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# 10 skills every interaction designer should have

If you're considering entering the world of interaction design (IxD), there are some skills you'll want to hone before applying to any graduate-level program—but they may not be the ones you think.

STORY

One of the primary misconceptions of interaction design (IxD), as both a graduate-level degree program and as a discipline in general, is that it's highly technical. IxD is often confused with **human-computer interaction (HCI)**, a field that grew more directly out of the computer sciences. While the fields do have many similarities, IxD is much more human-centric than computer-centric and doesn't necessarily see digital technologies as central to every solution the way HCI might. IxD is also confused with **user experience (UX)**, which we at CCA believe is not quite a discipline, but rather an inherently *multidisciplinary practice*, of which IxD is one of the core components. In other words, IxD is what you want to study if you're interested in jobs with UX in the title.

There are certainly many applications for technical skills in the field—after all, we aren't graphic designers, but need some of those skills to communicate effectively. We aren't engineers, but need enough coding knowledge to prototype and demonstrate. Beyond that, however, our deeper skills are more about systems thinking, sociology, and communication than about having a mastery of any particular technical skill set.

Here are the 10 skills every prospective interaction designer should possess, according to members of [CCA's world-renowned MDes in Interaction Design faculty](#).

## 1. People skills

First and foremost—every prospective interaction design student should have a deep interest in people. And not just people, but their needs, their desires, and how those needs are evolving over time. “People skills” are the core of using technologies in better ways. Without an interest in serving people, IxD is incapable of reaching its potential.

## 2. A few years of experience

We've found that to be a great IxD designer, it's pretty much essential to have a few years of experience in the working world. This helps give context for some of the major problems that need to be solved, the real-world challenges that might present obstacles, and clarity around how one might like to contribute to the dialogue. Each student also needs time to find their calling or visualize their path. People right out of college generally need some time to understand what's possible and what might actually appeal to them before they're really ready to make a big career choice.

## 3. A portfolio of designed “somethings”

Be they systems, products, services, environments, or business processes, it's invaluable to demonstrate familiarity in some way with the common challenges IxD designers face on a daily basis. Your portfolio is what tells this story of discovery. Gaining hands-on experience thinking about and engaging with the issues that affect people most, and then translating them into a format that others can digest is, hands down, the best preparation for the program.

## 4. English language competence

While it may seem to go without saying, having a well-developed speaking and writing capability with the English language is essential for entering CCA's IxD program. Our program draws talented students from diverse backgrounds all over the world, and they need to be able to effectively communicate sometimes-subtle ideas with each other in order to engage in the kind of deep collaboration that is the backbone of everything we do at CCA.



“Effective designers are able to evoke the experiences people want through what they design.”

