

National Association of Schools of Art and Design

Policy Analysis Paper

THINKING ABOUT TERMINAL PROFESSIONAL DEGREES IN ART AND DESIGN

October 1, 2004

The following statement is intended to facilitate discussion both within and outside the National Association of Schools of Art and Design. It is not a statement of accreditation standards or procedures, nor does it have any function in the accreditation process of the Association. Its purpose is to provide an analytical policy review of a number of issues associated with terminal degrees in the fields of art and design.

INTRODUCTION

For many years, the field of art and design has offered and recognized two terminal degrees: the Master of Fine Arts and the Doctor of Philosophy. The Master of Fine Arts is awarded primarily in fields of studio practice and considered the professional terminal degree in those fields. The Doctor of Philosophy is awarded in fields of academic practice that focus on visual content. The Ph.D. is the research terminal degree. This basic structure—a professional and a research terminal degree—is shared with many other fields.

In the last few years, many concerns about graduate degree titles and content have been raised and discussed. Among these are the prestige associated with specific titles; ways to develop degrees that combine professional studies, scholarship, and research; approaches to subject matter from multiple disciplinary perspectives; and how to develop and strengthen current programs. These and other issues are not always easy to resolve, either on a specific campus or in terms of national policies and frameworks. Issues of content, resources, and esteem can mix in volatile ways. Given the complexities, it is important to consider the many elements and forces producing the context for decision-making about terminal degrees. This briefing paper is intended to provide an overview of these elements, to make connections among them, and to pose questions useful to such considerations, both locally and nationally.

FOCUS

The focus of this paper is the question about whether nationally the professional terminal degree in art and design should be a doctorate rather than a Master of Fine Arts. Other issues of content and purpose are addressed, but usually from the perspective of the primary issue. This analysis reflects the fact that the MFA and the Ph.D. serve different basic purposes that remain constant as practice and designations evolve.

Some institutions are considering or have established doctoral programs that combine research and practice, that open new fields of research and scholarship, or that combine disciplines or perspectives in new ways. These individual programs may influence the evolution of national policy, but they are not in themselves an expression of a new national policy. In terms of content, they combine studio with other studies rather than redefining the professional terminal degree in terms of its present content. These experimenting institutions have worked with many of the questions posed in this briefing paper and thus are an important resource. The focus here is on the future of the terminal degrees that concentrate on professional practice. The word “terminal” is regularly used in art, design, theatre, and dance because of the need to qualify the purpose and rank of the Master of Fine Arts degree. An interesting question is, “What would happen if we stopped using that word?”

This paper has another focus: facing foursquarely possibilities productive, benign, and destructive to people and institutions and their work, and thus to the field as a whole. For example, it is critical to remember that new kinds of degree programs have been established in the past. When such programs are not widely accepted, individuals holding the credential are often disadvantaged in the academic marketplace.

FINDING A WAY FORWARD

Wise people consider things carefully, even if they move quickly. It is always prudent to calculate—in financial and all other dimensions—the known costs of any venture and to take possible or unforeseen costs into account, and to be ruthless in pursuing and understanding risks. Time is a major issue. Most institutions are not in a position to move instantly on the establishment of new degree programs. National discussion, particularly if it is analytical and thoughtful, can encourage and facilitate local considerations that, in the aggregate, will create the eventual national decision. Care is needed with the tone and tenor of discussions. National considerations need to be measured, calm, and respectful of the fact that leaders in each institution face different challenges and concerns with respect to all of the issues associated with all types of terminal degree study in art and design. This is true whether the institution offers terminal degrees or not. The human dynamics are such that even if a conversion of terminal designation from the MFA to the doctorate were deemed universally desirable and efforts in a significant number of institutions were placed in motion to create new degrees, it would take years for the evolution to be complete. During that time, professionalism and decency require extreme care with the conditions in which all our colleagues pursue their artistic, intellectual, and career aspirations and with the leadership functions that MFA programs provide on many levels. It is critical that discussions and decisions proceed in an atmosphere of reason and restraint and where, if possible, issues of prestige are secondary to issues of content and the substantive advance of the various fields of art and design.

