

**REVIEW OF THE M.F.A. IN ART**  
 Classification of Instruction Programs (CIP) Code: 50.0702  
 Fine/Studio Arts, General

**OVERVIEW**

The **M.F.A. in Art** program at Illinois State University is housed in the Wonsook Kim School of Art within the Wonsook Kim College of Fine Arts. The school offers four degree programs: a B.A., B.S. in Art, B.F.A. in Art, an M.A., M.S. in Art, and M.F.A. in Studio Art. Within the Studio Art sequence there are different disciplines - Painting, Drawing, Photography, Printmaking, Video, Sculpture, Glass, Ceramics, Expanded Media, and Wood/Metal Design – and MFA applicants specify their intended area of study. Though students enter the program into a specific sequence, the program is interdisciplinary, and they are encouraged to study with any faculty in the school. In addition, the School offers a minor in Art History.

**Enrollment and Degrees Conferred by Plan of Study, Fall Census Day, 2014-2021**

**M.F.A. in Art, Illinois State University**

First Majors Only

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Enrollments	10	15	14	16	15	15	10	11
Degrees	-	-	4	7	4	4	8	2

Table notes:

Graduating Fiscal Year consists of summer, fall, and spring terms, in that order. For example, Graduating Fiscal Year 2019 consists of the following terms: summer 2017, fall 2017, and spring 2018.

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

In Spring semester 2023, Associate Director Sarah Smelser was tasked with gathering information and initiating the self-study. After receiving the training from Planning Research and Policy Analysis (PRPA), Smelser conducted individual meetings and a retreat with faculty and staff to gather information on all degree programs in the Wonsook Kim School of Art. With some assistance from Professor Melissa Oresky, Smelser crafted drafts of the documents in the spring of 2023. Duties were then transferred to incoming Associate Director Brian Franklin, who completed the document with assistance from Director Tyler Lotz.

**Program curriculum**

The Wonsook Kim School of Art has a Master of Fine Arts in the studio disciplines.

**Program or academic unit faculty**

In the spring of 2023, school consisted of 30 tenured or tenure track faculty and roughly 10 non tenure track instructional assistant professors. Studio and Art History faculty typically participate in mentoring MFA students. T/TT faculty in the studio areas included, Assistant Professor Ruth Burke, Assistant Professor Greg Corness, Assistant Professor Simone Downie, Associate Professor Andreas Fischer, Associate Professor Brian Franklin, Professor Gary Justis, Professor Jin Lee, Professor Claire Lieberman, Professor and Director Tyler Lotz, Associate Professor John Miller, Professor Melissa Oresky, Associate Professor Morgan Price, Assistant Professor Jason Reblando, Associate Professor Randall Reid, Associate Professor Nathania Rubin, Professor Sarah Smelser, Associate Professor Albion Stafford, and Professor Michael Wille. Art History T/TT faculty included Assistant Professor Saskia Beranek, Professor Lea Cline, Associate Professor Elisabeth Friedman, and Associate Professor Melissa Johnson. Gary Justis has since retired, Sercan Sengun has resigned to take a new position, and three new tenure track faculty have been hired to begin the fall 2023 semester.

### **Program goals and quality indices**

Apart from successfully navigating all the degree requirements, core competencies, and assistantship duties, the vision of student success in the MFA program does not look the same from one individual to another. Students work, think, and learn in unique ways and faculty are careful not to mentor students or engage with their progress in a manner that is prescriptive or rote.

An advanced degree should be part of one's maturation as a person. As such, a student who is successful in the MFA program should develop strength and savvy to negotiate difficult situations in the workplace, adapt to changes in the labor market, and balance their creative life with the personal life.

Though an MFA is a terminal degree, it may not necessarily result in a clear professional track such as teaching or being a full-time studio artist. Some students apply to MFA programs, work through them, and graduate with goals such as increasing productivity, refining skills, and working through ideas. Students may disseminate their work through various contexts - exhibitions, artist residencies, participating in artist communities/networks – and bring their creative skills into fields peripheral to an art practice. MFA students should embrace and foster creativity within their studio practice as well as their career, whatever shape that takes.