## 5. Experience with experiences

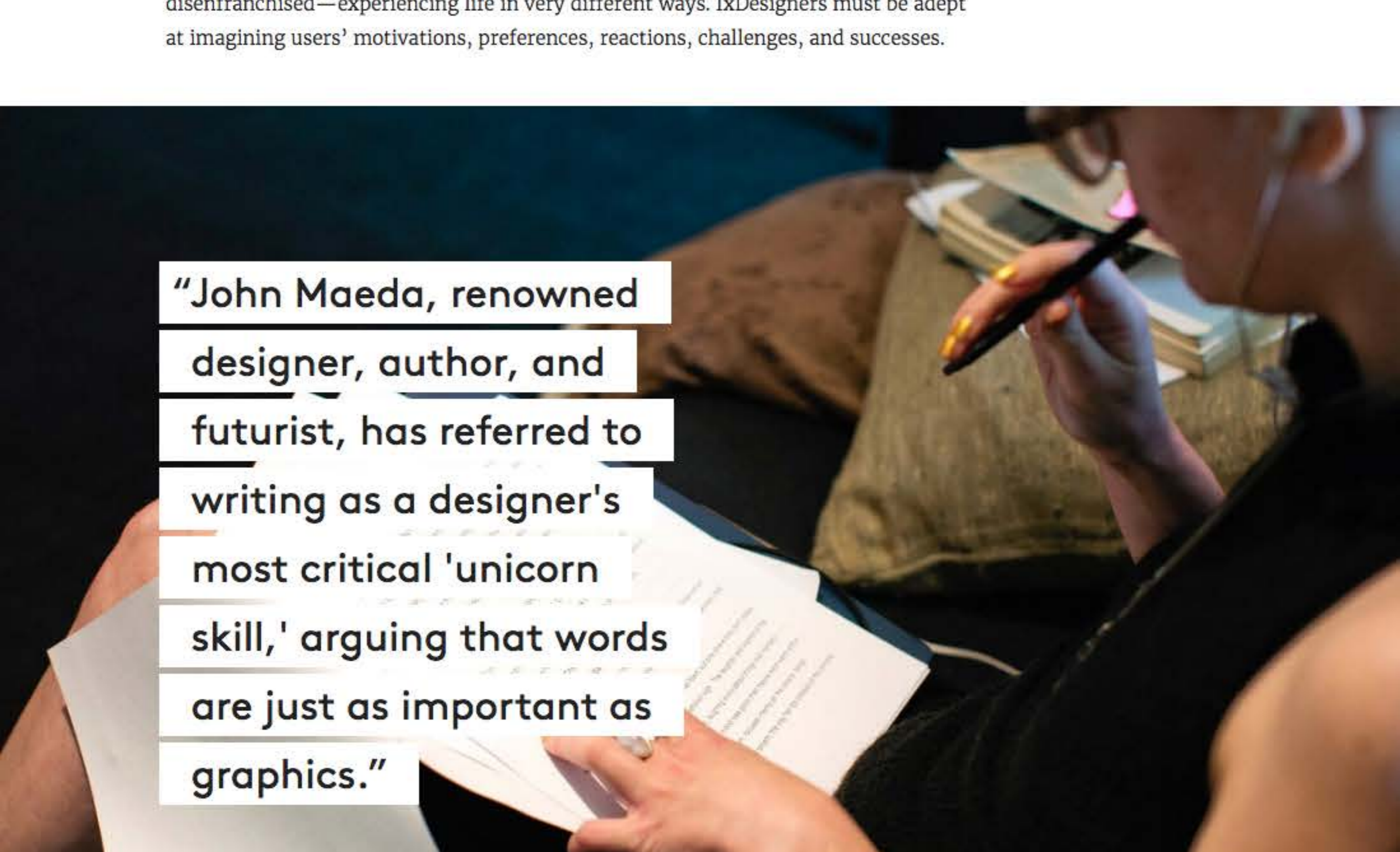
When we talk about “experience design,” we often take the term too literally, believing that we can make experiences for people and that the things we make are, themselves, “experiences.” In reality, “experiences” are changes in the states-of-mind of people in response to stimuli. Effective designers are able to *evoke* the experiences people want through what they design. In order to do this, it's vital that prospective designers be self-aware enough to make sense of and break down their own, very internal experiences, and be able to imagine how one could begin to evoke similar experiences in others through the tools of design.

## 6. Cognitive skills

Design is a practice that involves a great many skills and often the most important are things like curiosity, creativity, flexibility, integrity, critical thinking, and a sense of humor. These basic dimensions of human cognition may seem simple, but are hugely beneficial to the world, and we need to embed more of them in the ways we work and the designs we make.

## 7. Empathy

A central focus of IxD is understanding and responding to “user” needs. This requires the ability to anticipate and actively listen for others' experiences, even when those are difficult to articulate. IxD designers must be able to imagine what it would be like to be older, younger, homeless, frustrated, uninspired, disabled, depressed, disenfranchised—experiences lived in very different ways. IxD designers must be adept at imagining users' motivations, preferences, reactions, challenges, and successes.



“John Maeda, renowned designer, author, and futurist, has referred to writing as a designer's most critical 'unicorn skill,' arguing that words are just as important as graphics.”