NASAD PRINCIPLES

NASAD articulates the following principles for its own participation in discussions about the future of terminal degrees:

- NASAD is a forum for exchanging points of view. Debate, questioning, and even skepticism are welcome. However, the Association will work to preserve an emphasis on analysis rather than on concerted political action.
- Strategic analysis is essential. This means careful, realistic consideration of many contextual issues and forces. It means looking hard for the possible unintended consequences of any course of action. It means helping colleagues think rather than telling them what they should or must do.
- Two types of respect must be maintained: for preservation of multiple approaches to high-level educational efforts in the visual arts, and for thoughtful evolution, change, and innovation.
- Excellence has its primary source in the work of individuals. Aggregations of individual work are the basis for institutional performance.
- Individuals able to do excellent work in the visual arts may or may not have obtained specific credentials. Credentials are the result of demonstrated capability and capacity. They are not a substitute for capability and capacity.
- Decisions to offer specific degrees at specific levels are fundamentally and primarily the responsibility of individual institutions. This is true for content, degree level, and any specific relationship between the two.
- NASAD standards and accreditation procedures already accommodate both traditional and experimental approaches to terminal degrees. The NASAD Commission on Accreditation will review terminal degree programs with any title that are presented to it by member or applicant institutions. However, NASAD will not use the accreditation process as a means to change the terminal professional degree from the Master of Fine Arts to a Doctorate. Any such change must come from the decisions of institutions.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS AND QUESTIONS

Creation and Research

Research means specific things in specific fields or areas of study. Traditionally, research refers to the study of something that exists already, rather than the creation of something new. Traditional scientific or scholarly research may produce or lead to something new by gaining new knowledge about something that already exists. However, there is an important distinction between creating something and researching something, even though creation and research or investigation can lead to each other and can be a part of each other.

Particularly in academic settings, when creators need to compare what they do to what traditional researchers do, they will often say, “Our creative process is the equivalent to your research.” The sense is that “What we do in *our* profession produces a work of art or design, and what you do in *your* profession produces a work of research in the humanities, sciences, or social

sciences.” Accepting that one thing is the functional equivalent of another is not necessarily accepting that one thing *is* the other.

Opening Questions:

- Given that much progress has been made in higher education to obtain functional equivalency (*our* studio practice is an equivalent to *your* scholarly and scientific research), to what extent is it prudent to argue for direct equivalency (*our* studio work is no different than *your* scholarly and scientific research)? For one thing, to what extent would direct equivalency bring *our* research under the same requirements and evaluation regimes as *their* scholarly and scientific research and thus destroy the nature of *our* ‘research’?
- What is likely to happen if the definition of research broadens considerably to the point where all practice or investigation associated with practice is research? What about functional differences that sustain the basis for reciprocity, integration, resource allocations, and conditions of diversity that support multidisciplinary?
- To what extent can lost distinctions lead to new definitions and increased disciplinary territoriality by discipline or by type of degree?

The Natures of Degrees

For the most part, academic institutions, higher education, organizations, and accrediting bodies work hard to maintain the integrity of degree titles. If this were not the case, degree titles would become meaningless; titles would no longer signify particular approaches to knowledge, specific content, or certifications of capability and capacity. It is essential, for example, to have a clear distinction between the M.D. and the Ph.D. in anatomy.

Professional terminal degrees vary depending on the particular profession they serve. There is not much commonality between the MFA and the M.D. and no reason why there should be. However, the Ph.D. is different. Although institutions operate a wide variety of programs leading to the Ph.D., there is consensus that the Ph.D. is awarded for the completion of programs almost exclusively focused on scholarly research in the humanities, empirical research in the sciences, or combinations of the two in fields such as the social sciences or education. In fields such as music composition and creative writing, where Ph.D.s are offered by a few institutions, programs are centered on the development of high levels of scholarly competence in terms of traditional research in addition to intellectually-based creation of a work or works of art.

The situation just described leads to a fact. Terminal professional doctorates are essentially controlled by the respective professions. Overall standards and requirements for the Ph.D. are controlled essentially by the academy, which means by a consensus position of many disciplines.

