

**Some frequently asked questions, answered for you by Christopher Pavsek,  
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**What's distinctive about your program?**

**1: We are a cohort-based program.** Students enter the program as a group of 24 students and move through the program together year by year. This means you get to know your fellow students very well. You develop close working relationships with each other. You find friends and collaborators who will stay with you for a very long time after you graduate. You develop relationships with people you can trust and by fourth year you will have deeply trusted people working with you on your film productions.

That said, you also get to know all the other students in the program--as well as in the School--and there are numerous opportunities to work on films being made by students in other years as well as to work on artistic projects with students in Theatre, Dance, Music, and Visual Art.

**2: We are small, but we are big.** SFU Contemporary Arts offers every advantage of a small art school *and* all the advantages of a large, comprehensive university. You get to know your professors and work with them very closely. The Woodward's campus feels like a small town; it is comfortable yet exciting; it is knowable but very diverse. But you also have access to the dozens of nationally and internationally recognized departments and programs at all three of SFU's campuses. You can take classes in the sciences, in interactive technologies, in the arts and humanities, in business and economics and more, and you can put together a program that is rich and exciting. When you come to SFU you can get a fantastic art education at the same time that you can get a rewarding and challenging comprehensive university education. Many other film schools simply cannot offer this.

**3: You work on your own films or on films made by very small groups every year.** In every year of the program you will be making your own films and videos. In addition, you have opportunities to work on other students' films in a variety of roles. Though you work extensively on other productions, where you will gain invaluable experience, in all of the main production courses you will be making your own work either as an individual (with help from others, of course) or as small, cooperative groups (as you do in the second year).

**4: We still teach FILM.** In the first year or two you learn to shoot 16mm film on Bolex and Arriflex cameras. You learn how to use optical printers and how to hand-process film. In the third and fourth years of the program, the option to shoot on film is still there, though the majority of students opt to work in digital video.

We firmly believe in teaching students to use film in the early years of their program. Students learn the discipline that comes with working in the medium. They learn the

importance of proper technique in a way that video does not encourage. They learn the beauty of the film image as well.

**5: We teach film *production* and we teach *film studies*.** Requirements for our BFA major include a significant number of academic film studies courses. We firmly feel that students should know film history and know the workings of cinema as an art form and as an industry. This makes our students stronger, more intelligent, and more creative filmmakers. The program offers a broad set of classes--from a year-long introduction to film history covering the development of cinema from its earliest days to the present, including national traditions from around the globe, to specialized courses in film theory, different national traditions, directors, and genres.

**6: We train *complete, well-rounded filmmakers*.** While students will often specialize during the course of their studies, devoting themselves to a particular aspect of filmmaking such as cinematography, screenwriting, directing, editing, etc., our goal is to train students capable in *all aspects* of the art and craft of filmmaking. Though you may choose, for example, to become a cinematographer in the future, you will also learn to edit and direct. And as any great cinematographer will tell you, if you don't know what's going on in a director's mind, if you don't know what will be happening in the editing room, if you don't know how the picture will interact with the sound, then you will not be able to be a truly great cinematographer. The same goes with every other individual skill you may choose in the future to specialize in: a great editor has to know how a film is shot and written; a great director will understand the workings of the editing process. The knowledge of the entire production process is crucial and you will learn it here.

**7: What kind of camera equipment do you have?** This is a very frequently asked question, and for good reason. Cameras are among the most important tools you will use in creating your work. Currently, our main cameras are Red Scarlet and Epic Cameras, so you will have access to some of the highest-end video equipment available at any film school in Canada. We also have Panasonic GH5 dslr cameras and Sony 4k video cameras and an assortment of other DSLR cameras. We also have an Arriflex SR2 Super-16mm film camera and Bolex cameras.

But what's most important about this is that at SFU you get to *use* these cameras in your productions.

### **How is the program structured and how long does it take?**

You can complete the degree in 4 years, but many students take longer (some take 4.5 or 5 years) so that they might work or devote more time to particular courses.

For details of the requirements, please visit the Course Calendar, which you can find here: <http://www.sfu.ca/students/calendar/2018/fall/areas-of-study/film.html>. Also, for specifics on each course, please consult the calendar as well.

