

## REVIEW OF THE M.F.A. IN THEATRE

Classification of Instructional Program (CIP) Code: 50.0501  
Drama and Dramatics/Theatre Arts, General

### OVERVIEW

The M.F.A. in Theatre program at Illinois State University is housed in the School of Theatre and Dance within the College of Fine Arts. The school also offers minors in dance, film studies, and theatre; a B.A., B.S. in Theatre; and a M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies.

The M.F.A. in Theatre is a professionally oriented program designed to help students develop competencies as practitioners and teachers. Because the M.F.A. is the terminal degree in theatrical production, graduates of the program are eligible for positions as theatre professors on the post-secondary level. Students accepted into the program are admitted into one of two concentrations: directing or design. Students in the design concentration select from among three focus areas: costume design, lighting design, or scenic design. The program offered an acting concentration until 2017, when it was disestablished to focus resources on the other M.F.A. concentrations and on the acting sequence of the undergraduate theatre program.

Each spring the School of Theatre and Dance presents the Chicago Showcase, an event held in a prominent Chicago theater and attended by casting agents and production managers from the region. Graduating actors and designers (both undergraduate and graduate) showcase their work, hoping to generate interest and employment. There is a rich tradition of involvement in Chicago theatre by alumni of the M.F.A. in Theatre program, and many students find themselves with agents and jobs after the showcase. The design concentration also participates in the Michael Merritt Awards and Design Exhibition in Chicago each May, with design faculty choosing graduating students to showcase their work at the event.

Facilities issues have been a concern both for the School of Theatre and Dance and its theatre accrediting body, the National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST), since at least the 1980s. Clear and deliberate statements about the need for updated or renovated facilities have appeared in each NAST evaluation over the last three accreditation cycles. In February 2013, then Governor Pat Quinn announced release of \$54 million in state funds for reconstruction of the fine arts complex. Planning is well underway for the project, which had been scheduled to break ground in June 2016 and to be completed around 2020. However, due to ongoing state budget issues, the project is on hold. Until reconstruction can proceed, the University continues to address facility maintenance issues, particularly life-safety concerns.

**Enrollment, Fall Census Day, 2009-2016**  
**M.F.A. in Theatre, Illinois State University**  
First Majors Only

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
13	26	20	19	26	24	19	15

**Degrees Conferred, Graduating Fiscal Year, 2010-2016**  
**M.F.A. in Theatre, Illinois State University**

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
2	5	16	5	5	8	10

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY PROGRAM REVIEW SELF-STUDY REPORT**

**Self-study process.** The School of Theatre and Dance self-study process began earlier than is typical for program review at Illinois State University. The school first prepared for its accreditation review by the National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST), scheduled for fall 2015, and then used much of the documentation from the accreditation review to prepare its program review self-study reports due in fall 2016. Preparation for the NAST accreditation review began in summer 2012 and ultimately resulted in a revised mission statement, new vision and values statements, a new strategic plan, curricular revisions, and new student learning outcomes assessment plans. In fall 2015, when work on the accreditation request was nearly complete, the school constituted a program review committee. The committee met in spring 2016 for an orientation meeting and to then begin its work in earnest. The committee reviewed documents from the prior program review and the NAST accreditation request, discussed plans for data collection, assigned areas of responsibility for the report, and began soliciting information from faculty members in the school. The program review self-study report for the M.F.A. in Theatre program was completed in fall 2016.

**Program curriculum.** The M.F.A. in Theatre program requires at least 60 credit hours and takes most students three years to complete. The program emphasizes both theory and practice. A unique feature of the curriculum is the “Company Core,” a two-semester course team-taught by members of the design and directing faculty. Through the course, students explore methods and techniques of working cooperatively to create exciting and provocative theatre. All students in the program complete the Company Core regardless of their concentration or focus. All students in the program also complete three credit hours of college teaching or equivalent experience. This requirement is intended to prepare students to teach at the postsecondary level, since their M.F.A. degree qualifies them to do so. The balance of the curriculum is selected collaboratively by the student and the student’s M.F.A. committee, with the majority of coursework completed in the student’s concentration or focus. A maximum of one year may be taken in an off-campus internship program. The directing concentration requires an internship, in which each student spends one semester during the final year in residence at a professional theatre company. A qualifying examination and exit portfolio presentation are the required capstone experiences.

Each semester the M.F.A. candidate enrolls in M.F.A. Portfolio, a one credit-hour course intended to ensure regular and systematic evaluation of the student's progress toward the degree. In the course, students compile a professional portfolio which includes examples of the student's work, reviews, evaluations, and other artifacts. The portfolio also contains the student's responses to evaluations as well as statements from portfolio committee members which provide direction for the student's future work in the program. The portfolio provides the major objective basis for awarding the degree. Although the student is encouraged to engage in creative projects throughout the program, the portfolio stands in lieu of the traditional thesis or creative thesis project, which is the culminating experience in many programs.

