The American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA), the national organization that represents professional graphic designers, and the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD), which accredits college and university design programs, have prepared this publication to assist students in making choices among educational programs in graphic design. The text that follows is intended to help students consider the extent to which specific graphic design programs can accomplish their published goals and the clarity and accuracy of claims about career preparation.

**Many colleges and universities offer courses and degree programs in graphic design; however, content, time spent in the major, and graduation competencies reflect various purposes. The label** graphic design **carries many meanings. 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.**

**GRAPHIC DESIGN** is the profession that plans and executes the design of visual communication according to the needs of audiences and the context for which communication is intended. Graphic designers work in advertising agencies, consulting offices, in-house design departments in corporations, instititutions, publishing, and the film, television, and computer industries. They create printed and electronic communication that includes: books; magazines; newspapers; catalogs; posters; brochures; annual reports; graphic identities and logos; exhibitions; packaging; environmental graphics and signage; CD covers; movie titling; on-air television graphics; interactive websites; and multimedia programs. Their work is composed of images and typography. Graphic designers who work in film, video, or computer media also use sound and motion as means for communicating messages.

Studies in the compositional arrangement of basic two-dimensional and three-dimensional form are often required for degrees in other fields and it is quite common to find courses titled *design* in the beginning semesters of arts curricula. Because the term *design* appears in their titles, it is important to understand the distinction between this instruction and courses focused on *graphic design*.

Several titles in common use refer to the graphic design profession: *graphic design, visual design, visual communications, communication design, communication arts, commercial art, interaction design.* The term *graphic arts* may refer to printmaking or technical support areas, such as offset printing or the electronic preparation of art for offset printing and not to communication design activity based on creative problem solving. *Illustrators* create drawn images and require different professional preparation from that of graphic designers.

# 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 *pre-professional* 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. Students are encouraged to compare college curricula to the standards (left) and essential competencies (right) for professional practice defined by AIGA and NASAD before making choices to enroll in particular programs.

## 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 that meets NASAD standards 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 Graphic Design* or *Bachelor of Graphic Design*. The overwhelming majority of credits (at least 65%) are dedicated to design-related course work with at least 25% 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 accreditable 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 positions 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, at least 65% of the course work is devoted to overall studies in art and/or design; the reminder, 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. *However, the AIGA and NASAD do not recognize professional undergraduate degree programs with less than a major in graphic design as providing full preparation for entry and later upward mobility within the graphic design profession.* 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. Students holding this degree should pursue additional study at the bachelor's or master's level to qualify for practice careers.

**Four-Year Liberal Arts Programs** - Liberal arts programs are the most common undergraduate degree in the United States. They place greater emphasis on general education and lesser emphasis on studio design and visual arts studies than professional degree programs. Normally, 30-45% of the total credits are in art and design, with the remainder being course work across a range of fields. *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.

*The AIGA and NASAD do not recognize a four-year liberal arts degree in art or design as adequate preparation for entry as a graphic design professional.* 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 their 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-Year Programs in Graphic Design -** Community colleges and technical schools offer courses and curricula described as *graphic design, commercial art, graphic arts,* and *visual communication* in a two-year program of study. *Associate of Arts, Associate of Science,* and *Associate of Fine Arts* are typical degree titles. 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. *It is the position of the AIGA and NASAD that two years of study are insufficient in preparing someone for entry to the field as a designer and that there is a limit to what students graduating from two-year programs can expect in employment in the field.*

Two-year programs that advertise the potential for transfer to four-year programs in graphic design at other institutions are responsible for curriculum coordination, articulation agreements that define equivalencies between courses at the two institutions, and evidence that their students graduate from four-year programs in less than four years.

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 initial *Master of Arts* or *Master of Science* (30 semester hours) is offered by a number of institu-tions. The terminal *Master of Fine Arts* (60 credit hours) or equivalent, 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 professional licensing or certification of graphic designers; 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, stu-dents 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 deter-mine 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 prac-tice 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 special-ization 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 re-search 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, cgonitive 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.