Opening Questions:

- To what extent is the creation or development of works of art and design in the category of intellectual work traditionally called “art” due to content, approach, and habits of mind and

work? To what extent is it in the categories traditionally called humanities, science, social science, and so forth?

- Another approach to the same basic question: To what extent is making art and design a core type of work with many strong, essential connectors to other fields? To what extent is it a branch or an adjunct of other fields?
- To what extent do connections with other intellectual approaches—humanities, science, social science—create the possibility of combinations and integrations that mix content, knowledge, habits of mind and work, and goals in new specific ways?
- What are the implications of the answers to the first three questions to the natures of terminal degrees with a focus on visual content from one or more perspectives? For example, the terminal degree preparation of an individual able to think and work as an artist/designer and as a scientist. This is different than taking a Ph.D. in a traditional field—such as history, economics, one of the sciences, or higher education—and having visual-, art-, or design-related content the major field of study.

Terminal Degree Purposes

In practice, terminal degrees have two fundamental purposes. They prepare individuals to work at the most advanced levels of a particular field, and they provide a credential important for obtaining employment as a teacher in higher education. Perennial tensions arise from the implications of these two purposes for the content of terminal degree programs. This is particularly true in fields such as art and design where specific degrees are not required for employment, except in certain educational institutions.

Opening Questions:

- In what areas and to what extent is the MFA being questioned as the terminal degree in the art and design professions outside academe?
- To what extent are students seeking the MFA as a college teaching credential?
- To what extent does the MFA appear to be providing appropriate preparation for teaching traditional and currently developing studio content?
- Do the answers to the last two questions vary significantly from institution to institution, by type and size of institution, by region?
- If the nature and content of the professional terminal degree changed, what would various undergraduate curricula in art and design be expected to look like if taught primarily by holders of these new degrees?

Professional Doctorates

What can we learn from other fields? For 50 years, the Doctor of Musical Arts degree has been awarded primarily in the fields of performance and composition. The degree was established to address credentials and prestige issues in higher education. Approximately 50 institutions in the United States offer the DMA. In the field of law, the initial professional degree for many years was the Bachelor of Laws, or LLB. Most lawyers held two bachelor's degrees. Master's and doctorates were rare. In the 1960s, the law profession changed its terminal degree from the LLB to the JD, a professional doctorate now given as a matter of course to those completing the first professional degree in law. Very few individuals with JD degrees are called "doctor," nor does the profession use that title in its daily work. The field of education has had a professional doctorate for many years. The EdD is offered by many institutions. Some institutions offer joint doctoral programs where individuals interested in careers in education can obtain the EdD along with another professional terminal degree. Normally, with the possible exception of the EdD, individuals holding professional doctorates aspire to focus their life's work in a profession or disciplinary field beyond education.

Opening Questions:

- To what extent do the fields centered on the creation and/or development of works of art or design need a professional doctorate? What about design fields in which even MFA programs are rare?
- If there is a need, how much is driven by content and how much by the images of titles? For example, is a new level of degree needed to address content beyond the scope of the MFA? Is the content and structure of the present MFA sufficient for the professional doctorate? If not, how much more of what must be added to the MFA?
- Given its nature and the need to protect title/content consistency for all degrees, what would a professional doctorate focused on the creation and development of art and design be called? To what extent would a degree with any title proposed deal effectively with the prestige issue?

The Position of the MFA

For decades, institutions and organizations have worked to gain acceptance of the MFA as a terminal degree. Today, the MFA, or its equivalent, has significant attention, support, and respect in American higher education. This is the case not only in art and design, but also in theatre and dance. The MFA is clearly distinguished by length and requirements from the Master of Arts and Master of Science. The MFA is understood to be structured appropriately for the content that it addresses and the fields that it serves. The MFA codifies a real distinction between the specific kinds of intellectual applications, knowledge, and skills associated with professional practice in one or more studio fields and the specific kinds of intellectual application, knowledge, and skills associated with traditional scholarship and research dealing with works of art or design, or issues of visual content that are normally the central purpose of a Ph.D.