However, let me describe in general terms how the *production part of the program* works. Please realize that you will also have to fulfill other major requirements (such as film studies classes) and other university requirements (breadth classes, etc.) alongside these production courses.

In the **first year**, students take CA 130 (Fundamentals of Film) and CA 131 (Filmmaking I) where they learn the fundamentals of film production. They produce short films and complete a number of filmmaking exercises. You get going with filmmaking right from the start. In some years, the first year course will include a thorough introduction to 16mm production. In other years, that will occur in the second year. This depends on the professor.

In the **second year**, students take CA 230 (Filmmaking II), CA 231 (Filmmaking III), and CA 233 (Techniques of Film) as their main production courses and over the course of that year produce a film shot on video in groups of three. This is a full-on production, with full crews and full gear kits. In this course, you really learn to work as a production team and discover the ins and outs of work on a proper film set. In second year, students also begin taking skills classes in sound (CA 232) as well as a course in screenwriting (CA 238).

In **third year**, students usually take CA 390 (Filmmaking IV) and CA 393 (Filmmaking V). In these classes students produce a short digital video production in pairs and further learn the essentials of the video production process (camera, sound and editing) as well as advanced techniques in video production and post-production. Students also usually take CA 338 (Advanced Screenwriting) where they workshop scripts for the fourth year. In third year, students also begin pre-production on their fourth year film.

The **fourth year** is an intense, culminating year. In fourth year, students usually take CA 430 (Filmmaking VI) and CA 432 (Filmmaking VII), where they devote themselves to producing, shooting and editing their final film, which is a serious and significant project in which students bring together all that they have learned in the previous three years. The year concludes with a screening of all the fourth year films in a big festival-style event that invariably draws a packed house over two nights to the spectacular cinema in Woodward's. Many of these films go on to vibrant lives in festivals.

### **What kind of films do students make?**

Students make all kinds of films, ranging from short experimental works to fiction shorts to documentaries. The fourth year films have been remarkably diverse over the past ten years. They have included documentary studies of former miners in the Yukon and grain silos in the Prairies. They've included comedic narrative shorts and science fiction shorts. There have been high dramas and romantic comedies, even a martial arts comedy. The variety is incredible. Check out the sample works page online at the Contemporary Arts website.

### **How successful are your students?**

Very. Here are a few examples: In 2017, SFU Film alum Kathleen Hepburn's *Never Steady, Never Still* premiered at TIFF and went on to be listed as one of the year's best Canadian films. The film won multiple awards in Canada. Her next film, made with Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers, is premiering at the Berlin Film Festival in 2019. Several years ago, SFU student Joel Salasay's film *Lifers*, shot as a fourth-year film, was selected as one of the top ten student shorts at the Toronto International Film Festival and it went on to win the Leo Award for Best Student Short. Two recent grads (2016 and 2017), Jessica Johnson and Ryan Ermacora, are already successful experimental and documentary filmmakers and in January 2019 they had their first retrospective in Toronto as the Art Gallery of Ontario. It is *exceedingly* rare for such young filmmakers to have a retrospective at this level, or any level. Jessica is pursuing an MFA now and Ryan works as an independent filmmaker and cinematographer. Our students have shown their films around the world at festivals, they've gone on to get commissions from the NFB and Telefilm and to work for the BBC. Many of our students are actively working in the film industry across the country, and many have gone on to illustrious careers and to become some of the best-known filmmakers in Canada.

### **How much does it cost?**

Students pay standard SFU tuition and fees and should consult the SFU Calendar for the latest costs. In addition, students have expenses for materials and books. Also, many production classes have lab fees associated with them that range from 25 to 100 dollars per course. Students also pay for the cost of their film productions, including the price of film and developing, sound mixing, catering costs, etc. These costs can range from relatively minor amounts (\$75 or so) in video classes to significant amounts in the fourth year, when students spend a wide range on their final, graduating film. In the past, costs for the 4th-year films have ranged from negligible, for projects completed on video, to almost 10,000 dollars for ambitious productions with high shooting ratios. Most, however, spend at least several thousand dollars on their fourth year film. The actual cost is in the end determined by a student's own plans for his or her production.

### **How many people apply?**

In the past few years we have received about 125 applications for 24 spots.

