California State University, Chico

Debunking the MFA:

Worthwhile Investment, or Highway Robbery?

Anne Chamberlain

Professor Heather Altfeld

Honors Thesis - 399W

December 10th, 2021

Preamble

In two weeks I will graduate with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Communications Design and a minor in Studio Arts. For as long as I can remember I have checked boxes, jumped through academic hoops, and "gone through the motions" of American general education, then higher education. Now I have reached a crossroads. The global Coronavirus pandemic restrictions on travel and social interaction had at least one positive effect; it afforded me considerable time to evaluate my education and life goals. I found myself questioning my long-held assumption that I would immediately continue on to graduate school in pursuit of a Master of Fine Arts degree. It was this introspection of my own goals that led me to research the value of a Master of Fine Arts degree.

Through conversations with other students in my program, I know I'm not alone in questioning the value of a graduate degree in Fine Arts. While there are quantifiable metrics that can be applied to measuring the value of a Fine Arts degree, there are also many intangible and highly personal considerations as well. In this paper I will attempt to measure those values that can be quantified, and document those that are more subjective.

1. Introduction

When I first embarked on this investigation, I was *hoping* to be able to make a sweeping generalization, declaring that it is either worth it, or *not* worth it for a student to pursue a Master of Fine Arts degree (MFA). For many creative fields the MFA degree is considered a terminal

degree, meaning it is the highest attainable degree in that area. It is a requirement if you wish to become a professor, but outside of teaching it is generally not necessary for professional practice.

So when a creative person decides to further their education beyond a bachelor's degree by pursuing an MFA, what are some of the considerations?

The aim of this project is to offer research and reflection that will help recent and future creatives who have finished their undergraduate studies decide whether they should pursue an MFA, no matter what their specific area of study is.

Along the way I hope to answer some more elemental questions about the arts, and American higher education. Is getting a Master of Fine Arts degree worth it? Why do people seek out this degree, when it is not necessary for professional practice? Do the benefits outweigh the hefty costs? Does graduate student debt systematically encumber students of certain demographics more than others? Do MFA programs just feed the multibillion dollar university industrial complex? Does graduate school actually make us better artists, thinkers, writers, creatives?

Allow me to introduce the term *industrial complex.* An industrial complex is defined as a socioeconomic concept wherein businesses become tangled in social or political institutions, creating a profit economy from these systems. The term university industrial complex refers to the fact that universities have a strong financial incentive to squeeze more money from each student. The term negatively suggests that universities care more about the income they get from students than the value of the education they provide to students. Tactics for increasing per-student income include: incenting students to pursue additional degrees, encouraging them to

incur debt in the form of student loans and even reducing the availability of required courses to force students to stay in their program longer. Statistically, alumni of some types of programs feel the weight of that cost far longer and more permanently than alumni of other kinds of higher education programs.

1.1 What is an MFA Program? MA vs. MFA?

The College Art Association (CAA) of America is the principal organization in the United States responsible for defining the MFA degree. The CAA Board of Directors developed a set of guidelines for The Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree in Art and Design in 1977 to illustrate some of the most important objectives of the degree, and to set a standard of professional practice. I have found that these guidelines are also applied to an MFA degree in dance, creative writing, film or most any other MFA program.

The Master of Fine Arts degree differs from the Master of Arts (MA) in that the MFA is focused more on professional artistic practice in a very specific area, whereas MA programs (generally analogous to a Master of Science degree) are said to center on scholarly, academic and critical studies of the field of study. The MFA is widely recognized as a terminal degree, meaning that it is the highest level of education and study that one can complete in many fields, and the MFA qualifies one to join academia as a professor at a university level in these studies (CAA). The minimum requirement for the MFA is sixty semester credits of coursework at the graduate level (or ninety quarter credits), including courses in art history and cognate areas of study (CAA). Most MA degrees are non-terminal and only one year, while the MFA is generally 2 or 3 years. A Doctor of Fine Arts is a doctoral degree which may be given as an honorary

degree in the US, or earned as a professional degree in some countries (such as the UK). A Doctor of Fine Arts is comparable to a PhD, and the recipient of such an honor has usually made a significant contribution to their society in the arts. This is a rare degree.

Graduate programs are different from undergraduate programs in several ways– they are far more rigorous, self-directed, and specialized. They explore a specific area of interest, and programs are typically much smaller than undergraduate programs. Some programs boast a more multidisciplinary approach, allowing you to take electives outside of your area of study, but generally MFA students do not have much time for extraneous courses.

In order to gain insight on how current undergraduate students feel towards master's programs in the arts, I conducted a survey with twenty seven media arts students from California State University, Chico. The survey consisted of fifteen multiple choice and short answer questions designed to gauge students' interest in and knowledge about options for continuing education upon completion of their bachelor's degree program.

Ninety-three percent of respondents were within a year of completing their degree at CSU, Chico, yet only thirty-seven percent reported that they had given thought towards applying to graduate programs. Most reported that they were more focused on gaining work experience in their field, honing design-related skills through online credential programs, or looking for a job in a field adjacent to their undergraduate degree.

Forty-one percent of the group aspire to enter a career in marketing, and the other fifty-nine percent is diverse in the areas of design they are looking to pursue careers in.

Thirty-seven percent of respondents list high cost as a key factor holding them back from considering a master's degree. In a short answer section, the vast majority of students stated that they hadn't heard a truly compelling case that an MFA degree is worth the expense. They were concerned that while graduate programs allegedly increase a creative's potential earnings, they hadn't personally seen evidence that such programs really make a designer more successful. The remainder reported that they were genuinely tired of academia, thirsting for the "real world," or hadn't given it much thought either way.

In order to gain some insight about other kinds of creative master's programs, I interviewed Dr. Erin Kelly, an Assistant Professor of English, Graduate Coordinator, and Advisor of the College-Level Writing Certificate Program at California State University. She said that the majority of students of the creative writing master's program apply directly after completing their undergraduate degree, and most come from the BA program at Chico state. "A significant percent go into teaching," Kelly reported, explaining that the program even offers teaching opportunities as part of the curriculum.

1.2 Why Pursue an MFA Degree?

Alumni with an MFA degree in writing are qualified candidates for positions writing for advertising agencies, magazines, and newspapers. Creative writers may look to start a career with a publisher or literary agent, or they may practice their craft in a more freelance style, working with a range of clients on their own terms. Technical writing jobs offer some outlet for creativity and the pay can be quite respectable, especially at larger corporations. A large percent

of MFA writing graduates aim to remain in Academia as lecturers and professors if the opportunity presents itself.

Performing actors with an MFA in Theater Arts generally intend to act, but making it to Broadway or Hollywood generally takes many years of experience and networking. Some graduates find that performing in community theater groups or conducting workshops is a good way to gain the traction and attention necessary to book auditions. As a managing actor, career options can include teaching in schools or universities or working in administration for college theater departments. Some theater MFA alumni utilize their communication skills to pursue a career as public speaking instructors for corporations, and some choose to work freelance, establishing themselves as private acting or public speaking coaches.

Artists have a wider range of employment possibilities, depending on how they market their talent. Some pursue a career in service or graphic design work for advertising agencies, marketing departments and non-profit organizations or companies. Bolder designers start their own graphic design firms, taking larger corporations as clients. Teaching art or design offers opportunities at all levels, as does working in local art galleries. Some MFA graduates choose to work freelance with a variety of clients on a project by project basis.

Graduate students with Master of Fine Arts degrees come to the workplace with something a well-paid graduate of a Master of Business Administration program may lack– a repertoire of creative skills and methodologies which are extremely valuable to businesses in this post-pandemic age of technology. Marketing strategies have become more visual than ever. Successful websites and applications require excellent user interface design, and careful attention

to user experience. Successful advertising campaigns rely on strong consumer knowledge and excellent writing ability.

MFA degrees offer employment potential in a large array of different sectors including advertising, clothing, printmaking, magazine production, dance studios, digital media, publishing houses, and so on. Nearly all of today's entertainment requires the professional touch of trained artists. This is not to declare that MFA degree programs breed talent, but they do offer an environment that promotes creative development.

2. Pros of the MFA

For the sake of organization, I have broken my research into pros and cons of pursuing a Master of Fine Arts Degree. First, I will discuss the benefits to getting an MFA, including networking and career opportunities, teaching, earning potential, becoming part of a community, creative growth and development, and bolstering your credentials.

2.1 Networking and Career Opportunities

In *Should I Go to Grad School?*, authors Loudis, Blagojevic, Peetz and Rodman have brought together a wide range of successful, creatively interesting people to reflect on their choice to go to graduate school or not, and what that decision has meant in their lives. In chapter 32 of the book, renowned composer Jake Heggie explains how it took nineteen years to complete his master's degree. After completing two years, with only a thesis left to do, he dropped out of UCLA and moved to San Francisco for a writing position at UC Berkeley. Shortly after his move to San Francisco he was offered a position as the writer for the San Francisco Opera. He

eventually finished his degree after a former professor urged him to; he used one of his professional compositions as his thesis. “It was the ultimate looking glass. It gave me time and opportunities to work closely with remarkable, fearless people who forced me to examine myself and ask the biggest question of all - ‘why?’” (Loudis 186). In the end of his short story, he declared that while graduate school was not directly responsible for his success as a composer, it was an indirectly crucial part of the journey. Spectacular career opportunities came his way while at UC Berkeley and the Opera because of the connections he made during his first two years at UCLA.

This is not to say that every student who attends a graduate program will *easily* or *quickly* make connections that launch them into a lasting career, but the academic environment can be very conducive to career networking. Building those connections is arguably even more crucial in the context of making a living as a young creative, since qualifications like portfolios and letters of recommendation are far more subjective than the test scores of a medical student. Knowing the right people is sometimes a more effective way of “getting your foot in the door.”

In addition, if you are hoping to relocate to a new city where your industry of interest thrives, attending a graduate school in that city can be an excellent segue into a career in that location. For example, if a student wishes to pursue a higher degree in glass arts, it would be advisable to pursue that degree in Seattle where the demand for art glass is high and the occupation is booming.

Ted Davis is an American media artist originally from California. He is a graduate program coordinator and interaction design lecturer for the Basel School of Design in

Switzerland where he has worked since 2010. I had the opportunity to interview Davis to gain more insight into the value of graduate programs, and the differences between American and Swiss higher education. Since the graduate program he oversees offers a dual degree program in collaboration with the University of Illinois, Chicago, it is uniquely involved in both education systems.