Opening Questions:

- What are the particular ramifications for institutions and the field if institutional and aggregate recognition of and investment in the MFA as the professional terminal degree a) continue as they are, b) evolve over time, and c) diminish quickly?
- Given that higher education is in the midst of a generational change, to what extent is there a need to re-explain and recontextualize the MFA, both institutionally and nationally, to a new group of administrative leaders?
- Given that the MFA is a framework designed to facilitate advanced learning of certain kinds of content, to what extent can the MFA accommodate new purposes and content without losing its integrity? To what extent are investments needed to a) develop new approaches under traditional MFA frameworks and b) develop new MFA or other frameworks?

MFA Degree Recipients

By now, many hundreds of individuals hold an MFA in the visual arts and design. It is impossible to know how many of these individuals pursued the MFA primarily in order to gain a terminal degree that would serve as a teaching credential, whether they intended to focus their career in higher education or not. Some of these individuals have just graduated, others have just begun their careers in higher education, and will be seeking tenure. Still others already have tenure and are seeking advancement in rank. Many others have the degree as “insurance.” MFA holders of working age encompass several generations of people. Any change in the status of the MFA as a terminal degree could affect all of them in some way.

Opening Questions:

- To what extent is it important for the field to protect the investments of MFA degree holders in their terminal degrees? Are there individuals in the field at greater risks than others? Are junior faculty or others not yet hired as faculty members at greater risk than senior faculty?
- If it is important to protect current or potential members of the faculty, why is it important? For example, career entry and development, earning power, time and financial allocations, independence, prestige, and so forth.
- To the extent other field-wide considerations appear to make protecting current or potential faculty members a secondary priority, how could any transition to any new professional terminal degree be structured to do the least damage to MFA degree holders?

Implications for the MFA

If a professional studio doctorate were developed and used widely, what might happen to the MFA and to MFA programs?

Opening Questions:

- Might the MFA become (a) extinct over time, (b) the second tier of a three-tier graduate structure—MA/MS, MFA, doctorate, (c) the terminal degree title for programs that are exclusively studio-focused and not oriented to college teaching, (d) the qualifying degree for a professional doctorate, (e) the designation of highly experimental and/or individualized programs, (f) focused on high-level, but specific, skills sets for various professions in art and design, or (g) a credential primarily awarded through distance learning or low residency programs, and so forth?
- What are the ramifications for the field and for institutions and MFA holders of each possibility listed above?
- How might MFA programs be assisted, transformed, reshaped, harmed or destroyed?
- What are the dangers of creating the kind of national discussion that places the MFA in limbo, that gives excuses for maintenance or lowered funding based on wait-and-see rationales?
- What are the ways to innovate or experiment with doctoral programs without pulling support from the MFA? How can considerations and developments proceed locally without pre-emptive declarations of national policy?

Prestige – Individual

Many current concerns about the MFA as a terminal degree seem centered in questions of prestige: “A master’s degree, terminal or not, will never be accepted as equivalent to the doctorate.” “MFA holders have no chance to rise to high academic positions outside of their disciplines.” “MFA holders can be disadvantaged in hiring, promotion, and tenure situations.” “MFA holders are pointedly *not* called ‘doctor’ by institutional colleagues.” “The number of doctorates on faculties is seen as an indicator of quality.” “The MFA takes too much explaining, and increasingly, explanations do not work.”

Opening Questions:

- How universal is the prestige problem for individuals? Are there differences by region, by size and type of institution, by level of degrees offered, and so forth?
- To what extent can the prestige of the MFA be raised for those who do not sufficiently respect it?
- To what extent is the issue symbolic and centered around the term “doctorate”?

Structural Considerations

Degree programs are built around specific sets of goals and objectives. These may be focused around a particular discipline or profession, or combinations thereof. They may be conceived and

used for research doctorates, professional terminal degrees, or new combinations that may or may not carry traditional titles. Goals and objectives influence the development and evolution of structures, that, in turn, have a large influence on the way graduate education is organized within institutions. Control, and especially quality control, is a critical issue. It is not unusual to have an overall graduate school structure that sets requirements applicable to various disciplinary and professional programs. In many respects, education for terminal degrees is usually led by the student's major professor. Structurally, graduate programs have a more individual character than undergraduate programs. Therefore, decisions about graduate education move through a complex set of individual, disciplinary/professional, and institutional considerations and organizational mechanisms. Changing the credential awarded for completion of the terminal professional degree in art and design will not change basic structural and decision-making issues and formats, either in most institutions or for the field as a whole. However, it might change the relationship of those terminal degree programs to the organizational and decision-making structures that exist. Purpose and content could be significantly affected.

