

NMSU's CMI ranks among top animation schools in Southwest

LAS CRUCES >> The Creative Media Institute at New Mexico State University has been ranked as one of the top 10 animation and game design schools in the Southwest by Animation Career Review.

CMI ranks third on the list, after Brigham Young University and the University of Texas-Austin.

The programs were evaluated based on academic reputation, admission selectivity, depth and breadth of the program and faculty, value as it relates to tuition and geographic location.

"I think there is an increasing number of opportunities for creative media students because more and more people realize that story telling is profoundly effective at influencing any audience," CMI animation instructor Derek Fisher said. "With media becoming increasingly ubiquitous, there is a real need for artists that understand how to craft narrative for any visual format, from motion pictures to graphic novels. Among creative graduates, media artists and animators of the future have some of the brightest employment outlooks, due to the increasing demand for visual effects and animation in movies, television and video games."

Established in the College of Arts and Sciences in fall 2006, with only two students in its first graduating class, CMI has grown significantly. In 2013, CMI graduated more than 70 students. Enrollment in the department is currently at more than 300 students.

CMI offers degrees in animation and in visual effects and digital filmmaking.

"I think a general strength of CMI is that we have two majors, each strengthened by the other," Fisher said. "The curriculum has developed substantially since its inception with continual improvement in coordination with industry standards. CMI has improved

through workstation and camera equipment upgrades, as well as state-of-the-art visual effects, motion capture and motion control capabilities."

CMI facilities include a Vicon Motion Capture studio, THX theatre and screening room, various production spaces and sound rooms with editing suites.

The technology in the department -- combined with experienced faculty who are committed to helping students -- has helped the animation program gain national attention, animation professor Edward Bakshi said.

Upon graduation, students may pursue careers as animators, designers, technical directors, layout and storyboard artists, writers and more.

"Students can get jobs in New Mexico or anywhere animation/video games are produced in the country," Bakshi said. "Recent CMI-ANVE graduate Zac Wittstruck is working for Bakshi Productions, Inc. He is helping (my father) animator Ralph Bakshi with his latest animated project, 'Last Days of Coney Island,' which is currently in production."

Bakshi has worked on films "Rugrats Go Wild" and "The Spongebob Squarepants Movie," and is a producer and compositor for "Last Days of Coney Island."

Fisher's resume includes work on more than 20 major motion pictures including "Minority Report," "Zathura," "Constantine" and "Superman Returns." He is a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"Students have local internship opportunities, as well as those offered by big-name studios," Fisher said. "A past CMI intern worked the summer in the United Kingdom as a motion control assistant on 'The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader.' CMI alumnus Thomas DesJardins worked with Disney on the movie 'Wreck It Ralph.'"

Budgets for the various student-produced films vary, with funding provided by grants, scholarships, film production companies and crowd-funding through sites such as

Kickstarter.

CMI alumnus and now-instructor Derek Chase recalled a group of his peers that held a garage sale and used the proceeds to make their film.

"We want to teach traditional approaches; it makes students adaptable," he said. "No matter how much the software may change, they can transition their skillset from here into any type of job. We try to strengthen them through their core values."

Jess Gorell has worked as assistant to Bakshi on the "Coney Island" project and co-founded an animation school. Prior to that, she ran and taught in an East Coast arts education program while directing and producing theater and multimedia installations.

"Being able to bring an array of experience to CMI has been a great thing," she said. "My classes cover the various aspects of project development, as well the historical foundations of animation and the crucial realms of writing, voice acting and direction. I feel our entire faculty has succeeded in building a curriculum that equips our students well, while inspiring them as creators. So many students have taken advantage of all that we offer as a program to produce very strong work."

Screenwriting professor Ilana Lapid has worked in the department since 2011.

"I've noticed that students who come to CMI are so excited about learning," she said. "It's such a privilege to teach them because they love what they're doing and they're excited to develop their voices as filmmakers. We try to prepare them for the uncertainties of life as independent filmmakers."

CMI is emblematic of NMSU's goal to be 'all about discovery,' she said.

"Animation students have to discover and imagine and even re-imagine entire worlds," she said. "In digital filmmaking, we ask them to look inward and find new ways of looking at things. We want them to identify stories that reflect what they're interested in. We help them develop the tools necessary to bring those projects to fruition. It's a

process that begins when they arrive and continues as they go off into the world."

For more information visit <http://cmi.nmsu.edu>.

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