When asked if most of his graduate students receive job offers as a direct result of their participation in the higher degree program, Davis responded unequivocally, yes.

I also interviewed Stacie Rohrbach, an Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies at Carnegie Mellon University's School of Design. She explained that in addition to peer networking, graduate students at CMU "reap the benefit of being part of a very strong alumni network, and a lot of them give back! One of the things we strive to do is teach them to be agile and flexible. We are educating them to be lifelong learners. Even upon graduating, we prepare students to think on their feet, and think about the kinds of roles that they didn't envision. There is a very strong sense of community within cohorts, and many of our students maintain those relationships long after graduation." This leads me to believe that graduate programs and MFA's are key to the creative development and success of many people. In addition, a strong network built during a graduate program can lead to career opportunities that are higher paying than a less credentialed individual could attain.

2.2 Teaching; During and After Degree Completion

In every interview I conducted, subjects reported that a relatively high percent of their master's cohorts go into teaching in some fashion. Most masters degrees are not terminal, with

the exception of the Master of Fine Arts degree. The MFA is unique in that it makes it's recipients eligible to teach as a lecturer, an adjunct, or even associate professor. For many other disciplinary fields such as the social or physical sciences, a doctoral degree is required. Obtaining a doctoral degree typically takes six or more years, four years longer than the average time it takes to complete a master's degree (Nevill 44-49). An MFA is an advantageous degree because graduates are able to start their professional career within academia far sooner than teachers in other disciplines. Since masters degrees are cheaper and take less time to complete, they also yield far less average student debt.

Understanding tuition prices for graduate and professional students is complex, since prices may vary widely across subject areas at a single school, and between degree types. A 2017 study published by the Urban Institute estimated that 82 percent of master's degree students in public non-doctoral degree programs were enrolled in programs where annual tuition and fees were $10,000 or less. The annual average net tuition and fees for a master of arts degree program was $12,930, making a two year program cost around $25,860. Only 29 percent of public research doctoral programs had annual tuition and fees under $10,000 (Baum & Steele 4-5). The average annual net tuition and fees for a doctoral degree was listed at $8,480 per year, so an average six-year program would amount to around $50,880 (Baum & Steele 9-10).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that average graduate school tuition and fees amounted to $18,416 per year in 2016-2017. Data collected by the US Department of Education showed that nearly half of all students enrolled in postsecondary degree programs at the time financed those costs through loans during the academic year. For students who wish to pursue a masters degree that they are able to pay off in a timely manner,

getting an MFA to begin a teaching career is a good option. The additional wage premiums between teachers with bachelor's and master's degrees are considerable, and even larger in some other career pathways (Torpey & Terrell).

In 2007 the NCES published a longitudinal examination of subjects 10 years after completion of their bachelor's degree, in which authors Stephanie Nevill and Xianglei Chen found that 63 percent of doctoral students had received loans to help pay for their graduate education. In comparison, only 35 percent of master's degree students took out loans to pay for their degree (Nevill & Chen 24). Given that master's degree programs are shorter than first-professional and research doctoral degree programs, students whose highest degree was a master's were the least likely of all graduate students to borrow to finance their education and they borrowed the smallest amount (Nevill & Chen 26).

According to *The Condition of Education 2018*, published by the NCES, graduate school completers who had student loans for undergrad or graduate studies, the average cumulative loan balance in 2015-2016 was highest for those who completed research doctoral degrees, at $108,400. The average loan balances for those who completed masters degrees was $66,000 (McFarland 24).

2.3 Higher Earning Potential

In A *Field Guide to Grad School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum,* author Jessica Calarco, an Associate Professor of Sociology at Indiana University, states that American workers with advanced degrees have much higher median earnings and lower unemployment rates than workers with just a bachelor's degree (Calarco 303).

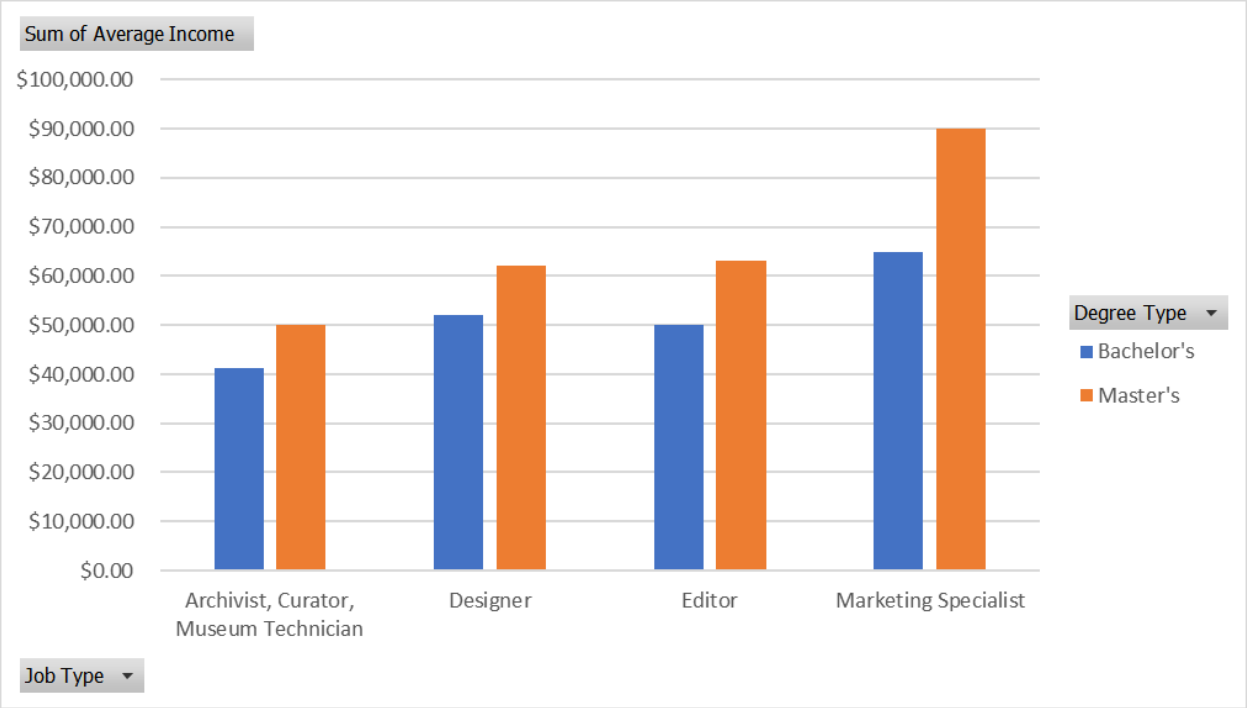
According to a 2017 analysis published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, this is true. Median weekly earnings of master's degree holders are $228 higher than those with only a bachelor's degree (Torpey). However, the data illustrated in the analysis was taken from a broad range of master's students ages twenty-five and up, disregarding their field of study. It is worth considering that lumping MFA graduate students in with Master of Business Administration degrees (MBA), Master of Science in Neuroscience degrees (MScs), and other areas of study might create a skewed average.

Elka Torpey, an economist in the Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections published a survey on average salaries in various occupational fields with data collected in 2013. Many of these occupations typically require a master's degree for entry-level jobs, but that does not mean that all workers in those occupations have a master's degree. Art, theater, and other post-secondary teachers are fields that generally require a master's degree. About 30% of these workers have a master's degree, about 13% have a bachelor's degree, the remaining 57% have one or more doctoral degrees. The average wage difference recorded was $6,200, 14% more for those holding a master's degree than those with only a bachelor's degree (Torpey & Terrell).

In occupations outside of academia, there was more data on the wage differences between those with and without master's degrees. The Bureau of Labor Statistics has collected and published extensive data detailing the premiums that workers with a master's degree earned over workers with only a bachelor's degree in these kinds of fields (Table 1). Designers with an MA or MFA make a median annual wage of $62,000 a year, $10,000 more than designers with only

their bachelor's degree. Editors with a master's degree make on average $13,000 more than those with only their bachelors, totaling around 63,000 annually. Marketing specialists who make on average $90,000 a year, make $25,000 more on average than those without their master's degree. Archivists, curators, and museum technicians with a master's degree make an average annual wage premium of $8,700 more than they would with only their bachelor's degree (Torpey & Terrell). Overall, average salary premiums of workers with their master's in addition to their bachelor's degree are quite formidable.

Table 1. Salary differences based on occupation type and degree level, 2013



2.4 Cohort & Community: The Perfect Fit

Given the information I learned during my research about how competitive acceptance to master's programs could be, I became curious about the basis on which program coordinators admit candidates.

"We are primarily looking for four things: a driven statement of purpose, glowing letters of recommendation, any creative or analytical work they may submit, as well as an interview where the staff hope to gain an understanding of the applicant's intellectual history, their personal goals in the program, the influences, the kinds of projects they wish to pursue," explained Dr. Kelly when I asked what qualities she looks for in a student. "The application process is not a test devised to find the 'perfect student,' but instead to find the 'perfect fit' for the students." In other words they are looking for students who can benefit most from, and fit in best with, the program they run. In fact, this sentiment was echoed by all of the graduate program coordinators I interviewed during my research engagement.

When asked if his graduate students tend to stick with their cohorts and remain close after graduation, Basel program coordinator Ted Davis reported that community is a huge selling point of the program. He explained that international students have about six months after graduation to apply to stay in Switzerland and search for work, but like many other countries it can be a difficult process. Still, most of his students try to stay in Basel for a while. Since their master's degree programs are composed of international students from all corners of the globe, I was particularly interested in the bonds formed between these diverse cohorts and whether they remained strong post-graduation. That six months often allows a student to continue working on

a project or complete a language program. Some return to their home countries, but many remain in Switzerland. He said he could think of several groups of colleagues who have stayed in proximity over the years, and many remain socially close with their original cohort even if they live and work far apart.

When asked about the sense of community in her graduate programs since the pandemic began, Dr. Kelly responded: “It’s been very strong, it’s harder since Zoom for sure, but your cohort is what gets you through graduate school and most of the time it really works. There’s a graduate student council, weekly study sessions, shared spaces, and a lot of room to build relationships.”

