



Degree Programs and Graphic Design in Canada

The Society of Graphic Designers of Canada (GDC) has prepared this publication with the intent of providing prospective students a basis for evaluating the published goals and claims of specific graphic design programs to deliver competent career preparation. This discussion draws heavily on information made available by the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) and National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD)* modified for applicability to the Canadian situation.

Key Points

Graphic designers work to achieve communication goals by analyzing and structuring messages, and by planning and composing images and text for the specific purpose of visually transmitting business, government, institutional or other information. Consideration of the public good is a common concern. Clients usually determine project aims, and designers often act as consultants.

Why “Graphic” Design?

The field of design is extensive, and encompasses many concentrations. Courses in design are often a prerequisite to acquiring degrees in other fields, but Graphic Design focuses on communication, and specifically on visual communication. The power of visual communication is today manifested everywhere in our society and cultural environment; it is the graphic designer that creates and shapes that environment.

Currently the practice of graphic design may be known under a variety of names: graphic design, visual design, visual communication design, communication arts, graphic or commercial arts are all common synonyms. On the other hand, the term “illustration or animation” does not refer to the same profession. Similarly, the term “graphic technology” refers to press printing or electronic pre-press technology, and not to the practice of graphic design, which is founded on analysis, structuring, planning, and solution seeking for a defined problem and context.

Types of Programs

Design programs in Canada can be generally grouped into three main types. There are four year programs offered at Universities, generally leading to an undergraduate degree. These institutions are usually members of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC). Another type of program are two or three year courses of study offered by institutions that are members of the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) or Polytechnics Canada. There are also other types of design programs, offered by a variety of institutions, generally for a shorter period of time.

While excellent programs of all types exist, the general consensus is that the longer term programs are best suited as a basis for training for professional graphic design practice. Therefore, the GDC has made a directory of programs offered by institutions belonging to the associations mentioned above available the gdc.net web-site.

Terminology

There are a variety of commonly accepted references to the design profession: graphic design, visual design, visual communication design, communication arts, graphic or commercial arts. The term “illustration or animation” does not refer to the same profession. The term “graphic technology” may govern those areas of press printing or electronic pre-press technology and not to the practice of graphic design, which is founded on analysis, structuring, planning, and solution seeking for a defined problem and context.

*Davis, Meredith. (2004) Making choices about the study of graphic design. Paper. American Institute of Graphic Arts and National Association of Schools of Art and Design. <http://nasad.arts-accredit.org/index.jsp?page=FAQ%2016>. Accessed July 15, 2007.

Association of Canadian Community Colleges or Polytechnic Canada

Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada

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Education in Canada. (2008). Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. Paper. <http://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Pages/default.aspx?cat=0&page=2&sort=Publication.PublicationDate&dir=desc> Accessed September 20, 2008.



Base collection of knowledge and skills

Graphic designers entering the profession are proficient in a wide realm of conceptual, formal, and technological skills. Despite what education and career tracks they have taken, particular underlying abilities have been acquired.

Degree Programs and Professional Preparation

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. While no single curriculum structure is preferred by the graphic design profession, there is a minimum threshold of competency for practice that generally can be acquired only within a four-year undergraduate professional degree program that provides a comprehensive education in the discipline. These programs are available in both art schools and universities.

Programs that address some, but not all issues of graphic design practice may provide opportunities for more breadth in art or other subjects. It is expected that students graduating from these preprofessional programs will acquire the essential competencies for practice through subsequent study before pursuing employment in the field.

Given the tremendous diversity among programs with graphic design content, any claim that all curricula offering some graphic design study produce the same outcome – a student fully qualified for entry to the profession – is misleading.

UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES

Four-Year Professional Degree Programs with Majors in Graphic Design

Within the framework of a four-year undergraduate program, the professional degree with a major in graphic design is intended to prepare students with the knowledge and skills required for a career as a graphic designer. These degrees are usually titled Bachelor of Fine Arts in Visual Communication Design or Bachelor of Graphic Design. A majority of credits should be dedicated to design-related course work in with a significant portion in graphic design. The remainder are taken in the liberal arts. The program is specialized, rather than broad-based, and designed for students who know they want to become graphic designers.

Although no curriculum can guarantee a specific career, successful graduates of four year professional programs should be qualified for most entry-level positions in graphic design. Their specific course work may also make them qualified for subspecialties (examples: electronic multimedia vs. print, exhibition, packaging, environmental, or advertising design). Further, these students should possess the education necessary to move toward management and/or leadership position within the field and also be ready for advanced graduate study in the field of graphic design.

Four-Year Professional Studio Art Degrees with Majors Other Than Graphic Design

The professional undergraduate degree in art focuses on the creation and study of art with part of that study being possible in design. Normally, most of the course work is devoted to overall studies in art and/or design; the remainder, to studies in the liberal arts. Bachelor of Fine Arts is the typical degree title. Within this framework, there are many ways in which graphic design content may be included.

Some of the most common are: 1) a small amount of required or elective course work, usually in the upper two years of study; 2) a set of courses that constitute an area of emphasis, specialization, or concentration within a larger major in general design or art; and 3) course work or projects assigned under an independent study program.



