to get started researching schools to write to:

- Come to the CDC library and ask to see the *College Art Association Guide to MFA Programs* in the Visual Arts, and/or the *Guide to MA/PhD Programs in Art and Art History*. These are the most comprehensive and up-to-date sources of information. For performing arts, use our Choices computer database or the Peterson's guides in the career library. We can show you how to use all of our database programs.
- Choices allows you to narrow down your list by state, degree, etc. It is available in the CDC computer lab.
- Talk to advisors and teachers who know your work well and see where they recommend you apply.
- Look at catalogs in the career resource library.
- Use internet resources such as <www.gradschools.com> (best for international searches) or <www.Petersons.com> (best for domestic searches)
- Consider how important location is to you: urban vs. rural, non-Midwestern, climate, part time employment possibilities, etc.
- Look at the websites of each of the colleges you are considering. Pay special attention to the faculty in the studios in which you are interested. What sort of work do they do? Where are their degrees from? You are really choosing a faculty member to study with, not just a university.
- **When you write** either by mail, email, or phone, ask for an application, catalog, or specific description of the program, which entrance exams or auditions are required for your program, and any information they can provide about financial aid, including assistantships and fellowships.

The ideal timeline

- Begin your search at least by September of the year before you plan to enter. (The earliest application deadlines are around the middle of January of the year in which you intend to enter; the latest are mid April. Assistantship application deadlines are usually earlier than that).
- Find out whether or not you need to take the GRE, MAT or other entrance exams (September). If so, contact the CDC for information about the tests.
- It may take a month to receive your materials (October).
- Investigate scholarships, fellowships, and other ways of paying for grad school (Start in October, but you won't finish until you begin to get your financial packages from schools).
- As you receive materials, begin to organize them by application deadline date.
- Allow a few weeks to look them over (November) and visit the schools if possible or practical. We highly recommend you visit to check out the facilities, talk with students, meet faculty.
- Begin to ask your professors for letters of recommendation. Allow them a minimum of two weeks, and many will need more to really be able to evaluate your work (November).
- Allow a month to write (and re-write) your application essays and put together your slide portfolio (November).
- Application packet should be almost complete by December.
- Build in time for auditions and campus visits (December through February, or whenever the deadlines are).

Apply to at least four schools

- One or two schools with a particular area or person with whom you would like to study.

- Two schools with strong overall reputations.
- One or two larger schools with a favorable admissions ratio.
- Schools with some type of inside connection: your advisor went there; your major professor has friends there, etc.
- Apply for assistantships at all schools you apply to.

A Completed Application Usually Includes...

1. **Transcript:** Admissions committees require official transcripts of your grades. To send a copy of your transcript to a graduate school, you need to contact the Registrar's Office – go to <http://www.alfred.edu/academics/html/transcript.html> for information. According to Federal law, the Registrar's Office is the only office on campus that can forward your transcript to a graduate school or company. In addition, you must make the request personally and in writing; a school cannot request them for you. Be sure to request your transcripts well before the application deadline. Guess what – it's free!
2. **Letters of Recommendation:** Most graduate schools require 2-3 letters of recommendation. Letters from your current faculty will carry the most weight with graduate admissions committees. Be sure to ask your references if they think they know you well enough to write a meaningful letter. Be aware that the earlier in the semester that you ask, the less busy faculty will be. It is a courtesy to provide them with addressed, stamped envelopes for their convenience - DO NOT ask them to send the letters directly to you to forward. In addition, giving your professors such documents as transcripts, a resume, a copy of your application essay, and a copy of a research paper may help them write a thorough recommendation. Most grad schools will expect you to have waived your of access to recommendation letters. ***Pick up our handout on Letters of Recommendation for more specific ideas.***

The Career Development Center will hold your references in a Credential File. We will mail them at your *written* request (e-mail, fax, in person, or postal mail) to the graduate schools to which you are applying. This file will be maintained for ten years after graduation, unless you continue to use your file on an active basis. There is no cost to you while you are a current student or for the first twenty (20) mailings after graduation. After that, there is a \$3.00 fee per address. For information, contact Peggy Broderick at the CDC (x2164) or see our website (www.alfred.edu/cdc - go to the Student section) to download the forms you need to start your file.

3. **The Personal Statement:** One or more essays on why you want to go to graduate school in art, your goals or philosophy of art, what you hope to accomplish in art school, the particular direction or focus in your work, etc. This is often the most difficult and time-consuming part of the application process. Your aim should be a clear, succinct statement showing that you have a definite sense of what you want to do, and showing your enthusiasm for the field of study you have chosen. Your essay should reflect your writing ability and reveal the clarity, depth, and focus of your thinking.

