

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

Classification of Instruction Programs (CIP) Code: 50.0501

Drama and Dramatics/Theatre Arts, General

### OVERVIEW

The M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies 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 a range of undergraduate and graduate degree programs across multiple disciplines, and the M.A., M.S. in Theatre Studies is the only stand-alone research-oriented master's program in theatre in the state. Designed to serve students preparing for terminal degrees in theatre or exploring professional pathways in the field, the program offers a flexible curriculum with coursework in theatre history, theory, criticism, and dramaturgy. Students pursue either a thesis or comprehensive exam as their capstone, supported by close faculty mentorship. Students are actively engaged in research and creative activities and regularly present at national conferences. In addition to their academic work, many students contribute to productions as dramaturgs, directors, or actors, including opportunities with the Illinois Shakespeare Festival. The program's increasing international enrollment, diverse curricular offerings, and integration with the School's production season reflect a commitment to global perspectives and inclusive practice.

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

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

First Majors Only

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Enrollments	6	9	10	14	10	10	10	7
Degrees	4	1	5	1	4	3	5	6

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

#### Self-study process

The School of Theatre and Dance self-study process began earlier than is typical, as the School responded to national concerns in the 2020-2021 academic year, which is when we mark the date of a comprehensive review of the Theatre and Dance programs and the beginning of a strategic planning process that was stalled in the 2022-2023 academic year due to internal challenges. That process was rekindled in Fall 2024 and continues. Accreditations were renewed for all theatre programs in the School of Theatre and Dance, effective April 2016. The program review committee was constituted in Fall 2022. The committee reviewed the previous program review and NAST report, discussed plans for the method of data collection, assigned areas of responsibility for the organization of the report, and began soliciting information from each area within the school. A new group of faculty renewed the writing of the program review in Summer/Fall 2024.

#### Program curriculum

Required application materials include transcripts, a c.v., a statement of purpose that describes the student's career goals and research interests, an academic writing sample that provides evidence of skills in self-guided research and the creation of thesis-driven argumentation, and three letters of recommendation. Qualities that mark the top-ranking students in the review of applications include: Critical thinking skills, evidenced in the writing sample, particularly the ability to posit and develop an argument; proficiency in general reading and writing skills, evidenced in the

transcript, writing sample, and personal statement; ability to incorporate research and/or critical theory in the writing, evidenced in the writing sample.

Defined by our accrediting body, the National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST), as a “Research-Oriented Degree,” the Master of Arts or Master of Science in Theatre must meet specific standards to maintain accreditation. The 36-hour program requires that students continue to develop a broad general knowledge of theatre, along with a specialized area of research or practice. Students cultivate their professional development by focusing on research and writing skills throughout their program and through their exit process, which includes either a written thesis or a comprehensive examination. Most students gain teaching experience that can be valuable as they move forward to compete for assistantships in terminal degree programs, to apply for teaching positions in community colleges or private high schools, or to work in professional theatres, where “teaching artists” are increasingly in demand, particularly in dramaturgy and educational outreach departments within the theatres.

In the first semester, 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 different 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 by the program; affiliated faculty in other programs also welcome Theatre and Dance graduate students into their courses and seminars. All students in the program either take a comprehensive exam or write a thesis as their capstone project.

#### **Program or academic unit faculty**

Core faculty members for the Master’s in Theatre Studies program are the Theatre and Film Studies faculty within the School of Theatre and Dance. In Fall 2024, that faculty included one affiliate. All hold terminal degrees, either Ph.D. or D.F.A. All faculty in the program teach both undergraduate and graduate courses; none are exclusively assigned to the graduate program. Full-time faculty have received national and statewide recognition for their research, professional leadership, and teaching.

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

Program Goals:

- To provide a challenging and engaging curriculum that is flexible enough to establish a broad knowledge in the discipline while allowing students to specialize in a chosen 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.
- To foster creative exploration, collaboration, and civic engagement in academic and production work

The only effective comparator program (research-oriented with a Theatre Studies focus) in the state is the M.A. program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. [The 50.0501 CIP Code, “Drama and Dramatics/Theatre Arts General,” under which we are currently classified, places us in a category of Master’s degrees that is diverse in subject matter, including applied programs in Directing, Sound Arts, and Leadership, and a degree in Performance Studies with an applied performance focus.] In comparison to the UIUC degree program, we offer closer mentorship of our Master’s students, as our faculty is not also mentoring Ph.D. students as the faculty is at UIUC, and our committee-based advisement system also ensures stronger mentoring relationships with more faculty members for our students. We have the added benefit of an on-site professional theatre company that has allowed students to obtain professional experience in dramaturgy, house management, and marketing, and we continue to promote the thesis or comprehensive exam as a capstone project.

