

School of Art & Art History
M.A./M.F.A. (Studio Art Division)
Strategic Assessment

The School of Art & Art History was founded in the 1930s and became the first studio program in the nation to award the MFA, which remains the terminal degree for artists nationwide. Today the School's Studio Division offers the Master of Arts and Master of Fine Arts degrees in nine studio arts areas: Art Education (MA only, with PhD in conjunction with the College of Education), Ceramics, Design, Intermedia, Jewelry & Metal Arts, Painting & Drawing, Photography, Printmaking, and Sculpture. The School supports an unusually comprehensive Studio Arts program while instituting curricular innovations in response to new developments in the arts. This has been the hallmark of the School since its founding; it gives distinction to the program and is a major factor in the recruitment of graduate students. Applicants are admitted to the MA program for two years and, then, if proficient, are invited to continue for one year to the MFA. This comprehensive degree program makes our students successful on the job market and in their future careers as professional artists and academic art instructors. The School's Studio Division is home to three of the 21 graduate UI programs ranked nationally in the top 10 among public universities: Printmaking #2, Painting & Drawing #7, Master of Fine Arts in Art & Design #7 (*U.S. News and World Report*, April, 2009).

ADMISSION PROCESSES AND CRITERIA

The process for admissions in each Studio Area is by portfolio review, and the criterion for selection is the professional potential of each applicant's portfolio of accomplished work as determined by the area faculty. The MA/MFA program has an ample applicant pool and is selective, with an average of 148 applications over the last five years. The average number of those accepted is 43 (or 36%) and the average number of those who have enrolled is 25 (=17% of the total applicants and 58% of those accepted). Since GRE scores of studio applicants do not measure visual acumen, U.S. graduate programs in studio art do not rely on them in admissions decisions.¹ They must be read in the context of other application materials and data. The School wishes to increase selectivity and in particular to increase the percentage of top applicants who are accepted and actually enroll in the program. This will require the ability to offer firm, multi-year recruitment packages.

The School works to increase the diversity of its student body. Currently there is a foreign student enrollment of 15 % and an under-represented minority population of 12%. The graduate population is 42% male and 58% female. These data exceed the stated goals of the UI strategic plan for the entire university.² Notwithstanding the flood of 2008 that closed School of Art & Art History facilities and forced the studio programs into a former big-box store, applications and enrollments have remained at pre-flood levels or better. We see this as a testament to the School's reputation and to the nearly wholesale equipment replacement and upgrade made possible by FEMA funds.

Most students in the program have some form of financial support. In 2007-2008 there were 60 ¼-time teaching assistants and 2 RAs. This provides both curricular staffing and a base of financial support for graduate students. As funding for TAs erodes with the advancing budgetary crisis, however, this crucial undergirding of the graduate program could be compromised. The Iowa Arts Fellowships have provided some help in the recruitment of top candidates, but, with just two fellowships awarded each year, they serve only a small fraction of the graduate population of 88. The RA positions provided this year by the Graduate College are helpful, but are for one year only. There are also some in-house fellowships funded by the donations and bequests of alumni, but the increase in recruitment fellowships that would make possible multi-year packages remains a high desideratum that would further strengthen the program in relation to peer institutions.

The Iowa Arts Fellowships have brought some exceptional students to our program, but that effort represents less than 7% of the Division's graduate students. The School's general scholarship fund serves only an additional 5%. Individual areas have funds to support a somewhat higher percentage of their students. Most graduate students in studio art remain dependent on TA appointments. In a period of fiscal constraint and reduced TA lines, graduate careers are in jeopardy. While there are some opportunities in the Graduate College for specific projects, studio art students are often at a disadvantage in translating their research interests and objectives into the criteria used in other academic disciplines. Most graduate funding sources are configured for students in PhD programs, thereby closing out even highly competitive MFA candidates. There are also few external funding sources for studio artists while they are enrolled. This is a principal concern and it underscores the need for

¹ The merging of studio (fine) art and performing arts GPAs/GREs for both the UI and national averages further compromises the value of this data. These are distinct disciplines attracting applicants with divergent skill sets.

