DEBUNKING THE MFA: WORTHWHILE INVESTMENT, OR HIGHWAY ROBBERY?
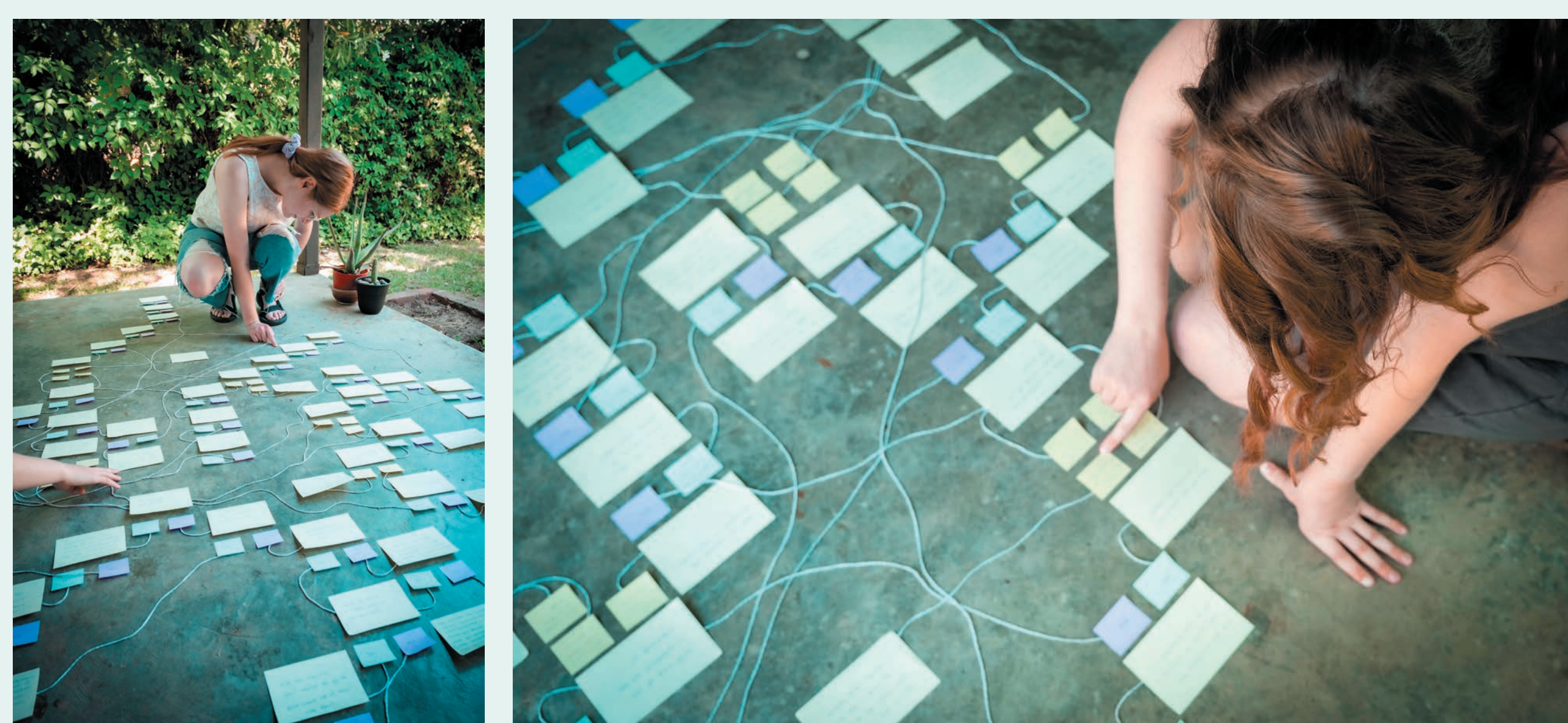
PROBLEM

If you are considering an MFA program in design, you are probably interested in going into teaching at the university level, or have an aggressive zeal for academia. These are both good things, and in order to teach, an MFA is the only ticket. However, you may not be set in stone about going to grad school– you've heard it's really hard, you've heard its really expensive, and you probably just spent the last 15 years in school already... So why do more?

The problem that this research engagement attempts to remedy is the lack of understanding about MFA programs, ie., the hidden pros and cons. This design project attempts to distill the kinds of questions one should contemplate before applying to MFA into one user-friendly tool.

CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

After conducting and synthesizing primary and secondary research findings, I began to develop an idea for a clickable tool that would help undegraduates become more informed about making the decision to apply to graduate programs.

As a kid, I always enjoyed the "choose your adventure" style books, as well as games like Dungeons and Dragons. I started to moodboard some different styles of information design and flowchart infographics for inspiration, and began to work on my questions.