Admissions committees will assess a number of variables from your statement, including: your motivation and commitment to the field of study; writing ability; realistic expectations of the program and resulting career opportunities; major areas of interest within the field; research or work experience; educational background (formal and informal); short- and long-term goals; reasons for deciding to pursue graduate education in a particular field at a particular institution; maturity; personal uniqueness - what you would add to the diversity of the entering class.

Questions to ask yourself as you begin to structure the personal statement:

- What sets you apart from other applicants? Why may you be a stronger candidate for graduate study – and more successful and effective in your chosen field – than other applicants?
- What factors or events have contributed to your development into the person you are today?
- What is special, unique, distinctive, or impressive about your and your life story? What are some experiences – academic, personal or work-oriented – that would help the committee gather further information about you?
- When did you originally become interested in the field, and what have you learned since that time that has strengthened your resolve?
- What are your specific career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that need explanation?
- Have there been any unusual obstacles you have had to overcome to get to where you are now?
- What personal characteristics do you possess that would enhance your prospects for success in your profession? How have you demonstrated this characteristic in the past?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

Other general suggestions:

- Creative opening sentences are great IF you can find something unique, and if you stick with the theme throughout your essay.
- Back up your claims with solid examples of when you have demonstrated the skill or competency you are describing.
- The number one mistake people make in writing personal statements is not proofing the names of the universities! For example “For as long as I can remember, I’ve wanted to get my degree from Duke University.”...except that you are writing to Princeton.
- Do not address information that might reflect badly on you such as poor grades or a low GRE score in your essay. Keep it positive and inspired. Address these other issues in an addendum to your application or in a cover letter that you will enclose. Your explanation should be short and to the point, avoiding long, tedious excuses.

The CDC has several books on writing application essays that you might want to look at before starting. We strongly recommend that you have your letters reviewed by a counselor at the CDC, the Writing Center, AND at least one faculty member. We’ll all be assessing different qualities of your essay and will be able to give you a wide range of feedback.

4. **The Interview, Portfolio and/or Audition:** Interviews are required in some fields and highly encouraged in most others. They can be a very important opportunity to persuade an institution's admissions office that you would be an excellent candidate. Portfolios and auditions are often required for creative disciplines and can be the most important part of the application procedure. Be sure to prepare by arranging for a mock interview with the Career Development Center, or speaking with your faculty members about putting together the best portfolio or preparing for an audition. Many websites, such as <www.interviewfeedback.com> have “insider guides” to graduate and professional school interviews.

5. **GRE or MAT** test scores. (Some MFA programs do not require entrance exams).
6. **For visual artists: Slide portfolio** of 15 to 20 examples of your work. This is usually the most important component of your application. It will make or break your admission and chances at assistantships/fellowships. Choose your work very carefully and send only slides of your best, most mature work. Never include slides of works that are seconds or filler. Do not send slides without asking your faculty or other professionals for their feedback. The slides themselves must be of the highest professional quality. No compromise of any type can be accepted on this point. Have them professionally done, or, if you do them, have them professionally critiqued. If you have any questions about labeling your slides, ask the university which method they prefer.
7. **For performing artists: an audition**
8. **Resume** – the CDC can assist with this.
9. **Fee** (usually \$25-\$100) – check the admissions website first! Some universities will waive the fee if you use their online application.

Mailing the completed application: Be sure to mail everything well before the deadline and call to confirm that it got there; a late application can ruin your chances regardless of whose fault it is. Package it up nicely and do not fold several sheets of paper into a small business envelope. If you can afford it, send it certified mail so that you will know when the application has been received.

Follow-Up

- After you have sent your application packet in, call the university and confirm they received everything they need for a completed packet.
- Write to the faculty person with whom you wish to study.
- Write to the head of the area in which you wish to study.
- Visit the schools in which you are interested, if possible. Do this before applying or certainly after applying or being admitted. If admitted to more than one school, do this to be able to make the best choice. Remember that this is an expensive, long-term decision.
- Make appointments in advance.
- Take work along if possible; certainly take slides.
- Look over the facilities and look at student work.
- Talk with the Chairperson about assistantship possibilities.
- Talk with the professor in your area.
- Talk with present graduate students and ask them: How accessible are the professors? Are there any departmental politics to worry about? Are the facilities adequate? Are the assistantships adequate?
- Prepare a monologue (a new one) in case the admissions faculty wants to see it. Even if you do not use it, it will not hurt to have an extra monologue memorized.