Experts in the field often indicate that the most valuable part of the graduate student experience is the state-of-the-art labs students gain access to, and the world class faculty. When asked what she thinks that a student is paying for when they attend a Master of Arts program, the first thing Dr. Kelly listed was the social connections made during the program. “The atmosphere of the collegiate experience, the freedom to explore what you’re interested in, and being surrounded by the people who want to be there and care, and you design your culminating activity, follow your interests,” are all paramount to the graduate school experience.

Literary critic Dr. William Deresiewicz (author of the book *The Death of the Artist*), opposes pursuing a master's degree in the arts due to the high price to pay-off ratio. At odds to that position, he does go on to say that graduate school is an amazing time to connect with like-minded peers and develop intellectually together.

2.5 Growth & Development

It is up for debate whether graduate school will make a person a better scholar or artist. These programs surely do not impart creativity or raw talent, but they do allow a student the time and space to learn, create, and develop. Having uninterrupted access to a studio or technologies that otherwise would be hard to come by is another benefit.

"Grad school can be a mixed bag, but everyone wants to be there and everyone cares," reported Dr. Erin Kelly, when I asked her if she believed that graduate programs create better scholars, artists or thinkers.

"Journalism school did make me a better writer. It made me tougher, braver, and it made me impervious to external pressures. I learned to be shameless," writer Lilly Hoeltzer affirms in her chapter of *Should I go to Grad School?*, when concluding her experience (Loudis 167). Hoeltzer expressed gratitude towards graduate school for making her a better writer, granting her excellent exposure to the journalism world and helping her publish some of her best work.

Through my peer survey, I was able to determine that cost was the main deterrent to students considering a master's program, and I asked Dr. Kelly a few questions in order to get a better idea of what students are really paying for with their tuition dollars. Steeping in the collegiate experience, enjoying the freedom to explore an area you're interested in, and designing a culminating activity of your choosing all came up in the discussion.

When I interviewed Dr. Deresiewicz and asked the same question, he cited some of the same reasons, but in a different order– "not only are you paying for the community and

networking opportunities... I know I took the environment, the mentorship, the facilities, and the time for granted. You don't realize how stimulating that environment is until you leave it." I've found this sentiment to be echoed by all of the graduate program coordinators I had the pleasure of interviewing.

2.6 Bolstering Your Credentials

With more and more master's programs being offered at American institutions every year, and more people competing for spots in them (Lam), it seems that the master's degree is the new bachelor's degree, especially for affluent America. Globalization has vastly increased the competition the average American worker experiences in the job market. People pursue a master's degree in order to set themselves up for success in their field, make important networking connections, and differentiate themselves. From our early development, students are told that the secret to success lies within a commitment to years of academic rigor.

In his book *The Death of the Artist*, Dr. Deresiewicz references Gerald Howard, executive editor at Doubleday, who compares writing programs to the NCAA. Like a football or basketball draft, a system of recommendations and grades from instructors pass along the most promising few to the big leagues– "in the field of professional writers, there are about as many uncredentialed walk-ons as there are walk-ons in major league baseball" (Deresiewicz, *Death of the Artist* 280).

The familiar mantra that the road to becoming a better thinker, writer, or creator, must include getting a higher degree may not always hold true. Oftentimes when faced with economic downturns and tough labor markets, people return to school to bolster their credentials and wait

out the storm. This was especially true in 2008, when many graduate schools saw record numbers of applications. Some have surmised that we may see a similar trend following the COVID-19 pandemic.

A naturally gifted student who is admitted into an affordable and fitting program can benefit hugely from pursuing an MFA degree. In addition, the master's degree has become indispensable for academic employment in the visual and performing arts, as well as creative writing. The time to hone one's craft in the company of like-minded creative individuals, under the instruction of a respected and experienced professor can prove priceless.

3. Cons of the MFA

In the following section I will address the impact of reduced admissions standards and the increase in student debt driven by federal loan programs that allow for unlimited borrowing. The university industrial complex benefits from both of these conditions by increasing the total number of admitted students and maximizing their per-student income.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the popularity of online programs. At the same time, job prospects for recent graduates during the pandemic are diminished. I will also touch on some other cons to pursuing a master's degree, including credentialism, overeducation, and the production of a uniform aesthetic among graduate program alumni.

3.1 Lower admissions standards, shrinking programs and a shallow talent pool

How do we evaluate talent? Is it the job of the schools, or of the students who attend these schools to decide if they are talented or studious enough for graduate school to be

beneficial? Driven by economic downturns and large bites out of educational revenue, graduate programs are less likely to be searching as valiantly for the "perfect fit" students, and are more likely to accept less talented applicants as a measure to fill seats.

Of course, quantifying creativity and talent is difficult. These qualities are extremely subjective and constantly fluctuating based on their backdrop. Creativity and talent must be fostered, and a graduate program can be a great outlet for that. Furthermore it is important to find a program, people, and an atmosphere where your individual learning style can best be employed. It is for this reason that graduate programs can be a huge risk if not properly researched. If a potential student is both talented and driven, and wishes to attend graduate school out of a pure desire to learn or teach, then the admissions process should facilitate their entry into the program. If however, they are not highly motivated, the admissions process should deny entry and save them both time and money.

MFA degrees don't always provide enough early-career earnings to begin paying down the massive debt that federal student loans taken out to obtain them can generate. History, writing, social work, and architecture students are included in the group of master's students who take on debt that entry-level job salaries in their industries cannot support. Some individuals who opt for a shorter program, attend a cheaper university, or happen to land an excellent job right after graduation are able to pay off their loans quickly, but the majority are not.

There is no doubt that part of the responsibility to admit the right students lies with the administrations. It is in their best financial interests to admit students who will be successful, but lately there is also a financial incentive to admit anyone willing to pay upfront.

In his book *Excellent Sheep*, Dr. William Deresiewicz references a large and well-funded study that found that for most individuals (excluding lower-income students and students of color), the university attended has no effect on future earnings. “What matters is the student– their brains and drive and work ethic– not the school” (Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep* 192). Deresiewicz explains that it is primarily the students who determine the level of classroom discussion and instruction. As a graduate student, your cohort are the people you spend almost all of your time interacting with, both inside and outside of the classroom. Because of this, your cohort shapes your values and expectations, for good or ill.

3.2 Background on the University Industrial Complex

Cathy Davidson was a professor and administrator at Duke for twenty-five years, and currently directs the Futures Initiative at the City University of New York. According to her book *The New Education,* “Students today are paying more for less. It’s a vicious cycle. ...Leaving college in substantial debt does not prepare students for the challenges of the twenty-first century economy; it leaves them disempowered and even more vulnerable to that economy from the start” (Davidson 168).

The rising tuition and cost of living at an average American university is outside the budget of a majority of middle class American families, but it is in the universities best interest to keep undergraduate degrees easily accessible to the most qualified applicants, regardless of economic background. Since the quality of undergraduate performance and the university’s acceptance rate are the general statistics by which overall institution ratings are based, it is

advantageous to make undergraduate education relatively affordable, and to increase competition and demand by keeping acceptance rates low.

Doctoral degrees are often funded on some level by the universities, and a stipend is usually awarded so that the student has something to live on while they pursue the degree. According to Calarco's *Field Guide to Grad School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum*, "doctoral students usually provide a source of low-cost labor for departments," and "programs are designed to train future university professors" (Calarco 21). In addition, some large corporations develop partnerships with universities to fund the development of technologies through these programs– a New York Times article describing the trajectory of the university industrial complex referenced the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which was receiving $25 million from Microsoft as part of a five year contract back in 2003, in support of developing educational technologies (Lee).

Unlike undergraduate and doctoral programs, terminal Master's programs are not funded. Even very expensive schools with large endowments rarely support master's programs, since their main focus is supporting undergraduates. In fact, graduate programs are becoming more and more of a grubstake, alleviating the losses that a university may incur while supporting their undergraduate programs. Graduate students are responsible for paying the full cost of tuition, fees and other expenses, which are especially high at private schools– some costing upwards of $100,000.

Curiously enough, Ozan Jaquette found while completing his Doctorate of Philosophy dissertation at University of Michigan, "Prestigious institutions have higher annual production of

master's degrees than non-prestigious institutions" (Jaquette 142). This is interesting because degrees from prestigious universities usually come with heftier price tags, and the terminal master's degree rarely comes at a discount.

So how can master's students afford it? The short answer is, most cannot. One might assume that graduate programs would eventually fizzle out due to these high costs, but the opposite is true.

According to data collected by the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) in 2014, numbers of MFA programs offered at American universities have grown exponentially over the last 40 years. Analyst Susan Falcon pointed out, "there are now 229 total creative writing MFA-conferring institutions– a more than 100% increase from a decade ago, when there were 109 (Falcon). According to a very recent article by Dr. Deresiewicz on the worth of the master's degree, "as recently as the mid-1990s, the School of Visual Arts in New York offered four graduate programs; now it offers 12 M.F.A.'s alone (visual narrative, social documentary film, illustration as visual essay), along with eight other master's" (Deresiewicz, *What's a Master's Really Worth* 11). This just goes to show the wild increase of programs, despite budget constraints and overall cost.

Scholarships, unfortunately, are not the reason that graduate students can pay their tuition. Calarco explains that with the current deficit of taxpayer support for higher education, scholarships are quite rare, and "departments use their terminal master's programs to make ends meet" (Calarco 20).

So where does the money come from?

3.3 Enter GradPlus, 2005

According to a recent Wall Street Journal article aptly titled *Top Master's Degrees Fail to Pay Off*, "unlike undergraduate loans, the federal Grad Plus loan program has no fixed limit on how much grad students can borrow" (Korn & Fuller). This means that students can borrow as much as they need to cover tuition, fees and any other living expenses, as long as they are full-time students. Since this program was introduced, no-limit loans have become a staple to universities who receive the tuition up front. Because of this, master's programs are treated as a cash cow, and institutions have a strong incentive to expand program options and accept larger numbers of applicants to increase the flow of federal funds. Universities face no consequences if alumni can't afford to repay the federal debts they owe.

Graduate school requires a huge time commitment and many students find it nearly impossible to also work full-time or even part-time while attending. This results in graduate students being more likely to rely on student loans than undergraduates.

The interest rates on student loans can be exploitative, sometimes as high as 7.9% according to Wall Street Journal statistics (Korn & Fuller). US student loans are structured such that they cannot be canceled through bankruptcy (Davidson 168). Essentially, federal aid is paid out in full to programs that systematically hobble students with impossible debt, and after around twenty years on an income-based payment plan, GradPlus loan balances can be forgiven with taxpayers bearing the losses (Korn & Fuller).

