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## **A Beginner's Guide to MFA and MA Programs (as told by PLU alums)** **By Jessie Ehman '14**

As an English major and a graduating senior, I have found myself struggling with the age-old question: “What do you plan on doing with your degree?” After some consideration, I settled on a plan that involved taking time off to live and work in the ‘real world’, and then applying to an MFA program. While this conclusion looked good on paper, I had only a vague and somewhat idealized notion of what an MFA actually entails. Fortunately, PLU has been home to more than its fair share of brilliant young writers who not only have gone on to attend distinguished MFA and MA programs, but who were also willing to share their experience, advice, and aphorisms with me. What’s more, the seven graduates I spoke with were undoubtedly the most insightful, intelligent, and kind-hearted individuals that I have had the privilege of meeting.

If you, like me, are interested in the inner workings of these difficult, yet rewarding programs—or just want to know what makes a good application—please read on to discover what words of wisdom Hanna Gunderson, Kolby Harvey, Mark Hengstler, JP Kemmick, Amanda Schmidt, Jonathan Stout, and Anna Rasmussen have to impart. I promise you won’t regret it!

An MFA or MA program is...

According to Hanna Gunderson, an MFA, or Masters of Fine Arts is “a two or three year degree, [which] gives you time to focus exclusively on writing, to study with other poets, fiction writers, [and sometimes nonfiction writers], and to take workshops with established poets and writers.” JP Kemmick, however, was slightly more succinct in his response. In an MFA, he said, “You write a bunch and people sit around in a circle and talk about your writing and [later] you go to bars, drink beers, and talk more about writing.” In contrast, an MA, or Masters of Arts, said Amanda Schmidt, “lasts for one year, and during that year you do extensive research and work on a thesis project, which is usually an extensive paper,” During your program, Schmidt continued, “you also take courses that deal with theory and critical analysis, all of which you research, incorporate, and use in making your argument in your thesis.”

Start ahead of time (way ahead of time)

Oftentimes, applying for graduate school “is like [having] a part time job,” said Anna Rasmussen. Therefore, it is important to plan well in advance. In other words, she stressed, “don’t submit the day before the application is due, but do make lists of deadlines, and polish both your writing sample and personal statement.” Additionally, never underestimate the importance of studying for the GRE, which is valid for five years after the initial test-taking date. “Just because you’re a writer, doesn’t mean you can do well on the writing portion,” cautioned Mark Hengstler. Although many writing-based programs do not require the test for acceptance, most literature programs do list the GRE as an application requirement. So, be sure to do your research when looking at prospective schools and their requirements.

While Amanda Schmidt managed to avoid procrastination and even worked on her writing sample for “nearly two years,” she still admitted to feeling as though “I didn’t have enough time.” Once again, start preparing as early as possible and avoid waiting until the eleventh hour. Application due in December? Consider beginning over the summer. To keep yourself on track, make a spreadsheet detailing what you need to do for each program and, by all means, don’t expect your materials to be perfect. Selection committees are looking for “people who display passion about what they’re doing” and not perfection, said Schmidt. Finally, with all the time you have saved, “try to get fee waivers for every single [application] that you possibly can, said Jonathan Stout. As application fees range from \$25-\$100, submissions costs can quickly add up. Therefore, taking the time to request the waivers is well worth the investment.

Apply to as many schools as possible (but do your research)

Most of the graduate students I interviewed applied to between eight and thirteen schools. “I applied to ten schools,” said Hanna Gunderson, “and it’s not unusual for people to apply to as many as 20.” Although you never know where your work is going to resonate, there is something to be said for quality versus quantity. Therefore, take time to research each individual program. Consider factors such as faculty members, program size, program length, and funding opportunities. Location was of particular importance to graduate students. “If you’re miserable in the city, you’re going to be miserable in the program,” said Kemmick. Don’t be passive about your choices. Take initiative. Be brave. “Get into contact with the head(s) of the program and try to talk to some current and recently graduated students,” said Schmidt before adding, “You won’t be happy or successful at a program, no matter its prestige, unless it’s truly the right fit for you.”

Don’t be deterred by the application process

Although the application process is undeniably competitive, with smaller schools accepting a grand total of four to nine applicants a year (a discouraging 2% to 10% acceptance rate), try to remain positive and remember that you are not alone. In fact, several graduate students admitted to completing as many as two or three application cycles before they were accepted. Some took a practical approach to the situation. “If you can’t handle getting into an MFA program, you can’t handle applying to literary journals,” said Kemmick. Others dispensed sage advice. “If [you] [don’t] get into a program, it [is] because of one of two reasons,” said Kolby Harvey. “Either 1) something was amiss in [your] application or 2) it wasn’t the right program for [you].” Harvey went on to describe the application process as being far from perfect. “The process is designed to make you feel worthless and stupid,” he said. “But know that everyone who has ever applied to grad school has felt this way. The problem isn’t you. It’s the system.”

