

Academic Program Review of the School of Drama
Report of the Review Committee
June 2, 2014

The Graduate School, University of Washington

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In response to your charge letter dated March 12, 2014, we submit the following report. It is based on our reading of the School of Drama's self-study; meetings with faculty, staff, students of the School conducted on April 30 and May 1, 2014; and exit interviews held on May 1, 2014.

Respectfully submitted,

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We were very favorably impressed by the dedication of faculty and staff and by the quality of the experience that they are providing to students in the BA, MFA, and PhD programs. The School has been led for the past twenty years by executive director Sarah Nash Gates, who is to be commended for adapting creatively and decisively to the severe challenges posed by the recent financial crisis and for her successful efforts in fundraising, which have become even more crucial. Credit is also due to the other members of the School's executive council: the heads of the various programs (Performance; Design; Theater History, Criticism and Theory).

The School's self-study showed admirable thoughtfulness and candor and this reports presumes familiarity with it. Our specific recommendations address points brought up in the self-study as well as some that were not mentioned in it. In conducting

this review we have striven to help the School; to look forward, not backward; and to make the report as useful as possible to the incoming executive director.

Recommendations

These are our specific recommendations. Some relate to areas specifically mentioned in the self-study; others deal with matters that came to our attention during the meetings with members of the School.

1. Timing of next review

We recommend that the School's status be continued and that the next review be conducted in ten years' time, i.e., 2024.

2. Musical theater program

While the review team understands the potential positive outcomes for the School of Drama if the new Musical Theatre concentration becomes permanent, a few words of caution are probably worth sharing. The following is offered to help those responsible for developing the program ensure that the presence of a new cohort of students does not create unanticipated problems for the older programs.

Following discussion with various parties, the review team has come to understand that a seventh major production (a musical) will be added to the season of the School of Drama following the 2014-15 season. Assuming this occurs, the addition of a seventh show will allay some concerns that dedicating one of the six existing production slots to repertoire from musical theatre would negatively affect the casting opportunities for Drama majors, particularly the BA students. On the other hand, the addition of another major production does raise the question of when this show will fall into the production season and how its presence changes the schedule of design and construction for the shops. The team was told that some work might fall into the summer months and provide additional employment for nine- or ten-month employees. If so, this might certainly prove to be of benefit to staff, should they desire additional hours. The review committee hopes that the scheduling of any additional productions specific to musical theatre may be incorporated in such a way as not to reduce the human resources currently dedicated to School of Drama productions.

Similarly, it is hoped that the budgets for musical theatre productions will be drawn, as the review committee was told, from new funds raised specifically for this purpose. With School of Drama production budgets already considerably lower than those at peer institutions, it would be inappropriate to attempt to divide existing funds across the needs of seven major productions, especially given the relatively larger budgets that musicals require.

The review committee is not clear how acting instruction is to be provided to students in the musical theatre program. While some seemed to believe that an adequate

number of teachers are present within the current roster of School of Drama acting faculty to deliver an acting class without having to cancel an existing section for Drama majors or non-majors, others seemed less certain that this is the case. The review committee hopes that adequate discussion has occurred on this topic between administrators of the musical theatre program and the head of performance for the School of Drama in order to ensure that adequate faculty resources are in place for all constituents.

Finally, it is also not clear that human and physical resources are in place to handle a full cohort of musical theatre students once the program reaches its full enrollment. In addition to the need for acting classes mentioned above, students will also need access to private voice training, practice rooms, music theory classes, dance instruction, and some sort of instruction in dramatic/musical history and literature. While the review committee is confident that the college administration recognizes the long-term needs inherent in maintaining a program of this nature, since private fundraising is only in its initial stages, it is hard to see how all the necessary lines can be assured. In addition, the team wishes to note that the School of Drama does not currently employ a full-time sound designer, a position that would seem essential for the production needs of a musical theatre program.

