

## Review of the M.F.A. in Art

Classification of Instructional Program (CIP) Code: 50.0702  
Fine/Studio Arts, General

The Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) in Art program is housed in the School of Art within the College of Fine Arts. The school also offers a minor in art with an art history emphasis, a B.A., B.S. in Art (liberal arts), a Bachelor of Fine Arts (B.F.A.) in Art (studio arts), and a M.A, M.S. in Art (art education or visual culture).

The M.F.A. in Art is a three-year program designed to provide students with the time and supportive atmosphere needed to develop a mature body of work in the media of their choice. The program blends rigorous intellectual inquiry with active studio practice. All full-time students in the program receive a full tuition waiver and a 20-hour per week graduate assistantship. Demand for the program remains strong, with more applicants than can be accommodated. Program enrollment consistently ranges between 15 and 18 students.

The program is designed to prepare students for careers as practicing artists and as art professionals in a variety of settings including galleries and museums, government agencies and institutions, community programs, schools, design firms, production studios, publishing houses, packaging studios, web studios, entertainment industry, art studios, auction houses, and large corporations. Because the M.F.A. is the terminal degree in the studio arts, graduates are also qualified to teach at the postsecondary level.

The M.F.A. in Art program is one of six programs at Illinois public universities assigned CIP code 50.0702. Enrollment in the program at Illinois State is among the lowest of the six programs, but that is by design based on resources available to the program and on a desire to keep admission to the program highly selective. The program at Illinois State is unique among its peers with respect to the variety of media taught in the program, including glass, which is offered in only a few M.F.A. programs in the nation.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY PROGRAM REVIEW SELF-STUDY REPORT

**Self-study process.** In the summer of 2015, School of Art faculty and staff participated in a program review retreat. Individually and within small groups they discussed and reviewed the school mission statement and strategic plan. Participants then divided into smaller groups to examine specific goals for related program review topics, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of programs, and develop recommendations for building on strengths and improving areas of weakness. The issues identified and addressed in this retreat deepened the understanding among faculty and staff of the academic programs in the school and became the foundation for the self-study. Many individuals made significant contributions to this program review. Key faculty and staff members helped the interim director of the school write the self-study report. In addition to full participation by faculty in the program review retreat, faculty members participated in all facets of this review.

**Program curriculum.** The M.F.A. in Art is a 60 credit-hour program that emphasizes both theory and practice in the production, history, and teaching of the visual arts. Candidates for the degree are expected to demonstrate artistic proficiency in at least one of the following media disciplines: painting, sculpture, printmaking, video, ceramics, metalwork and jewelry design, photography, drawing, or glass. Candidates are also expected to demonstrate proficiency in written and oral communication. The capstone experience required of all students in the program is a formal thesis exhibition in a professional gallery setting that demonstrates intellectual maturity and artistic proficiency in the student's media discipline. The exhibition must be accompanied by a thesis supportive statement, which is a critical essay that describes the student's studio work, its development, and its historical and cultural references. The student must also pass an oral defense.

**Program or academic unit faculty.** All tenure track faculty members in the School of Art hold the terminal degree in their respective fields (M.F.A., Ed.D., or Ph.D.) and are active scholars and artists who present their work at regional, national, or international venues. The School of Art is unusual in the diversity of its degree programs and, therefore, in the diversity of qualifications for faculty teaching in them. The terminal degree for studio faculty is the

M.F.A., the terminal degree for art history and visual culture faculty is the Ph.D., and the terminal degree for art teacher education faculty is either the Ed.D. or the Ph.D. Collectively, School of Art faculty is an accomplished and highly regarded group of artists and scholars. Art history faculty members publish in scholarly journals and contribute essays and chapters to edited books. Art teacher education faculty members exhibit original works of art, publish articles and present at conferences, and conduct methods workshops at elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the region. Studio arts faculty members exhibit in some of the most prestigious art galleries and museums in the country.