## 8. Written communication skills

Users still depend on written content to interact with apps and technology. If IxD designers don't write well, the digital and physical interactions they produce will be confusing and ineffective. John Maeda, renowned designer, author, and futurist, has referred to writing as a designer's most critical “unicorn skill,” arguing that words are just as important as graphics. IxD designers must be able to apply the same “clean design” principles to their written communication that they apply to their graphic design.

## 9. A Growth Mindset

IxD designers must be able to test their ideas, play with their designs, receive feedback, and iterate. This requires the ability and willingness to make low fidelity prototypes, seek out critiques, and flexibly reframe and change direction. They must be able to “fail early and often” and exercise a Growth Mindset, which is the belief that abilities (and designs) can be developed through dedication and hard work.

## 10. A studio practice

The IxD approach at CCA is not based around computer science or engineering—we're rooted in the design discipline, after all—so we take a fundamentally studio-based approach to the work that we do. Studio-based curriculum is rooted in learning through action and developing a creative design process that can be objectively evaluated. Due to the short timeline of our program, we cannot create a designer from scratch in just three semesters; thus, students with a previous background or degree in some kind of studio practice (graphic design, industrial design, architecture, or in some cases even film, animation, or select fine arts disciplines, etc.) will be ready to hit the ground running to get the most out of the accelerated timeline of CCA's three-semester intensive graduate program.

[Learn more about CCA's MDes in Interaction Design program](#) →

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# MFA in Design: Alumni Q+A with Shihan Zhang, product designer at Vim

Shihan Zhang graduated from CCA's MFA in Design program in 2017 as an international student from China.

## STORY

A product designer and award-winning experimental design futurist, Shihan is also an artist-in-residence at Gray Area Foundation for the Arts in San Francisco, where she creates inventive designs that solve some of the world's most pressing challenges with style.

We caught up with this talented CCA alumna to ask why she decided to pursue her MFA, what it was like as an international student studying for a master's degree in the U.S., and a whole lot more.



Shihan Zhang (MFA in Design 2017)

### What was the primary deciding factor behind your decision to pursue an MFA in Design?

I finished up my undergrad in industrial design in China and wanted to explore how to merge design with other disciplines to catalyze innovation and create impact.

### How has your career taken shape after graduating from CCA?

By day, I streamline healthcare experiences for patients, doctors, and employers at a startup called Vim. By night, I'm a **design futurist** (and current artist-in-residence at Gray Area), building immersive future-present intersection experiences.

My speculative works are about expanding the possibilities of technology to extrapolate world conditions and address uniquely Anthropocene challenges, such as global warming and air pollution. Through a systematic and cultural lens, my design works are intended to inspire conversation and empower the audience to reflect, while gently nudging them toward change.



Shihan Zhang's Skin Farming Jackets are incubators for living algae, which could exist in a speculative future world's Personal Carbon Economy.

### Did you enroll in the two-year or three-year program?

The three-year program. For international students, it's perfect for familiarizing yourself with a new living and studying environment. It's also a good opportunity for people who want to change careers to focus on design. The most common challenge I observed with career-changers was with missing design experience, so that's the beauty of the three-year program in the MFA Design—the extra year helps consolidate design theory and foundation, while developing new software and hardware skills that prepare you for the many interdisciplinary projects you'll be working on in your second and third years.

### What's different about studying Design at CCA?

The culture of collaboration and criticism. CCA has a wide range of specialized programs and every program is well connected. You're able to choose the classes you're interested in, from any other major, or easily connect with students to work together on a project.



Collaboration and critique are at the core of all CCA programs.

The design criticism is the key to push your works and thoughts forward. Gathering feedback from professors, guest critics, and classmates, can empower you to find better solutions to the problems and your own voices in the work.

The program is also well connected with the local community. The studio classes are always paired up with leading design organizations. You'll be able to visit companies and museums on field trips, work with new technologies, and showcase your work to leaders in the Bay Area.

