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POV: What are Visual Art Faculty Worth at a Community College?
Richard Lubben, Community College Week, August, 2010

Is it true that many community colleges value visual art faculty and their years of formal education and creative production less than they do other research-based disciplines?

As an artist/instructor at South Texas College, I hope this is not the case. But my informal survey of 35 of Texas' 54 community colleges raises some serious questions. Community college policy makers can't seem to agree where to place visual art faculty on their academic salary scales. Some colleges pay visual art faculty at the PhD level, others at the masters' level, some in between, making for an unfair mishmash where clarity and even-handedness should prevail.

When it comes to artists, some may question whether original creativity and artistic expression should be considered as important as academic research and publishing papers. I say yes. Without original creativity, the work of historians or anthropologists would be crippled, conducted in a soulless void. Nevertheless, many community colleges do not consider a terminal graduate degree in visual arts — the master of fine arts (MFA) — equal to the terminal graduate research degree in art history — the PhD.

Things are different at most four-year universities. With few exceptions, four-year universities, along with national accrediting agencies, national and state art associations — and even, in my state, the Higher Education Coordinating Board — recognize the MFA as the only terminal graduate degree in the visual arts and the equivalent of a doctorate.

If you ask almost any university visual art professor in the United States what degree he or she holds, it will usually be the MFA. A master of art degree would not be adequate in most cases to teach at the university level except at an instructor level or as part-time faculty, unless the artist had a remarkable record of accomplishment or showed extraordinary potential when hired. The MA is generally a 30-36 graduate hour degree, while the MFA consists of at least 60 graduate hours, a written thesis, a solo exhibition of creative work and often an oral defense.

The rigor and commitment of an MFA program is equal to a PhD program, though the focus is original creative research instead of original investigation. According to the College Art Association and the National Association of Schools of Art and Design, a national accrediting agency, the MFA is the "recognized terminal degree in visual arts and the equivalent to terminal degrees in other fields, such as the PhD."

Why, then, do so many community colleges place MFA faculty on a lower salary/academic classification scale? Maybe it's the term "master." Centuries ago the

title “master” was synonymous with the title of doctor and professor. During the 14th Century, according to historical texts, the title “doctor” began to be used instead of “master” for the highest degree in medicine and law, while “master’s” remained as the highest degree in arts and language. Perhaps administrators are too focused on the words of the title instead of the degree of professionalism and accomplishment.

Because I teach in Texas, I put together some data showing how MFA art faculty are compensated at 35 colleges in my state. (See Graph) It shows that various colleges place their visual arts faculty in various spots on the salary/academic classification scale. I found that Texas colleges classified and compensated MFA faculty ranging from someone holding a MA to the equivalent of a PhD, with six different levels between the lowest and highest salary classification levels. It’s a phenomenon not confined to Texas. Many community college art faculty around the country are going through a similar struggle for equality.

I don’t know why there is such a difference between university and community college policy, but perhaps it is because, in general, academic requirements for community college faculty are often less than those at universities, if the university offers graduate level courses. Community colleges are generally only required by accrediting agencies to hire faculty with a master’s degree and 18 graduate hours in the teaching discipline. Faculty who teach graduate and post-baccalaureate coursework, by contrast, must have an “earned doctorate/terminal degree in the teaching discipline,” according to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools section on faculty credential guidelines.

So if the MFA is recognized by national accrediting agencies and universities to be the terminal graduate degree in visual art, equivalent to the doctorate, why wouldn’t it be the same at a community college?

I challenge community college policy makers to consider these facts and do what is right for your faculty and institution. Creativity should not be valued less than academic research in higher education, nor should the academic accomplishments and credentials of creative arts faculty.