

Report of the Academic Program Review Committee for DXARTS

Center for Digital Arts and Experimental Media Review Committee

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Executive Summary

At the invitation of the University of Washington (UW) Graduate School on behalf of the Provost, a review committee consisting of two internal and two external faculty members completed an assessment of the Center for Digital Arts and Experimental Media (“DXARTS” or “the Center”). In summary, the Review Committee (“the Committee”) is impressed with the ongoing development and productivity of this innovative, collaborative, and transdisciplinary program.

The Committee reviewed the Self Study completed in Fall 2017 and conducted interviews with faculty, staff, students, alumni, and other DXARTS stakeholders during the site visit in February 2018. The Committee also reviewed the DXARTS 2008 self-study, and conducted its assessment according to UW’s program review guidelines.

In so doing, the Committee recommends that: i) DXARTS be granted departmental status; ii) two FTE faculty lines be added, initially through 0% appointments within UW and eventually recruited from outside the university; iii) the Ballard facility be relocated closer to campus; iv) support staff in the areas of grant writing, marketing/communications and/or advancement be leveraged more effectively with College resources; and that v) the Center and Divisional Dean submit an interim report in five years, with a full review taking place in ten years.

In this report, we describe particular areas of **strength** for the program, note a number of **concerns**, and make **recommendations** about how these concerns might be addressed.

STRENGTHS

Strong and Diverse Full Time and Adjunct Faculty

Four full time faculty members (Karpen, Pampin, Coupe, and Psarra) support a diverse, rigorous media-focused curriculum and program. They have built a strong foundation and successfully maintain heavy teaching loads and active research agendas. They are passionate, engaged, and dedicated to the Center and its mission.

DXARTS has strategically enhanced its faculty by creatively utilizing the job titles of research associate and research scientist, and by reaching out to adjunct faculty (faculty with home departments outside the program within UW.) Thomas Deuel is one example and the various research scientists are another.

Adjunct faculty associated with DXARTS include collaborative colleagues in the arts, sciences, and humanities including those in the eScience Institute and Human Centered Design and Engineering. These faculty highlight the Center's diversity and commitment to interdisciplinarity. Eight of the Center's ten adjunct faculty participated in the review meeting, illustrating an overwhelming commitment to the Center and a strong investment in its ongoing success. Those interviewed were highly complimentary about DXARTS's activities, faculty, and students, and seem to genuinely value the Center and its contributions to the UW community.

Commitment to Collaborative Research and Creative Productivity in Media Arts

DXARTS supports and promotes collaborations with a wide variety of departments across the UW campus. Faculty, staff, and students collaborate on a variety of technology-focused projects fusing the arts, sciences, and humanities. Many such projects result in performances, gallery exhibits, published recordings, and other deliverables. Ongoing faculty research such as the Art+Brain Lab with the Swedish Neuroscience Institute and the "Sanctum" project with the UW School of Law, illustrate the Center's remarkably diverse research and creative agenda. Junior faculty seem particularly engaged with on-campus collaboration and are developing new relationships with various campus constituencies. Notable among these are Afroditi Psarra's emerging partnerships with HCDE and Dance that bring both faculty and students together to explore creative media projects.

High End Facilities and Equipment Supporting Innovative Activities

DXARTS maintains outstanding physical facilities that support their interdisciplinary, collaborative activities. The Center's offices, studio/work spaces, hands-on laboratories, fab lab, and soft lab provide faculty, associates, and students with state-of-the-art audio, video, computing, and physical fabrication facilities.

Equipment available for student use is of similar high-quality to the physical facilities and supports high-end media activities. Audio and video equipment includes an array of high-end microphones and recording units, video and still cameras. The Ballard fab lab includes a wide variety of high-end physical fabrication equipment including wood and metal shops, 3d printing machines, laser cutter, soft materials tools, and electronic prototyping tools.

Multi-Faceted Staff Supporting Research and Administrative Needs

A group of dedicated, flexible staff members support DXARTS's instructional, research, and administrative needs. Full time research associates assist faculty and students with their activities in addition to engaging in their own research. An administrative staff member manages budgets, coordinates hiring activities, advises students, and manages the Center's day-to-day administration. A PhD student oversees the Ballard fab lab and two undergraduate work study students assist with various tasks. All team members are remarkably dedicated to the Center and work diligently to ensure its ongoing success.