**Program or academic unit faculty.** Each concentration or focus in the M.F.A. in Theatre program (directing, costume design, lighting design, and scenic design) has one core faculty member who mentors students through the program. Each core faculty member has earned the terminal degree in their field (the M.F.A.). In addition, each has an extensive portfolio of regional and national credits, some including work in Chicago and New York. Faculty members remain active as professional directors, designers, actors, and consultants in productions of the School of Theatre and Dance and its Illinois Shakespeare Festival as well as productions in regional and national venues.

**Program goals and quality indices.** Goals of the M.F.A. in Theatre program are to provide the highest standard in academic and production opportunities to students in the program, to prepare them to succeed in the professional field; to encourage collaboration and empathy among students in the program, to actively engage with the world through the creation of live theatre, to captivate audiences by producing thought-provoking, socially-relevant work on stage, and to recruit the top graduate students to the program from the national pool. Quality indices include student-faculty ratio, student quality, rigor of the curriculum, faculty accomplishments, and success of recent graduates.

**Student learning outcomes assessment plan and process.** A new student learning outcomes assessment plan for each academic program of the School of Theatre and Dance was completed in conjunction with reaccreditation and program review efforts of the school. Work on the assessment plans began in earnest in fall 2014. A major step in developing the plans was identifying four broad categories of learning outcomes that would apply to all academic programs of the school: foundational knowledge, fundamental skills, collaboration and professionalism, and evidence of practice. Within each category, each program of the school was asked to develop learning outcomes and to map those outcomes to the curriculum. The assessment plan for the undergraduate theatre program was the first of the three assessment plans to be completed. That plan provided a template for developing assessment plans for each of the two graduate programs of the school. The assessment plan for the M.F.A. in Theatre program was completed in early 2017.

The new assessment plan for the M.F.A. in Theatre program sets forth separate learning objectives for directing and design concentrations. Rubrics describe mastery of the objectives at four levels of performance. Data are collected and evaluated using the rubrics at various points within the course of study for each concentration. Four to six courses and projects have been identified as collection points for the various learning outcomes within each concentration. These include projects such as analysis papers, design projects, tests, collaborative projects and productions, and culminating projects such as the comprehensive examinations. The teacher of record or supervisor for the course or activity through which data are collected is responsible for sharing that data with colleagues and with the School Curriculum and Assessment Committee. Each fall assessment results are reviewed and discussed by program faculty to identify any changes to the program that may be needed to improve student learning.

**Specialized accreditation.** The School of Theatre and Dance and its theatre programs, including the M.F.A. in Theatre, are accredited by the National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST). NAST renewed its accreditation of the school in March 2016 following an October 2015 evaluators' visit. The next NAST accreditation review is scheduled for 2025-2026. The School of Theatre and Dance is also one of 40 institutions nationally that belong to the University Resident Theatre Association, which recognizes theatre training programs with accomplished faculty members who continue to work professionally and bring the latest practices to bear in the training of their students. URTA recognizes the Illinois Shakespeare Festival at Illinois State University as one of 20 partner theatres in the United States and one of two in Illinois. URTA sponsors auditions each winter in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco for students interested in applying to one or more URTA member institutions.

**Responses to recommendations resulting from the previous program review.** The Academic Planning Committee, at the conclusion of its 2007-2008 review of the M.F.A. in Theatre program, recommended that the program continue its efforts to recruit high-quality students and a more diverse student population, to address the pressing need for renovation of aging facilities, and to monitor curricular initiatives in the acting concentration of the program in light of recommendations from the National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST) and the University Resident Theatre Association (URTA). Since the 2007-2008 review, the M.F.A. in Theatre program has made progress recruiting high-achieving students. These successes are largely attributed to professional successes of program alumni, the growing national reputation of the Illinois Shakespeare Festival, and adoption of the Company Core model of collaboration across concentrations in the program, which sets the M.F.A. program at Illinois State apart from some peer institutions. Increasing assistantship funding to compete with other M.F.A. programs for talented students had been a goal identified in the 2007-2008 program review. That goal is a continuing challenge for the program and school. With regard to facilities, the University received a commitment in 2013 from then Governor Pat Quinn of funds to reconstruct its fine arts complex, which includes facilities that support academic programs and productions of the School of Theatre and Dance. While planning for the project has progressed, construction remains stalled due to state budget issues. With regard to curricular initiatives since the last program review, the program successfully implemented its acting concentration with a focus on classical acting and civic engagement. However, the School of Theatre and Dance has since disestablished the acting concentration to focus scarce resources on other concentrations of the M.F.A. program and on the acting sequence in the undergraduate theatre program.