**Program goals and quality indices.** Goals of the School of Art are to maintain an educational program in the visual arts that provides a professional education in the studio arts, art education, graphic design, and art history; to provide arts-based instruction for the General Education program of the University and, therefore, for the general student population, and selected course work in art production for non-art majors interested in the studio disciplines; to recruit or retain a faculty and staff with strong academic and professional credentials who are committed to teaching, to their own creative/scholarly work, and to participating in academic shared governance; to provide and maintain physical facilities and resources adequate to the educational mission and goals of the school; and to recruit and retain students who are committed to acquiring a professional-level art education within the liberal arts environment of the University. Goals and objectives of the M.F.A. program are to develop the student's proficiency as a studio artist in the individual's selected discipline; to fully prepare students for active and successful lives as career artists; to prepare students for careers as art teachers, especially in higher education; to acquaint students with current issues in art, art criticism, and art history; to direct students in acquiring unique artistic expressions or styles; to assist students in acquiring the skills to communicate in writing and speaking about their artwork and its intellectual implications; to provide the terminal degree, qualifying the graduates for pursuit of careers in higher education; and to utilize fully a performance-training center at Illinois State to train professionals and to provide a significant cultural experience for the people of central Illinois. Among the quality indices used by faculty to compare the program with aspirational programs at other institutions are the uniqueness of the media taught in the program and the out-of-classroom opportunities available to students and the quality of faculty and student work and the significance of that work in the contemporary art world.

**Student learning outcomes assessment plan and process.** School of Art faculty has adopted nine student learning outcomes for the M.F.A. in Art program: students will maintain a robust studio practice; students will develop an original, cohesive, conceptual body of work; students should demonstrate understanding of the major issues in contemporary art and the relationship of these issues to their own artwork; students should engage in interdisciplinary activities; students will create a thesis exhibition and supportive statement; students will demonstrate the ability to complete a research project in a specific subject in art history; students should develop a professional network; students should participate in the delivery of instruction through the graduate assistant or teaching assistant experiences; and students will participate in semester graduate reviews. Assessment of learning outcomes is a continuous process involving regular review of student progress with regard to the quality of academic products created and to the growth in skill and sophistication relative to the student's admission folio. It is expected that synthesis of the knowledge of history, research methods, aesthetics, studio practice, and pedagogical methods will be obvious in student work. Initiative and ability to work independently are also important considerations when assessing student progress in the program.

**Specialized accreditation.** The School of Art and its programs, including the M.F.A. in Art, continue to meet expectations of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD). The school and its programs of study were reaccredited by NASAD in 2014. The next accreditation review is tentatively scheduled for 2023-2024.

**Responses to recommendations resulting from the previous program review.** Three recommendations by the Academic Planning Committee resulted from the previous program review in 2008-2009. The committee recommended that the program encourage all eligible faculty members to apply for full graduate faculty status so they can fully participate in graduate education in the school. In fall 2014 the Director of Graduate Studies at the University reported that the process used by the School of Art to nominate its faculty for full graduate faculty status differed from the process adopted by other units at the University. The School of Art had been seeking waivers to allow associate graduate faculty members to chair capstone committees when other units were nominating their faculty members for full graduate faculty status to allow them to do so. The school has since changed its process and has nominated all associate graduate faculty members for full graduate faculty status. All nominations have been accepted by the Graduate School. The committee also recommended that the program continue to recruit quality

students to maintain an optimum enrollment of 25 students. Since the 2008-2009 review, the School of Art has had to work within increasingly limited budgets, making it difficult to support 25 students in the M.F.A. in Art program. Desiring to provide a graduate assistantship for each student in the M.F.A. program, the school determined that it could support only 20 students after the University raised its minimum assistantship stipend. The school has since continued to recruit for that number. In addition, the committee recommended that faculty analyze graduate art programs, nationally or internationally, with qualities to which the program at Illinois State might aspire. Discussions regarding aspirational programs are ongoing in the school. One improvement already adopted by M.F.A. faculty based on practices at aspirational programs is the requirement that all students participate in end-of-semester group critiques. Students and faculty in the program agree that the critiques are beneficial to the development of the students as artists.