### **How many people get interviews? What are interviews like?**

From the pool of applicants we usually select about 50 people to interview. The process of deciding whom to interview takes a few weeks, since two to three faculty read every application and we try to give them each a lot of attention.

The interviews take place a few weeks or a month after the application deadline. They are about 15 minutes long. We ask you questions about your application questionnaire and about your experience as an artist or your life experience. In short, we try to get to know

you better. You cannot really prepare for the interview in any way, except to come excited and ready to let us know how interesting you are and how dedicated you are to film as an art. We do not ask "test" questions: that is, we won't ask "Who directed *La dolce vita* and in what year was it released?" But we will ask about your interests, your ambitions, and your passions, and try to get a sense of how you would fit with our program. The only preparation we recommend for the interview is that you reread your application before coming.

### **What kind of students are you looking for?**

We are looking for intelligent and passionate and creative people. You don't need to have experience in filmmaking, but you do need to have an authentic passion for it. We are looking for people who are ambitious and driven but who are also ready and excited to work with other people. Film is a collective and collaborative art, so we need people who want to really join others in learning and in creating great films. You should also realize that we are a film program in an art school, so we are looking for students who are interested in art beyond cinema--you don't have to be a painter and a dancer, but you should have some a real interest and enthusiasm for the arts.

### **How should I answer the questions on the questionnaire?**

We can't tell you what to say, obviously, but follow these principles as you answer the questions:

- Be honest and let us know who you really are and what you really think.
- Make sure that we get a sense of your interest and passion for film and for art. There are many ways to get this across in the answers to the questions you've been given on the questionnaire.
- Take the questions seriously and answer them thoughtfully and concisely. The quality of your writing--its correctness, its style, its fluidity--tell us a lot about you as a student and as a potential artist.
- Above all: remember that you are applying to an *art* school in a *university* and that we take the making and study of art seriously and that we take our mission as a university, where you will be a student in a wide variety of courses, very seriously as well. Impress us with your passion, your ability, your vision, and the degree to which you, too, will take being an artist and a university student seriously.

Some specifics about each question on the questionnaire:

#3a: You should let us know what sort of art you have done or do (including, but not limited to, filmmaking), but also remember that not only art experience can contribute to

being a good filmmaker. Interesting and compelling life experience can make for great filmmakers.

#3b: Let us know what aspect of filmmaking really excites you. Do you want to end up as a DP working on big productions in the future? Or do you want to be an independent director-producer making your own creative documentaries? Do you imagine that you'll be a scriptwriter some day? Do you think that five years down the road you'll be hoping to start your own company, or working as a grip in a studio, or working your way up as a producer, or producing cool narrative web content for non-profit organizations? Do you want to be a video artist exploring the frontiers of the art form? There are a thousand things you can do with our degree and we want to know your *ambitions*.

#3c: Here are 4 tips about this question.

-- The assignment here is for a 5-minute film. **No dialogue and no music.** That means there can be no conversations amongst characters and it means you should not present an idea that is appropriate for a longer film.

-- Though you can use sound in this imaginary film, remember as well that film is a *visual* medium. Your readers are not inside your mind and they cannot SEE what you are imagining. Make sure that we can visualize what this film will look like. This not only lets us know what the film might look like, but it also gives us an idea of your visual sense and your ability to imagine and communicate how your film will appear.

-- As important as it is to describe the film's visual and sonic style, we need to have a sense of the *ideas* behind the film.

-- You can propose any kind of film *other than a music video*: it can be a documentary, a fiction film, or an experimental film--or perhaps you have discovered yet another new form of film.

#3d: This can be something that you've read that is explicitly about film, or it may be about something else entirely, but you have to be discussing a written work that has influenced how you think about film and cinema.

#4: The Photograph. *Please* read this question carefully and follow the instructions exactly. Do NOT submit more than one photograph. If you submit more than one, we will only look at the first one to be fair to those who submit only one. Please keep this in mind: while of course we will be impressed by the technical quality of your photo, that is not what is most interesting to us. What is interesting is your *idea* and the way you have figured out how to convey what you have been asked to convey. This is a place to show us how you *think* and how you can put ideas into *images*; it is a place to show us your originality and your aesthetic sense.