State of the arts degree

What is an MFA good for? These creative students say the pricey classes are worth it.

DEGREES

Alyssa Wilmuth Keegan had reached a roadblock.

After graduating with a theater degree and working as an actor briefly in Virginia, Keegan moved to New York to try to make it in the business.

Instead, she ended up with five jobs.

"I was doing all of these things to pay rent to live in New York City," she says. "I was actually passing up auditions because I had to work. I woke up one day and thought, 'I think I need to restart.'"

So she went back to school — a decision she didn't make lightly.

With master's degrees averaging tens of thousands of dollars, prospective arts students have to choose whether or not a graduate degree is worth the time and financial expense.

And it's not like a master of fine arts degree promises future riches: On PayScale's recent ranking of the highest-paying graduate degrees, not a single arts degree made it into the top 200. Still, the number of MFA students has been increasing every year since 1991, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Plenty of D.C.-area students have found reason to love the MFA, and the salary potential isn't necessarily one of them.

"Being an artist is a very difficult life, not one that will have a big payoff," Keegan says. "Go to [get your undergraduate degree] for sure — you definitely need some training. Understand the lifestyle. If you love it, then go and get more education."

Keegan was accepted into the classical acting MFA program at George Washington University. It's an accelerated, one-year program designed specifically for students who have had some professional experience.

Plenty of upper-level arts courses break from the traditional two-year, straight-out-of-undergrad rhythm to allow students some flexibility.

"What happens at midcareer is life's complicated," says Dana Tai Soon Burgess, department chair and full professor of dance at GW. "You might have a family and some jobs."

To keep things simpler for busy students, GW's MFA in dance is an 18-month accelerated program that's completed mostly online. This allows artists to continue working in their fields while also getting the chance to incorporate lessons from the class.

Another benefit of seeking a higher degree in the arts is the chance to build a portfolio and make professional connections.

As director of the six-month intensive Institute of Documentary Filmmaking at GW, Nina Gilden Seavey guides a group of students to become a production team that creates a documentary short film from beginning to end.

"You can't do it alone. You have to be part of a community of people who will read proposals, recommend you for jobs and talk about production," Seavey says. "Our filmmakers work together for years."

Higher-level arts classes can also help get your work recognized by professionals. At American University, students pursuing MFAs in studio art display their final exhibitions in the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, where professional artists are

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AHEAD

Call Moore will display her final MFA project at AJ’s Noten Arts Center.

MFA degrees
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also regularly featured. Student Call Moore says AIU has a strong visiting artist program.

“We had a big cultural shift last year. I saw in New York a few weeks later and he re- mentioned me and my work,” she says. “This is the first time you’ve been out of the studio and been recognized for the work you’re doing.”

Moore’s program also gave her the opportunity to study at an artist residency in Berlin, where she met and was able to share her work with artists from around the world.

While earning a higher degree in the arts can offer access to resources and support, some artists find alternatives to the more traditional programs.

Sheldon Scott, a performance artist and writer in D.C., started his career as a social worker, but felt like something was missing. After Scott took a few acting classes, his teacher encouraged him to speak in an open-mic night. From there he knew he wanted to perform. He continued to study, did some on-camera work and even took some intensive classes in LA.

“Never have I seen a school that has a supportive community of artists that has allowed him to build connections. He started working in performance art full-time about a year ago and expanded his practice, which included a mixture of live performance, dance, music and photography, has been featured in the Hermitage Museum, Arlington Art Center and the National Portrait Gallery.”

Scott says his team have recommended some MFA programs, but he’s unsure if he wants to risk taking time off from his practice.

“While there’s not enough value to formal education at the same time, I’m not sure,” Scott says. “I’m almost a step in production mode. It’s kind of a revelation about being able to keep up that kind of momentum. It’s a very precious time now.”

Graduate-level art programs may not work for everyone and there are many duties to consider before making that leap.

For Keegan, the MFA program helped to refocus her acting career. Since graduating, she’s started in Tennessee William’s “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” at the Round House Theatre in Bethesda. Her MFA class also performed their work at the Hollywood Fringe Festival in Los Angeles.

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