**Changes in the academic discipline, field, societal need, and program demand.** Since the last program review, the number of applicants for the M.F.A. in Art program at Illinois State has consistently exceeded the number of students the program is able to accommodate. Acceptance rates from fall 2010 to fall 2014 ranged from 9.5 percent to 28.2 percent. Despite this demand, the School of Art has not targeted the M.F.A. program for enrollment growth. Instead the school wants to increase the competitiveness of acceptance into the program. Some M.F.A. programs around the country are reducing or eliminating financial assistance offered to their students. Faculty of the M.F.A. program at Illinois State has not entertained serious conversations in that regard. Instead, the school remains committed to the program at current budgetary levels, including financial support for its students.

**Major findings of this program review self-study.** The program review process has afforded faculty a forum to discover aspects of the program that can be improved to create a more student-centered experience. An ongoing challenge for the program is recruiting and enrolling a diverse student body. In the coming years, student recruitment strategies for increasing enrollment will need to include strategies for increasing the percentage of students from traditionally underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. Another ongoing issue is the appropriate level of interdisciplinary study by postsecondary art students. Although faculty has not yet reached consensus regarding the interdisciplinary educational experiences M.F.A. students should have, all faculty members agree that more such experiences are needed. This is a topic being discussed by art educators across the country. M.F.A. faculty will continue discussion of the issue in coming years while closely monitoring similar discussions at other reputable art programs.

**Initiatives and plans for the next program review cycle.** Developing a more rigorous and aggressive recruiting plan for each media specialization of the M.F.A. in Art program is a priority. Faculty and staff are already deep into developing such a plan, including strategies for recruiting a racially and ethnically diverse applicant pool. The program review has confirmed what was previously known only anecdotally, that all M.F.A. media specializations must strive to be more competitive. School of Art faculty and staff will continue to engage in vigorous, thoughtful, and introspective conversations about how to build a program that is responsive to the contemporary art world while retaining the values of a comprehensive art program.

## **PROGRAM REVIEW OUTCOME AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ACADEMIC PLANNING COMMITTEE**

**The Academic Planning Committee, as a result of this review process, finds the M.F.A. in Art to be in Good Standing.**

The Academic Planning Committee thanks the program for its self-study report and for opportunities extended to all faculty and staff members to participate in the program review process (e.g., through participation in an all-school summer retreat). The committee recognizes the program for its contributions to planning and preparation for the new fine arts complex, including relocation of University Galleries from campus to Uptown Normal in 2014.

The committee commends the program for its stable enrollment of highly-credentialed students. The application and selection process is extensive and rigorous, involving submission of 20 art works, a research paper, and a statement of artistic philosophy. Graduates pursue careers in studio arts, with some serving as faculty members at postsecondary institutions.

The committee commends faculty for the high quality of the program, evidenced by its reaccreditation in 2015 by the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD). The program is characterized by an appropriately rigorous curriculum, individualized attention to students, faculty members active in their disciplines, numerous co-curricular opportunities integrated with the curriculum and linked to student learning outcomes, and productive collaborations with Milner Library. The curriculum incorporates group critique sessions, review of each student's work by all faculty members at the end of each semester, and a capstone experience involving an exhibition, thesis paper, and oral defense. Students are assigned studio space and work one-on-one with faculty members in their discipline and with faculty members with expertise in other media. Instruction and mentoring of students is enriched by faculty members' experiences as professional artists who continue to exhibit regionally and nationally. The program provides numerous opportunities for students to exhibit their creative works, with exhibitions held in recent years in New York, Chicago, and California, at regional and local venues, and through an exchange program, at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Faculty and students work collaboratively with the art specialist at Milner Library to select resources appropriate to the curriculum and extensively use resources of the Special Collections unit in their courses and creative endeavors.

The program review self-study process at Illinois State includes analysis of aspirational programs to identify actions faculty might take to further elevate the quality of the program and its regional and national presence. The self-study report for the M.F.A. in Art program evidences discussions by faculty members about aspirational programs, but the analysis is incomplete. The committee asks faculty to continue and conclude those discussions, in the process identifying quality indicators, one or more M.F.A. programs regionally or nationally that excel with respect to each indicator, and actions the M.F.A. program at Illinois State might take to approach, reach, or exceed those levels. Faculty might choose to approach this analysis on the broad M.F.A. program level or on the individual discipline level. The self-study report identifies one practice already adopted by the program, end-of-semester critiques, based on knowledge of best practices in other M.F.A. programs. The committee encourages the faculty to use this opportunity to identify other potential program enhancements. The committee asks the program to summarize its findings in a report submitted by the School of Art to the Office of Provost by January 31, 2017.