### What advice would you give someone considering the MFA in Design program?

MFA Design is an interdisciplinary design program, where you'll get a chance to work on lots of exciting projects woven between the fields of Interaction Design, Industrial Design, and Graphic Design.

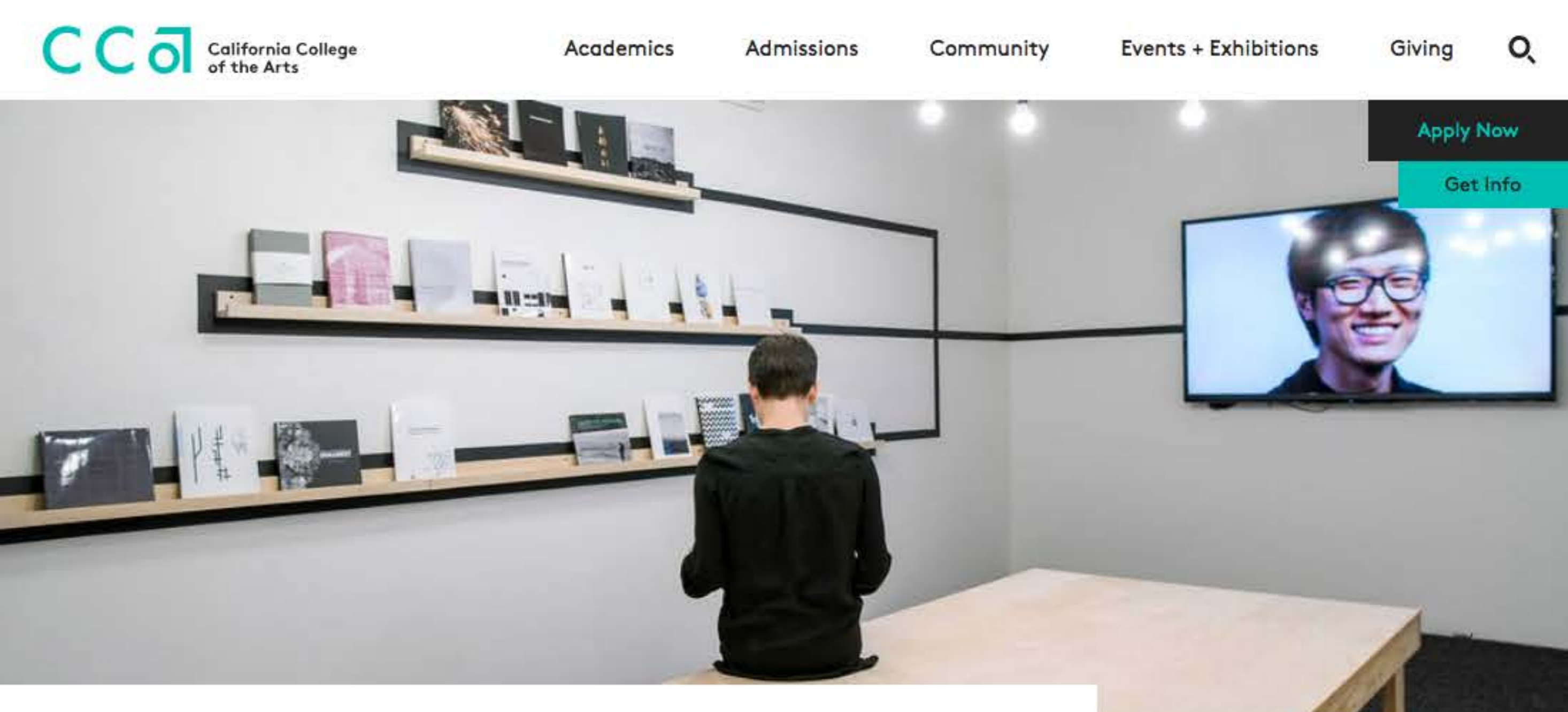
You'll meet peers from different backgrounds who have a passion for design just like you—you might even be able to find your future partners.

[Learn about the future of Design at CCA](#) →

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## Two years or three years for a master's in Design? Here's the difference.