² 10.9% for racial/ethnic minorities; 9% for international enrollments. "The Iowa Promise: A Strategic Plan for the University of Iowa, 2005-2010," Appendix, Indicators of Progress, nos. 19 and 20.

additional recruitment fellowships and multi-year packages if the future of studio art degrees at Iowa is to be secured.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Iowa MFA graduates become independent artists and secure teaching positions in premier art departments. Artists measure success in terms of winning opportunities to exhibit their work. Most of our graduates are successful in exhibiting work professionally; 80% find employment related to the arts and roughly 20% find college-level teaching positions. Since 1997, MFA graduates have taken teaching positions at the University of Wisconsin, Syracuse University, University of Texas, Alfred University, University of Montana, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Parsons-New School for Design, University of Washington, Princeton University, University of Tennessee, Virginia Commonwealth University, Kansas City Art Institute, and other strong programs. The School of Art & Art History is one of the oldest university-based schools of art in the nation and it has hundreds of alumni teaching in art departments around the country. These faculty direct their best students to the School and this is an important factor in the consistency and strength of the applicant pool

Students and recent MFAs have received residencies (equivalent to fellowships) at the most selective and prestigious artists' colonies (MacDowell, Yaddo, Skowhegan). Also testifying to the success and reputation of the program are the fellowships awarded to UI MFA students by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Council for International Exchange of Scholars (Fulbright).

Although some universities and art institutions offer a two-year MFA degree, the College Art Association (CAA), the flagship professional organization for academic artists, has long held a three-year degree to be preferable. CAA most recently reaffirmed this recommendation in October 2008 in its latest revision of the MFA Standards position paper. We believe it crucial that the graduate program in studio art at the UI continue to conform to this high professional standard. Some of Iowa's peer institutions offer a two-year program of study, but the strongest (Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Purdue) require three years for the MFA. With academic and contemporary art practice emphasizing art historical and critical engagement, the School of Art & Art History believes that the depth of study permitted by a three year curriculum better prepares our MFA students for successful careers as academic faculty and independent artists. A sustained applicant pool and a strong placement record support that view. Reliable data on completion rate and time to degree are not available, but the majority of students complete the MA in two years and the MFA in one additional year.

PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

The Studio Division has recently instituted a number of innovations to the graduate program. With changes in the nature of art creation, specifically the plurality of media overlapping with traditional processes and critical practice, we have created seminar-like studio courses complementing art production with contemporary theory. Two hires in Intermedia have bolstered this rapidly evolving area where traditional media interface with contemporary, time-based media (video, performance, internet, and other digital formats) to sustain the vitality of this avant-garde area of art instruction and production. Faculty and students in Intermedia created and maintain the Daily Palette on the University of Iowa website, a feature that projects to the state and to the nation the works of School of Art & Art History graduates and Iowa artists alike. This is one of our most visionary outreach ventures. Intermedia courses are also "Writing University" courses and aim to inspire collaboration between practitioners of visual and literary culture on the UI campus.

We are pursuing the national trend in the arts in which artists act as social agents and create community-based projects. As part of the "Building Sustainable Art Education Programs at the State Training School and the Iowa Juvenile Home" (funded by the Roy J. Carver Charitable Trust), students compose art curricula and teach weekly workshops at the Iowa Juvenile Home for Girls. In the Spring 2010 we will offer a new graduate course, "Art Practice as Research: Portfolio and Exhibition," which will involve students working collaboratively with Iowa Community College faculty and students to curate Community College art exhibitions.

Studio areas foster strong graduate student communities through exhibitions, events and activities. Beginning with the Spring semester of 2006 all MFA students were required to exhibit their art work as part of degree completion, since preparing an exhibition serves a vital purpose in the education of artists. The professional gallery in the Art Building West and three temporary galleries in Studio Arts and the Market-Dubuque Building allow graduate students to have capstone exhibitions. Beginning in 2003 the School streamlined the process for completing graduate degrees in studio art, including a revision of procedures for admission to the MFA upon the completion of the MA. This initiative is aimed at keeping students on track for timely completion of the degree.

