

REVIEW OF THE M.A., M.S. IN THEATRE STUDIES

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

OVERVIEW

The M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies 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.F.A. in Theatre.

When the School of Theatre and Dance submitted its self-study report for this program, it was called the M.A., M.S. in Theatre. The program name was subsequently changed to the M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies, effective May 2017, to more accurately reflect the curriculum of the program and to distinguish it from the more production- and practice-based M.F.A. in Theatre program offered by the school.

The M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies program is designed for two populations of students: those who intend to pursue a terminal degree in theatre (M.F.A., Ph.D., or D.F.A.) and need a rigorous master's degree program to prepare them for that experience, and those who want to work professionally in theatre after graduation but are not yet certain which specialization within the discipline best fits their interests. The program provides a breadth of coursework in history, theory, and criticism and allows students to customize their course of study in consultation with a faculty advisory committee. Well over half of program graduates are employed as educators or in higher education in some capacity. Some graduates now hold terminal degrees and teach in colleges or universities. Others teach in private high schools or community colleges. A smaller percentage of graduates continue to work in professional theatre or other arts-related sectors, including freelance dramaturgy or resident dramaturgy, directing, designing, and development for non-profit arts organizations.

The M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies program was included by the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) in a 2015 report of academic programs at Illinois public universities with either enrollment or number of graduates at levels below thresholds established by IBHE. Universities with academic programs below one or both thresholds were asked by IBHE to analyze the viability of each program and report its status and future. With respect to the M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies program, Illinois State University reported to IBHE in 2016 that extensive accreditation and program reviews would be the venues for analyzing the program. The review outcome section of this summary report sets forth conclusions of the analysis.

Enrollment, Fall Census Day, 2009-2016

M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies, Illinois State University

First Majors Only

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
21	7	14	9	6	3	7	10

Degrees Conferred, Graduating Fiscal Year, 2010-2016

M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies, Illinois State University

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
2	2	3	3	4	2	3

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 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 each area within the school. The program review self-study report for the M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies program was completed in fall 2016.

Program curriculum. The National Association of Theatre and Dance (NAST), which accredits the School of Theatre and Dance and its theatre programs, defines the M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies program as a “research-oriented degree.” The 36 credit-hour program requires that students continue to develop a broad general knowledge of theatre along with a specialized area of research or practice. In the first semester of the program, a required research methodologies course introduces a broad range of research and writing skills, from formulating research questions and locating primary and secondary sources to current methodologies with which to frame a study. The rotation of courses in theatre studies includes nine seminars in the areas of history and historiography, criticism, theory, dramaturgy, and dramatic literature. At least one graduate-level seminar in history, literature, or theory is offered each semester. Affiliated faculty members from other academic programs also welcome theatre studies graduate students into their courses and seminars. Students cultivate their professional development by focusing on research and writing skills throughout their program and through either a written thesis or comprehensive examination. Most students in the program gain teaching experience that can be valuable if they subsequently compete for assistantships in terminal degree programs, apply for teaching positions in community colleges or private high schools, or seek work in professional theatres.

Program or academic unit faculty. Faculty for the M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies program includes (as of fall 2016) three tenured associate professors, a full-time non-tenure track professor, a part-time non-tenure track professor, and a tenured full professor who is an affiliated faculty member. All faculty members have earned a terminal degree in the field (either a Ph.D. or a D.F.A). All faculty members associated with the program teach both undergraduate and graduate courses. Full-time faculty members have received national and state-wide recognition for their research, professional leadership, and teaching.

Program goals and quality indices. Goals of the M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies program are to provide a challenging and engaging curriculum that is flexible enough to impart broad knowledge of the discipline while allowing students to specialize in a sub-discipline of the field; to encourage students to build a critical vocabulary to create, discuss, and write about artists and artworks grounded in specific historical and/or cultural environments; to graduate a diverse group of high-achieving student-scholars, teachers, and artists; and to foster creative exploration, collaboration, and civic engagement in academic and production work. Program goals align with *Educating Illinois* (the strategic plan for Illinois State University) and *The Illinois Public Agenda* (the strategic plan for higher education in Illinois). Quality indices include co-curricular opportunities, curricular development, and student quality.

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, including theatre studies. The theatre studies assessment plan was completed in early 2017.

The new assessment plan for the M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies program sets forth 11 learning objectives, each of which identifies a concept or skill students are expected to master. The plan identifies three sequential courses or activities within the plan of study for each learning objective. Most learning concepts are introduced in the first year of the program and are further developed in subsequent courses. Concepts are assessed a third time in the final semester of the program. The plan includes rubrics that describe mastery of each student learning outcome at four levels of performance. These rubrics are used to evaluate evidence produced by students in response to assessment tasks that have been standardized and embedded in required coursework, tasks such as midterm and final examinations, comprehensive examinations or thesis work, oral defenses of comprehensive examinations and theses, and group projects or production work. The teacher of record or supervisor for the course or activity through which data are collected is responsible for sharing that data with the head of the theatre studies program. The program head compiles and submits assessment data to the School Curriculum and Assessment Committee for archiving. 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.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies, 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 evaluators' report describes a "relaxed yet disciplined environment for learning" and student evaluations of the program that are "very supportive of the program and very positive regarding their experiences." The curriculum was found to be "effective in relation to the stated goals and objectives," and the evaluators found "no significant departures from standards or common practice as stated in the NAST Handbook." The next accreditation review is scheduled for 2025-2026.

