

National Association of Schools of Dance

ADVISORY

Transitions from Undergraduate Programs or Professional Companies to Graduate Programs

Definition of Graduate Study

All graduate degree programs in dance focus on advanced work in one or more aspects of the field and/or the connections of dance to one or more other disciplines. Graduate programs are structured to use the knowledge, experience, perspectives, and aspirations that students bring upon admission. Rigor, virtuosity, high expectations for competence in the area of specialization, and an ever-broadening knowledge of dance as a whole are all expectations in graduate programs. Programs focused on performance and choreography normally require some graduate level study in one or more scholarly areas of dance. Graduate programs may vary from one to seven years in length, often depending on the extent to which a student attends full- or part-time. There are various types and levels of graduate degrees. Each degree type and level has its own fundamental purpose. Although graduate study may provide credentials associated with obtaining employment in various settings, and although graduate programs are concerned about the careers of their graduates, the primary focus of graduate study is the development of deep competence in the primary area of study.

Making a Fundamental Choice of Degree Level and Type

There are two basic levels of graduate degrees, and two basic types of graduate degrees.

Basic Levels—Initial and Terminal. Graduate degree programs may be characterized as initial graduate degrees and terminal graduate degrees. Initial graduate degrees are those at a level between the baccalaureate and the terminal degree for a given field. Normally, these degrees are titled Master of Arts, Master of Science, or Master of Education. Terminal degrees are those which designate the highest level of academic achievement for a given field. Normally, these degrees are designated Master of Fine Arts, Doctor of Philosophy, or Doctor of Education.

Basic Types—Practice-Oriented and Research-Oriented Degrees. Practice-oriented degrees prepare students for professional work directed toward dance performance and/or choreography, the communication of knowledge of works of dance, and their interrelationships with each other. The Master of Arts, Master of Science, or Master of Education are the initial graduate degree titles. The Master of Fine Arts is the terminal degree title.

Research-oriented degrees prepare students for a scholarly or a research activity directed toward the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge, primarily in verbal and/or mathematical form. The Master of Arts is the usual degree designation at the initial graduate degree level. At the terminal degree level, the degrees Doctor of Philosophy or Doctor of Education are the degree designations.

Further Considerations about Degrees

Initial Graduate Degrees. Approximately 25 institutions in the United States offer the Master of Arts in Dance. The Master of Science or Master of Education may also be offered by some institutions. When considering degrees in education, it is important to note the distinction between degrees focused primarily on education with some requirements in dance, and degrees focused on dance with some requirements on education. Initial graduate degrees require at least 30 semester hours, or 45 quarter hours to complete. Normally, students spend one to two years full time to complete requirements for these degrees. The Master of Arts degree is offered in many areas of specialization. Some are practice-oriented degrees, some are research-oriented degrees, and some may have significant objectives in both practice and research subject matter. Major areas of study include performance, choreography, teacher education, notation production, aesthetics, kinesesthesiology, interdisciplinary studies, movement therapy, and so forth.

Master of Fine Arts. The Master of Fine Arts is the terminal practice-oriented degree in dance. Approximately 30 institutions in the United States offer this degree. Students complete at least 60 semester hours, or 90 quarter hours, and at least two years of full-time study. MFA programs are focused on such specializations as performance, choreography, directing, production, intercultural and interdisciplinary performance, and so forth.

Doctoral Degrees. Less than five institutions in the United States offer the Doctor of Philosophy in Dance. Some institutions may offer a Doctor of Education degree with Dance as the cognate or minor field. As the terminal research-oriented degree, Ph.D. programs emphasize scholarship and its applications to various aspects, issues, and problems in dance. Major fields include dance history, performance studies, pedagogy and dance education, cultural studies, and interdisciplinary programs.

A Primary Fact about Making Choices

Given the common agreement among graduate programs with regard to degree types, levels, and titles, each specific graduate degree program has specific goals and characteristics that make it unique from all other programs. Fundamental leadership for graduate programs comes from experienced faculty having specific views about the approach their graduate programs should take—everything from admission criteria to course requirements, to final project expectations. Even when graduate programs share common overall goals, their approaches to reaching these goals may be quite different. This diversity produces a richness of endeavor and accomplishment across the field of dance. However, it poses a significant challenge to perspective students. Each has the task of finding the best match of program characteristics and aspirations to individual characteristics and aspirations.

Preparation for Careers

The dance profession contains areas of engagement. Choreography and performance, scholarship, teaching, therapeutics, management, and technical production are all areas with many sub-specializations. Many careers in dance are unique, built by individuals, based on a variety of circumstances and necessities. Obtaining a graduate degree in dance provides no career guarantee. Graduate programs deepen knowledge, skill, and understanding important to success in many

dance and dance-related careers. Graduate programs provide degree credentials that are required or deemed desirable, particularly in certain aspects of education. For example, many degree-granting institutions of higher education prefer faculty with terminal degrees. It is important to determine the extent to which a graduate level credential has relevance for your career intentions, both in terms of knowledge and skills development and in terms of necessary credentials.