If you are not accepted:

- Remember that your application will be in competition with a small percentage of the top undergraduate BFA /BA graduates and a school's final selection will represent a small percentage of this group (only about 5% of BFA graduates finish an MFA degree). Check the application to admission ratio for each school in the College Art Association Guide to MFAs. Your work and your application can be strong and there may be a number of others that are stronger.
- It is impossible to know or predict how a particular department will make its final selections or to know the strengths of the other applicants.

- Call the department graduate admissions director. Do not act or sound angry or defensive; this would be inappropriate and unprofessional. Always be polite and professional. Ask specifically if something was deficient or lacking in your application.
- Determine if you will reapply the next year after further research or preparation. Many times another year's maturity in working can help gain you admission to graduate school.
- Did you apply only to schools with too high an admissions ratio? Would you be wise to apply to some larger state university programs, or less selective institutions, where your chances are better?
- Try some alternate strategies. For example, apply at mid-year if allowed. Students may drop out or graduate, leaving openings. Or, apply during the summer session and excel. This is a chance to prove your value, if you can, and then apply for program admission.

Paying for Grad School

There are many types of aid provided for graduate study. ***You should never rule out a school as too expensive until you learn more about the types of aid generally received by its students.*** Federal aid is available to many U.S. citizens, nationals, or permanent residents. In order to qualify, all applicants must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). For the purposes of most federal student aid, graduate students are automatically considered independent. Keep in mind, however, that some schools require parental information and expect a contribution from parents who are able to provide, even if you are an independent student.

- Types and amounts of aid will vary tremendously by school
- Apply to as many sources as you can find
- Make sure you have all the forms required by each school
- Complete all forms legibly and accurately. Check your applications carefully, as errors and omissions can often cause problems
- Keep copies of all forms
- If you have special circumstances, communicate them directly to the financial aid officer
- Be aware that changes in your financial aid package may occur each year - it is up to you to find out if that happens
- Send in your application well before the deadline

Types of aid:

Grants and Fellowships - generally, these are awards that do not require repayment. They may be based solely on academic merit (fellowships/scholarships), or awarded based on need (grants). Many include tuition and stipends for living expenses. [A database of fellowship sources is available on the CDC website under the Student section.](#) There is also a database of scholarships on our Choices program, available in the CDC library. We will show you how to use it.

Teaching Assistantships - could require about 20 hours per week and may involve delivering lectures, doing crits, advising students, and supervising labs, assisting a professor. If you are interested in a TA position, contact the academic department. Ordinarily, you are not considered for such positions until the school has accepted you. Some schools have full-tuition waivers; others will waive part of your tuition.

Loans - There are several different federal loan programs available to you. Each loan program has a different maximum amount you can borrow, different requirements for eligibility, different interest rates and different repayment options. In addition to federal loans, there are many loan programs available to specific groups such as medical students, law students and MBAs. General information detailing some of these

programs can be found in *Peterson's Guide to Graduate and Professional Schools: An Overview*, which is available at the Career Development Center. The Financial Aid office of the school you are applying to should also be able to provide you with additional information.

Some of the better known fellowships in the arts are below (but there are so many more out there – please inquire):

The Mellon Fellowships – Open to seniors who plan to apply to a PH.D program. Masters degree students who attended a university without a PhD option are also eligible. This will aid students with outstanding potential to be teachers or humanitarian scholars and covers full tuition and book plus \$15,000 annually. The deadline to apply is December 18th . <http://www.woodrow.org/mellon>

Jacob K. Javitz Fellowship Program - This fellowship provides support to students of superior ability and a promise of a Master's degree that will lead to a doctoral degree in fine arts. This program grants the graduate student a stipend of \$18,000 annually. The web address is <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/HEP/legps/javits.html>

The Marshall Scholarship - This scholarship is open to all students. It gives graduate students the opportunity to study in The United Kingdom. Students are awarded \$16,500 a year to spend on their academic studies. The deadline to apply is late September. Their web-site is <http://ukscholarshipsdatabase.britishcouncil.org> or go through <http://www.britcoun.org> and click on students.

Rotary International Academic Ambassadorial Scholarship Program - Open to any student. This scholarship sends a student to any country they wish as long as it has a Rotary club. This student must promote friendly relations between different nations. The student has tuition and fees covered plus \$23,000 for any other academic endeavors. The deadline is early March and the web address is <http://www.rotaryfellowships.org>

Fulbright Scholarship - This is an educational exchange program offered to students who are interested in a study abroad program. This scholarship is awarded to top bachelors and masters candidates. The deadline for this scholarship is no later than October each year. The web address is <http://www.iie.org/fulbright>

Thayer Fellowship – This is a SUNY award for artists in the New York State College of Ceramics. Deadlines are late November/early December. Applications are available in the Art Office in Harder Hall.