When the financial crash of 2008 hit, the numbers of people who might have considered getting their MFA plummeted. Because of this, admissions standards dropped as schools scrambled to fill classes and make up for the financial deficit Deresiewicz reported, in a recently published New York Magazine article titled *What's a Master's Degree Really Worth*. We are seeing a very similar trend now, due to COVID-19. Some would argue that now is a great time to apply to master's programs since it is easier to get in, but to what end?

In my interview with Deresiewicz, it was established that the most important components of a master's program are the people who teach it and the people who participate in it– a talented, like-minded cohort is very important to the overall value of the experience. Theoretically, when admissions standards drop, the percentage of raw talent within programs is diminished. The connections and network that a student may build while in school is arguably not as rewarding as it otherwise might have been.

Bourree Lam is an experienced economics journalist and editor with an interest in cultural issues. Currently she is the Bureau Chief for Personal Finance Coverage at The Wall Street Journal. In her work, she generally explores the ways macroeconomic changes affect the daily lives of Americans.

In 2014, Lam wrote a particularly scathing economic analysis of the average return on investment that a creative must acknowledge when they pursue an MFA, whether it be in poetry, dance, or design. Right off, she references American art critic Jerry Saltz's claim that Master of Fine Arts degrees are "straight-up highway robbery" (Lam), and goes on to address issues familiar to anyone considering a graduate degree: rising costs and poor job prospects. "The risk

is more arresting to practicing artists and creatives than people in any other field. With MFA tuition averaging 40 grand a year, the price for a two year program plus room and board can land you over $100,000 in debt" (Lam). Korn and Fuller's article *Top Master's Degrees Fail to Pay Off* highlights recent film program graduates of Columbia University and NYU who had accrued a median debt of $181,000 upon graduation. Two years after completion of their Master of Fine Arts degree, half of the graduates were still making less than $30,000 a year.

Fuller and Korn went on to further exemplify this dilemma of schools victimizing graduate students by detailing the debt of non-MFA graduates at Northwestern University, USC and NYU. The average median cost of a speech pathology degree at Northwestern is $148,000, and entry level salaries in the first two years generally do not surpass $60,000. A degree in marriage & family counseling from the renowned University of Southern California costs an average medien $124,000 and most entry level positions in the industry offer about $50,000 a year. A degree in publishing at NYU costs an average of $116,000, yet the medium income of recent graduates is $42,000 two years after the program.

A medical student with an equivalent debt who becomes a practicing surgeon right out of school has a lot less to worry about than an MFA graduate who has far less hope of dependable return on their investment, especially right out of school. But in *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux*, author and professor Cathy Davidson recalls a time she was taken to the hospital after collapsing in her apartment, and upon waking up apologizing to all the young doctors in the ward for the two hundred thousand dollars of debt they must be in from their schooling. The medical students spoke to her later, smiling - "we all owe more than that. I owe over $400,000!" one doctor said (Davidson 165). Davidson

goes on to explain that she later learned how these young interns and residents deal with their enormous tuition burden– by going into lucrative, specialized fields, rather than becoming general practitioners, ER physicians, or going into public health… Similar to the way creative writers and graphic designers must seek employment with corporate/tech industries that will allow them to pay off their debts. While this paper focuses primarily on the dismal predicament of MFA graduates attempting to pay off their loans, it is not meant to discredit the egregious debt that students in other fields also struggle with.

Bourree Lam concludes her condemnation of the MFA with the fact that the cost is not yet dissuading young creatives in the arts from pursuing such degrees, and admits that perhaps the reason for that is because no one studies art for financial gain. She speculates that the kind of people who would allocate $100,000 for a degree that promises them no financial return are either rich or hopelessly naive. This begs the question as to whether students should or should not be more concerned about the consequences of borrowing money to land a career that won't pay off the debt.

Of course this is not to say that graduate degrees in the arts aren't worth it, or should only be pursued by the wealthy– but instead should point out how the system victimizes those who may benefit from a graduate program that they really cannot afford.. Essentially, schools are peddling thousands of degrees a year that may not qualify their alumni for high-enough paying jobs to repay their loans. Korn and Fuller found that while graduate students account for only a small fraction of overall college students currently enrolled in the United States, the debt owed by that group is nearly equivalent to the federal loans that undergraduates in the United States collectively took out in the same period.

Since schools enjoy the free flowing federal loan money, and demand for spots in graduate programs still far exceeds the supply, schools can continue to raise costs relatively unchecked. This is prevalent especially in the case of Ivy schools, which can leverage their legacy and claim that the high cost is always worth the degree, when there's almost no way that it is.

3.4 The Exploitative Nature of Graduate Student Loans & the Value of Diversity

As previously established, the value of the master's program lies within the students participating in it. Keeping excellent candidates out on the basis of finance theoretically devalues the programs due to lack of diversity. Because of the high cost to attend and the availability of federal loans, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) students who often come from less wealthy backgrounds rely far more heavily on the predatory student loan industry.

I do not mean that less BIPOC students are admitted to graduate programs, or that less choose to attend graduate school– in fact, the opposite is true. According to a study published by the American Council on Education in 2019, 57.7% of black bachelor's degree graduates went on to pursue advanced degrees, while only 43.8% of white bachelor's degree holders did the same (Espinosa 5). These students were far more likely than others to receive federal grants and loans, but graduated with the greatest student loan debt of any group.

The U.S. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that total graduate student enrollment of racial/ethnic minorities has increased massively between 1976 and 2008 (Table 2).

The best documented of the minorities has been Black students, where the number increased from 90,000 students in 1976, to 315,000 students in 2008 (Aud 125).

Table 2. Total number, total percentage distribution, and percent of female graduate (post-baccalaureate) fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions, by race/ethnicity: Selected years, 1976-2008

Race/ethnicity	1976	1980	1990	2000	2003	2005	2008
Number enrolled							
Total	**1,566,644**	**1,617,720**	**1,859,531**	**2,156,896**	**2,431,117**	**2,523,511**	**2,737,076**
White	1,335,646	1,352,351	1,449,830	1,478,644	1,616,272	1,666,846	1,749,565
Black	89,670	87,910	99,819	181,425	230,342	259,205	315,194
Hispanic	30,897	38,642	57,888	110,781	136,488	148,420	169,364
Asian/Pacific Islander	28,587	37,735	71,954	132,679	152,834	163,029	184,932
American Indian/ Alaska Native	6,381	6,003	7,319	12,644	14,825	15,899	17,737
Nonresident alien	75,463	95,079	172,721	240,723	280,356	270,112	300,284
Percentage distribution							
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
White	85.3	83.6	78.0	68.6	66.5	66.1	63.9
Black	5.7	5.4	5.4	8.4	9.5	10.3	11.5
Hispanic	2.0	2.4	3.1	5.1	5.6	5.9	6.2
Asian/Pacific Islander	1.8	2.3	3.9	6.2	6.3	6.5	6.8
American Indian/ Alaska Native	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6
Nonresident alien	4.8	5.9	9.3	11.2	11.5	10.7	11.0
Percent female							
Total	**42.7**	**46.2**	**51.4**	**56.3**	**57.5**	**58.5**	**59.0**
White	43.0	46.9	53.3	57.8	58.8	59.4	59.7
Black	56.3	59.6	63.2	67.8	69.5	70.4	71.3
Hispanic	41.5	47.3	53.3	59.8	61.5	62.2	63.0
Asian/Pacific Islander	39.3	39.7	43.8	51.8	54.0	54.7	55.3
American Indian/ Alaska Native	41.7	49.7	56.3	60.3	62.1	62.7	63.1
Nonresident alien	23.6	25.4	30.4	38.9	40.3	41.6	41.5

NOTE: Data from 1976 through 1990 are for institutions of higher education, while later data are for degree-granting institutions. Degree-granting institutions grant associate's or higher degrees and participate in Title IV federal financial aid programs. The degree-granting classification is very similar to the earlier higher education classification, but it includes more 2-year colleges and excludes a few higher education institutions that do not grant degrees. Data include enrollment in master's, first-professional, and doctorate programs. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS), "Fall Enrollment in Colleges and Universities" surveys, 1976 and 1980, and 1990 through 2008 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), "Fall Enrollment" survey, 1990, and selected years, Spring 2001 through Spring 2009.

It is important to note graduate enrollment by institutional type– public, private not-for-profit, and private for-profit varies widely by race. According to the NCES data, a higher percentage of black students attend for-profit institutions than any other races/ethnicities shown in 2008 (Table 3). Large federal student loans taken out to afford the high cost of tuition contribute to the debt patterns among these students.

Table 3. Number and percentage distribution of U.S. citizen enrollment in degree-granting institutions, by race/ethnicity and institutional type: 2008

Institutional type	Total	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	American Indian/Alaska Native
Number enrolled						
Total, all types	**18,442,233**	**12,088,781**	**2,584,478**	**2,272,888**	**1,302,797**	**193,289**
Public institutions	13,545,180	8,817,677	1,759,200	1,832,397	982,876	153,030
Research	3,614,610	2,612,923	355,490	294,693	318,678	32,826
Other 4-year	3,392,814	2,266,300	471,852	415,226	199,662	39,774
2-year	6,537,756	3,938,454	931,858	1,122,478	464,536	80,430
Private, not-for-profit	3,454,943	2,513,749	431,988	248,545	236,537	24,124
Research	1,012,479	692,750	103,743	87,379	122,796	5,811
Other 4-year	2,407,925	1,799,663	321,311	158,120	112,079	16,752
2-year	34,539	21,336	6,934	3,046	1,662	1,561
Private, for-profit	1,442,110	757,355	393,290	191,946	83,384	16,135
4-year	1,147,730	615,507	312,559	136,784	70,205	12,675
2-year	294,380	141,848	80,731	55,162	13,179	3,460
Percentage distribution						
Total, all types	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
Public institutions	73.4	72.9	68.1	80.6	75.4	79.2
Research	19.6	21.6	13.8	13.0	24.5	17.0
Other 4-year	18.4	18.7	18.3	18.3	15.3	20.6
2-year	35.4	32.6	36.1	49.4	35.7	41.6
Private, not-for-profit	18.7	20.8	16.7	10.9	18.2	12.5
Research	5.5	5.7	4.0	3.8	9.4	3.0
Other 4-year	13.1	14.9	12.4	7.0	8.6	8.7
2-year	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.8
Private, for-profit	7.8	6.3	15.2	8.4	6.4	8.3
4-year	6.2	5.1	12.1	6.0	5.4	6.6
2-year	1.6	1.2	3.1	2.4	1.0	1.8

NOTE: Nonresident alien enrollment is not included in table. Research institutions include those with a high level of research activity or those that award at least 20 doctor's degrees per year. Relative levels of research activity for research universities were determined by an analysis of research and development expenditures, science and engineering research staffing, and doctoral degrees conferred, by field. Further information on the research index ranking may be obtained from http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/index.asp?key=798#related. Other 4-year institutions include those that award at least 50 master's degrees per year, those that primarily emphasize undergraduate education, and those that award degrees primarily in single fields of study such as medicine, business, fine arts, theology, and engineering.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Spring 2009.