Basic Questions about Graduate Study

Any graduate program represents a significant commitment. Leaders of graduate programs agree that prospective students give in-depth attention to their reasons and motivations for applying to graduate schools.

Here are some basic questions you should ask yourself:

- Why do you want to go to graduate school? What weight are you giving to such factors as: curiosity; sense of purpose; passion for technique and/or subject matter; networking for a career; fear of leaving the supportive atmosphere of higher education; concerns about readiness and prospects for success in the world of dance beyond academe; transition from the professional practice of dance into formal education at an advanced level; change of direction or emphasis within the field of dance; interest in connecting dance to other disciplines or areas of study; and so forth?
- What goals do you have with regard to artistic growth, scholarly endeavor, teaching proficiency?
- What kinds of competency development are you seeking? For example, more technical knowledge and expertise to carry out and fulfill artistic, scholarly, or pedagogical goals; studies that open new possibilities for engagement that are presently unknown; the opportunity to be taught and mentored by specific individuals or within a specific institution; deep interest in a particular kind of artistic project or topic area; and so forth.
- How much time do you want to devote to obtaining a graduate degree?
- How much experience have you had outside academe? What is your own analysis of this experience, or lack thereof, in relation to the types, levels, and subject matters of graduate programs that pique your interest?
- How much have you spoken with teachers, dance professionals, and other experts in education about the nature of graduate study and its relationship to your specific situation and aspirations? How much research have you done into the overall requirements of graduate education?
- To what extent have you become self-motivated and self-directed? Are you ready to take significant responsibility for your own education?
- What are your criteria for a good match between you and a graduate program? How do you plan to connect the following aspects of your individuality to specific programs of graduate study within and among institutions: who you are, how you think and work, what you have accomplished so far, and what you want to know and be able to do?

Considering and Choosing a Graduate Degree Program and Institution

You have many choices among graduate degree programs. Your task is to find the best institution and program for you. This requires matching your talents, needs, personality, and goals with a degree program that can help you fulfill your aspirations. Then it takes effort to accomplish this task effectively. Here are some questions to get you started.

- What graduate degree level and type is appropriate for you? There are no hard and fast rules or practices because of the great variety among degree programs. However, the Master of Arts degree is the usual degree for students seeking to enter a graduate program either immediately or soon after completion of an undergraduate program. The Master of Arts degree is usually the first step to the Ph.D. A significant number of doctoral programs in American higher education require a master's degree as a prerequisite for admission, while others allow individuals to enter the Ph.D. program directly. In some institutions, the Master of Arts degree provides a great variety of opportunities to combine performance and scholarly studies, both in dance and in fields related to dance.

The Master of Fine Arts degree is focused on the highest level of creation, performance, and production. High levels of technical proficiency are required for admission into these programs. Some institutions consider applications only from individuals with professional experience. Normally, MFA programs are intensely focused on a particular area of performance specialization, but also include requirements in dance history, analysis, or other scholarly areas.

The Doctor of Philosophy degree is focused on studies in and about the field of dance. Institutions admit students based on judgments about their potential to succeed as scholars or to apply high levels of scholarship in other careers. Applicants must demonstrate their potential for intellectual work at the most advanced levels of the field. Many doctoral programs require research tools such as foreign languages, statistics, computer programming, etc. Doctoral programs are highly focused in the area of specialization. Normally, they are not focused on creating and presenting works of dance.

- What do the teachers and professionals whom you respect think about various institutions and their graduate programs? Probe deeply into their understanding of a program's specific goals. Try to determine how current their impression is regarding these programs. Remember that programs evolve constantly and that current information is essential. Obtain advice from more than one person and be sure to share with each advisor your own specific goals for graduate study.
- What does your analysis of published materials from a variety of institutions tell you about possibilities? It is important to obtain enough information to make comparisons. It is also useful to understand how graduate programs work in general. Thorough study is essential if you are to ask good questions and ultimately make good decisions.
- What is the primary focus of particular programs that interest you? Remember that within a specific institution, individual programs may vary a great deal. It is important to understand the specifics of individual programs that interest you.