3. CineMedia program

Approximately a month before the School of Drama's submission of its written self-study, the CineMedia BA pilot program—organized through General Studies in the same manner as the new Musical Theater program—was terminated. While it is clear that the growth of a large-scale interdisciplinary BA in applied filmmaking remains unviable in the current economic climate, it is equally clear that the Screen Acting classes for MFA students, as well as the continuance of the organized film production/visual storytelling course series at the BA level (currently offered by Andrew Tsao), are absolutely essential to the School of Drama's continued success more generally. Interviews with diverse groups of faculty revealed that recruitment of graduate students to both the acting and design programs this year was severely impacted by the loss of a CineMedia BA program and/or promise of an organized set of classes and film production component in the curriculum. The professional success of the MFA students completing their respective degrees is also at stake. Unless the graduate students are able to showcase their skills in well-designed short films that circulate easily in the national/international field, the prestige of the School of Drama and their ability to place MFA students in the theatrical working world will dwindle significantly in the coming few years. In addition, the talent demonstrated by the BA students working with Professor Tsao thus far is remarkable and the professional quality of the films commendable. Quite frankly, the quality of these short films is surprising, and all the more so when one realizes that they were made in makeshift studio spaces in the basement of the Penthouse Theater and with outdated equipment.

In order to sustain even the current number of film-related courses offered by Professor Tsao, a stable TA line dedicated to the existing BA course sequence in film directing/applied filmmaking is essential. This position demands immediate attention insofar as the TA supplied by the College of Arts and Sciences during the CineMedia initiative will end after AY 2014-15. In addition, the review committee encourages the School of Drama to continue working with other related units on campus (DXARTS, Cinema Studies, English) that previously participated in the curricular structure for the CineMedia pilot program in order to rethink and innovate a mentoring process and curricular options for interested students to pursue outside the purview of a CineMedia major per se.

While limited space and financial resources are obvious, the addition of a permanent TA line for Andrew Tsao's filmmaking series at the BA level and Screen Acting classes at the MFA level will enable the continuation of the current quality of productions. Also necessary will be funds adequate for an updated HD digital camera, which could be rented by the School of Drama, rather than purchased, in order to avoid the problem of technological obsolescence. Ultimately, a sound studio would be ideal. The committee learned through interviews with faculty that space is unavailable in Hutchinson Hall for this purpose; also unavailable are the funds necessary to renovate any space located elsewhere on campus that might be dedicated to a sound studio. In the coming years, we encourage the School of Drama to prioritize these needs and to seek funds from both the College and from fund-raising endeavors to enable the growth of this curricular imperative.

4. PhD line

The School of Drama's self-study proposed a new line in non-western theatre for the PhD program. We fully endorse that proposal.

We agree that the Center for Performance Studies has been invaluable in allowing PhD students to get the range of courses they need in order to be competitive in the job market. It is also clear that the School of Drama cannot control the schedules of faculty outside the School, so it cannot ensure that the courses needed will be offered when they are needed. This makes it nearly impossible to be sure that the members of each incoming cohort of students will have the access they need to courses they should be taking.

Given the size of the program, the three faculty now present can just cover its needs. But to do so they must teach full-time all the time. The self-study notes that "All of the PhD faculty teach at least 3/5 of their load in the undergraduate curriculum, and occasionally in the MFA curriculum, and as a result, currently, there is little room for leaves, or sabbaticals" (30). This is not a sustainable situation. In order to regain the national reputation of the PhD program, its two new faculty members must be as productive as scholars and as highly visible in national professional organizations as the

program's single senior faculty member is. They need to continue to apply for grants, research leaves, and course reductions in order to produce at a level of scholarship and national service that meets or exceeds their peers. They also need to develop innovative interdisciplinary projects with faculty in the other programs within the School and with faculty from outside the school. The faculty you have appear to be quite capable of doing all of this and were eager to do so. But the course needs of their students make this far more difficult than it should be. They must have access to release time and an additional faculty member would make release time possible for all the faculty in the program.