Opening Questions:

- To the extent that art and design programs have fundamental control of the MFA, what are the possible effects on that control of moving to a doctoral structure, especially if the doctorate is a Ph.D.?
- How will investments in the MFA and other terminal degrees, the natures of degrees, definitions of research, and other factors influence the nature of control?
- How would the field avoid control of the professional terminal degree program by those with little in-depth understanding of the nature of its content and product, or the habits of mind and work that are involved? How would the field avoid the transfer from majority to minority voting rights with respect to degrees for creative work?

Institutions —Eligibility and Capacity

According to the Council of Graduate Schools, there are, at present, approximately 1,700 master's-degree-granting institutions in the United States, and between 450 and 600 institutions that award a doctorate of some kind. Some institutions that presently award the MFA are not chartered or eligible to offer doctoral degrees. Capacity is also an issue. As is the case for the MFA, terminal doctoral degrees carry certain resource responsibilities. Offering a research doctorate means research capabilities. For institutions that already offer professional or research doctorates, moving into new doctoral program areas may be somewhat easier. However, resource issues still remain. For schools of art and design, either located within or in close proximity to research universities, joint programs—especially those combining professional and research content—are possibilities.

Opening Questions:

- To what extent do eligibility and capacity issues differ with respect to offering professional and research doctorates in institutions that now have neither? For example, what about gatekeepers such as boards of trustees, regents, accreditors, the lobbying power of current

doctoral institutions, and so forth? How difficult is it to obtain the authority to grant the Ph.D.? Is there the same degree of difficulty in awarding a professional doctorate?

- What, beyond the MFA, would be required for an institution to offer a professional doctorate in art and design—just more of the same for more time, or something different? What are the implications of the answer on administrative structure, supporting resources, and funding (see below)? Is the answer significantly different for a research-focused doctorate with a studio component?
- How do questions of eligibility and capacity change when degree content is provided cooperatively? To what extent and in what ways do non-doctoral institutions give up the degree-granting authority to a doctoral-granting partner?

Doctorates Offered Abroad

Institutions in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, and perhaps other countries are offering doctoral degrees in studio art and design. Availability of these doctorates combined with prestige issues associated with the MFA raise questions of foreign competition for terminal degree students. The presence of these foreign opportunities could put real or self-imposed pressure on American institutions.

It is critical, therefore, to understand the commonalities and differences in approach to terminal degree education in the United States and in other countries.

Opening Questions:

- What are the commonalities and differences among doctoral degree programs in various countries, especially English-speaking countries? What about entry requirements, credit for previous academic or life's work, time to degree, qualifying examinations, project expectations, and so forth?
- To what extent are foreign doctorates (and MFAs) accepted in American colleges and universities as entry-level qualifications for faculty positions?
- To what extent are other definitions, philosophical assumptions, and structures of foreign degrees acceptable in the United States among (a) art and design schools and departments, (b) the graduate schools of research institutions, (c) the community of graduate education as a whole, and (d) various gatekeepers?

Funding

Graduate education is more expensive than undergraduate education, and doctoral education is the most expensive of all. Thus, the funding challenges are great for institutions considering creating or evolving to doctoral level study in any field. This is a primary reason why decisions about degree offerings must be left to institutions. High levels of funding become a sustaining responsibility. The start-up costs are only the beginning.

Opening Questions:

- How would you answer the following: If a large number of MFA-granting institutions offered a professional doctorate in art and design that replaced or was in addition to the MFA, how much would it cost—per current MFA student, per institution, or nationally? In what ways are the benefits worth the costs?
- How likely are increases in funding to be forthcoming? How likely are they to be sufficient to create new programs *and* sustain current undergraduate and graduate programs?
- What problems are we trying to solve, and what are the most cost-effective ways to solve them?