In a chapter of *Excellent Sheep* where Dr. Deresiewicz debates the value of an undergraduate degree from a public versus a private school, he notes the intrinsic value that socioeconomic diversity contributes to the academic experience. “Despite huge budget cuts, there are some very good public schools in every part of the country. The student body is far more diverse in terms of socioeconomic background– with all of the invaluable experiential learning that implies” (Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep* 193). When students from diverse

backgrounds come together, they each bring unique experiences and world views to the table. Not only is this advantageous because the environment simulates the real world working experience, but the nature of the projects they chose to pursue are affected by it. Students are naturally inclined to focus on solving problems they perceive in the world. Diverse students perceive the world differently, and expose each other to world views they would not normally encounter.

While wealthy upper middle class students who can afford to support the programs through hefty tuition may be talented and creative in their own right, they will likely be focused on solving and exploring very different kinds of problems in their graduate studies than students who come from more humble backgrounds. For example, a graduate student who grew up in, and beat the odds of an impossibly poor school district/widening digital divide, would be more inclined to put their time and passion into projects that aim to solve those problems. These individuals are their own communities' best defenders and activists, and they are society's movers and shakers.

Graduate students in creative writing may choose to write stories exposing systematic flaws that hurt people from low-income backgrounds, and service designers who get their MFA may focus on making resources like food and clean water more accessible to those communities. Fine artists might be compelled to create murals or sculptures that celebrate persecuted groups, and help tell their story in order to gain support for social change. Supporting these different kinds of creatives indirectly supports the movement to balance income inequality, and expose/destroy other systematic problems in our society.

On the flip side, when institutions use students for profit and hobble them with debt, it is a conflict of interest for the schools and the greater society that could benefit from their work. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in the case of MFA students, who are less likely to find their way out of debt in the early years of their career. According to Davidson in *The New Education,* about "twenty percent of graduate school borrowers see their total student loan debt balance increase in the first 5 years of their loan." These young individuals are not putting money towards their retirement, are less likely to be able to buy a house, and are likely putting off raising a family. To make matters worse, if the economy takes a sour turn (or a pandemic hits) and a person with formidable student debt loses their job, they could end up losing their home or facing repossession of their vehicle. Furthermore, US student loans are structured such that they cannot be so easily escaped through bankruptcy (Davidson 166).

This brings us to the issue of these young people not being able to invest in a house, or raise a family when it is most biologically feasible. The ability to have children in both men and especially women begins to decline by age 40, but the average student borrower takes 20 years to pay off their student loan debt, the majority of which take out those loans in their early to mid twenties. Some professional graduates take over 45 years to repay their student loans.

In *Excellent Sheep, The Miseducation of the American Elite*, Dr. Deresiewicz begins his final chapter by touching on privilege in the context of the American education system. He insists that privilege no longer be handed down, and argues that it is the duty of the education system to mitigate the class system as it did in the middle decades of the twentieth century. We can certainly begin with the admissions process, as they did in the 1930s. Furthermore, Deresiewicz expressed his belief that affirmative action should be based on class instead of race,

a change that many critics of the American education system have been advocating for for years (Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep* 235).

If academic institutions begin to reconsider their conception of merit and the criteria by which admissions decisions are made, the whole education system will change. In order to develop a better class of future leaders and solve the problems we face as a society today, we must refocus on which qualities to promote, and learn how to select for them in admissions without allowing financial motives to interfere. The best master's students will be the ones with resilience, self-reliance, independence of spirit, genuine curiosity and creativity, and a willingness to take risks and make mistakes.

3.5 Job Prospects in Academia

While having an MFA statistically leads to higher earning potential, it is important to recognize the financial rewards of obtaining an MFA are a gamble. While people generally do not pursue an MFA for financial gain, they often do not intend to go into debt while doing so.

According to Jessica Calarco's all-encompassing *Field Guide to Grad School*, there are a few categories of employment prospects within universities for students with graduate degrees, but those prospects just aren't as numerous as they once were– the percentage of full-time, tenure-track positions available including benefits and retirement has decreased in recent years, despite the increase in graduate programs offered (Calarco 302). Navigating the academic job market can be tricky as a graduate student, especially in the arts and humanities. The turnover within the job market is pretty slow (even an elementary school that can afford a full-time art teacher probably won't hire a new one often, since most teachers have 20-30 year careers), and if

a graduate student is constrained by location, the pool of opportunities can be quite small. "Having a degree from a prestigious school might help, and being an especially good artist or teacher might help, but it's not a guarantee," (Calarco 311) which is a trend that echoes in nearly all fields.

A lot of people find the *non-terminal* MA a more affordable degree in terms of both time and money spent, but while an MA might typically ensure you a steady career, it does not provide the opportunity to teach that comes with the *terminal* MFA. There are only so many tenured positions available in academia, and while the number of tenure-track positions has grown somewhat in recent decades, it has not grown as exponentially as the number of people pursuing terminal degrees in the arts.

As previously established, interest on student loans can be incredibly exploitative, "currently fifty percent higher than on mortgage rates" (Davidson 166). Davidson explains in *The New Education* that at public schools and private ones that lack large endowments, tuition has gone up "out of necessity, to meet the bottom line." Students are facing these costs in the form of tuition hikes, and faculty are experiencing huge cutbacks as well in the form of hiring caps and limits on how frequently courses within a major can be offered. "Over half of all courses taught on campuses are now taught by adjunct, part time instructors with no benefits or job security, a number that has risen by 30 percent since 1975… these highly educated instructors teach on a course by course basis for wages that are below minimum wage if calculated hourly" (Davidson 167). If this is what is in store, why would anyone aspire to be a professor? This diminishes the overall benefit of the MFA, and other terminal master's degrees.

As mentioned above, Professor Rohrbach of Carnegie Mellon University confirmed that a lot of their graduate program alumni take jobs in tech that they may not be enthused about upon graduation. The high tuition costs force many students into fields and would-be career paths they wouldn't otherwise choose. The numbers of graduate students aspiring to start a teaching career post-graduation is likely to take a dive in coming years, especially in light of the pandemic and increase of online/hybrid learning– which is a terrible shame.

When I interviewed Professor Stacie Rohrbach about the emphasis placed on teaching at the Carnegie Mellon master's programs she directs, she first referenced her own experience earning her master's degree at North Carolina State University in 2003. Under the guidance of Meredith Davis (Professor Emerita of Graphic Design at NC State, where she served as department head and taught for 26 years), Professor Rohrbach's graduate experience was "extremely focused on educating educators," and became widely known for producing excellent teachers. She explained that each program has a slightly different focus, and depends heavily on the desires of the students and the interests of the faculty of each program in any given year.

When asked about the focus that the CMU program puts on education, Stacie Rohrbach responded that "It's not a focus of our program. I had gone to NC State and at the time that program was known for *educating educators*. A lot of people who had teaching aspirations went to that program. That's not as much the case in our program at CMU. A lot of our students will go on to work in the tech industry to start, to pay off their debts as quickly as they can. Oftentimes they will transition into jobs that are looking at service design, social innovation;

they have aspirations of leveraging design technology for good down the road, which is nice to see."

"Later on, we do see quite a few students go on to teach in some capacity, maybe not in a traditional faculty position in an academic environment… But they will conduct workshops, for example at CapitalOne labs, or at IDEO– where teaching is a component of what they do."

It is a telltale sign that so few students express a desire to teach upon completion of their terminal master's degree– especially since the reasoning often seems financial. The world needs experienced, erudite, technologically progressive teachers in academic institutions in order to make programs worth their price, but it seems word has gotten out that teaching is not a reliable career path if you have large student debts to pay off in a timely manner. In addition, full-time teaching jobs can be difficult to come by. Given the state of student debt, graduates find that going into the tech industry is the most financially feasible option (albeit less emotionally rewarding), and often plan to switch to something more personally fulfilling once they can afford to do so.

While attending an information session for UC Berkeley's master's program in graphic design, I spoke to the Executive Director of their program, Gwynne Keathley. She reported that a number of their students have the opportunity to pursue teaching aspirations with academic graduate student internships during completion of their degree, meaning that they may teach undergraduate lectures in addition to attending their own seminars. While she did not have the exact breakdown of how many students take part in this, "she would guess that about four or five

students per cohort do so." The Berkeley design program only launched in 2019, and they have about 40 students in each cohort.

It is important to recognize that graduate students aren't generally recognized as official university employees, so standard labor laws don't apply to their university work, and they do not usually receive benefits. At some universities, such as NYU, students have assembled graduate student unions to argue for fair compensation. In an article published by The Atlantic, author David Ludwig explains that many graduate students believe that they are being exploited, "citing the meager compensation they receive for the services they provide to their universities.... Though the financial burden of graduate school is most extreme for medical and law students, the debt often faced by those graduating with doctorate and master's degrees is hardly negligible" (Ludwig). At larger research institutions, graduate students may be expected to cover a substantial portion of their salary with grants (Calarco 307). Teaching while completing a graduate degree may be a necessary component of the learning process, but it certainly falls into an awkward grey area between great teaching opportunity and unpaid obligation.

3.6 Job Prospects Outside of Academia

For students attempting a career transition, returning to school in a new area of study to pivot from a previous career path can be effective. Still, the time off taken to complete a master's degree can make maintaining a career network and re-entering the workforce more challenging, and a graduate program may not instill the practical, on-the-job skills necessary to the new career direction.

In our final weeks of my undergraduate program at California State University, Chico, Communications Design Professor Barbara Sudick recommended that when it comes to graduate programs, it is important to consider career opportunities or hubs in relative proximity to school location.