The University of Washington is located in a region with sizeable and vibrant Asian and Asian American communities. It would be wise if the focus of the proposed new faculty member were in Asian or Asian American Theatre. Certainly it would bring needed diversity to the program if the faculty member hired was Asian or Asian American, but this need not be a requirement. As the self-study acknowledges under its Faculty Diversity section, "The field, particularly outside of the performance/acting specialization, is not deep with people of color" (21). It is therefore important to look for those scholars, regardless of their own ethnicity, who will attract student of color to be the next generation of leaders in the field.

The self-study asks "Is there a need to embrace a wider menu of career goals for any of our students or in any of our programs? For example: expand PhD career training beyond academic scholars?" (32). The answer for the PhD program would appear to be yes, and the new faculty hire we recommend should be one who can address this issue with some authority. The list of PhD alumni on the School's website shows placements for one student per year over the last four years. This is a fine record given the current market for scholars trained to work in Research I universities, as the School's scholars are, but it represents only a 50% placement record for a program that brings in two students each year and proposes to bring in three. The market is not expected to improve in the future. Other placement options can and should be explored, all of which would fit in with the School of Drama's new goals relating to "innovation," "leadership," and "entrepreneurship" (2).

5. Associate directorship

The new executive director is coming from outside the University with little direct experience in academic administration. It is important that he be given every opportunity to succeed. For this reason we recommend that associate director be appointed from among the tenured faculty.

The associate director would help the incoming director learn the lay of the land, help relieve some of the very heavy administrative burdens that will fall hardest in the first year or two, and free up a certain amount of the director's time for fundraising.

In addition, the experience should prove valuable to the holder of the associate directorship, as there is currently no opportunity for faculty members to serve in School-wide leadership positions until they reach the post of executive director. Service in this position would give faculty members experience that would increase the likelihood that the person who someday succeeds the incoming director can be appointed internally. Even if the faculty members who hold this position do not go on to serve as executive directors of the School, serving in this capacity might give them a broader perspective on the operations of all the programs of the School and thereby help bring the various programs closer together.

During the exit interview, members of the School mentioned that the creation of an associate directorship had been considered but eventually abandoned, as faculty members are already stretched too thin leading the various programs. It should be emphasized, however, that what we are suggesting is not a deputy directorship that would consume a large amount of the holder's time, but an associate directorship, in which the associate director might serve as assistant, apprentice, adviser, and understudy to the executive director. It could be held by associate professors as well as by full professors. In addition, by rotating this position, more faculty members could gain the experience that this position affords, and it would prevent the burden of serving from falling too hard on any single individual or program.

6. Creditize student activity

The review team was surprised to discover that the undergraduate performers involved in an ambitious production of Václav Havel's *The Beggar's Opera* were all doing so on an extracurricular basis. While the team members understand and support the notion that a BA in Drama is not built exclusively upon performance as a requirement, nevertheless, the students (and faculty) are investing a huge number of hours in what is unquestionably an academic enterprise, and it seems strange that some sort of elective credit would not be available for them. The team would recommend that a course number be established (perhaps for variable credit) so that those students who wished to do so could earn credit for their work in a major production.

7. PhD first-year exam/communication

In our discussions with students enrolled in the PhD program in Theater Criticism, History, and Theory, students reported high satisfaction with access to faculty, professional preparation, and the placement record of graduates. They cited as deficiencies the lack of a non-Western specialist among the PhD faculty and a lack of choice in choosing seminars, given that there are only three faculty members who each give two graduate seminars per year. Both of these concerns could be remedied by the addition of a fourth faculty line, discussed elsewhere in this report.

We were surprised in our discussions to hear of two serious concerns. First, students said that teaching assistants are not receiving adequate advance notice of what, where, when, and with whom they will be teaching. This is a particular difficulty for incoming and international students. To the extent possible, this information should be provided to teaching assistants as soon as faculty have it. There is no point in hoarding it.

Second, students expressed frustration with a set of written examinations that are administered at the end of the first year of study. (In contrast, they found the third-year examinations to be helpful.) These examinations, which comprise several questions answered over a short time period, are understandably and perhaps unavoidably stressful. Nonetheless, some students said they had no clear idea of the purpose of the examinations, or that they found the manner in which oral feedback was provided “humiliating.”