- With regard to a specific program, what do you find about the following issues:
 - ◊ *Basic Orientation.* What is the mix of making dance and studying about dance? What do the published goals and objectives of the program tell you about what program leaders hope to see realized in their students?
 - ◊ *Primary Subject Matter.* What do course and other requirements tell you about subject matter focus?
 - ◊ *Program Philosophy.* Philosophies show themselves in decisions about content, process, and value. Reviewing student and faculty work is a good way to get a sense of the guiding philosophy.
 - ◊ *Specialization and Disciplinarity.* What areas of specialization and what disciplinary focus or connections are possible within the program? What kinds of final projects does the program allow?
 - ◊ *Artistic and Intellectual Techniques and Approaches.* Artistry, research, and pedagogy contain many connections and all of these connections can be made from different artistic and intellectual perspectives. What is the program's orientation with respect to various artistic, statistical, historical, philosophical, sociological, or political methodologies?
 - ◊ *Organizational Structure.* To what extent are there course requirements, individually designed studies, examination barriers, and so forth? How much self-direction is required? What are the final project requirements, and how is the final project evaluated?
 - ◊ *Preparation for Teaching.* To what extent is the program focused on preparation for teaching or for other specific types of careers? Institutions and programs differ widely on their approach to this issue.
- What can you learn from an onsite visit or participation in a summer program? Personal experience is the best way to get a sense of what a particular graduate program is like. Try to be on campus when you can talk with graduate faculty and graduate students.
- What is the reputation of a specific degree program that interests you? Remember that reputation is more than a list of successful or famous graduates or rankings. Focus on the institution's reputation for teaching, its fairness and integrity, and its approach to the individual student.
- How can you best assess your own readiness to enter and sustain work at the level a particular graduate program requires? While entrance may be determined by the results of the application process, your own assessment about your ability to sustain the level of effort required can only be determined by careful analysis. Remember, you will be challenged artistically and intellectually in new ways. It is wise to talk with current students or recent graduates to gain the best understanding of what is expected. Be sure that you have a deep interest in the areas of study required for completion of the program.
- What are the retention policies in general? What retention policies are applicable to the specific graduate program that interests you?
- Who are the faculty, and which faculty members are most likely to be your teachers, advisors, and mentors? Artistic, intellectual, and personal compatibility are usually critical for

success in graduate programs. Focus on such issues as teaching ability, artistic and intellectual orientations, areas of professional activities, and so forth.

- What do you observe regarding access to resources? Does a graduate program have the facilities, equipment, library collections, and resource access beyond the institution to support the work you are interested in doing?
- To what extent is the institution helping graduate students with career issues? For example, to what extent are graduate faculty members advising students with a view to creating the best possible set of credentials for work or for further graduate study?
- If you enter a performance-oriented program, what is the program's approach to the body sciences, medical services, and physical therapy?
- What are the time limits imposed by the institution regarding the graduate degree that interests you?
- To what extent does the graduate program provide continuous evaluation and feedback about your progress through the program? To what extent is there a competitive or nurturing philosophy or atmosphere? How does the answer relate to the way you learn?
- What opportunities will you have in your area of specialization? For example, performance and choreography, scholarship, teaching. To what extent are certain experiences guaranteed or required as part of the program?
- What is the institution's record for placement for graduates? What percentage of program graduates go into specific kinds of work in dance? If you plan to attend a graduate program hoping for a specific career result after graduation, what is the complete set of qualifications necessary to achieve that result? Do you have a chance of meeting all these qualifications after completing the degree that you are considering?

The Application and Audition Process

Applications to the graduate degree programs that most interest you will usually involve an audition or interview. Remember that the application process contains two evaluations in one: the graduate program's assessment of your candidacy, and your assessment of the suitability of the graduate program.

- What is the nature of the application process? What kinds of interviews, auditions, letters of recommendation, writing samples, undergraduate transcripts, standardized examination scores (GTA or GRE), and so forth are expected and/or required? Will you need to prepare a résumé? What about examples of previous work, medical examinations, and application fees?
- What is expected in auditions and interviews? Information you have obtained from the institution should provide the schedules of auditions and interviews and what kinds of presentations will be expected. It is important to obtain this information well in advance well in advance of any projected appointments for auditions and interviews.
- How does the admission process work? What is the schedule? What are the deadlines?

- Where will the admission decision be made, and who will make it? For example, will these decisions be made in the dance program as a whole, in the institution's graduate program as a whole, by the graduate dance faculty, or by individual faculty that lead the program for which you are applying?
- What requirements must you meet if you are entering graduate school after a long period in the profession?
- What if you are an international student? It is necessary to obtain a proper visa and otherwise meet all other foreign student requirements set forth by the government of the United States. Some institutions might have specific requirements such as English language proficiency, assurance of continuous financial support, and previous educational credentials.
- Does the graduate program have a set of orientation instructions or a student handbook? If so, you should obtain information about what is expected of student beyond artistic and curricular requirements.
- How compatible is the institution's environment with your preferences? What living arrangement can you expect?

Financial Considerations—Degree Program and Beyond

There are several things to be considered and planned for before entering a graduate program.

- What are the elements in calculating the overall costs of attending a particular graduate program? These include, but are not limited to, tuition and fees, housing and food, transportation, books and materials, clothing and shoes, insurance, medical and other maintenance costs, and so forth. Many institutions provide an estimate of the annual attendance costs in their published materials. If this information is not readily available, ask about it. Some locations are much more expensive than others.
- To what extent can scholarships, grants, and financial aides alone assist with the costs? Each of these areas is extremely complex. It is important to investigate these issues carefully, remembering the intensity of effort expected in graduate programs.
- Does the institution offer teaching or other assistantships to graduate students? Some graduate programs provide students with opportunities to work part time as teachers or staff. Stipends paid reduce the cost of attending the graduate program. These opportunities also provide important experience that can be useful in taking the next steps in a career. It is extremely important to investigate the availability of such opportunities and the criteria for participation.
- To what extent does the institution offer competitive scholarships or need-based scholarships? Be sure you understand the criteria for selection as completely and as quickly as possible.

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