Students require studio space to create their work and access to specialized equipment and facilities, some of them high tech, others industrial in character. Although each area requires a minimum cohort of students in order to create and maintain a sense of community vitality, the size of the faculty and the capacity of the physical facilities

dictate the number of graduates in each studio area. The total number of full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty is 25, or 3.52 students per faculty member. This is somewhat high, given that studio art instruction and mentoring requires much one-on-one instruction and mentoring. In comparison to other studio programs at comparable institutions Iowa's faculty size is somewhat smaller than Wisconsin-Madison, Indiana, and Texas-Austin (all of which have 28 permanent FTEs) and somewhat larger than Ohio State (20) and Penn State (18). Faculty numbers are most important in relation to the range of media covered in a comprehensive program and the number of students in each area. The current number of 25 permanent FTEs is a minimum for the 9 areas represented in the School, with a student enrollment of 88. Each studio area requires at least two faculty members to sustain a graduate curriculum in that medium. Possible retirements in the near term threaten three studio areas, which would reduce instruction and mentoring in the represented media to a level below that necessary for graduate work. Two of these areas are nationally ranked. Another highly ranked area is similarly affected by attrition. This could have ripple effects throughout the School.

Filling a faculty line in critical practice is also a top priority. Critical practice in the visual arts shares a fundamental aspiration with campus-wide initiatives on sustainability. It addresses global challenges from the perspective of art and examines new ways in which society acts regarding the environment and the use of natural resources, with emphasis on site-specific localities. We envision such a faculty member would mentor students working on environmental projects and engage in creative research dovetailing with that of faculty in other disciplines where sustainability is engaged as a universal problem.

The MA/MFA program is designed so students can develop their studio work, which ultimately culminates in a group show for the MA and a one-person exhibition for the MFA. Students augment their work with courses in the Art History Division. This interdisciplinary experience was a foundational principle of the School of Art & Art History in the 1930s and has remained a hallmark of our institutional profile even today as many studio programs at major universities remain administratively divorced from art history. The commitment to educating studio artists in an art history and liberal arts environment (the "Iowa Idea") was first articulated by President Walter Jessup and Graduate Dean Carl Seashore in the 1920s and has been sustained as a characteristic and distinctive feature of the graduate studio program. The concept is based on the thinking of Jessup's teacher, the philosopher John Dewey, who held that the study and practice of art is fundamental to a liberal arts education. Seashore added to that his own research on the nature of creativity as the unifying principle across all disciplines in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and sciences. That is what brought Grant Wood to campus, and the strength of this idea and its continuing vitality can be seen in UI writing and performing arts programs and in the current administration's resolve to rebuild the Arts Campus. The graduate program in studio art is central to that effort and to the historical institutional profile of the entire university.

The planned new studio arts building will signal to the academic art world that the innovations in the arts made at Iowa nearly a century ago are now being revitalized in the age of the digital image. What remains in question is the financial support necessary to ensure a faculty and graduate student population of comparable scale and quality.

CONCLUSION

As we look to the future there are three challenges in particular confronting the graduate program in studio art: recruitment fellowships, faculty lines, and permanent facilities. As planning for the new studio arts building moves forward, we can be confident that the physical needs of the School will be addressed. Guaranteeing the high quality of the graduate applicant pool, however, is a particular concern and it will be important to find new ways to offer more multi-year recruitment packages to studio arts applicants. Our plan of action is to restructure the allocation of TAs and scholarships to make possible more long-term funding commitments. We must also work to maintain the appropriate number of faculty supporting graduate degrees in the full range of media essential to a distinctively comprehensive school of art and to ensure the introduction of contemporary ideas that comes with a fresh generation of studio artists.