The MFA program has always had a rigorous written component and that is one of its selling points. However, students who apply and come to the program don't always recognize the value of good writing. Generally, faculty agree that students lack effective written and verbal communication skills, and this problem is ever-present throughout graduate reviews and in writing the supportive statement. Some grads also have problems with organization, time management, and practicing of self-care.

“Student success” has become a more expansive term than it used to be, and its connotations have changed since pandemic isolation. Metrics are varied; they could be as straightforward and measurable as curriculum, articulation, student support, reactions to teaching, job placement, and post-graduation opportunities. MFA students also need to graduate with some professional accomplishments already under their belts; applying to exhibition opportunities, residencies, and grants, shows the ambition they will need to maintain as successful artists in the world.

### **Student learning outcomes assessment plan and process**

Learning outcomes for the MFA program build on the outcomes from the BFA program, further maturing students' artistic practices with a higher level of proficiency in conceptual understanding, experimentation, critique, analysis, and exhibition experience. Students in the MFA program take graduate seminar and critique courses dedicated to these learning outcomes. However, a large portion of their MFA career is pursued through independent studies with faculty where they hone their abilities to discuss their concepts and processes.

### **Specialized accreditation**

Illinois State University's accreditation with the National Association of Schools of Art and Design, for the MFA degree in studio art is currently in good standing. Our last reaccreditation was in 2014. We will submit another self-study and have a site visit Spring semester of 2025.

### **Responses to recommendations resulting from the previous program review**

Enrollment issues cannot be addressed without increased funding for assistantships and tuition waivers as is standard at competitive MFA programs around the country. Our faculty has become more diverse, but more work is required to match the demographics of our student population. The school has utilized the EDEP and SDEP programs in several recent searches. The school's web page has been overhauled and improved during the reporting period, but some challenges remain. The school maintains a graduate catalog entry that accurately and clearly describes available plans of study and graduation requirements. Students have been given more team-teaching opportunities. Our alumni tracking efforts continue but would be significantly strengthened if a new advisor could be hired and the assistant to the director could shift duties.

### **Changes in the academic discipline, field, societal need, and program demand**

During the reporting period, the graduate teaching assistants have unionized which has resulted in increased wages for many. Applications are down for MFA programs around the country. Smaller numbers in our MFA program, as a result of stagnant funding, have made recruitment more difficult. There are more students receiving graduate degrees in the art field than there are jobs available.

### **Major findings of this program review self-study**

While the Wonsook Kim School of Art's programs have been strong across the board during the reporting period, the MFA program has had mixed results. Among the successes, students continue to graduate in 3 years. They go on to work as practicing artists and gain employment in related fields. Illinois State funded a new graduate studio with critique spaces for the MFA students, which opened this semester in Eastland mall. This facility replaced a dilapidated facility in downtown Bloomington. MFA thesis exhibitions have moved to University Galleries' new location in uptown Normal. The school's commitment to EDIA has become a formalized priority among faculty and staff through the formation of the school Belonging and Equity Committee and its inclusion in the school bylaws. Civic engagement has increased as a priority in courses. We have hired new tenure track faculty in Studio and Art History. The school continues to develop and offer innovative sequences and courses that are desirable to current and prospective students. Co-curricular offerings are very strong. Facilities have been upgraded and the Fine Arts rehabilitation project is in progress.

Despite the successes of the school, there are significant areas for improvement for the MFA program. Funding has been the major roadblock to enrollment in the program. Assistantship dollars have been stagnant, contracts have resulted in higher wages for graduate students, further squeezing the budget, and tuition waivers are now being limited and centralized for distribution at the college level. Because the degree does not provide a clear path to financial success, most prospective students are seeking only programs that provide substantial, if not full funding, including assistantships and tuition waivers. As a result, we had no choice but to reduce our numbers. The smaller cohort can create additional challenges with peer interactions. Fewer assistantship dollars have resulted in the need to hire more student workers to complete the necessary tasks.

Additionally, faculty are often overburdened and undercompensated for taking on MFA independent studies and thesis committee membership. Some faculty and staff feel underappreciated in relation to their teaching, research and service responsibilities. Students need to feel welcome, seen and cared for. Facilities including CVA lack the communal spaces for students to sit, eat, rest and engage socially. While the diversity of the student population is increasing, the demographics of the faculty and staff have been slower to change. Not all facilities in the school will be touched by the Fine Art rehabilitation project.