Quality indices identified with aspirational programs include Co-curricular Opportunities, particularly the potential of interfacing more regularly with the Illinois Shakespeare Festival; Curricular Development, particularly the potential for a new degree track for returning theatre educators and programs that better integrate their Theatre Studies and Film Studies offerings; and finally Student Quality, focusing on the need to continue to recruit high-achieving international students.

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

Assessment planning and process for the graduate programs in the School of Theatre, Dance, and Film are still in development.

### **Specialized accreditation**

Theatre programs in the School of Theatre and Dance are accredited by the National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST). Accreditations were renewed in April 2016, following an October 2015 evaluators' visit. The Visitors' Report described a "relaxed yet disciplined environment for learning" and student evaluations that were "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 Fall 2025.

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

The need to integrate Theatre and Film Studies was addressed by faculty intention and by increasing interest from admitted students. Three students identified comparative projects in the last eight years, one of whom has gone on to work in criticism/production in popular entertainment and another who has entered a Ph.D. program in Film Studies. A recently enrolled student has professional film and theatre experience prior to entering the program. Rather than an integration of the areas, which was ultimately rejected by our accreditor, Film & Digital Media has become a sequence itself and established film production curricula. The visibility of this major in web searches and in the new name of the school will likely increase the number of applicants with film interests to the Master's in Theatre Studies.

Due to the small number of students enrolled in this program, the establishment of separate sequences (at the catalog level) for research-oriented work and applied theatre work was abandoned. Program faculty are more carefully monitoring student interests and have established a "track" that is most pursued by each category of student. They have also begun advising students into these tracks earlier in their first year of the program, which has improved student satisfaction overall.

The program continues to explore the potential for a program that meets the needs for continuing education for theatre educators, with cooperation from the faculty in Theatre Teacher Education. This is being rolled into the current strategic planning process.

Faculty continue to poll international students about how they learned about our program. Responses point to general web searches and recommendations (online or otherwise) from alumni of all areas of the program. As mentioned previously, the theatre and dance areas are working on aligning the curriculum to the production season, which will address both student and faculty/staff workloads by making this work "visible" in credit hour production and FTE.

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

Since the last program review, the discipline has lost several masters-level programs, including some programs that we had previously identified as comparator and aspirational programs. In all cases, these programs were ended due to a budget model restructuring at the university, a process that we are now undergoing at Illinois State. Given the small enrollments of most seminars and the relatively low numbers of graduates generated by the Master's in Theatre Studies, program faculty are understandably concerned about the future. The program needs transparency from the director of the school and the dean as we move into restructuring. General education hours and teaching support for program faculty should be strong arguments for the retention of this program, despite small class sizes.

Program demand appears to be rising from international students, given the number of international applications that the program receives each year, while societal need for domestic students is perhaps the trickiest question, given the challenges to higher education in general and arts education in particular.

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

As stated previously, the need to align the production program to the curriculum is even more clear as we approach the transition to a budget model at the University. Also, in order to provide more flexibility for both undergraduates and graduate students and ensure frequency of offering specialized courses for graduate students, program faculty are at work on a program revision that would create more options to satisfy the current Theatre History I and II requirements for the undergraduate core. The result will be a menu of courses from which undergraduates and graduate students will choose preferred electives including Theatre and Performance of the Americas (Indigenous Theatre/Performance or Latin American Theatre/Performance), African American Theatre/Performance, Women's Theatre/Performance, etc.) And finally, given increasing interest from graduate students in film/television/entertainment, the program will continue to foster collaborations with the new Film & Digital Media sequence, particularly with the Film Studies faculty.

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

1. Continued work to realign the production program to the curriculum. For this Master's program, the primary concern will be to establish credit hour models for student dramaturgs in the mainstage season.
2. Creating great flexibility in the 300/400-level stacked courses, including THE 376/486 and 377/387: Theatre History I and II.
3. Determining the feasibility of graduate certificates in Dramaturgy and Directing.

## **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 to be in Good Standing.

The Academic Planning Committee commends the program for its commitment to academic and artistic excellence, robust student engagement in creative activity, and longstanding efforts to support diversity, equity, and inclusion. The committee appreciates the program's responsiveness to recent challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, evolving disciplinary priorities, and shifting student demographics.

The committee acknowledges that the program aligns well with the university's Educate Connect Elevate strategic plan and commends the inclusion of clear goals that reflect this alignment. The program demonstrates strength in preparing students for both professional theatre careers and doctoral study. The program's integration of theory, history, and practice, combined with close faculty mentorship and individualized student pathways, were recognized as key assets.