For example, a student pursuing their MFA in Interaction Design might prioritize a program in Washington higher than a program in Pennsylvania, since there are more large industry players headquartered in the former than the latter state. Having internship possibilities in close physical proximity while attending graduate school may be the "foot in the door" a student needs for a great career opportunity down the road.

If you are hoping to go into an academic career, the opposite is true– according to Professor Calarco, "most universities and departments won't hire their own graduate students as faculty members, at least not in the first few years after graduation."

In his book *The Death of the Artist*, Dr. William Deresiewicz explains how location is pivotal to the careers of many different kinds of creatives. "While we might like to believe that there are talented people everywhere, the truth is that the talented people have converged on a limited number of places, to be with other talented people"– and these places happen to be some of the most expensive cities to live in (Deresiewicz, *Death of the Artist* 92). Just as software engineers flock to Silicon Valley, cinematographers go to Los Angeles, dancers and writers must go to New York, and visual artists/designers move to Chicago, New York and the San Francisco Bay Area.

High cost of living turns many away, but those who do not conform tend to eventually reach their own creative limits within their community. Some view higher degrees as the golden ticket to a high enough paying career to actually live in an area where their industries are. In addition, Deresiewicz points out that "the centers are the places where you find collaborators," something that is much harder to do remotely (Deresiewicz, *Death of the Artist* 93). A master's program can be a good way to ease into living in many cities and getting involved in new industries, but it can also be a lot harder to afford an apartment in one of these places when you have debt in addition to the high cost of living.

It is important to note that many of these historic creative hubs have seen a mass exodus unlike ever before, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The advantage of today's communications technology has allowed many of these individuals to continue making a living by sharing their work virtually from remote locations. It is hard to say whether people will migrate back to cities once COVID is under control, but there is no doubt that a lot of young creatives may never return to their old haunts. This could slightly reduce the draw towards master's programs and big city life, as we move into a more permanent digital age.

When I interviewed Dr. Deresiewicz to ask him about the costs and benefits of MFA degrees, he declared that if a student has an undergraduate degree in the arts, and returns to school in the same field hoping for a guarantee of a larger paycheck upon completion of their master's, they may be a bit naïve.

3.7 Lasting Effects of COVID & Pitfalls of Online Education

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic will reshape the economy, government and our higher education system in lasting ways. Universities recorded their largest cash deficits in decades this past academic year, thanks to a big drop in enrollment and a lack of room-and-board revenue from the students who did enroll, but took their courses online between 2019 and the present.

Theoretically, this will cause universities to grasp even tighter to the federal loans that graduate programs provide. Admissions standards are expected to continue to drop, both in undergraduate and graduate programs because the schools are not making enough money to stay comfortably afloat, and many students report that they just aren't interested in a post-covid hybrid education.

In an article published in 2021 by Wall Street Journal author Patrick Thomas details how MBA programs have lost record numbers of applicants this year, despite business schools' implementation of hybrid in-person/online courses. Students have opted out because in light of the pandemic, connecting with people has become harder than ever before. The perceived value behind the MBA degree has diminished because the relationships formed during in-person networking and overseas trips make the expensive MBA degree worth it to many (Thomas). Currently, the worth of a master's is handicapped by the pandemic, and there is no saying how long it will last. Even though many universities are returning to in-person activity, there will likely be a lot of restrictions on travel, cohort sizes, conventions/receptions/big events, and more that are considered vital to successful MFA programs.

Jakab Spencer, an author for the Wall Street Journal and editor of the *Heard on the Street* published a news analysis which observes how the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a large bite out of higher education revenue– the largest drop in cash inflow in decades, more even than 2008 (Spencer). Furthermore, our emergence from the pandemic, and evolving attitudes about online learning may have long-term effects on colleges and universities.

Spencer references the remotely instructed Minerva Institutes at KGI, which received 25,000 applications for the class of 2024, and admitted less than one percent, making it "far more selective than even Ivy League schools, and cheaper too" (Spencer).

Despite being only weeks away from their bachelors graduation, seventy-seven percent of my initial survey respondents who reported that they were interested in graduate school answered that they had not looked at any specific MFA programs yet. Forty-five percent said their top priority would be to participate in the quickest degree program possible. They seemed relatively impartial to the quality or location of the program, until the possibility of an online program was brought up.

When asked if they would consider an online graduate program, seventy percent said that they would. In addition, if an online graduate program were less expensive than an in-person program, 89 percent said they would strongly consider applying.

Later, when I interviewed Dr. Deresiewicz and asked what he thought of the value of online graduate programs, he paused for a moment, then sighed. "I should say that I haven't actually looked into them... But the whole... I mean, I've thought about the idea... And the idea is

just hideous. It just sounds like a waste of money. I mean, look, there are a lot of institutions in American higher education (specifically for profit) but not just for profit, that you know are happy to take your money and their tuition costs may even be less than another school. But what you're getting out of it is completely worthless." Deresiewicz is not alone in this belief that the most valuable part of a graduate program is the in-person nature, the connections and networking you're able to do in person. To many, myself included, graduate school just feels like the logical next step, the next hoop to jump through. However, to be online or even hybrid might defeat the point of a graduate program, which leads me to ponder how many students are pursuing them for the wrong reasons.

3.8 A Ponzi Scheme?

In an article aptly titled *The Real World vs. The MFA*, writer Marian Palaia claims to be "living a dream she was never brave enough to have" (Palaia), in large part due to the MA and MFA programs that she completed over a period of twenty-five years. She addresses several of the negative assumptions that people make about MFA programs, first tackling an increasingly popular idea among critics that MFA programs are somewhat of a pyramid scheme, aimed to keep otherwise marginal writers (who are themselves MFA grads) employed (Palaia).

Theoretically, as the number of MFA programs offered increases exponentially, more students attend and less applicants are rejected. As Deresiewicz would concur, the talent pool remains static. Thousands of those less-talented students go into debt each year in pursuit of a dream that will not ultimately allow them to break even, since *theoretically* there are far more aspiring creatives out there than there are high-paying jobs to support them upon completion of

their degree. Year after year, a slightly larger and proportionally less gifted group will receive their diploma, the gifted few will get industry or teaching jobs, and the cycle will continue until the system is no longer sustainable, and collapses.

3.9 Credentialism, Overeducation, and Business

Horace Mann is credited with creating the foundation for the modern public education system back in the 1830s, just as the rapidly industrializing world was demanding different skills and behaviors out of the American people than it previously had. The school system as we know it has not changed as rapidly as our society has in the last two hundred years. Over time, the entanglement of business in schools, and schools *as* businesses has contributed to the mass unemployment, rampant credentialism and overeducation that we see in America today.

Mann's original school system was aimed at building workers to support the industrial powerhouse America was projected to become, lumping students into groups rather than treating them as individuals. Some believe that schools manifest this same tendency today, squashing creativity and doing little to foster intelligence in their quest to demand discipline and order. Given the technological innovations and the financial sophistication of our current digital economy, it is important to step back and consider the function of education *overall* as more than a process to produce a workforce, and *individually* as more than just a return on investment in oneself.

Credentialism is a belief in or reliance on academic or other formal qualifications as the best measure of a person's intelligence or ability to do a particular job, and it is a big part of how the university industrial complex functions. A 1985 article published by the Atlantic by James

Fallows details the issue of credentialism in the context of the business world, with which Academia is deeply entwined. In essence, credentialism is the desire to put another letter behind your name or add more to your resume, regardless of the cost or actual value of the achievement.

In *The Case Against Credentialism*, Fallows speaks about the culture of achievement that has developed since the beginning of the education system as we know it, explaining that "The basic tenet of this culture of achievement is that he who goes further in school will go further in life" (Fallows). American society is described as a meritocracy by Fallows, Deresiewicz, and most other literary critics involved in higher education in the sense that those who show the most academic merit will succeed. The meritocracy developed in a very different world from ours, and its educational system was designed for a very different economy. Fallows theorizes that the academic-credentialing system that has evolved over the past century is deficient by its own most basic standard– that of guaranteeing high performance. "At every step of the way what is rewarded is excellence in school, which is related to excellence on the job only indirectly and sometimes not at all" (Fallows).

According to a national survey conducted in 1937-1938, only about half of all employers required that prospective managers have even a high school diploma, and only one eighth required a college degree. Thirty years later a regional study found that nearly half of all managerial jobs formally required either a B.A. or a graduate degree (Fallows). He draws this phenomenon back to the invention of IQ tests and the dawning of the idea that "intelligence" was a single, measurable, and unchanging trait that severely limited each person's occupational choice. To the creator of the first intelligence test, the French psychologist Alfred Binet, IQ meant something very different from what it has come to imply today.

"If the first major social change, the rise of professions based on advanced educational degrees, dramatically increased the importance of higher education, the second change implied that only a few people would be recognized as having the raw intelligence to handle long years in school and the careers that would follow," Fallows explained. The results of this perception were spelled out by American psychologist Richard Herrnstein, in his book *I.Q. in the meritocracy*– "The ties among I.Q., occupation, and social standing make practical sense," he wrote. "If virtually anyone is smart enough to be a ditch digger, and only half the people are smart enough to be engineers, then society is, in effect, husbanding its intellectual resources by holding engineers in greater esteem, and on the average, paying them more."

While a bachelor's degree has become an indispensable stepping stone to a career that requires any sort of skilled labor, the master's degree (especially an MFA) is not nearly as requisite a step towards the vast majority of career paths in pertinent fields. Despite this, many creatives seem to be feeling increasingly obligated to obtain higher degrees and add as many letters to their title as possible so that they can make a living.

In one of his bolder literary analyses titled *What's a Master's Degree Really Worth*, Deresiewicz reviews the Korn & Fuller article referenced above, and affirms that "Not only is the master's degree the quintessential example of a bureaucratic credential —drably functional and frequently deeply pointless — but much of its growth has been in fields that are themselves explicitly bureaucratic." While he is speaking primarily to degrees in business and social services here, he also takes a shot at self-proclaimed professionally trained "creatives" and the transition of creativity itself becoming a business concept, in his book *The Death of the Artist* (Deresiewicz

267). He refers to a book published in 2002 by Richard Florida, titled *The Rise of the Creative Class*, which does not define the creative class as people who do creative work– rather, he defines it as "people who add economic value to the market through their creativity." Deresiewicz adds that companies were quick to adopt this philosophy, and soon behind them, universities. "Design thinking" became a new infatuation of modern corporations, first inspired by IDEO. Schools began to launch design programs outside of traditional "graphic design", taking notes from Stanford's renowned d.School. It was in the early 2000's that "Creative", as an employment category, really took off (Deresiewicz, *Death of the Artist* 268). This monetization of education and creativity, and financially driven institutions has surely had an effect on the changing nature of graduate programs in the United States.