### **Initiatives and plans for the next program review cycle**

The school has a number of initiatives and plans for the next cycle in no particular order. We will seek additional funding both internally and externally to support our MFA population. We will adopt curricular changes that improve the educational experience and simultaneously reduce faculty loads. We will review and revise program policies and procedures in the MFA handbook. We will examine the writing component of the degree. We will examine the weight placed on MFA reviews. We will clarify voting procedures for students passing benchmarks in the program. We will hire replacements for retired faculty in several sequences including Art Education. We will work to increase diversity among faculty and staff. We will renovate existing studios and classrooms untouched by the forthcoming Fine Arts rehabilitation project, and update aging equipment and technology across the school. We will hire more student workers to offset a waning graduate assistant population and changes in school's organizational needs. We will provide faculty and staff with resources to support their work.

## **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 Art to be in Good Standing.

The Academic Planning Committee thanks the program for their efforts in completing a comprehensive self-study report. The committee commends the program on developing a thorough self-study report that substantiates claims with insightful evidence. The program demonstrated a commendable level of inclusivity and participation in developing their self-study report. The Academic Planning Committee applauds the program's faculty retreat and ongoing meetings to discuss the self-study and to review program goals and future initiatives. The committee also acknowledges the program's use of various planning documents as well as the engagement of multiple stakeholders in making programmatic decisions.

The committee commends the program's emphasis on individualized attention and goal alignment to the University's Strategic Plan, *Educate-Connect-Elevate*. The program's enrollment experienced strong growth between 2015 and 2017, increasing from 7 to 15 students. Since 2017, enrollment has ranged from 10 to 15 students. The committee appreciates the program's transparency in discussing the impact increased assistantship costs had on the number of opportunities and overall enrollment. Various recruitment efforts were also noted in the self-study report, including conferences, marketing materials, email communications, and scholarship opportunities. Likely influenced by the modest overall enrollment totals, the percentage of historically underrepresented students enrolled in the program varied from 28.6 percent in 2015 to 10.0 percent in 2019. The program's efforts to track diverse student populations and the establishment of the school's Belonging and Equity Committee in 2021, indicate a commitment to monitoring and improving diversity initiatives. These efforts were applauded by the committee. The committee congratulates the program's efforts to align with its mission and values and promote student diversity.

The program's efforts to support student success were also recognized by the committee. The committee recognizes the program's work in drafting a clear definition of student success while being cognizant of the varied professional tracks graduates of the program can pursue. The committee also appreciates the program's acknowledgement of the challenges associated with supporting student success including faculty fatigue and overload. Despite these challenges, the committee commends the program on the launching of various initiatives including a review of the curriculum for obsolete requirements, diversified course options, flexibility in faculty makeup on committees, and assessing the quality of graduate studio spaces.

The committee acknowledges the program's curricular efforts during the previous eight years. Changes to the program's curriculum since the last review have been primarily editorial. The committee recognized faculty's attendance at workshops such as inclusive teaching, decolonizing the curriculum, and diversity. The committee also congratulates the program on integrating Equity, Diversity, Inclusivity, and Access into student artist exhibits and at University Galleries.

The committee recognizes the program's work in the area of assessment. The committee commends the program on their work with UAS in developing an assessment plan in 2018 and annually submitting updates to UAS since that time. Learning outcomes for the program intentionally build on the outcomes of the B.F.A. in Art program which was noted by the committee. The committee applauds the program's willingness to invest time into developing an assessment plan and encourages the program to continue their work in refining and using the assessment findings in their future planning efforts beyond compiling information from faculty to affect change in the program.

The committee praises the program's faculty for the completion of 973 professional development opportunities focused on pedagogy that were delivered by the Center for Integrated Professional Development on campus. Over 200 spring and summer institute courses, 57 DART/AIM training sessions, attendance at the Teaching and Learning Symposium, and a variety of other professional development experiences were also completed by the program's faculty. The committee also notes the faculty's engagement in professional development experiences that were external to the university.

An impressive list and tracking of alumni career paths and occupations was also recognized by the committee. The committee also appreciates the program's attempts to implement an alumni survey and encourages the program to revisit these efforts or possibly consider other methods to formally track alumni since an initial survey, funded in 2019, was met with a low response rate.

