Are there any other documentary filmmaking programs like the Institute?

There are no other intensive graduate documentary filmmaking programs in the nation like the one here at the George Washington University. The Institute for Documentary Filmmaking is held annually between January and June and leads to a Certificate in Documentary Filmmaking. For the past 23 years, we have been the only institution that offers this intensive training and education in nonfiction production. Maintaining a standard of excellence found across all of the programs offered by the School of Media and Public Affairs at GW, the Institute for Documentary Filmmaking has been ranked one of the top ten documentary programs in the nation.

Do you need to have media experience in order to be considered for the Institute?

You do not need media experience, technical expertise, or a theoretical background in order to be considered for the Institute. You do need a bachelor’s degree from an accredited institution of higher education. We do not require the GRE for admission. With your application, you will submit two letters of recommendation and two 500-word essays. The most competitive applicants are those individuals with broad-ranging life experience and demonstrate passion for nonfiction storytelling who will be able to work collaboratively as a cohesive production team.

How is earning a certificate in Documentary Filmmaking different from receiving a master’s degree?

Master’s programs at other universities can take two to three years to complete and frequently cost over $100,000. GW’s Institute for Documentary Filmmaking provides all of the tools you need to launch yourself as an emerging documentarian in a way that is more cost effective, time efficient, and frequently results in the same career opportunities afforded by longer, more expensive degree programs.

Since this is an accelerated program, what information is covered?

There are three intensive components to the Institute—theory, technical training, and production. For the theory portion of the course, you will meet from January through March on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 6:30–8:00pm. Outside of class you will watch many films, read a number of texts, and complete many writing and visual story assignments.

During the March and April training portion of the program, you will meet in required small group workshops to master high-definition cinematography, lighting, sound, and Adobe Premiere editing. These workshops will be held on weekends, in the evenings, and periodically during the weekdays.

When you are in production of your group film project during the months of May and June, you will be working 24/7 to complete your film. We have provided a detailed course outline for students interested in more specifics of how the program is conducted, found at http://go.gwu.edu/doccentercourses.

Because our emphasis is on the theory and practice of documentary filmmaking, the business of marketing and distributing documentary films is addressed only in the most general of terms.

Finally, if there are specific aspects of filmmaking, such as in the crafts of cinematography and editing, for which you would like more advanced training after completing our six-month program, we will help you identify opportunities that will advance your long-term career goals.

Is there a benefit of going to a documentary program in DC rather than in another part of the country?

Absolutely, Washington, DC, is considered the “Docuwood” of filmmaking. Not only are PBS, Discovery, and National Geographic based here in Washington, DC, but there is an entire industry in DC that supports these nonfiction giants and we call upon them regularly for internship placement, speakers, and networking. Further, you will benefit from being able to access the largest historical collections in the world at the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and the Smithsonian in your everyday work in the Institute that no other location outside of Washington, DC, can provide.
Can I be considered for the program if I work a full-time job?

Yes. However, please be aware that this is an intensive program that lasts for six short months, so we demand a lot from you. The workload during the theory portion of the program is commensurate with all graduate-level courses at GW. Further, once we begin technical training, there are two required weekend training sessions in February and March and several during-the-day group exercises. Finally, we strongly recommend that individuals who work request time off from their employers in the all-important group film production period in May and June.

What are my financial aid options?

Financial aid is typically not available for certificate programs. If you visit the GW Student Financial Assistance page, http://gwired.gwu.edu/finaid-g/AlternativeLoans/, you will find private alternative loan and payment plan options to suit your financial needs.

Each year, one deserving student receives The Elberger Scholarship, which provides $2,500 worth of support towards tuition.

Visit our “Costs and Scholarships” page to learn how to finance your attendance at the Institute, at http://go.gwu.edu/doccentercosts.

What are my internship opportunities while I’m in the Institute?

The Institute offers a substantial internship program that is available to all program participants. We recommend that you avail yourself of this unique opportunity to fully benefit from the Institute experience. Placement begins in late January and interns can expect to work 15-20 hours per week in an unpaid internship through the beginning of May. Interns have been successfully placed at National Geographic Television, Discovery Communications, and WETA, as well as with many highly experienced independent filmmakers and production companies.

Are there event/networking opportunities through the program?

Yes. When you become a member of the Institute, you become part of a community that we have been building for the past nearly quarter century. You will have the opportunity to attend film screenings, panels, and professional development seminars offered by our many Documentary Center partners. Our guest speakers are Academy Award and Emmy Award-winning filmmakers and broadcast industry leaders who will bring unique insight into the many questions you will have about nonfiction filmmaking. Further, you will meet alumni who have achieved successful documentary careers in broadcasting, independent filmmaking, and in non-profit media advocacy. Most importantly, upon completion of the program, we continue to mentor you for years to come and provide you with opportunities—educational and professional—to help you on your journey towards becoming an accomplished documentarian.

How many applicants do you accept each year?

There is no set number of individuals that we accept, but generally the Institute is comprised of approximately 15-18 students per year. Our admissions decisions are based on the all-important goal of creating the best, most compatible, production team possible from each year’s applicant pool. Therefore, the personal essays are critical in our evaluation of each candidate’s potential in helping us meet that goal.

I have a film idea of my own that I’d like to make, can I do it during this program?

Applicants to the program should not expect to make a film on their own. Filmmaking is a collaborative effort and we emphasize this fact throughout the term of the Institute. If you have a film idea that you’d like to offer to the group for your final project to produce in May and June, that is up to you. But be aware that many ideas will be vetted and yours may or may not be the one selected. Most importantly, we believe your ideas about documentary filmmaking will profoundly change as you go through the Institute experience and that will inevitably affect how you might later approach the film that you now think you want to make.

We look forward to reading your application! For more information, go to http://go.gwu.edu/docinstitute.