**Changes in the academic discipline, field, societal need, and program demand.** Nationally there has been more emphasis in theatre during the past decade on work that directly reflects the challenges and ideas of our time. As film and television have continued to dominate the realm of escapist entertainment, live theatre remains one of the few places where audiences are challenged to think critically about their world. While the School of Theatre and Dance intends to continue producing accessible and enjoyable works, the school also recognizes the need for its

students to wrestle with complicated and even controversial ideas as artists of their day. The past decade has also seen advancement in technology in the discipline of theatrical design. Theatre faculty members make every effort to remain current with these trends, such as digital rendering and drafting. However, many peer institutions have surpassed the School of Theatre and Dance with respect to its theatre technologies during the past decade. To continue to attract top students, the school needs to upgrade those technologies.

**Major findings of this program review self-study.** The M.F.A. in Theatre program has continued its tradition of training professionals who make significant contributions to the field of theatre. For example, in August 2016 alumni of the M.F.A. in Theatre program were included in three categories of Jeff Awards nominees (directing, scenic design, and costume design). The Jeff Awards program has annually honored outstanding theatre artists in the Chicago area since 1968. Reputation of the M.F.A. program at Illinois State remains strong, as evidenced by its competitiveness in recruiting. However, there is still room for improvement in competing for the most highly-qualified and talented students. As faculty members have retired or resigned, several key teaching lines have not yet been renewed by the University. This was one factor in the decision by program faculty to disestablish the acting concentration in the M.F.A. program and a factor that has impacted the directing concentration. If the M.F.A. in Theatre program is to remain competitive, current faculty in design need to be retained (and replaced upon retirement), and additional faculty members need to be hired for the directing concentration. As new faculty members are recruited, the school must make every effort to hire and retain a more ethnically diverse faculty. While the reputation of the M.F.A. in Theatre program remains strong, it continues to compete with peer programs with more modern facilities and better access to the latest theatrical technology. If implementation of the fine arts complex reconstruction project remains stalled, the program may begin losing students to its peer programs. The M.F.A. in Theatre program recently implemented a significant curricular change by introducing the Company Core, which formalizes emphasis in the curriculum on the collaborative process. Implementation of the Company Core merits close observation by faculty for its impact on production quality and the student experience.

**Initiatives and plans for the next program review cycle.** Based on findings of this program review, faculty of the M.F.A. in Theatre program plans to track the impact of the Company Core on the education and preparedness of students and program graduates; work to diversify the student population and faculty with respect to ethnicity, gender, and artistic interests and talents; cultivate more direct ties between the program and the theatre industry, particularly in Chicago; and formalize a visiting artist program for the School of Theatre and Dance. To successfully recruit for student diversity, the program may need to adopt recruitment strategies that supplement University Resident Theatre Association audition sessions, which tend to attract a homogenous applicant pool. Producing theatre that speaks to a broader spectrum of American society may help attract more diverse student and faculty populations, which could, in turn, lead to more diversity in curriculum and production. Ties to the theatre industry may be nurtured by enabling faculty to accept high profile professional assignments during the school year and by allowing students to assist their mentoring faculty on such assignments. The School of Theatre and Dance occasionally hosts visiting artists who help mentor and teach students in the school. Students in the M.F.A. in Theatre program could benefit from the school expanding and formalizing a visiting artist program. It is especially important for students in the program to interact with professionals throughout an entire production process.

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

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

The committee thanks the program for a detailed, critical, and forward-looking self-study report that documents a methodical, multiple-year effort involving all faculty and staff members of the school to carefully evaluate its theatre and dance programs. A particularly noteworthy aspect of the report is the analysis of comparator and aspirational programs and their relevance to the program at Illinois State University.

Through its strategic planning processes, the program has successfully addressed requirements of both program review and specialized accreditation. The committee congratulates the program on its contributions to reaccreditation of theatre programs at Illinois State University by the National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST) in 2016 for a 10-year period.

The M.F.A. in Theatre program is delivered by a highly credentialed faculty using the master-apprentice model. The committee commends faculty members for their recruitment and selection of professionally mature students through the University Resident Theatre Association, for the individualized attention and mentoring faculty members provide students once they are admitted to the program, and for support faculty members provide to help students secure employment in the profession (through initiatives such as the annual Chicago Showcase). As a result of this support, almost all students entering the program graduate. Because the program is able to provide an assistantship to each student, graduates begin work in a profession noted for irregular employment with lower student debt than they otherwise would have incurred. Success of the program is evidenced by the numerous graduates serving on theatre faculties of universities across the country and by contributions graduates make to professional theatre companies, most notably renowned companies in Chicago such as Steppenwolf Theatre, Goodman Theatre, and the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre. Program alumni have been recognized through numerous regional and national industry awards.