It is evident from the self-study report that faculty has done considerable work since the last program review on the student learning outcomes assessment plan for the program, including adoption of student learning outcomes for both curricular and co-curricular activities that align with the mission and goals of the School of Art. It is also evident that providing ongoing feedback to students regarding their work is deeply ingrained in the school culture. However, it is not clear whether that feedback is being systematically documented and compiled and then used for program-level review. The committee is cognizant of the challenges in assessing student learning on the program level in disciplines with strong emphasis on qualitative holistic evaluation of individual expression and creativity. Developing a strategy to do so provides the program a unique opportunity to provide leadership among its peers nationally. Accordingly, the committee asks program faculty to continue its work on a student learning outcomes assessment plan that reflects the culture of the discipline and school while providing a means of obtaining feedback on the program level to guide program development and modification over time. Resources that might aid this effort include scholarship of teaching and learning in the discipline, experiences of aspirational programs, and University Assessment Services staff. The committee asks the School of Art to submit a written update to the Office of the Provost regarding the status of assessment plan development by May 15, 2017, and to submit a revised assessment plan to the Office of the Provost by May 15, 2018.

### **Recommendations**

The Academic Planning Committee makes the following recommendations to be addressed within the next regularly scheduled review cycle. In the next program review self-study, tentatively due October 1, 2023, the committee asks the program to describe actions taken and results achieved for each recommendation.

- While program enrollment has been stable in recent years, the committee recommends development and implementation of a recruitment plan that formalizes enrollment targets for the next review cycle and addresses several enrollment challenges identified by faculty in the self-study report. The committee recommends that the plan address a) expanding applicant pools to increase program competitiveness and maintain high standards for students accepted to the program, b) increasing the percentage of students in the program who self-identify with traditionally underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, c) increasing applicant pools in disciplines with no applicants

or a low number of applicants in recent years, and d) expanding the program web presence by showcasing the expertise and professional accomplishments of all faculty members.

- With respect to enrollment targets, the self-study report notes that enrollment is limited by available graduate assistantship funding because every student is granted an assistantship. Given the reputation of the program regionally and nationally, the committee encourages faculty to consider also recruiting students who may be able and willing to enroll in the program without an assistantship.
- For the benefit of prospective and current students, the committee encourages the program to maintain a graduate catalog entry that accurately and clearly describes available plans of study and graduation requirements.
- The committee notes the positive impacts on learning reported by students participating in the numerous interdisciplinary educational experiences made available to them by the program. The committee encourages program faculty to explore expanding those opportunities, through connections and collaborations with faculty and programs within the school and outside the school. Among approaches to consider is creating more team-teaching opportunities for working with M.F.A. students, including team teaching for the duration of a course and team teaching during segments of a course in which that approach may be most advantageous for students.
- Elements of a robust alumni tracking system are in place, including ongoing contacts between individual faculty members and graduates of their discipline, networking at professional association meetings and alumni events, an extensive social media presence, and periodic surveys of alumni. The committee recommends integrating these into a formal alumni relations plan and then implementing the plan to track alumni and document their professional successes.
- In fall 2014, approximately 13 percent of School of Art faculty members self-identified with racial/ethnic groups traditionally underrepresented among faculty at the University. The committee recommends that school faculty continue efforts to expand applicant pools to include candidates from those groups when faculty positions are filled, particularly tenure-line faculty positions. As noted in the self-study report, the Recruitment Assistance Program sponsored by the Office of the Provost is one resource that could help with this effort.
- Beyond the work requested by the committee to revise the student learning outcomes assessment plan for the program, the committee urges the program to continue to utilize information collected through student learning outcomes assessments over the next eight years to make program improvements and to document how that has been done.