Prototype usability testing with Jenna Lateano and Sonya Gaysinskiy, 2021

DESIGN SOLUTION

The final product of this design project is an interactive application, available for use on my portfolio website.

It leads the user through a choose-your-own-adventure style flow chart, organizing a vast succession of queries into a succinct journey that ends in a recommendation of what action the individual user might consider taking next in regards to his or her academic or vocational future.

https://chamberlaindesign.us/senior-design-project/

https://xd.adobe.com/view/c4a0fbed-e7bd-406c-ade2-a544779080d2-91f3/?fullscreen

TARGET AUDIENCE

My target audience is specifically focused around students who are fresh out of their undergraduate program, contemplating applying for their Masters of Fine Arts degree.

However, my findings are relevant to any creative within the humanities, fine arts and design realm considering a terminal degree program.

Recent Undergraduate considering an MFA - Persona & Journey Map

WYATT, 22

- denotes pain points in product/service design

Wyatt is a recent undergraduate of a Media Arts & Design program at California State University, San Jose. He is unsure what he will do next, now that he has finished his degree, and has not yet found a job. He plans to live in the Bay Area for the time being, and is a little apprehensive about leaving Academia so soon. After COVID hit, his last year of classes was fully online, and he is not so interested in more online school– but at his core, he is an intellectual who thrives in a learning environment. The vaccine is now widely available and he is considering applying for grad programs in the coming fall. His parents are pressuring him to pursue a higher degree, because his undergraduate debt is almost paid off, and it would make him the higest educated in the family.

GOALS
Wyatt would like to learn a little bit more about whether an MFA degree would actually be worth his time and money. He is not all that interested in teaching, but is open to the idea.

TECHNOLOGY
Wyatt is very technically savvy, with a sharp eye for good web design. He prides himself in his love for UX/UI research, and his aptitude for back-end coding.

EXPERIENCE & SKILLS
So far Wyatt is quite picky about the sorts of jobs he is applying to, and hasn't found anything fitting yet. He has had two different design internships which he tolerated but did not love.

REFERENCES
Wyatt has several professors who are encouraging him to apply to MDes, MFA, and MA programs, but he is not sure which would fit him best, or which area of design he is ready to commit to.

