



Low Residency MFAs

contemporary graduate education

→ At VCFA, students give their art the time and attention it needs, with the one-on-one support of dedicated faculty and talented peers. They are witness to the evolution of graduate education.

Low-residency programs may well represent the future of the MFA.

The first low residency MFA writing programs began in the 1970s. At the time, the concept of an MFA that didn't involve full semesters of classroom learning stood at the fringe of education. These programs tended to attract mostly students who couldn't attend class full time. Despite the enthusiastic student testimonials, the programs carried a stigma—some believed that low residency meant low quality.

Today, low residency programs have gone mainstream, and the stigma is gone. Alumni/ae have won honors ranging from Pulitzer prizes to Guggenheim and NEA fellowships, and have seen their careers advance as quickly as those of their peers in traditional programs.

Vermont College of Fine Arts has been a pioneer in low-residency education. All that experience has paid off. In 2011, VCFA's low residency MFA in writing program was ranked #1 in the nation by Poets & Writers magazine. Recently, VCFA expanded its offerings to include MFA programs in graphic design, music composition and film. Here are just a few of the reasons why students weighing the choice between traditional and low-residency program are choosing VCFA.



Academic rigor

The best low residency MFA programs offer academic standards that meet and often exceed that of traditional classroom MFAs. “At VCFA, we ask a lot of our students—and they rise to the challenge” says President Tom Greene. “That’s because of the students we attract, who tend to be very self-motivated, and because of the high standards of our instructors, who offer their students an unparalleled level of support.”

At VCFA, all students participate fully in two residential intensives per year, and agree to a sustained work commitment of 25 hours per week during the semester. Depending upon the program, that work might include monthly submissions of new or revised material, critical analysis, a creative thesis, and preparation for a final lecture, reading, exhibition, or performance. It's a big commitment—but it delivers big results.

Artistic freedom

From the start, low-residency programs were designed to mirror the lives of professional writers and artists in the real world. VCFA isn't a place where students choose from a numbered list of courses with predetermined objectives. Here, students have the freedom to set their own goals and make their own choices. This helps them create work that is powerful, compelling, and truly their own.

One-on-one contact with instructors

"In traditional programs, some students will be anonymous, and others will be best buddies with their professors," says Tom Kealey, author of *The Creative Writing MFA Handbook*. "But in low-residency programs, students get the one-on-one attention, semester in and semester out."

In traditional MFA programs, student-to-faculty ratios might run well into the 20:1 range. At VCFA, the ratio is 5:1. All contact with the advisor during the semester is on a 1:1 basis, in the form of a continuing, substantive dialogue. As a result, the depth of focus on student work is often greater, and so is the level of progress.

In addition, the residential intensive provides opportunities for contact between students and teachers that extend beyond classroom time. Meals, recreation, and social settings allow students and teachers to discuss work at length and in detail. The opportunity to linger over work, to focus intently on it in a casual setting, often isn't possible in traditional classroom programs.

Quality, diverse staff & visiting faculty

Traditional MFA programs usually draw upon the regular faculty of the school to which they belong—including less experienced instructors. There's seldom room for voices from outside academia. At VCFA, the faculty and visiting artists come not from a single university department, but from academic programs throughout the country—and from the artistic world at large.

The result? A rich and diverse learning environment that isn't possible in traditional MFA programs.



The face-to-face power of the residential intensive

For the duration of the residential intensive, VCFA students engage with their art and that of their fellow students undisturbed by outside concerns. They also plan a semester's worth of work. This sets the stage for a close collaboration between students and their advisors once the residency has ended.

Just as important are the relationships students form on campus—deeply personal bonds that often last for life. What makes this possible is an immersive environment that cannot be recreated in traditional classroom programs. At VCFA, the relationships forged during residencies become the support systems artists depend upon for their entire careers.



One of the biggest advantages of low-residency programs in decades past is still an advantage today: the ability to complete an MFA quickly while still working full-time. In the current economic marketplace, fewer and fewer people can afford to drop out of circulation for two years to pursue an MFA. VCFA's low-residency options deliver the best of both worlds—the opportunity to achieve artistic growth while simultaneously pushing forward in a career.

Given these advantages, it's little wonder that a growing number of students are pursuing low-residency MFAs. At VCFA, students give their art the time and attention it needs, with the one-on-one support of dedicated faculty and talented peers. As a result, they're making major steps forward in their artistic lives. Those who have experienced the power of a low residency MFA are witness to the evolution in graduate education.



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