Innovative Ph.D. Degree Program

DXARTS supports a diverse population of current doctoral students who have been recruited from domestic and international locations, from the academy, and from the private sector. Current students cite the studio and lab facilities, the unique PhD degree program, and a well designed curriculum as reasons for joining DXARTS. They feel challenged by the program and report that they have freedom to experiment and explore.

Although DXARTS is a young program, it boasts a nascent cadre of alumni who remain strongly committed to the Center and its mission. They report that the degree helped them expand their artistic experience and provided them with valuable time to work on long-term, challenging projects. One student said that the PhD program "pushes you into unknown territory" and that its flexibility provided opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. The alumni base provides strong advocacy for DXARTS beyond UW and brings acclaim to this outstanding program.

A Growing Minor Program that Increases Campus Visibility

DXARTS maintains a strong campus presence through its minor, which has seen steady growth since its inception in Spring 2016. The Center's undergraduate courses in particular, appear to be highly sought after and taken by students from all parts of campus. This increase in enrollment is a benefit to the program's visibility, reputation, and income. It may also enhance interdisciplinary collaborations as students from diverse majors take courses in DXARTS.

CONCERNS

Faculty and Staff

Given the small number of DXARTS core faculty there was extensive discussion about the need for a critical mass of faculty especially given the Center's aspiration to become a department. While no department can serve all needs, it is notable that DXARTS does not have any current faculty with a departmental connection to visual arts nor any faculty who specialize in theoretical/critical discourse.

With faculty having their primary appointments in diverse departments, academic processes including tenure, promotion, merit, and other evaluations are difficult to oversee and guide. This is also a challenge with two DXARTS faculty holding administrative positions: Professor Juan Pampin as Director of DXARTS and Professor Richard Karpin as Director of the School of Music. This leaves few faculty to serve as mentors and/or to guide evaluations, assessments, and promotions. The two DXARTS administrative appointments also have a negative impact on the number and variety of classes that can be taught by the core faculty.

The number of DXARTS alumni hired by the program is also concerning. The self-study remarks on the successful employment of PhD alumni. While this is true, 25% of the Center's PhD alumni are employed by DXARTS itself, including one of the faculty and two staff members. This employment pattern may be internally useful to the Center, but unfortunately limits the growth of its national and international reputation.

Finally, while DXARTS adjunct faculty expressed enthusiasm about their relationship and partnerships with the program, the faculty within DXARTS was not always as strongly spirited when describing its adjuncts and partnerships.

Research and Dissemination of Knowledge

A nuanced challenge for the Center is its stated vision of sustaining research on the leading edge of the intersection of art and technology. To remain on this leading edge DXARTS will need to continue to evolve and articulate their practice of research and the goals toward which they strive. This articulation is critical as part of future interdisciplinary collaborations.

During conversations with DXARTS faculty about the nature of their research, productivity, and the dissemination of their work, the Committee sometimes encountered defensiveness that appears to stem from years of being asked to defend the program. We heard a similar defensiveness from some students that appeared to echo that of the faculty. The Committee's intent was to clarify how DXARTS defines research, not to question the value of their work or methods. While it is natural to assert the value of one's work, that expression of value is best interpreted as an opportunity to educate potential collaborators, sponsors, and allies, rather than a challenge to the quality of one's endeavors. The Committee is concerned that such defensiveness may generate missed opportunities in the future.

Resources and Facilities

DXARTS rents a considerable facility in Ballard that requires substantial care and maintenance and no longer has the support of an essential full time staff member. The Committee noted that

travel time between campus and the Ballard Lab routinely approaches or exceeds 30 minutes. While the off-site location of the Ballard facility does have many benefits, we believe that they may be outweighed by the disadvantages of the distant location.

Budget and Finances

Contributing to the concern above is the Ballard facility's rental and utilities expense, which places a significant burden on the DXARTS budget. This cost may not be sustainable long term.

Another budgetary concern is the cost of graduate student funding (including tuition and stipends), which has increased without an increase in the Center's budgetary allocation. This cost presents an ongoing challenge for sustaining the Center's ongoing efforts to maintain a high level of productivity and recruit outstanding students.

