

REVIEW OF THE M.F.A. IN THEATRE
Classification of Instruction Programs (CIP) Code: 50.0501
Drama and Dramatics/Theatre Arts, General

OVERVIEW

The M.F.A. in Theatre at Illinois State University is housed in the School of Theatre, Dance, and Film within the Wonsook Kim College of Fine Arts. The School offers multiple degree programs across theatre, dance, and film, with the M.F.A. serving as the terminal degree for practitioners in Directing and Design. Students pursue one of four areas of specialization—Directing, Costume Design, Lighting Design, or Scenic Design—and receive intensive, hands-on training grounded in individualized mentorship and rigorous production experience. The program is cohort-based and follows a 2-2-0 recruitment cycle, typically enrolling eight new students across all specializations each year, with a maximum of 16 students in the program at any time. Students engage collaboratively from their first semester through courses like Company Core, and they contribute to the School’s robust production season and community engagement efforts, including work with the Illinois Shakespeare Festival and local schools. Accredited by the National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST) and affiliated with the University/Resident Theatre Association (U/RTA), the program supports students’ artistic and professional development while fostering equity, diversity, and inclusion in both curriculum and practice.

Enrollment and Degrees Conferred by Plan of Study, Fall Census Day, 2017-2024

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

First Majors Only

| | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 |
|-------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Enrollments | 19 | 17 | 16 | 15 | 12 | 15 | 16 | 12 |
| Degrees | 1 | 2 | 4 | 6 | 6 | 4 | 5 | 2 |

Table notes:

Graduating Fiscal Year consists of summer, fall, and spring terms, in that order. For example, Graduating Fiscal Year 2024 consists of the following terms: summer 2023, fall 2023, and spring 2024.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
PROGRAM REVIEW SELF-STUDY REPORT

The Master of Fine Arts (MFA) program in the School of Theatre, Dance, and Film at Illinois State University prepares students for success in four different areas. Students specialize in either Directing or Design, where they further choose a focus in either Costumes, Scenery, or Lighting Design. Graduates of the program are positioned to enter the work force as collaborative artists engaged in the current state of the entertainment industry and are poised to emerge as its future leaders.

Program curriculum

The MFA is a terminal degree program that requires 60 credit hours. All MFA students enroll in MFA Portfolio (THE501) every semester and complete two semesters of Company Core (THE491 & 492). Company Core is a unique foundational feature of the MFA program, bringing students across areas together to work on developing their collaboration skills. Additionally, students complete nine credit hours of history, literature, or criticism/theory, and complete three hours of college teaching or an equivalent.

Beyond these core requirements for each MFA student, faculty advisors structure specific courses of study for their students that allow them to pursue coursework in their given area of specialization. Students take a variety of courses across their given specializations designed to help them develop the expertise needed to succeed. The

types of expertise that are needed vary between sequences; however, faculty do collaborate to bring students together where they can. MFA students are also encouraged to pursue elective coursework outside of their area of specialization.

Program or academic unit faculty

Each area of the MFA program has a primary faculty member at its head (Directing, Costumes, Scenery, and Lighting). Two additional faculty members support directing students through mentorship in the production season. The MFA faculty are also supported by the faculty and staff of the School of Theatre, Dance, and Film, who cover a variety of fields and provide classroom, administrative, and production support.

Program goals and quality indices

The MFA program's goal is to prepare students for success as professional artists working across the entertainment industry. Students are prepared with deep craft and technical knowledge coupled with research and creative activity work in the SOTDF's production season as a 'lab' for students to practice their craft.

The production of an eight-show season provides students with their primary vehicle for research and creative activity. The makeup of this production season is determined by faculty each academic year based on student need and learning outcomes. The typical composition of a production season is two dance concerts and six theatre productions. These productions are varied in style and content to provide students with a diverse understanding of theatrical production. This production season is a vital part of preparing students for success in entertainment.

Student learning outcomes assessment plan and process

The MFA program is still working on developing the assessment process and guidelines for assessment data collection and analysis, and how that assessment data can be factored into program design.

Specialized accreditation

The MFA program is accredited by NAST- the National Association of Schools of Theatre, and its partner program, the University/Resident Theatre Association (U/RTA). The MFA program was last reviewed along with the entire School of Theatre, Dance, and Film in 2015. The MFA program is in good standing with both accreditors. The next NAST review is scheduled for the Fall of 2025 and documents are currently being prepared for that review process.

Responses to recommendations resulting from the previous program review

In response to the last program review, the MFA program has worked to update its curriculum to reflect current trends and the current state of the entertainment industry. The MFA has also worked to diversify the student body, curriculum, and production season in response to recommendations made in the previous program review. Other changes include cultivating further ties to the professional theatre industry and work to manage faculty workload, particular in noncredit hour activities. Concerns about the age of facilities and equipment were reflected in the last program review and last NAST review and remain an ongoing concern for the program.

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

In the time since the previous program review, the entertainment field has experienced many changes. Some of these changes were a direct result of the tumultuous effects of the COVID 19 pandemic on the entertainment industry, and others are the result of changes in culture and technology. The program continues to develop responses to these evolving needs to prepare students to succeed in an evolving entertainment industry.