Enrollment in the program during the review period remained modest, averaging around six full-time students per year. This figure closely aligns with the number of assistantships available and reflects a deliberate cap based on funding capacity. While international student enrollment increased during the review period, the program experienced a decline in domestic enrollment, including among students from historically underrepresented backgrounds. This shift raises concerns about long-term sustainability and compliance with IBHE viability thresholds. The committee encourages the program to monitor enrollment patterns closely and to consider strategic adjustments in recruitment, marketing, and assistantship structures to promote a more balanced and inclusive student body.

The committee commends the program for its multifaceted approach to supporting student success. Faculty mentorship is clearly a strength, with individualized advising and close collaboration guiding students through thesis projects, comprehensive exams, and professional development. The program offers a flexible curriculum tailored to students' goals, whether they seek terminal degrees, teaching positions, or careers in dramaturgy and other creative fields. Students are active in research and creative activity, presenting at national conferences and participating in initiatives such as the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival. The committee also notes the program's

efforts to promote civic and community engagement and the strong alumni network that supports post-graduate placement, particularly in higher education and the nonprofit arts sector.

The committee recognizes the program's strong faculty cohort and applauds the program's success in faculty hiring that has contributed to curricular breadth and diversity. Faculty have been active in national and international scholarship, dramaturgy, translation, and leadership in professional associations.

The committee further commends the program's longstanding EDI initiatives such as the Crossroads Project and Diverse Voices Project and notes the infusion of global and underrepresented theatre traditions into the curriculum.

Despite these strengths, the committee expressed concern over several aspects of the submitted self-study. Most notably, the report states that the student learning outcomes assessment plan is still under development, a finding also noted in the previous program review. The absence of a documented, implemented assessment plan remains a significant gap. While it appears that some assessment practices may be in place, they were not presented in the self-study.

The self-study also lacked a clear description of the self-study process, including how stakeholders were engaged. In addition, the committee observed that some content appeared to be reused from the previous self-study report, particularly the comparative and aspirational program analysis. These sections would benefit from updates using current data and context.

The committee noted inconsistent presentation of data throughout the report. For example, the faculty productivity section was presented in a narrative form rather than the requested table format, limiting trend analysis. Information about retention, time-to-degree, and student demographics was often anecdotal or lacked analysis. While international student enrollment has increased, the program did not address concerns about declining domestic enrollment among underrepresented groups or the risk of falling below IBHE viability thresholds.

The committee recognizes the thoughtful curricular innovations underway, including the integration of new elective courses and attention to dramaturgy. However, it recommends clearer documentation of curricular revisions and their impacts.

### **Follow-up Reports**

**Develop and implement a student learning outcomes assessment plan.** The program should submit a follow-up within one year of this review that provides the current assessment plan, describes how it is being implemented, and explains how findings inform program decisions. This plan should be submitted to the Office of the Provost by October 1, 2026.

### **Recommendations.**

The Academic Planning Committee appreciates the efforts of the Theatre faculty and staff in preparing the self-study. The committee congratulates the M.A./M.S. in Theatre program on a productive review cycle and provides the following recommendations to be addressed by the next program review, tentatively due October 1, 2032.

**Monitor and address enrollment trends.** The committee recommends that the program routinely analyze enrollment and graduation data to ensure continued compliance with IBHE viability thresholds. In addition to monitoring international recruitment, the program should examine strategies to attract and retain more students from underrepresented domestic groups and consider how changes to assistantship structures or curricular offerings may affect enrollment.

**Document and present faculty productivity using standard formats.** For future reviews, the program should provide faculty scholarly and creative activity in the standard table format, disaggregated by year and faculty

member. This will allow for trend analysis and clearer demonstration of faculty contributions across the review cycle.

**Ensure that new comparative and aspirational program analyses are conducted for each program review cycle.** The committee recommends that these analyses be based on current data and reflect recent developments in the discipline and labor market. The program should clearly distinguish between updated and reused content and connect findings from these analyses to potential program enhancements.

**Clarify and strengthen documentation of student success outcomes.** The committee encourages the program to provide specific and disaggregated data on metrics such as retention, time-to-degree, completion rates, and post-graduate placement. Inclusion of evidence from alumni surveys, internal tracking, or other sources would support claims of student success.

**Continue to strengthen curricular diversity and clarity.** The committee commends the program's infusion of global and underrepresented voices in the curriculum and recommends ongoing efforts to clearly document how these curricular changes are structured and implemented. Future revisions should ensure that such content is not only present but systematically integrated into core coursework.

**Continue alumni engagement efforts.** Several informal and formal alumni engagement activities that were 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. Working with the Alumni Engagement Office is also encouraged.

**Continue collaborations with Milner Library.** Build upon a strong existing relationship to evaluate and maintain resource availability. Consider expanding digital resources, integrating information fluency outcomes and assessment into the curriculum, and integrating library tools into assessment plans. Such efforts ensure that both faculty and students have ongoing access to the information and skills needed for effective scholarship.