Alfie Kohn is an American author and lecturer in the areas of education, parenting, and human behavior. He is a proponent of progressive education and has offered critiques of many traditional aspects of parenting, managing, and American society more generally, drawing in each case from social science research. In his book *What Does it Mean to be Well Educated?* Kohn reflects on the purposes of education, exposing some of the ways that higher education has become a for-profit industry.

Kohn points out that some businesses benefit from education in direct ways, like selling textbooks to students, and others do so in indirect ways like "school-to-work" programs, where students are defined as future workers and shaped to specifications of employers. It is notable that Kohn always refers to businesses as separate entities from schools, when in fact schools are frequently treating graduate programs the way a business might– as a means to maximize profitability, rather than focusing on what is in the best interest of students. This title was

published over a decade ago in 2004, and some of Kohn's theories are more applicable now than ever before. Kohn claims that "the whole notion of education as a public good is being undermined, paving the way for privatization of schools," warning that when a business ethos takes over, emphasis on quantifiable results and standardization of procedures to improve those numbers can be quite disruptive to "learning for the sake of learning" (Kohn 22-23).

In his book *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elit*e, Deresiewicz also brings up this tendency of people to determine the value of higher education based on its return on investment, rather than *learning for the sake of learning*. He then dares the reader to evaluate the return of investment of having children, spending time with friends, or listening to music. "The things that are most worth doing are worth doing for their own sake… Anyone who tells you that the sole purpose of education is the acquisition of negotiable skills is attempting to reduce you to a productive employee at work, a gullible consumer in the market, and a docile subject of the state" (Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep* 79). This propensity to value education only as a means to get a better job, or win a higher salary has contributed to the development of credentialism, and in some cases, joyless overeducation.

Furthermore, some individuals report that graduate school in creative fields can feel performative in nature. This relates to credentialism, the desire to achieve a higher degree regardless of its actual value, and overeducation, the desire to achieve a higher degree even if it is not necessary to your career path. In *41 Answers to an Impossible Question*, when speaking on her own experiences in graduate school, writer and poet Lucy Ives theorized that "you are not there to learn specifically, but rather to enrich the research of professors, and generally contribute to the atmosphere of intellectual endeavor often" (Loudis 199), noting that she found this

particularly prevalent within the humanities. Ives claimed to have found nothing *innately* distasteful about such "performances of academic involvement", but seemed hesitant to admit that graduate school, despite performative in nature, actually helped her develop as a thinker or writer.

While calling America *overeducated* seems misconstrued, the practice of becoming more educated than is *practical* or *financially feasible* is a growing trend in America, driven by credentialism and the so-called american work ethic.

Prior to the Presidential Election of 2020, Democrats campaigned to use government resources to offer more financial aid and lower interest rates on federal student loans. Republicans planned to rely on private sector initiatives and use financial incentives to encourage more accountability from universities on cost. With all intent focused on making education less expensive and more accessible, little attention was paid to the fact that there is a deficit of high-paying jobs open for these graduates.

While there is arguably inherent value to pursuing an MFA degree beyond just finding employment, a lot of alumni are hard pressed to find a well-paying job that actually requires their level of education. In many cases, they settle for jobs that they are overqualified and overeducated for. This becomes a bigger issue when the individual settling for a lower paying job is saddled with a few hundred thousand dollars of student debt.

3.10 The Uniform Aesthetic

In the *The Death of the Artist*, William Deresiewicz tackles the value of art school. He addresses the persuasion that being a student is antithetical to being an artist. Afterall, school is rooted in authority, method, and a somewhat strict time frame. Some artists do not respond to the pressure it may force upon them, and some experience the feeling that they are moving too fast, or in too linear a fashion to really experience creative development.

In addition, Deresiewicz refers to the familiar idea graduate programs– particularly programs in the arts– attempt to "tear you down, in order to build you back up in the faculty's image", causing a uniform aesthetic amongst alumni. He refers to poet Kenneth Goldsmith, who studied sculpture at RISD and reported the programs there encouraged a "dull" and "overly cautious" approach to creativity (Deresiewicz, *Death of the Artist* 278).

Marian Palaia expresses a similar sentiment in her tirade against the MFA in creative writing, stating that "every single soul who comes out of one will be writing the same book anyway, because, through some magical, mysterious process I have as yet been unable to grasp, all MFA programs teach them how to write in exactly the same way" (Palaia). Despite this, Palaia claims that she doesn't really subscribe to these blanket theories that disparage the MFA as some kind of scheme, pyramid, formulaic aesthetic, or otherwise and has never found evidence of academic faculty encouraging their students to emulate a formula when it comes to creative writing.

When speaking to Deresiewicz, David Busis, a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop condemned the MFA style a myth, arguing that "MFA's allow less talented people to publish through hard work, and if you're not inspired, but you are lucky enough to get your ten thousand hours in, then your prose is just going to come out kind of flat. But the inspired people are still writing inspired fiction" (Deresiewicz, *Death of the Artist* 278).

Palaia goes on to refute the aforementioned claim that MFA's produce a uniform aesthetic, instead attributing editors for the formulaic nature of what Master of Fine Arts students see in print and therefore tend to emulate. She implies that while there is no *formula*, there *is* an environment that all MFA students share and are influenced by, which is far more likely to cause the similar style.

While an MFA program might make you a more experienced scholar or artist by giving you the atmosphere and time to develop creatively, they do not impart talent or creativity.

3.11 Alternatives to Getting an MFA

If a student feels compelled to go to graduate school to make them more appealing to potential employers, there are often many alternative ways to achieve that goal at a far lower cost.

Non degree programs such as online boot camps, credential programs and community college courses can be very beneficial to increasing one's potential earnings and desirability to employers. These options are generally far more affordable, accessible, and diverse for working adults (Calarco 7). They are built to aid in the pursuit of job-related skills and offer certificates,

badges and other microcredentials from accredited institutions that look great on a CV– for example, a certificate in web design, healthcare administration, or computer information technology.

I recently happened across an intriguing article published in Wired Magazine on the rise of stackable credentials, another one of these alternatives. Author Jon Marcus is a higher-education editor who holds a master's degree from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, and is currently a journalism instructor at Boston College.

He explains that with unemployment ever-present, many people have begun turning to nontraditional programs that offer rewards for completing short courses on specific skills such as coding, user experience design, or basic accounting, rather than pursuing multiple-year degrees. Marcus explains the growing interest in "microcredentials," and how "hard skills" these programs teach can be immediately valuable, when applying for jobs, internships and whatever else (Marcus). While stackable credential programs may sound like they only apply to those involved in more technical career paths, this is not true. Writers, actors, and other kinds of creatives in more traditional fields looking to make their way in our brave new tech-heavy, post-pandemic world could also reap the benefits of such programs.

Half of the battle of being artist or creative is finding an outlet where you can display your work and receive the compensation you need to make a living. A lot of people are finding that they may need more education to return to the workforce, or to get there in the first place. They will need to get it quickly, at the lowest possible cost, and in subjects directly relevant to available jobs. Between the economic toll the coronavirus pandemic is taking, and the resulting

boost that technology is experiencing, microcredentials are gaining some traction (Marcus). Some large corporations such as Google have launched their own certification programs that are considered equivalent to a four-year degree for their hiring processes.

4. Conclusions

4.1 Elemental Questions about The Arts

Does pursuing an MFA simply feed the multibillion dollar university industrial complex? At this point, the answer is unequivocally yes– especially when it comes to private, for-profit schools. However, there are some intrinsic values to pursuing a Master of Fine Arts degree that cannot be overlooked, despite somewhat absurd costs.

According to the various accounts from *Should I go to Grad School?*, it seems that the most successful and satisfied master's alumni had one thing in common: they entered their programs in the "right" state of mind. By expecting only to better their crafts through dedication to themselves and to their work for the duration of the program and trusting the process, rather than expecting an immediate financial reward, these alumni do not regret their decision.

When I conducted my initial exploratory research, I was shocked that sixty seven percent of my survey respondents listed greater chances of employment as the number one pull factor for pursuing an MFA, explaining that the degree would make finding a more lucrative job easier. Only three individuals were interested because they enjoy school, and another three were interested because their dream career would require such a degree (presumably teaching).

While it is somewhat counter to our capitalistic society, the decision to get an MFA *has* to be anti-capitalist in nature, since the result is not likely to satisfy the market for saleable goods or services. Too many people get an MFA thinking it will result in a job, or a better job, when that is not likely. If one feels the calling to teach Fine Arts at the university level, the MFA degree is a necessary part of the journey.

Finishing an MFA requires discipline, maturity and willingness to fight for your own cause. It is a privilege and an investment in yourself, and it's worth boils down to your happiness. According to an article by Jill Lepore on *The American Work Ethic*, our society tends to ask people to live for their jobs, and be a worker first and foremost (Lepore). This is problematic because the point of the MFA is not really meant to build *the worker*, it's more about building *the thinker*, based around personal growth and development. The "risk" you take when investing in an MFA program is deeply tied to the value you place on your own happiness completing it.

The humanities and arts are important to all of us– and as Nussbaum argues in her novel, *Not For Profit*, are necessary to societal progress (Nussbaum 2). Through the arts we are able to process experiences, find connections, and create impact. Be it through poetry, dance, or digital design, arts & humanities help us document the world around us, and allow us to work out how we are a part of it. MFA programs are a vital part of this process, and some of the greatest creatives and thinkers of our time could not have reached their level without the time, guidance and support that an MFA offers.

This is not to say that those without talent, inspiration and drive will gain those traits by participating in an MFA program- they will not. This research engagement has made me more confident than ever that an MFA degree will not make a person more talented. Nor will it make a better scholar if that scholar is not *already* exceptional. In a perfect world admissions standards would stand in the way, protecting those who would not benefit from an MFA experience from spending a lot of their time and money on it.

It has been proven time and time again that you do not need an MFA to be a successful artist. Many successful artists never receive any academic training, and instead rely on raw talent, practice, and their own marketing ability. However, that "perfect fit" program may make a world of difference to an aspiring creative with an open mind, a love of academia, and a lot of discipline.

