



4/14/2017

Proposal for Suspension of MFA Program

Submitted By: The Department of Theatre and Drama

The Department of Theatre and Drama is requesting to suspend all admissions to the MFA Program for a period of up to three years, commencing with those candidates that intend to apply Fall 2017/Spring 2018 admission in the Fall of 2018. Both the Graduate Program Faculty and the Department voted to request the suspension of suspend admissions to the MFA program on January 30, 2017. This request affects MFA specializations in Acting, Directing, Scenic Design, Lighting Design, Costume Design and Entertainment Technology. At present, seven students are currently enrolled in the program with one additional student "stopped out" for health concerns for the current semester.

The rationale for our decision is complex, but is summarized in the points below:

- The amount of the financial award available for teaching assistantships to incoming students, once competitive with our peers, has fallen to a level which puts UW-Madison at the very bottom of the list of URTA (University/Resident Theatre Association) member schools. We rely heavily on the USITT Conference (United States Institute for Theatre Technology) and URTA national unified portfolio reviews to recruit students seeking funded MFA positions, (with only an occasional student applying outside of the URTA process), we find ourselves unable to attract *any* (not merely "the top") students, as was the case in the recent 2016 round of interviews.
- Most of our peer schools offer generous graduate assistantships (both teaching and non-teaching) at least at 50% and generous supplemental financial packages. Self-funded students are rare.
- Production budgets for University Theatre, which are 80% reliant on ticket sales, have remained stagnant for many years and thus funding to give access to state of the art technology is difficult. This puts several of our specializations (Lighting, Theatre Technology, Scenic Design), at a competitive disadvantage to other, better-funded programs with access to the latest technology in these rapidly advancing fields.
- The Directing specialization has been on hiatus for 6 years due to the campus service of Norma Saldivar. This specialization at one time averaged almost 50 applicants per 3-year cycle.
- The Acting specialization has not recruited a three-year cohort since the fall of 2012. It graduated its most recent class of eight MFAs in 2015. Because of the campus service of Professor Saldivar and Professor Patrick Sims (Vice Provost for Equity and Diversity), the full-time acting faculty has been reduced to just two-- Professors Boyette and Furumoto. Two

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additional faculty lines in Voice and Movement were lost to earlier budget cuts. Though short-term staff and VAP hires have enabled suitable course offerings to graduate the 2015 students, the lack of continued continuity of instruction in both Voice and Movement, Directing and Advanced Acting has dealt a lethal blow for continuing a MFA program that would be accredited by NAST (National Association of Schools of Theatre).

- Lastly, the external MFA program review from the spring of 2016 made it clear that the programs, in their current configurations, were hardly sustainable, from a financial and even philosophical standpoint. They lack cohesion, faculty and a firm identity when measured against those of peer institutions.

It is this last point, which provided the final impetus for us to consider suspending admissions for the time being. We are currently in the process of revising the BS degree in its entirety. This process has involved all faculty and staff in an intensive collaboration of reflection, ideas, innovations and vision. Indeed, the process has consumed most of the departmental energy and meetings for more than a year. As the undergraduate degree very much is/was dependent on some graduate students serving as instructors, we have been examining our plans for undergraduate instruction with the future of the MFA in mind. The two programs have had a symbiotic relationship for many years and it was time to revisit all of our assumptions. However, we have given the re-imagining of the BS degree in SOE our primary focus. We feel confident we are on track to submit our intents for a revised BS degree. But re-imagining the MFA will take an equal amount of time, and time is what we are seeking by putting all MFA admissions on hold for now. We intend to devote equally intense reflection and collaboration in re-imagining a future MFA during the next academic years.

We are unaware of any serious impact to other programs/degrees if we suspend the MFA for now. We have examined the impact to our current students, and have determined that there will be little to no impact on them. Current students in the MFA are:

Acting/Directing : 0

Scenic Design: 1 first year

Costume Design: 1 first year, 1 second year

Lighting Design: 2 second year, 1 "stopped out" with three semesters completed

Entertainment Technology: 2 second year

Prospective 2018 Graduates: 5

Prospective 2019 Graduates: 2 or 3 (if lighting student returns in the Fall)

The student in Lighting Design, who has stopped out, can easily be accommodated (on her own timeline for re-enrollment) through tutorials with her mentors and ample production opportunities with University Theatre. We do not regard this as any impediment for her—or the program admission suspension.

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We foresee that the remaining students will be able to complete all required courses through regularly scheduled course offerings and/or tutorials with their instructors and mentors. Their production work with University Theatre will continue uninterrupted, with all students receiving the promised number of production experiences and thesis assignments.

The remaining students are securely funded through their program completions. We have examined the departmental budget for the near future to provide for, with short-term staffing, any instructional obligations traditionally fulfilled by MFA students in the course instruction for BS students.

As stated, we are currently in the process of examining how best to allocate the totality of the departmental budget to creatively deal with funding all of the instructors necessary to teach the amount of courses we feel are necessary to a new, re-imagined BS program. What, if any funding, we can devote to supporting a future MFA at an amount competitive with peer institutions remains to be determined. We would need time to explore partnerships and funding from new, heretofore unexplored external sources. This suspension buys us that time.

Of great concern to us is the fact that we are the only school in the UW system to offer the MFA in Theatre and Drama. We hope that supporting the eventual continuation of the MFA in Theatre and Drama would be a priority for this noted research university.

Again, we stress that this proposal has the strong support of the faculty and staff in Theatre and Drama. We would be happy to provide any additional documentation you require in making this decision. Our intent is that we will use the time to examine all aspects of the future of the MFA and develop a highly competitive, contemporary degree in the Department of Theatre and Drama.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Professor & Chair

Department of Theatre and Drama

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