American Association of University Women

<http://www.aauw.org/3000/felgrawa.html>

These grants are open to women who are U.S. citizens or permanent residents. Applicants should be preparing to re-enter the work force, change careers or advance their current careers. Funds are provided for tuition, fees, books, transportation and dependent care. The deadline is December 15. Application needs to be requested by December 1.

Advice from AU art alumni

Many Alfred graduates have the career goal of teaching at the college level, and that is the primary career goal of many MFA degree candidates. College teaching is an extremely competitive field, so here are some ways you can prepare yourself for that career, as well as teaching jobs at other levels:

- Do not be overly concerned with rankings, or try to mold your work into what

a school seems to be seeking. Look for a school and instructor that supports development of your work. This search can be something of a challenge in itself. Be clear on your own style and adaptability, but be aware that most schools are looking for artists who are willing to grow, not people who come in believing they are already perfect artisans and just need the degree.

- Stay connected to reality. In the undergraduate world of art school it is common to find most students making art that speaks only to themselves. Be ready to demonstrate and explain how your work and you as an artist are important to society and in particular to a university community.
- Be well rounded. Draw well descriptively and understand the full range of composition approaches, acting techniques, etc. Understand and be able to work with traditional materials, processes, and compositions. Have a practical understanding of art history and the contemporary art scene. Be able to explain the range of art and performance activities to people of varied backgrounds both in speaking and writing.
- Graduate work is specific. If you cannot choose between printmaking, photography, and graphic design right now, you will probably need to make that choice before entering graduate school. (This is a general guideline: some programs will allow you to remain broad in your media. The school's website will usually give you a good idea of whether or not they encourage this). For performing arts degree, graduate faculty will expect you to have been honing your craft in a specific area long before you apply.
- Take advantage of every teaching opportunity. Take courses in how to teach. Apply for graduate assistantships. Teach at community art centers. Resume entries in this area will give you an important leg up when job searching.
- Follow the advice of CDC staff and your faculty for professional preparation: resume, artist's statement, portfolio, headshot(s), teaching outlines, audition appointments and slides of your students' work (if possible and appropriate to the position you're applying for). Many schools will ask that you please not send
- A videotape of your performance upon initial application; you should contact the school for specific requirements for replacement of live auditions.
- Be organized. Meet deadlines, be on time, and keep all personal files and information up to date. Read all professional publications. Budget money for the job search, professional materials, and travel. Follow up on contacts. Join the College Art Association or professional performing arts organizations.
- Be personable by nature. Be friendly and positive. Speak well. Take every opportunity to present yourself to groups. Be confident but not pushy when meeting admissions representatives and other artists.
- The reality of any artist is that for every one actor, musician, dancer, visual artist that makes it, ten are struggling to pay rent. Be prepared for the fact that a steady paycheck is not something that comes right away with an MFA in performance or studio.
- Visit the school! Meet the faculty, the art students, and the admissions people. Check out the facilities and make sure they are what you will need to succeed. Most importantly, make sure the school feels right.

Grad School Checklist for Sample University, MFA in Ceramics
Customize for your own use

Sample University

Address: 264 Sample Street, Boston MA 33004

Email: admissions@sample.edu

Website: www.sample.edu/ceramics

Degree: *MFA in Ceramics*

of MFAs per year: *15*

of ceramics faculty: *4*

Flexibility to individualize curriculum: *Some – they encourage the use of mixed media in sculpture. Unique in that students aren't assigned one advisor, but a team of three faculty members.*

Facilities: *10 gas kilns, 3 salt/soda kilns, 1 raku kiln, 14 electric; individual studio spaces; excellent facilities overall*

Thesis requirement: *MFA show and artist statement; thesis is required*

Study abroad program: *Not specific to art school*

Connections for internships: *Not really discussed at interview; referred to their career services office*

Unique to this university: *Excellent guest lecture series; exhibit each semester; formal progress evaluation each semester; huge studio spaces.*

Financial:

Sticker price: *\$17,000/year*

Tuition waiver: *Possible for the best candidates, no need to apply separately*

Assistantship options and requirements: *Yes, majority receive money. There is a separate application for assistantships.*

Other university fellowships: *Yes, review them at www.sample.edu/fellowships*

Application Info

GRE required?: *No*

Waiver for online application?: *No*

Application fee: *\$50.00*

Other requirements: *Transcript, 20 slides, interview required, essays*

DATES:

Application mailed: *11/2/2010*

Transcript sent: *11/2/2010 (requested from Registrar's office)*

Emailed to follow up and confirm receipt: *11/8/2010*

Thanks to Lindsay Gilbert '05 and Kadie Midlam '01 for help with this document