We get a lot of questions from students researching graphic design graduate programs that want to know what the difference between a two-year and three-year MFA program is, so we're taking an in-depth look at both options to help you decide which is the right one for you.

STORY

[Two-year MFA](#)
[Three-year MFA](#)

CCA's MFA in Design program takes students on a deep dive into contemporary design culture and tools through investigation, exploration, and experimentation in a heavily studio-based curriculum. We provide the tools, network, and collaborative environment for students to develop new hybrid territories while concentrating on one of our core design disciplines: Industrial Design, Interaction Design, and Graphic Design.

One of the most unique features of this graduate program isn't the curriculum or the expert faculty or game-changing location: It's the cadence of how the program's MFA can be earned. We offer two options, allowing students to complete the program in either two years of study or three.

We'll tell you why, but first, let's talk about the two options.



Work from CCA's 2015 MFA in Design thesis exhibition.

### Which program accepts which applicants?

First and foremost: It's not a matter of talent. If you're accepted to join the CCA MFA in Design program—whether in the two- or three-year program—you've been hand-chosen from a large, highly competitive group of applicants because we see incredible potential in your work. We're excited to help you refine your creative abilities, process, and voice.

So what *does* determine placement? It's a matter of experience.

### Two-year MFA

## The two-year program is best for students who have the experience to dive right in.

- Current designers who want to advance their careers:** These students hold an undergraduate degree in Graphic Design, Industrial Design, or Interaction Design and are coming back to graduate school to study the same concentration area. They want to learn new expansive skills and increase their ability to create work across disciplines. Many have experience working in the design field and aim to reinvent their current practice.
- San Francisco employment seekers:** These are students trying to connect with the design and tech communities in the area. After all, San Francisco is the creative capital of the tech world, and CCA faculty, alumni, and programs all have deep ties with today's most innovative tech companies located in the Bay Area.



Work from CCA's 2015 MFA in Design thesis exhibition.

### Three-year MFA

## This option is intended for students who could benefit from an additional year of experience in order to excel in the MFA's two-year coursework.