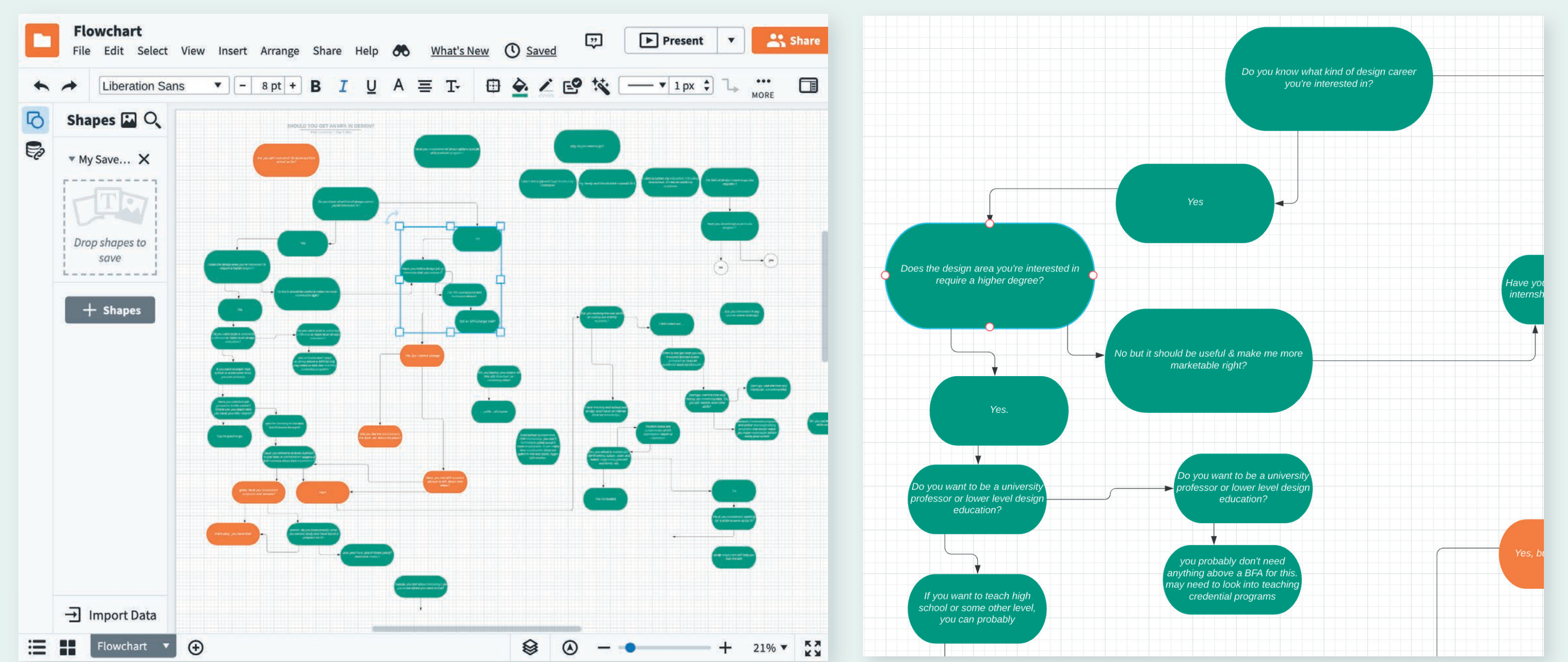|	STAGE 1 Awareness	STAGE 2 Consideration & Research	STAGE 3 Decisions	STAGE 4 Experience
DOING	Wyatt is a little bit frustrated in his job search, and starts considering graduate programs more seriously. He isn't sure where to start in his research, and hasn't met with a career or grad advisor.	He has heard about a tool developed at another CSU during a BFA capstone project, that was designed to help students in his position decide what to do next. He looks up the project.	He uses the mobile application, answering the questions to the best of his abilities.	After navigating through the tool once, and then a second time for good measure, he feels more secure in his decision to wait for a little while before applying to graduate programs.
THINKING	"After such a tough final semester, I'm glad to be done with online school. I do feel a bit cheated of my undergrad education though, and I haven't found a job yet. What about grad school in design?"	"Googling 'should I go to grad school' has not helped me very much so far, and I'm feeling overwhelmed by all of the options and opinions floating around the internet. I'd love a more concise resource..."	"Wow, this tool takes a lot of different things into consideration that I might have otherwise not given any thought to. Debt and job prospects after getting a degree are worth considering."	"Waiting for a little while before applying to grad programs is a good idea. I haven't yet decided what area of design I'd like to devote myself to, and some applications require professional work experience."
ENJOYABILITY & PROBLEMS	Wyatt is overwhelmed by the number of program options, and doesn't know what he would do with his degree upon completion. He's never met a graduate student who regretted their choice, though.	Wyatt is still a little bit overwhelmed by all of the information and conflicting viewpoints surrounding MFA programs. Some consider it the best investment of their life, some say you can do without it	While he appreciates what this tool is trying to do, it is still difficult to come up with a solution for everyone's individual situations. He'd probably be better off with a career/grad advisor.	This still doesn't quite resolve Wyatt's current issue– being a recent undergrad who isn't quite sure what to do next. Applying to jobs will hopefully allow him to work in the field and learn more about himself.
TOUCHPOINTS	-LinkedIn -Handshake -AIGA careers site -Instagram Profile	-CSU Chico design research thesis (Debunking the MFA) -Reading books and articles about MA/MFA programs	-"Choosing your program" tool (Debunking the MFA)	-Next steps (another tool, to help narrow the possibilities for graduate programs, and also a tool that shows areas/companies where undergraduates are often hired right out of school)
OPPORTUNITIES	A simple, user friendly tool that can help recent undergraduates decide if pursuing a masters' degree is a good use of their time and money could be incredibly useful to students like Wyatt. and their pros & cons.	There is opportunity for other tools in addition to the "choose your path" (Debunking the MFA) application, for instance– something that shows different programs for specific design areas.	User interface is perhaps a little underdeveloped, and the tool could be a little more inclusive (have a wider range of "answers" so as to not leave out any users).	There is a good opportunity for this whole concept to be taken a step further into more tools and infographics to make the whole post-grad process a little more transparent and accessible.

PROTOTYPING

Initial Concept Mapping with Post-It Notes

I was struggling to comprehend and organize all of the different routes, options and nuances a student should consider when considering grad school.

Essentially I ended up grouping the chart into interests, programs and costs. I wanted to make sure that a user could make it through the entire map and not get stuck in a loop.

Flow Chart Prototyping with Lucid.app

I wanted to start looking into ways to organize and connect the questions, and I stumbled upon lucid.app, which allowed me to rearrange and group the answers easily.

SUCCESS STATEMENT

Students have a user friendly tool to expose them to some questions they should ask themselves before they consider applying to MFA programs. Some of their questions regarding the degree itself, and the risk you take when you make the investment in one have been answered. Some students who might otherwise not have considered an MFA degree can consider it.

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