Depending on their goals and objectives, content, and the range and depth of graphic design studies, these programs provide students with a little, some, or a significant amount of pre-professional preparation for practice in graphic design.

Students who enroll in these programs should view them as a way of: 1) gaining a broad-based professional degree in art or design, or a specific professional degree in a field other than graphic design; 2) acquiring some aspects of the common body of knowledge and skills related to professional practice in graphic design; and 3) developing a sense of where graphic design fits into future education and career plans.

Four-Year Liberal Arts Programs

Liberal arts programs are the most common undergraduate degree. They place greater emphasis on general education and lesser emphasis on studio design and visual arts studies than professional degree programs. Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science are the usual degree titles.

In these programs, graphic design courses can never be more than a small part of the total credits required for graduation. The number of qualified graphic design faculty is also likely to be smaller than in professional degree programs, limiting the range of course work the program can appropriately deliver. Promotional materials for these programs, however, too frequently describe a graphic design focus, specialization, concentration, or major. Although consistent with the way in which these terms are used elsewhere in the institution, such titles can mislead students and employers to believe that the degree will qualify them for employment in design at any level.

Such programs have value to many students, especially those who are unclear about career aspirations, but they are not structured to provide the requisite knowledge and skills. Graduates of these programs who gain employment in the field of graphic design are usually limited in their advancement in the profession and require extensive apprenticeship training by employers. In a challenged economy, such opportunities may be less available. Many graduates of these programs discover they must pursue a second bachelor's degree or master's study in order to compete professionally with more qualified peers.

Students who enroll in liberal arts programs should view them as a way of: 1) gaining the valuable knowledge and skills inherent in a broad liberal education; 2) acquiring a general foundation for later design study; and 3) determining their level of interest in design or graphic design.

Two- to Three-Year Programs in Graphic Design

Community colleges, technical, and polytechnic schools offer courses and curricula described as graphic design, commercial art, graphic arts, and visual communication, computer arts in a two to three year program of study. These programs typically culminate in a diploma or certificate. Effective programs prepare students for: 1) technical support positions in the field of graphic design; and/or 2) transfer to a design program in a four-year institution. Students prepared to provide technical support services are not employable as designers responsible for the invention of appropriate visual form, development of communication strategy, or management of design practices. They gain computer skills used to prepare designers' work for printing or the web. Some learn to configure and provide support for computer systems in design offices while others prepare for work in the printing industry or web based media.

It is common that two-year programs try to serve both students who wish to prepare for technical support positions and who wish to transfer to four-year programs through the same curriculum. The all-too-frequent result is a compressed, generalized set of courses that may not be acceptable as transfer credit by four-year programs in which discrete topics, such as typography, are examined in greater depth across a longer



sequence of courses. Applicants to two-year programs who want to continue their studies in four-year programs should question admissions counselors about specific courses that transfer to four-year programs.

MASTER'S DEGREES IN GRAPHIC DESIGN

The degrees, Master of Arts or Master of Science is offered by a number of institutions. The degree Master of Fine Arts is more typical and required by most colleges and universities when hiring graphic design faculty. At present, the master's degree is not required for professional practice in graphic design and there is no national professional licensing of graphic designers (except in the province of Ontario) there are no practice-driven criteria that shape master's curricula in the same way that they indicate certain course work at the undergraduate level. Therefore, students should look for a good match between their purpose for pursuing master's study and program content, and structure. Because graduate students work closely with faculty, applicants should determine the appropriateness of faculty qualifications and interests. There are several program profiles among current graduate offerings.

General practice orientation

Students with educational experiences other than the four-year professional undergraduate degree with a major in graphic design prepare for graphic design practice or undergraduate teaching careers through this type of degree program. Instruction resembles design office practice and students' work is largely in applied problems that replicate assignments in the field. These curricula generally follow the model of fine arts, with high concentrations in studio instruction and a final project or exhibition of visual work required for graduation.

Specialized practice orientation

Students focus on a segment of practice, such as interaction design, or a particular philosophical approach to graphic design, such as design for social change or as a medium for personal expression. These programs narrow the range of issues addressed in the curriculum and rely heavily on in-depth investigations that push the boundaries of a practice specialization or focus on personally defined problems. They may lead to a way of looking at design that differs from mainstream practice. Again, the conclusion of studies generally takes the form of a project or exhibition. Students in these programs often hold professional undergraduate degrees in graphic design and may have practice experience that informs their selection of a specialization.

Research orientation

This profile responds to the growing field of design research and doctoral degrees in the discipline. Students enter these programs to develop research skills and to speculate on emerging issues and areas of practice. They are less concerned about (re)entering the field of graphic design as it is currently practiced and more interested in developing the body of knowledge about design. While some graduates of these programs do return to practice, many will enter research positions or teaching. Course work may include: 1) study of research in non-design disciplines that hold significance to the understanding of design (example: anthropology, computer science, cognitive science, etc.) and 2) studios that address issues beyond those of the typical design office and seek deeper understanding of design theory. Graduation requirements may range from a written thesis, to a final visual project, to a research project situated within a practice-oriented context.

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