Figuring out the best way to learn one's craft can be incredibly difficult, and the answer is often discovered through generous amounts of time spent practicing one's craft professionally, outside the protective realm of academia. For others, academia is the best environment for honing their craft.

When I interviewed Dr. Erin Kelly, she emphasized how important the "perfect fit" is to the faculty when they interview. They rely heavily on portfolios and essays, experience and connection to the student before they accept an applicant. In a perfect world, this level of care would be taken into the consideration of every student who applies to a Master of Fine Arts program in the US.

In general, the choice to pursue a master's degree boils down to personal circumstances, good chemistry, and funding. The time and space to explore and think deeply is critical to realizing the benefit of an MFA program. The success of the human species requires academics to explore, and one of the best venues for that exploration is graduate school. However, the rising costs, and obstacles that keep students from considering, or pursuing that level of education and academic rigor holds us all back in a sense. Not that our society would benefit from everyone going to graduate school, but those with the talent, motivation and desire should be supported.

In addition, we need to take a good hard look at the higher education system, note how the university industrial complex has warped the master's degree, and advocate for reform. There is a lot that can be done to help students afford these programs (not artificially through loans). Reform could make MFA programs more successful and accessible than they currently are, and mitigate the debt students must accrue to obtain these degrees. As always, the argument should be made that more American tax dollars should go towards supporting education so that universities can thrive and turn out graduates with the skills and knowledge needed to advance our culture and economy. Universities should be able to weather the pressures of economic downturns and pandemics, while continuing to serve the needs of students and our society in general. Additionally, close attention needs to be paid to where the university funding is allocated as well, with regular audits of school boards and individuals overseeing the dispersal of funding.

Establishing guidelines that require program costs to be balanced against average potential income for graduates of those programs is a good idea as well. In other words, the cost of a program should be lower if income expectations for professionals in that field are lower, and

higher for fields with greater earning potential. Alumni should not graduate with so much debt that they are held back from leading a full, balanced life. Measuring and reporting on graduates ability to pay off debt should be a mandatory published metric for all programs, similar to the way universities must report ethnic diversity, acceptance rates and graduation rates. This data could go a long way to helping students better understand the long-term impact of their decision about which program to attend.

Creating dollar-based caps on how much graduate students can borrow rather than the current limit of a school's cost of attendance would naturally curb graduate tuition, even for expensive universities like Columbia and NYU. By instituting price caps on graduate programs, and preventing institutions from charging amounts beyond what federal aid and a reasonable student contribution to tuition can provide, the trend of the starving artist could perhaps shrink.

In theory, graduate programs would become more accessible to creative people despite their backgrounds, who would have the freedom to get their degree without the fear of crippling debt holding them back.

Demand would increase if graduate school was affordable, admissions standards would rise, and new programs would be added in response to demand, rather than for the purpose of increasing university revenue.

For individuals who wish to pursue their master's degree in order to teach or go into social work, mandating affordability for the required credentials would also be valuable. Since the job security around teaching has a competitive and somewhat uncertain future, it would be

especially cruel to saddle these young professionals with debts that they cannot hope to repay if they do not land a stellar tenured teaching position right off the bat.

It is imperative that talented and passionate creatives of all backgrounds are able to pursue a higher degree without suffering crippling debt. Holding them back holds our entire society back, and wastes the cultivation of potentially groundbreaking ideas.

The goal of this research paper initially was to determine the worth and validity of the MFA itself. However, the focus quickly evolved into a search for answers about student debt and the development of the system that has caused graduate degree programs to grow at such enormous rates and increase tuition by larger margins than ever before. In essence, the cost of the terminal Master of Fine Arts program has become artificially inflated by the University Industrial Complex (i.e. schools using it for profit, and to subsidize undergraduate learning) to a point that it is no longer a financially viable choice for many creatives.

In conclusion, the value of an MFA cannot be measured solely on the cost of the program, debt burden and income earning potential of participants. There are multiple benefits to both the individual, and to society as a whole, when talented, motivated individuals with the drive to excel hone their skills surrounded by a diverse cohort.

4.2 Afterthoughts

Due to the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning, it proved quite difficult to administer surveys and interviews on a larger scale. To continue this research, I would

like to administer surveys to a larger sample group of undergraduate students in the arts, ideally from both public and private institutions.

This thesis challenged me to explore economic and social principles as well as historical happenings that are incredibly relevant to my peers and I, but have always been outside my general area of expertise.

Works Cited

Aud, S., Fox, M., and Kewal-Ramani, A. *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups* (NCES 2010-015). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010.

CAA Board of Directors. "Guidelines for the MFA Degree in Art and Design." *CAA Guidelines*, 5 May 2019, www.dev.collegeart.org/standards-and-guidelines/guidelines/mfa.

Calarco, Jessica McCrory. *Field Guide to Grad School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum.* Princeton University Press, 2020.

Davidson, Cathy N. *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux*. Hachette Book Group, 2017.

Deresiewicz, William. *Excellent Sheep: the Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life.* Free Press, 2015.

Deresiewicz, William. *The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech.* Henry Holt and Company, 2020.

Deresiewicz, William. "What's a Master's Degree Really Worth?" *Intelligencer,* 17 Aug. 2021, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2021/08/whats-a-masters-degree-really-worth.html?utm_source=tw&utm_campaign=nym&utm_medium=s1.

Falcon, Susan. "2013-14 Report on the Academic Job Market: Adjunct Unions, Administrative Bloat, & Reform of Student Loans" *Association of Writers & Writing Programs,* Nov. 2014, https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/83/the_2013-14_report_on_the_academic_job_market_adjunct_unions_administrative_bloat_reform_of_student_loans.

Fallows, James. "The Case Against Credentialism." *The Atlantic Media Company*, 1 Dec. 1985, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1985/12/the-case-against-credentialism/308286/.

Herrnstein, R. J. *I.Q. in the Meritocracy.* Atlantic Monthly Press, 1973.

Jaquette, Ozan. "In Pursuit of Revenue and Prestige: the Adoption and Production of Master's Degrees by U.S. Colleges and Universities." *University of Michigan,* 2011.

Korn, M., Fuller, A. "Top Master's Degrees Fail to Pay Off – Elite Schools Push Programs that Don't Yield enough Income for Graduates to Cover Loans." *Wall Street Journal*, Jul 09, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/financially-hobbled-for-life-the-elite-masters-degrees-that-dont-pay-off-11625752773

Lam, Bourree. "M.F.A.s: An Increasingly Popular, Increasingly Bad Financial Decision." *The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company*, 19 Dec. 2014,

www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/12/mfas-an-increasingly-popular-increasingly-bad-financial-decision/383706/.

Lee, Felicia R. "Academic Industrial Complex." *The New York Times, Late Edition (East Coast), The New York Times Company*, 6 Sept. 2003, https://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/06/arts/academic-industrial-complex.html

Lepore, Jill. "What's Wrong with the Way We Work." *The New Yorker,* 18 Jan. 2021, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/01/18/whats-wrong-with-the-way-we-work.

Espinosa, Lorelle. *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report*, The American Council on Education, 2019.

Loudis, Jessica, et al. *Should I Go to Grad School?: 41 Answers to an Impossible Question.* Bloomsbury, 2014.

Ludwig, David. "Graduate Students: Unionizing on a Campus near You?" *The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company*, 16 Apr. 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/04/graduate-students-of-the-world-unite/390261/.

Marcus, Jon. "More Students Are 'Stacking' Credentials En Route to a Degree." *Wired, Conde Nast,* 2 June. 2020, www.wired.com/story/students-stacking-credentials-route-degree/.

McFarland, J., Hussar, B., Wang, X., Zhang, J., Wang, K., Rathbun, A., Barmer, A., Forrest Cataldi, E., and Bullock Mann, F. *The Condition of Education 2018* (NCES 2018-144).

U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2018.

Nevill, S.C., and Chen, X. *The Path Through Graduate School: A Longitudinal Examination 10 Years After Bachelor's Degree* (NCES 2007-162). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2007.

Nussbaum, Martha Craven. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities.* Princeton University Press, 2016.

Palaia, Marian. "The Real World vs. The MFA." *Literary Hub*, 19 Mar. 2019, https://lithub.com/the-real-world-vs-the-mfa/.

Spencer, Jakab. "The $670 Billion College-Industrial Complex Is Under Threat From Online School." *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 June 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-670-billion-college-industrial-complex-is-under-threat-from-online-school-11624636809.

Thomas, Patrick. "M.B.A. Programs Pass on Hybrid Learning." *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 July 2021, pp. B1–B2, https://www.wsj.com/articles/m-b-a-programs-from-stanford-to-columbia-and-nyu-pass-on-hybrid-learning-11626346800.

Torpey, Elka. *Measuring the Value of Education: Career Outlook.* U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018. https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2018/data-on-display/education-pays.htm?view_full

Torpey, E., Terrell D. “Should I get a master’s degree?,” *Career Outlook*. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 2015.

Bureau of Labor Statistics, *U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook*, Postsecondary Teachers, January 2022 https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/postsecondary-teachers.htm

Additional Supplementary Articles (used for research, but not cited in my thesis)

Altbach, Philip G., et al. *In Defense of American Higher Education.* Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

Arum, Richard, and Josipa Roksa. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses.* The University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Bowser, Benjamin P. *The Abandoned Mission in Public Higher Education: the Case of the California State University.* Routledge, 2017.

Covert, Bryce. “The American Work Ethic.” *Longreads*, 8 Apr. 2019, www.longreads.com/2019/04/08/the-american-worth-ethic/.

Dadawala, Vikrant. “In Defense of Grad School: Let Us Now Praise This Much-Maligned Institution.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education 66.21, Chronicle.com*, 2020, www.chronicle.com/article/in-defense-of-grad-school/.

Dorn, Charles. *For the Common Good: A New History of Higher Education in America.* Cornell University Press, 2017.

Henderson, Algo D., and Jean Glidden Henderson. *Higher Education in America: Problems, Priorities, and Prospects.* Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1981.

Rossman, Mark H. *Graduate School and Beyond: Earning and Using Your Advanced Degree.* Paradigm Publishers, 2010.

Seligman, Amanda I. *Is Graduate School Really for You? The Whos, Whats, Hows, and Whys of Pursuing a Master's or Ph.D*. John Hopkins University Press, 2012.