Critical to the success of the program are the opportunities for students to act, design, or direct in productions sponsored by the School of Theatre and Dance or its Illinois Shakespeare Festival, now in its 40th year, or by registered student organizations supported by the University. These opportunities provide valuable learning experiences for students while positively contributing to the quality of life in the community, region, and state. The committee recognizes faculty members for their dedication in mentoring students in these and other venues, typically involving evening and weekend hours.

The committee commends faculty for its critical evaluation of the program curriculum since the last program review and for the difficult decisions faculty members have made to promote the long-term viability and sustainability of the program. The decision to disestablish the acting concentration has freed resources that can now be directed toward students in the directing and design concentrations of the program and toward students in the undergraduate theatre program. The committee commends the program for its introduction of the Company Core as a means of modeling collaboration across the concentrations and helping students bond professionally, while freeing some faculty time for other duties and pursuits.

The committee recognizes contributions faculty and graduate assistants make to the General Education program at the University and to instruction and mentoring of undergraduate theatre students in the school. Advanced graduate assistants have the opportunity to serve as instructors of record for those and other courses, which helps them prepare for teaching positions at colleges and universities.

The most recently completed component of the strategic planning process is the student learning outcomes assessment plan for the program that aligns with the new mission, vision, and values of the School of Theatre and Dance. The plan builds from four broad learning areas applicable to all academic programs of the school by articulating learning outcomes unique to the M.F.A. in Theatre program for each goal. The committee encourages the program to proceed with plan implementation in the coming years and to use findings resulting from plan implementation to inform program changes. The committee asks the program to report on its implementation of the plan in 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 through a report submitted by the School of Theatre and Dance to the Office of the Provost by October 31, 2019. The committee asks that the report include a brief description of assessment activities, assessment findings and their implications, and any changes to the assessment plan either made or planned based on experience with its initial implementation. One plan refinement faculty might consider is adding strategies for obtaining feedback from external stakeholders. Given the strong connections the program continues to nurture with alumni and visiting artists, this could be as straightforward as documenting conversations faculty members frequently have with them. As faculty members revise the assessment plan, the committee encourages attention by faculty to sustainability of its assessment efforts.

**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.

- Periodic review of the curriculum is important to maintain a program that is current, relevant, and responsive to student needs and demands. In its self-study report, faculty has identified tracking success of the Company Core as a priority for the coming review period. The committee agrees, noting the opportunity for faculty to consider whether to retain the core and whether the core could be adapted for use in the undergraduate theatre program.

The committee recommends evaluation of the impact disestablishing the acting concentration may have on the remaining concentrations in the program and on other programs in the School. The committee also suggests exploring opportunities to enhance the program through further collaboration with curricula and faculty in other units at the University, such as costume design/production and playwriting.

- The percentage of students in the program self-identifying as persons of color was about seven percentage points lower than the percentage across all graduate programs at the University in fall 2014. The percentage of students in the program self-identifying as male was approximately 30 percent in fall 2016. The committee supports the program goal of increasing these percentages during the next review cycle. As the self-study suggests, it may be helpful to supplement the University Resident Theatre Association recruitment process with narrowly targeted recruitment efforts external to that process. The program might also consider establishing targeted scholarships or fellowships if they do not already exist.
- The committee supports the program goal of cultivating additional ties with the theatre sector and its companies. Doing so could benefit students and faculty in numerous ways. Stronger connections with professional theatre, particularly in the Chicago area, could help with student recruitment and placement of program graduates. Those connections might also lead to additional guest artist or guest lecturer arrangements. A particularly intriguing strategy articulated in the self-study report is for faculty members to engage in high profile professional arrangements with theatrical companies and having those faculty members assisted by students they would otherwise be mentoring on campus. The program might look to its aspirational programs for guidance with developing such a strategy.
- The committee encourages continued attention by the program and school to concerns expressed by some faculty members regarding workloads. Aspects of the program that may warrant attention, in addition to faculty and staffing levels, include production scheduling, integration of academic work and production work, and faculty assignments and credit load. The committee is cognizant of the challenges modifying any one of these aspects may have on student recruitment and student success.
- The committee recognizes and commends the strong commitment by the school to recruit for diversity across multiple dimensions when filling faculty positions. Efforts since the last program review to achieve greater gender balance have been successful. However, in some sub-disciplines the percent of faculty members who are persons of color is less than the average across all university faculty. The committee encourages the school to continue its efforts to promote faculty diversity as it has faculty positions to fill, particularly in sub-disciplines with lower-than-average representation from traditionally underrepresented populations.
- The NAST accreditation report notes that much of the equipment used by School of Theatre and Dance programs is reaching the end of its life cycle. The report notes that some but not all needed equipment upgrades have been included in the planned fine arts complex reconstruction project. The committee suggests that the school develop a long-term plan for systematic replacement of equipment across its programs. Having such a plan could help guide allocation of resources as they become available and may also be useful when seeking private contributions to the school.