Major findings of this program review self-study

Some of the major points raised by this program review self-study include a need to continue to prepare versatile design and directing students in the diverse fields of entertainment, continuing concerns about the state of the SOTDF facilities and equipment, development of the Company Core sequence at the heart of the MFA

curriculum, work on diversifying our programs, and considering the size and scope of our productions with our available resources. All these issues are subjects the faculty have been discussing and align with efforts from the program to continue to self-assess and interrogate its own practices.

Initiatives and plans for the next program review cycle

For the next program review cycle, the MFA program intends to develop assessment criteria and processes to help guide the further development of the program. The program also intends to continue to develop plans for the needed facility and equipment improvements, to diversify our offerings to prepare our students for a variety of careers in entertainment, and to evaluate our production season in light of current budgets and resources.

PROGRAM REVIEW OUTCOME AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ACADEMIC PLANNING COMMITTEE

The School of Theatre, Dance, and Film houses the Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) in Theatre, a terminal degree program offering advanced professional training in Directing, Scenic Design, Costume Design, and Lighting Design. The Academic Planning Committee acknowledges the substantial effort invested in preparing the self-study, especially amid recent faculty transitions and ongoing post-pandemic challenges in the arts. The committee appreciates the program's commitment to cultivating theatre practitioners who are collaborative, artistically rigorous, and community engaged.

The M.F.A. in Theatre offers an intensive, production-centered curriculum supported by a professionally active faculty and distinctive opportunities through the Illinois Shakespeare Festival and other co-curricular collaborations. The program emphasizes individualized mentorship, project-based learning, and interdisciplinary partnerships. The committee commends the program for its thoughtful implementation of the "Company Core" course sequence, its continued support of diverse professional pathways, and its efforts to integrate equity and inclusion throughout the curriculum and production season.

At the same time, the committee expresses concern regarding several structural and operational areas of the program. The self-study reflects a program with many strengths, but also reveals significant gaps in assessment practices, data tracking, and infrastructure that affect both student and faculty experience. Therefore, the Academic Planning Committee flags the M.F.A. in Theatre for further review and requests that the School of Theatre, Dance, and Film take the following actions and submit the following reports based on those actions.

Report: Due October 1, 2026

Submit to the Academic Planning Committee via the Office of the Provost

Revise and expand the academic unit overview. The Academic Unit Overview contained outdated and occasionally inaccurate content and did not clearly distinguish current conditions from past program review materials. The committee asks the program to provide a revised narrative that includes:

- Clarify the distribution of tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty (including TT:Total instructional ratios), including faculty loads and contributions to sequences, advising, and creative activity (including description of faculty workload practices and efforts to recognize production-based labor).
- Include a copy of the current strategic plan or describe the process and timeline for developing one.
- Update the section to reflect ongoing staffing vacancies and concerns about physical infrastructure, particularly Westhoff Theatre and the CPA. Include plans for mitigating these challenges in the interim.
- Clarify the use of graduate assistants and production staff, especially regarding advising, mentoring, and teaching-related roles.

Develop and submit a formal assessment plan. While individualized mentorship and evaluation are strong components of the M.F.A. experience, the program currently lacks a formal assessment plan that clearly maps student learning outcomes to evaluation practices. The committee asks that the program faculty:

- Identify and articulate program-level learning outcomes for each concentration.
- Document the processes by which students are evaluated (e.g., semester reviews, thesis projects, committee feedback) and align them with learning outcomes.
- Collaborate with University Assessment Services to ensure the assessment process meets institutional expectations.

Expand documentation and evidence of EDI efforts. While the self-study articulates strong commitments to Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging, many claims lack concrete evidence. The committee asks that the program:

- Provide examples of how EDI principles are implemented in curriculum and production (e.g., syllabi excerpts, guest artist profiles, inclusive casting policies).
- Reflect on the impact of changes to course content, faculty development, and programming as they relate to fostering a more inclusive environment.

Provide an update on facilities and technology supporting M.F.A. training. The committee recognizes ongoing efforts to address aging infrastructure and applauds strategic partnerships and donations that have enhanced lighting and design capabilities. However, facilities limitations—particularly in the Westhoff Theatre—pose significant constraints on student learning and production. The committee requests:

- A report detailing how space, equipment, and safety issues are currently affecting M.F.A. student opportunities.
- A summary of anticipated improvements and how they will support the program's educational mission, particularly in relation to the Illinois Shakespeare Festival and interdisciplinary collaboration with film and digital media.

Develop a strategy for alumni tracking and student success documentation. The program's current system for tracking alumni outcomes relies primarily on informal faculty relationships. While several examples of alumni success are highlighted in the self-study, the committee encourages the program to adopt more systematic tracking strategies and define "student success" more clearly. Specifically, the committee asks that the program:

- Establish formal mechanisms for tracking alumni (e.g., periodic surveys, use of institutional tools such as Steppingblocks).
- Provide data on time to degree, retention, and graduation.
- Define what constitutes success within the M.F.A. program and how it is measured and communicated.