Don’t be afraid to take time off

Most graduate students took several years off between undergraduate and graduate school. During their respective gap years, JP Kemmick worked at AmeriCorps and the Sierra Club, Mark Hengstler took a job as a barista, and Jonathan Stout entered the field of construction. Aside from the allure of part-time jobs, there are numerous reasons to give oneself a break after

graduation. The years after undergraduate school “go a long way in preventing grad school burnout,” said Kolby Harvey, who also added, “When you finally go back for your Master’s, you’ll really want it.” For Amanda Schmidt, taking a year off helped her to “clear my mind, relax, and refocus on what I wanted out of my life.” Kemmick cited the need to “figure out what it meant to be a real person in the real world”, and Stout simply asserted the desire to “stay alive and work.” Mark Hengstler was also happy to be doing “anything as long as I [could] make enough money for food and rent and still be reading.”

While deciding whether or not to take time off is an individual choice, it is important to know your limits. On one hand, “the biggest danger of taking the break is not going back because you’ve lost momentum,” said Schmidt. On the other, Gunderson warned, “You want to be completely sure that you’re prepared for graduate work and to make your own writing schedule.” And for those who decide to go directly from undergraduate to graduate school, Anna Rasmussen had two questions: “Do you feel confident sharing a classroom with people who may be a great deal older than you [and] do you feel comfortable teaching people who may be only seven months younger than you?”

### Dream big

Although it may seem cliché, reach for the impossible (no matter how improbable it may seem). “Don’t be afraid to apply to your dream schools,” Gunderson urged. “I almost didn’t apply to the program I’m in now because I didn’t think I had a chance at getting in, but here I am!” Other students echoed the sentiment and Kemmick even took the concept a step further by saying, “My end goal is to be one of the best writers in the United States of America.” His advice to MFA and MA hopefuls? “Aim ridiculously high and see where [you] can go from there.”

### Writing is an act of humanity (not just a career)

“Surround yourself with really kind and giving people,” Mark Hengstler suggested when asked for the number one piece of advice he would give prospective graduate students. Enough can’t be said about kindness and basic human relationships in an industry that is, oftentimes, dominated by the pressure to compete, publish, and get ahead. In fact, said Hengstler, it is important to remind ourselves that writing was never intended to be an industry or a career path, but something much “deeper than that.” What makes a person successful has little to do with profit or publication and everything to do with simple act of giving to others, being kind to oneself, and the ability to synthesize different perspectives. So, “engage in the smallest things with the most love,” Hengstler concluded, and remember that stories are “a way of opening up our experiences” and sharing them with others.

### Life after graduate school

While most graduate students expressed interest in going on to attend a PhD program, teach at a university, or simply write for a living, they readily acknowledged the difficulty of obtaining such a position. “Job prospects [are] bad for everyone right now,” said Kolby Harvey. “Any job you apply for, you’re fighting against a pool of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of applicants.” Jonathan Stout agreed, saying, “You could have three books published and an MFA and [won’t]

get called back for the first interview.” Why? The industry is simply inundated with a large number of writers who are talented, qualified, and competitive.

While an MFA or MA does prepare students to work as adjunct professors at universities and community colleges, the students I spoke with had differing reactions to the position. “Just google ‘MFA adjunct’ and you’ll find horror stories,” Kemmick said. “You’ll be rushing to teach five lit classes a day and won’t have time for your craft.” Mark Hengstler, however, had a slightly more positive perspective on the situation. “If I teach at community college, [it would be] wonderful,” he said. In the end, Amanda Schmidt championed the versatility English majors. “We have developed excellent critical thinking skills, among others, which we can bring to a myriad of careers,” Schmidt said before continuing, “I think it’s important to pursue something that you love, and you can bring [those] skills to whatever you choose.”

There are many ways to be a writer

“It is incredibly easy to play false games with oneself,” said JP Kemmick. “I used to think if I could just get into an MFA program, then I would be a writer.” However, being a writer has more to do with committing the act of writing than with higher learning. If one writes (regardless of whether or not they have been accepted to an MFA or MA program) they are a writer. In fact, according to Kemmick, the only qualification is “putting your butt in the seat.” So, take Kemmick’s approach and “sit in your bedroom for many hours [without] talking to anyone” or follow the advice of Jonathan Stout and “write more than you are comfortable writing.” Whichever you choose, write often, write as much as possible, and, in the immortal words of Elizabeth Bishop, just “write it!”