Faculty Leadership and Time

Most faculty leading MFA programs either have MFAs themselves or the equivalent professional training and experience. If studio-based doctorates are to be offered, questions are sure to be raised about the qualifications of those with only MFAs to guide doctoral study, especially in places where the MFA is not respected. Another issue is faculty time.

Opening Questions:

- In programs that are studio-based, what are the risks of short- or long-term program leadership transfers from studio expertise to scholarly research or other kinds of expertise?
- What issues of time, and therefore of resources, must be confronted? What would be needed beyond what is available now? What about managing overall institutional requirements for offering doctorates?
- How would you answer the following: If MFAs can lead doctoral study, isn't the MFA equivalent to the doctorate? If it is equivalent, why is the doctorate needed?

Relationships

The success of art and design programs within multipurpose institutions rests in significant measure upon maintaining productive relationships with high-level administrators and other faculty and administrative groups that can have influence on the climate and resources of the art and design program. Relationships fray quickly over resources, especially when there are feelings of unwarranted outside pressure to duplicate functions at higher costs. Moving degree functions from one credential level to another has often produced national and institutional animosities. Whatever is done, the field of art and design must take care that it does not damage productive relationships or reputations and images associated with thoughtful stewardship and responsible aspirations.

Opening Questions:

- Given all factors and complexities, how can discussions, analyses, and actions regarding terminal degrees with a studio component proceed in ways that both are and appear responsible to institutional and higher education leaders?
- How can the discussion include issues of respect and prestige without creating an overall message that says, “We are insufficiently honored, you pay”?
- How do you respond to the following: What would a change from MFA to doctorate mean for the quality, intensity, scope, or content potential of what we are now doing?
- How can we clearly differentiate the various functions of advanced study such as the highest levels of studio practice, research and scholarship, combinations of studio practice and practice in other fields, combinations of studio practice and research and scholarship, research and scholarship in combinations of fields, and so forth? All of these are inherent or applicable to advanced study in art and design. Each has a different approach and body of content; therefore, proposing the same degree-rubric for all is full of risk.

Prestige —Institutions

To a great extent, prestige is in the eye of the beholder. There is no way to measure prestige accurately, and even if it could be measured, it is not at all clear that there is a moment-to-moment correlation between prestige and quality. Prestige, in part, is based on images. Offering advanced degrees is often associated with institutional prestige. Also, there is no question but that, in each field, especially to those without knowledge of the field, degrees from some institutions are “more prestigious” than others. The issue of prestige has been raised to high levels of concern because rankings have become especially critical in a society where there is little time to analyze and think. In the continuing competition for attention, resources, and images of success, institutions will make all sorts of decisions based in part on their perceptions about prestige. In this climate, it is important to face the prospect that, for some hiring institutions, an MFA from one school could have more prestige than a doctorate from another.

Opening Questions:

- If a professional doctorate is to be awarded in art and design, in what ways does it matter which institutions start it and eventually offer it?
- To what extent can issues of institutional prestige—if over-emphasized—cloud judgment about what is and is not leadership?
- To what extent can new approaches be site-specific or models for other institutions, and what is involved in making this determination at another campus?

CONCLUSION

Clearly, the number of issues and the numbers of relationships among them are large and complex. Extreme care is needed at all levels. Several matters stand out: the impact of any course of action on people, on teaching, and on the freedom of art and design faculties to design and operate professional studio curricula. It is critical to leave the advocacy mode and ask strategic questions of ourselves about what can go wrong with any decision. Assuming that any decision is all positive can lead to grave problems.

NASAD's position is clear. It remains able and willing to accredit new and experimental programs. NASAD accredited institutional membership is no barrier to innovation at any degree level.

On the policy level, the Association urges caution, careful consideration, and the maintenance of clear consistency among the title, purpose, and content of all degree programs offered now or in the future. It also urges realistic assessments about long-term resource needs and availabilities as program and strategic plans are made. It also urges clear identification of the nature of any present problems with recognition of the MFA as the basis for determining what might be done to address those problems quickly with present resources, this irrespective of what might evolve as deliberations about terminal degrees proceed.

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