Both of these issues—assignments for teaching assistants and the rationale for and administration of the first-year examinations—can be addressed with better planning and communication, but they also warrant a pause to reflect on the important role of doctoral students as junior colleagues and as the future of the field.

8. Funding

The School of Drama’s success at fund-raising is notable, and it is clear that the outgoing Executive Director’s commitment to this task has been invaluable. As a result, a palpable “culture of fund-raising” is evident among the faculty and students, including the PhD students who have not yet been involved in any targeted fund-raising initiatives. We encourage the PhD faculty and students to discuss possible fund-raising endeavors with the incoming director to support the students’ travel to conferences and for research. The School’s current fundraising initiatives are predominantly “actor-centric.”

At the same time, there are numerous needs in the School of Drama that should be redressed with University resources rather than through outside fund-raising alone. The dire state of the directing and acting classrooms, for instance, should be discussed immediately with Classroom Technology and Events (previously Classroom Support Services). Adequate lighting for these classrooms is particularly urgent, and should be brought to the attention of the respective offices that attend to classroom equipment at the University.

9. Design faculty

We note that the MFA in Design program came in for particular criticism in the Review Report by the U/RTA Membership Committee and we found similar criticisms reflected in the self-study and in the interviews we carried out. While it was clear that

some of these criticisms were merited, it was also clear that not all the problems identified could be laid solely at the feet of the faculty in that area. The Design faculty do seem to be addressing many of the issues raised in the report but they need assistance. While there is much that can be addressed, the following seem most useful.

U/RTA recommended strengthening the position of the General Manger to function more like a production manager or to add a production manager to the staff. We endorse that recommendation. This person should be responsible for insuring that season selection occurs within a time frame that allows the Design program to properly schedule its work on the shows. Too often the season selection seems to have come late, as it did when we were doing our review. This person could also help to ensure that workloads were reasonable and that students were not overworked in the program. This person should also take the lead in ending the “acknowledged historical lack of respect for the professional staff’s role, expertise and skills” (4).

The Design faculty must re-examine its curriculum to ensure that it is reasonable for the skills of the students it is able to recruit today and to eliminate the “often repetitive” nature of the courses noted in the U/RTA report. The structure of the curriculum plays a large part in the overwork seen in the students and this can be fixed.

The financial packages that can be offered to student in the Design program seem inadequate for the program to recruit the limited number of top-notch students available in any given year. We understand that only half of the average student time in the degree program is actually covered by financial support from the University. Competing programs at other institutions do far better than that. The School of Drama should focus a great deal of attention on finding a way to fully support its MFA Design students throughout their time in the program. Until that happens, however, the curriculum should be readjusted to include the training that students no longer have when they enter the program.

MFA in Design students are required to complete a quarter-long internship. They must find the opportunities themselves and we agree that this is good training for them. It also goes along with the emphasis on entrepreneurship that the School of Drama has recently added to its Vision and Goals Statement (2). But the students are currently required to fully finance this internship term themselves. This includes travel to and seeking short-term housing in another city while dealing with the leases and other commitment they have in Seattle. This does not seem equitable when compared to the support given to students in the professional actor training program. The School of Drama should make it a high priority to remedy this situation. Scholarships need to be made available as soon as possible with more secure forms of funding sought out in the near future.

The MFA in design program is put at considerable disadvantage by low production budgets. The money available for purchasing materials for shows is quite low in comparison to the production budgets at peer institutions. This significantly limits the

experience MFA design students can acquire. We recommend that the new director give this issue immediate attention.

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Notwithstanding these suggestions for improvement, we want to emphasize that we found in the School of Drama a faculty that was knowledgeable about the national challenges facing academic programs in the arts and humanities today and fully aware of the issues within their School. They are addressing both the internal issues and external challenges with insight, creativity and determination. Members of the administration of the College and University at all levels should be asking how they can help this talented and dedicated group of individuals and should be actively pursuing ways to do so.