Responses to recommendations resulting from the previous program review. All recommendations from the previous program review in 2007-2008 have been acted on, including continued decision-making about optimum enrollment, the identification of benchmark and aspirational programs, and the limitations of the program's accessibility for part-time students. With regard to the latter, the process of making the program more accessible to part-time students is ongoing, as the program explores the potential of a new focus for returning teachers.

Changes in the academic discipline, field, societal need, and program demand. Major changes that have impacted the program through the last program review cycle include increasing interest among prospective students for degree programs with offerings in dramaturgy and literary management; an increasing focus on globalization and international recruitment; and an increasing demand in the Midwest for theatre programs with options for working educators who seek a master's degree. In the field, "teaching artists" are increasingly in demand, particularly in dramaturgy and educational outreach departments within professional theatres.

Major findings of this program review self-study. The M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies program is strong and stable and offers an appropriately rigorous curriculum, including its capstone projects. Successes of program alumni evidence the strength of program coursework, graduate assistantship teaching assignments, and discipline-specific experiences. Challenges faced by the program include replacing tenure track faculty members who have recently retired or resigned, revising the curriculum, and increasing assistantship support to continue to attract highly-qualified students to the program.

Initiatives and plans for the next program review cycle. Based on its findings from this program review, faculty of the M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies program plans to develop new materials for recruiting students to the program, examine the feasibility of launching a new sequence for practicing teachers and other part-time students, revise the curriculum slightly to account for the two populations of students that most commonly enroll in the program (i.e., students who intend to seek a doctorate in theatre studies or a related discipline and students who are either exploring the discipline or intend to seek professional work upon graduation), and investigate the increasing popularity of the program with international students in order to strategize international recruitment more effectively.

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.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies 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. The committee finds particularly insightful the niche identified by faculty for the program based on that analysis: a rigorous research-oriented program requiring a thesis or comprehensive examination and designed to support students seeking direct entry into the profession upon completion of the master's degree in addition to students intending to pursue a terminal degree.

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 committee commends the School of Theatre and Dance for supporting numerous curricular and co-curricular opportunities for students to obtain production experience, including students in the M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies program, through productions sponsored by the school or its Illinois Shakespeare Festival, now in its 40th year, or by registered student organizations supported by the University. The committee commends faculty members for their dedication in mentoring students in these and other venues, typically involving evening and weekend hours.

The committee recognizes the program for its collaboration with units external to the school. Students in the program are encouraged to take courses offered by other units at the University, and faculty from other units serve on thesis committees for students in the program. Through the Theatre Connections initiative, the program works to integrate productions sponsored by the school with coursework in other academic programs of the University. The program continues to nurture a collaborative relationship with Milner Library. Librarians provide information literacy instruction and research assistance for students in the program, including assistance with use of materials in the Special Collections unit of the library for coursework and research. Graduate assistants have worked with faculty and staff in the Dr. Jo Ann Rayfield Archives to help build an archival collection related to the Illinois Shakespeare Festival, now in its 40th year.

The committee commends faculty members for their extensive efforts to develop a 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 goals applicable to all academic programs in the school by articulating learning outcomes unique to the M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies 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 one or more 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 revises the assessment plan, the committee encourages attention by faculty to sustainability of its assessment efforts.

Finally, the committee acknowledges inclusion of the M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies program in the report by Illinois State University to the Illinois Board of the Higher Education regarding programs at the University that fall below enrollment or degree thresholds established by IBHE. Based on the extensive multiple-year strategic planning effort undertaken by the school, on recent reaccreditation of the school and its theatre programs by the National Association of Schools of Theatre, and on this review by the Academic Planning Committee, the committee believes there is strong institutional justification to retain the program as it is currently structured and that no further review

of the program is necessary at this time. The committee notes that the School of Theatre and Dance maintains enrollment in the program at levels necessary to ensure program quality; those levels are comparable to or higher than enrollments in comparator or aspirational programs. The committee notes that faculty and graduate assistants in the program teach and mentor students in the undergraduate theatre program at the University, the largest such program among public universities in the state with respect to enrollment and degrees conferred. Faculty and graduate students also teach general education courses, with some advanced graduate assistants serving as instructors of record. The committee further notes the unique contributions of the program to graduate-level theatre education in the state through its support for students seeking direct entry into the profession upon graduation.

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.

- In its self-study report, faculty has identified several curricular initiatives for consideration during the next review cycle. Among them are developing ways to better integrate theatre and film studies and establishing separate sequences for pre-professional students and students intending to seek a terminal degree in the field. The committee supports these discussions as well as further consideration of a sequence that could serve practicing K-12 teachers in the state. If faculty decides to pursue a theatre pedagogy sequence, faculty may benefit from consultations with other graduate-level teacher education programs at the University, many of which have been challenged to accommodate the work schedules of practicing teachers. Responses to this challenge by other programs at the University have included offering courses only during summer term, offering evening courses, and providing some or all instruction online.
- Although substantially increasing enrollment may not be advisable or feasible at this time given the resources currently available to the program, the committee encourages continued efforts to recruit a pool of highly talented applicants. The committee suggests a diversified and strategic approach to recruitment in which the types of recruitment materials and communication channels used may vary depending on the intended audience. For example, as faculty has noted in its self-study report, determining why more international students have applied for and enrolled in the program in recent years could help the program design strategies targeted toward increasing that segment of the student population.
- 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.