### **Follow Up Reports.**

**Strategic plan.** The committee commends the program for establishing goals that align with college and university priorities but also notes that the program does not have a formal strategic planning document. The committee recommends the program develop a strategic plan for their own area. The plan and associated activities could help the program be more strategic in identifying internal and external trends while also developing focused priorities that might provide insight into how to best address some of the challenges presented in the self-study. The committee asks the program to submit a revised aspirational plan to the Office of the Provost by August 15, 2026.

**Aspirational programs.** The committee appreciates the program's review of aspirational programs within the self-study report. The committee recommends the program submit a follow-up report with additional analysis of the aspirational programs, the actions undertaken by these programs that are of interest, how those programs were successful in implementing those actions, and the M.F.A. in Art program's plans to implement these actions. The committee asks the program to submit a revised aspirational plan to the Office of the Provost by August 15, 2026.

### **Recommendations.**

The Academic Planning Committee appreciates the work of the M.F.A. in Art program faculty and staff in developing this self-study report. Overall, the report was well-written, thorough, and provided insightful information about the program's current initiatives and future plans. The committee congratulates the M.F.A. in Art program on a successful eight years.

In addition to the program's noteworthy efforts and accomplishments, the Academic Planning Committee provided recommendations for consideration. The committee's recommendations outlined below are to be addressed within the next regularly scheduled review cycle. Details describing the actions and outcomes associated with each of the committee's recommendations should be included in the next program review self-study report that is tentatively due October 1, 2031.

**Further stakeholder engagement in program planning processes.** While the program has demonstrated inclusivity in various aspects, involving additional stakeholders throughout the assessment and planning phases could further promote a participatory culture while also garnering valuable insights and perspectives that may not otherwise be considered. Possible strategies include bringing more students into the planning and self-study processes, exploring ways to collect more than self-assessment feedback on the graduate advising experience, identifying potential partnering organizations, and the development of a program advisory board.

**Exploration of additional data tracking.** The committee suggests the program identify and consider ways to further integrate data into their operations rather than rely on recollection. For instance, the program noted there were not any data to track student retention when the data are available from Planning, Research, and Policy Analysis on campus. Although the program did not feel retention was an issue, the collection and utilization of data could serve to not only confirm these assertions, but also be used to market the program's high retention rates and their associated "best practices" that support these rates. Other examples where additional data could be helpful include timeline to degree completion, scholarly activity among students, and placement rates of graduates.

**Continued review of curriculum.** The committee recognizes the program's work with the curriculum, particularly in the integration of Equity, Diversity, Inclusivity, and Access into course curricula and artwork. The committee encourages the program to consider undergoing a curricular review to consider what changes or developing trends have occurred in the field since the last review. The committee also recommends the program track or formalize assignments for non-course credit-hour producing activities such as independent studies and mentoring graduate students.

**Continue implementing and refining the student learning outcomes assessment plan.** The committee encourages faculty to continue their implementation of the student learning outcomes assessment plan for the program during the next program review cycle, to continue to utilize information gathered through plan implementation to make program revisions as necessary, and to document how that has been done. The committee encourages faculty to periodically evaluate the effectiveness of the plan in assessing student learning to identify any modifications to the plan faculty may deem necessary. If not currently being used, the committee also suggests the program consider the role of data collected for external accreditors in the assessment plan.

**Continue alumni engagement efforts.** Several informal and formal alumni engagement activities led by various faculty were highlighted in the self-study report. The committee applauds the program's faculty for their work in supporting these high-impact experiences. The committee suggests the program may want to increase efficiency and possible resource sharing in this area by establishing a working group/committee to organize and promote these experiences.

**Continue the collaborative work with Milner Library.** The committee recommends that the program work with the subject liaison librarian to examine and evaluate the library's journals and monograph collection to aid in both the selection and deselection process of these sources. Given recent journal cancellations and expected increases in distance and hybrid courses, we encourage the department and library to further collaborate to increase awareness of alternative access to resources, such as Interlibrary Loan and I-Share lending, among faculty and students. In conjunction with the aforementioned recommendation on student learning outcomes assessment planning, we also recommend that the program work with the subject liaison librarian to develop a tiered approach for information fluency learning outcomes for the department, align those outcomes to the curricula, and integrate those outcomes into the student learning outcomes assessment plan for the program.