

PhD in Interdisciplinary Design and Media at Northeastern University
College of Arts, Media and Design
March 17, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CAMD's experiential PhD in Interdisciplinary Design and Media is a bold new degree program that provides a rigorous, globally-aware, practice-based, and human-centered approach to advanced scholarship. It aims to cultivate researcher-designers with a versatile repertoire of methods at their disposal and a passion for applying those skills to the emerging epistemic perspective of integrated humanics and creative collaboration across disciplinary boundaries. The proposed degree is designed to attract entrepreneurial self-starters who seek to break ground and invent new fields through hybrid and integrated approaches to knowledge creation.

The program emphasizes four pillars of excellence: engaging with the nature of human experience through innovative, interdisciplinary approaches to design; investigating new forms of digital media and data-driven communication across diverse disciplines; articulating how creativity can embrace connections between artistic practices, innovation, entrepreneurship, and research; and connecting with changing forms of technology and media to foster shared experiences and exchange within local and global communities. In this context, the new, experiential PhD program will cultivate a research culture dedicated to developing human literacies for new media technologies and collaboration across and beyond the university. The integration of data, technology, and human literacies invited by this program provides a vision and template for articulating humanics as a creative field of the future.

The PhD program is unique in its focus on practice-based research: scholarship applied to or conducted through making or creation. It is an emerging area that has been applied internationally to a wide range of creative fields and industries, many of which are represented within CAMD: music, theatre, design, studio art, games, architecture, journalism, and others. It differs from other forms of knowledge creation in that it rigorously cultivates the creation of artifacts as a mode of producing new knowledge, theories, and methodologies. Practice-based research integrates fields such as creativity and cognition or human-computer interaction to understand how practice operates, to enact that knowledge in practical applications, and to use the acts of creation themselves as a research methodology.

Building a CAMD Experiential PhD

Experiential learning in a design context provides opportunities to expand critical inquiry by stepping outside of academic boundaries to work on complex, real-world projects in collaboration with diverse industries (e.g., Google, Amazon, Disney), the creative sector (e.g., IDEO), government, NGOs and the nonprofit sector (e.g., FEMA, Red Cross, Nature Conservancy, United Nations), arts and education organizations, and communities. CAMD PhD students will be encouraged to conduct their research in—and in some cases create—"living labs" embedded in real-world contexts. We also envision on-campus partnerships with research initiatives, centers and institutes.

Structure & Approach

The proposed PhD program sits at the College level within Arts, Media & Design, in order to engage flexibly across CAMD disciplines. This approach supports finely-tuned specializations by building multiple paths that work off a shared foundation that explicitly supports interdisciplinary collaboration. Students are encouraged to draw from and blend epistemic approaches to design research, creative practice, and critical theory, and interrogate, through research and practice, the societal, humanistic, and historical implications of each.

The program is composed of three elements: a **core** (16 SH plus 4 SH writing) that will offer a common set of foundational methods to establish interdisciplinary interaction; a specialized, customized program of study, as put forward for the approved **research path** (28 SH); and an original, fully developed **research/creative project** (dissertation). The paths from which students will choose will conform to their expertise and tap into the expertise of CAMD's world-class faculty in Information Design & Visualization, Design Research, and Creative Research. A minimum of 48 credit hours of coursework beyond the undergraduate degree is required. (An advanced placement track may be proposed in the future.)

Market Demand / Competition

There is no direct competitor for the proposed PhD in the greater Boston area. The PhD in Media Arts and Sciences at MIT's Media Lab covers some of this ground, but maintains a heavy bias towards computer science and engineering. Cornell University's Ph.D. in Human Behavior and Design is a multidisciplinary program integrating the social sciences and design that bears some resemblance to the CAMD PhD, but is not a practice-based and follows a traditional framework based on social sciences and psychology. The Harvard Graduate School of Design's PhD program sits within a broader liberal arts context and focuses specifically on architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design. NYU's Tisch School of the Arts offers a Ph.D. in Performance Studies, and Rensselaer's Department of the Arts offers a PhD in Electronic Arts, but neither covers the breadth of disciplines housed at CAMD nor are built on the international model of practice-led and practice-based critical research. None of these programs offer the unique experiential PhD model being developed at Northeastern.

We surveyed a number of relevant programs nationally (at IIT, Carnegie Mellon, University of Washington, and Stanford, among other) and internationally (including the Royal College of Art, Goldsmith University, and University of the Arts, all in London). Directly comparable programs are rare and lack the breadth of interdisciplinarity to which the Phd in Interdisciplinary Design and Media aspires. While many have similarities, none fully embodies the potential of the experiential PhD in Interdisciplinary Design and Media at Northeastern.