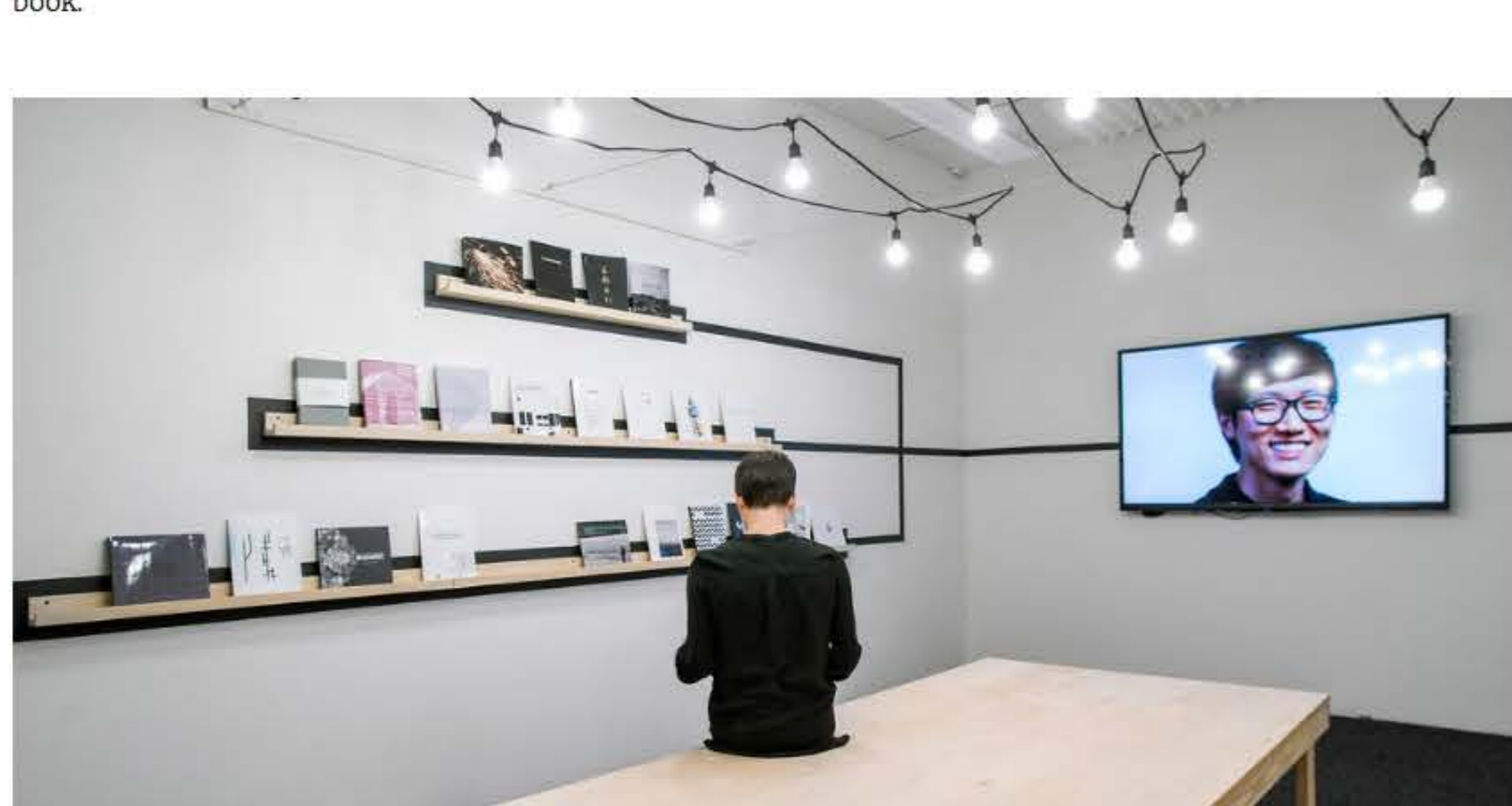
The three-year program is best for students who hold unrelated undergraduate degrees, as well as those changing careers within design who may hold a design or peripheral degree.

- Career changers:** These students have an undergraduate degree in a different field altogether. These students have been successful in their career, but are interested in a graduate degree to change their profession.
- Hybrid designers:** These students have an undergraduate degree in a related field but want to select a new area of concentration, or have a design background and undergraduate degree and have been in the workplace for a little while but want to find new territories in design. They seek a graduate degree to advance their careers or get excited about new territories of design, such as technology, hybrid practices, or new ideas.
- International designers:** These students are looking to build on their international degree with a graduate degree from the U.S., where they haven't studied before.

### Why offer two paths to an MFA in Design?

The MFA in Design curriculum at CCA is renowned for its studio culture. Focused, intensive studio sessions allow students to develop their skills. It's a very hands-on making culture of learning and development. Students participate in a lot of independent work and have the freedom to try out different ideas to develop their own interests and perspectives, supplemented by courses in research practices, business models, design context, and technological exploration.

The final year of the MFA in Design is the thesis year, which further allows long-term research and design investigation. Mentored by faculty, students produce an individual body of work and present it at the end of the year as an exhibition and a book.



Work from CCA's 2015 MFA in Design thesis exhibition.

If you're lacking a design background, changing concentrations, or don't have the ideal amount of experience working with certain tools and techniques, you won't get the most out of that independent exploration and group critique time without an additional year of guided skill-building. That extra term allows each student to get a handle on the foundational and technical knowledge needed to do the more conceptual work that a thorough thesis requires.

This is how we ensure that, regardless of whether you do the MFA in Design in two years or three, you'll successfully graduate and join our prestigious network of alumni, who work at a range of exciting companies—from Apple and Adobe, to IDEO and PARC; SFMOMA and MoMA NY, to their very own design studios that began as a seed of an idea at CCA.

[Explore the MFA in Design program](#) →

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