

A Continued Recommendation for The Center For Digital Imaging Arts at Boston University

Posted At : March 7, 2008 8:43 AM | Posted By : Steven Erat

Related Categories: Personal, Adobe, Photoshop, Events, ColdFusion, Photos, Video, New England

Last summer I **posted my initial thoughts** on the **Professional Digital Photography program** at Boston University's **Center for Digital Imaging Arts (CDIA)**, as well as some **short video clips** from the studios. While I've been attending the 18 month part time program I've received numerous inquiries requesting additional advice or insight about the program. I've decided to synthesize my email replies into a single blog entry for the benefit others who may be interested as well. Below you'll find an update on my experiences and some helpful advice.

I absolutely love the quality of instruction, facilities, and equipment available in the Professional Digital Photography program at Boston University's Center for Digital Imaging Arts. They have a well thought out curriculum, outstanding instructors, and state of the art facilities. They are so successful that they've purchased a large building across the street from their primary location in Waltham, MA to effectively double their capacity. They also operate a new campus in Georgetown, Washington D.C., and I've heard they are opening additional campuses in San Francisco, CA and Austin, TX.

The school offers job placement and in fact they have a staff member dedicated to working with students on this. The curriculum was first created a few years ago and at that time it had one business course at the end. However, the curriculum has been revised based on student feedback and they now offer about 5 business courses to cap off the photography program including the topics of shooting stock photography, print making, marketing and branding, building a website, and starting a business. Their goal is to prepare you to successfully start and run a small photography business.

The Photography program is Digital. You will be provided with a list of required equipment and recommended learning materials. Most students have either Nikon or Canon dSLRs, about half and half. Of the Canon variety, the 30D or 40D is recommended, plus an assortment of accessories such as lenses, light meter, tripod, etc. I recommend purchasing high quality lenses that are capable of wide apertures such as 2.8 at all focal lengths. You should absolutely not skimp on lenses. During the program you will learn studio lighting for still life photography, interior architecture, standard portraiture, glamour photography, and eventually event (band) photography and weddings.

Studio lighting is another area you shouldn't skimp on, but you won't need to purchase your own until you leave the school. The school maintains a huge equipment inventory of the best quality including Profoto strobes and related equipment. A basic two light Profoto kit with pocket wizards, soft boxes, and umbrellas will cost in the range of \$4000 - \$6000, but fortunately the school permits you to check out equipment for up to 3 days at a time. Again, you should buy the best strobe kits you can find because they provide consistent, controllable light output and are very durable, but you can delay this purchase until

after you complete the program. Its also worthy to note that you can sign up to use their studio space when they are not being used, where Sunday's are your best bet.

I highly recommend attending the part-time evening program. It runs 2 nights a week and every third Saturday all day. The students are mostly working adults ranging from the mid 20's to those past retirement age. They take it very seriously and all seem to be quite dedicated. I find that I'm constantly inspired by the work of others in my class, and I find their input and collaboration to be highly valuable.

By contrast, the daytime program is largely occupied by young students in the late teens and early twenties, and the atmosphere is quite different where high school behavior and antics seem to be the norm. Based on the opinion of some classmates who have "made up" courses during the day, and based on my experiences while visiting the school during the day, I recommend against attending the day program.

Another advantage of attending part time is that you have more time to review and practice between classes, whereas the full time, day students must march on immediately.

CDIA has standardized the use of **Adobe Lightroom** to manage the photographic workflow. Lightroom provides a way to organize your photographic collections in an intelligent, intuitive manner, and it provides the ability to annotate your photos with metadata such as copyright, keywords, location, subject, and other IPTC data. Thorough instruction is provided to help students master digital development of RAW images in Lightroom, such as global changes to exposure, color temperature, contrast, and saturation performed on either individual photos or in batches.

I've been using Adobe Photoshop for 10 years and still I feel like I've learned so much here because there are 5 courses on Photoshop alone, ranging on topics from basic tonal adjustments to Beauty Retouching and even Creative Photo Illustration. Even the instructors say they are constantly training themselves in Photoshop because with every new version there are new features and techniques that can make your photographic workflow faster and easier, and many new techniques that have a higher sophistication and are able to achieve previously unattainable goals. For me, the PS training will move me from a long time amateur to a solid professional.

My only caveat is that on the administrative side they have issues, and they often miscommunicate information or publish contradicting information on paper vs on the web, for example. My coworker is also a student there, and he encountered more "issues" than I did, but if you can tolerate their (many) small mistakes, then the program is definitely worth it because its the instruction that counts and this is where the school really excels. I did have some doubts about a new instructor they hired, so I made an appointment with the program director to discuss it. He was very accomodating and understanding, and he was sincerely concerned about the points I raised, and then he took action to address them to my satisfaction. So the school gets bonus points for being receptive to criticism, in my opinion.

Regarding my own aspirations as a professional photographer, well, I would love to do it full time some day, but for now I have a great job at Adobe where I've been for 8 years, and I look forward to many years there ahead. Although, I'm planning to do some professional photographic work on the side for a combination of portraiture, fine art, catalog photography, stock photography, and perhaps some architectural and event photography. I don't think I'll do wedding photography though because the opinions that I've heard describe it as completely chaotic and grueling while working under very high pressure, and that doesn't appeal to me, but I should experience it once before making a final decision.

There are many artist studios in the area that have been made by renovating former school houses or factories, such as the Emerson Umbrella in Concord or the Maynard Art Space. Some of them are for live-in artists only, but others are available for rent without requiring the live-in option. I recently started renting a space in the **Western Avenue Studios** in Lowell, MA where I share it with 3 others. I only use it occasionally on weekends and such for now, but I may consider renting my own studio should business look prosperous. They have a long waiting list, so if you're considering this then find a place and get your name on the waiting list ASAP because it could be several months to a year before there's an opening, unless you find someone looking to share an existing rental space.

Finally, I'd like give a shout out to my favorite instructors and provide links to their websites. These instructors are simply off the charts, knock your socks off, absolutely great instructors. They have the ability to convey complex ideas in easily digestible chunks, provide extremely useful advice based on their professional experiences, and full of excitement and enthusiasm.

- **Brian Tetrault**
- **Tim Lynch**
- **Dave Henderson**
- **Chris Alvanas** (see also **his tutorials** on Layers Magazine)

You can browse though many of **my photographs here on Flickr**.