Governance

An overwhelming number of constituents interviewed during the site visit expressed a strong desire for DXARTS to become a department. One concern as this venture moves forward is the challenge of retaining and sustaining nimbleness in terms of interactions with a wide variety of units on campus. Faculty lines residing in whole or in part in other departments can foster long-term collaboration and appears to have benefitted the program in multiple ways.

Related to this concern is the potential challenge of not becoming another silo as a department. The Center's faculty's must remain diligent and continue actively seeking partnerships with other units in ways that foster robust collaborations and deeply interdisciplinary projects.

Recommendations

Departmental Status

The review committee unanimously supports the DXARTS faculty's strong desire to obtain departmental status. Doing so will give the DXARTS program an additional measure of prestige and respect on campus, and will allow it to achieve political parity with other campus departments. Departmental status will also allow DXARTS faculty to:

1. Control its own faculty lines and budgets;
2. Control its own tenure/promotion process;
3. Hire its own teaching faculty, control instructional assignments, and efficiently hire adjunct instructors as courses (especially those offered in the minor program) increase in enrollment.

The Committee suggests that the departmental development process model the path taken by CHID, which underwent reorganization. The Committee specifically notes that achieving departmental status was a primary recommendation from the previous program review ten years ago, and that the recommendation has not yet been acted upon.

Faculty

In the process of becoming a department, at least two, and ideally three, FTE faculty lines should be added. Initially this can be accomplished by adding 0% appointments from their adjunct faculty.

Moving forward it is important that the Center be able to hire faculty from outside of the UW (and alumni) community. In these hires, the Committee recommends that strong consideration be given to true joint appointments with faculty who span multiple departments in their interests and activities. The Committee's discussion included the potential of adding faculty in the visual arts, history/theory, and other areas yet to be identified. In these hires the Center should be mindful of building a more gender balanced faculty as well as actively recruiting to hire other diverse populations.

The Committee recognizes UW's current budgetary and hiring challenges. As noted above, the Committee recommends that the faculty expansion process consider creative ways of broadening the community, including 0% appointments from collaborating departments.

Fab Lab Facility

The Committee recommends that the DXARTS program consider strongly the importance of securing a fabrication facility location closer to the main UW campus. Doing so will allow more community building/interaction, facilitate more collaboration, and increase visibility. In any facility move, it is critical to maintain graduate student studio and gallery testing spaces.

Staffing

The Committee recommends that the Center take better advantage of College of Arts & Sciences staff resources including advancement, grant support, media/communications, and other services. Staffing needs for equipment management and similar services might also be consolidated or leveraged with other UW shared services programs.

Other Considerations

The Committee recommends that DXARTS strengthen its connection to the greater UW campuses, colleges, and schools. DXARTS has strong relationships with select departments, but there is an opportunity to build upon those collaborations with current adjunct faculty and seek their assistance to expand the community. DXARTS can also build on networks among alumni to expand their sphere of influence to the larger community of regional, national, and international artists.

All units must be creative in seeking alternative funding streams to enable their work, and DXARTS is no different in this regard. The Committee recommends that DXARTS explore alternate funding streams including grants, donors, and curricular expansion such as opportunities for unique online courses and micro-credentialing. The Committee also recommends that consideration be given to the tremendous fabrication capabilities of the Fab Lab that might possibly take on campus work or excess work from other campus shops (e.g. Physics.).

The Committee recommends that DXARTS seek additional performance venues and opportunities both on and off campus. Doing so will help to raise the Center's profile and will also support students by providing additional performance/exhibition opportunities.

DXARTS faces ongoing challenges in terms of its focus on cutting edge work. This commitment to inventing new and emerging technology-based art forms (as stated in the Center's mission) is

admirable, but may be a challenge to sustain long term, and should remain a primary discussion point as DXARTS moves forward with strategic planning for the coming ten years.

Next Review and Interim Report

The Committee recommends that the DXARTS program be approved for continuance and that its next formal review take place in ten years' time.

An interim report should be created by the divisional Dean and DXARTS in five years to assess post-review activities. Doing so will allow DXARTS to address concerns stated in this report and will encourage the University to take action on the Committee's recommendations.