The graduate program in art history prepares students for professions in academic and museum settings by providing comprehensive education in a variety of chronological, geographic, and ethnic fields, as well as theoretical approaches, within the discipline of art history. It aims to produce professionals who understand the study of art history as a humanistic enterprise connected to other arts and humanities disciplines represented in university-wide curricula. Engagement with the contemporary world through the study of visual culture in all its forms is an imperative also addressed by the program.

ADMISSION PROCESSES AND CRITERIA

Applicants entering with the MA are admitted directly to the PhD program; those without must first complete the requirements for the MA and then apply for advancement to the PhD. From 2004 to 2008 there was a 109% increase in the number of total applications to the AH graduate program. At the MA level, the increase was 183.3%. Admissions show an increased selectivity over the same period, with a high of 80% in 2004 and a more selective 33% in 2008. Increasing application rates can be attributed to a stronger record of faculty publication and to reformed recruiting practices, including mailings targeted to top students graduating from major undergraduate programs.

Combined verbal, analytical, and quantitative scores on the GREs for enrolling students show a small increase (from 1702 to 1729) between the years 1996 and 2003. Although scores have fallen only slightly below the national average for AH and arts/humanities during the last three measurement periods and below all UI humanities programs, they are still about 100 points above the average for UI fine/performing arts programs. The GRE, however, does not test for visual acuity, which is an attribute we value highly in the selection process, and we have found that high GRE scores alone are an insufficient predictor of academic success in the discipline. GPA averages for enrolling students during the same period (ranging from 3.39 to 3.44) remain stable and are comparable to the average of all UI programs. Enrollment figures from 2004 to 2008 reflect positive changes in funding practices in the AH graduate program. The year 2006 marked a nadir in enrollment (25% yield) and, not surprisingly, was the last year the AH offered ¼-time TA appointments to prospective students. In 2007/2008 and 2008/2009, only ½-time appointments were offered to promising applicants, and numbers have begun to rebound. In 2007, all five of our top recruits enrolled. Yet the ability to attract the best candidates remains somewhat hampered by the lack of full tuition waivers and the difficulty offering more multi-year funding packages because of variable TA allocations. These constraints notwithstanding, increased recruitment efforts have resulted in quantitative and qualitative improvements.

Attracting under-represented students to the discipline of art history has been a challenge nationally as well as at the UI. Of the 35 graduate students registered for fall 2009, 3 (8.6%) self-identify as non-Caucasian. We would like to improve on this statistic. Evolving demographics in the state of Iowa suggest that a line in Latin-American art would help attract a more diverse graduate student population. This is a priority of the School.

Virtually all AH graduate students engaged in coursework are funded by TA or RA appointments. While AH has not been able to increase multi-year funding packages to the desired level, all successful students receive funding for at least four years. A Strategic Funding Initiative grant from the Graduate College for 2009-2010 made possible the recruitment of seven new graduate students with a combined ¼-time fellowship and ¼-time TA package and demonstrates what can be achieved with increased resources. AH students are eligible and in most cases receive funding for two years at the MA level, and four years for the PhD degree (two years of course work, and two for research and writing).

Funding post-comp students is more challenging and is limited to internal AH fellowships, Saturday & Evening Program appointments, and, beginning in fall 2009, one ½-time TA in the Department of Rhetoric. External AH fellowships for students just commencing Ph.D. research projects are scarce discipline wide. Because of limited post-comp funding options, students sometimes take jobs that slow their research progress. In order to enhance external funding, AH and the Division of Sponsored Programs have hosted workshops on identifying fellowships and writing grant proposals, resulting in a significant increase in applications for external funding. We believe this initiative will soon begin to show results.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

An MA in art history is often sufficient for students seeking employment in arts-related fields such gallery management, non-profit organizations, and state and local government positions. Students combining an MA in art history with either an MBA or an MLS are also poised for desirable employment opportunities equal to the PhD in
academic and museum environments. AH graduate students with a PhD objective who left the UI with only the MA degree equalled 13% during 1996-2000. This figure is in the middle range of other UI humanities programs.

Data from 1996 to 2000 for AH students with a PhD objective show a 46% completion rate, a figure in the middle range among other humanities graduate programs at UI. The median TTD for AH students at the UI between 1996 and 2000 is 7.7 years; the national mean TTD for AH students is 9.5 years. TTD for AH at Iowa is virtually on par with the 7.6 year TTD mean for all doctoral programs nationally.

The rate of art history graduate students leaving the UI without any degree is low (8%). Those leaving without the PhD equal 21% (this includes the 13% who did earn MAs), which is better than the average of 32% for all arts/humanities programs. The low attrition rate can be attributed to intensive individual advising by the Graduate Advisor, a collegial and supportive environment, faculty mentoring of graduate students in the Art History Society, and the Art History Colloquium, a 1-credit hour course required of all graduate students wherein academic and professional skills such as grant writing, and conference proposals are taught.

While Art history’s TTD of 7.7 years from BA to PhD is near the middle among other UI humanities programs, improvement is needed. The TTD is lengthened both by the acquisition of two foreign languages (sometimes three) and the foreign research travel typical in the discipline. Because important research continues to be published in languages other than English, the language requirement is a practical necessity at the PhD level. As an initial step toward shortening TTD, however, AH revised the graduate curriculum and reduced the non-English language requirements for the MA degree. This structural streamlining is already beginning to show results; all 4 students awarded PhDs during the 2008-2009 academic year earned their degree in fewer than 7 years, with two of these completing the PhD course work, research, and writing in 4 years. The trend is encouraging.

AH graduate students also earn externally funded fellowships. Awards have been granted by institutions such as the Fulbright, the Smithsonian Museum, the Winterthur Museum, the U.S. Department of Education, the Terra Foundation, the Etruscan Foundation, the Charles Reed Center for Western Studies, the American Studies Association, and the Western History Association. Many AH students have also been successful in having research papers accepted at the most prestigious conference in the discipline, the College Art Association annual meeting. Professional publications in the discipline do not usually publish graduate student papers, but one current ABD will have a portion of her dissertation research published in the premier journal of her field of specialization.

Excellence in UI art history graduate students is also recognized internally. Between 1995 and 2005, 15 art history graduate students were recipients of Ballard Seashore Dissertation Year Fellowships. Art history graduate students frequently win T. Anne Cleary International Dissertation Fellowships. In 2005, a Spriesterbach Dissertation Prize was awarded to an art history PhD student; this year an AH PhD received the Graduate Dean’s Distinguished Dissertation Award. AH graduate students often gain prizes at the Jakobsen Forum. Last year, an AH student was honored as a University Outstanding TA.

Positions in both academic and museum institutions are sought by AH graduates, and Iowa’s AH graduate program has a record of success in these areas. Because of the comprehensive curriculum that includes training in both Western and Non-Western fields (Asian, African), art history graduates gain placement in national and international academic and museum institutions. Art history degree holders from 1997-2005 have taken positions at Dartmouth University’s Hood Museum, Brigham Young University, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, University of Arizona, the West African Museums Project in Dakar, Senegal, and the University of Taipei. Even during the present recession, AH graduates are competitive. Of the five PhDs graduating during the 2008-2009 academic year, four have been hired at four-year universities and one is employed as a researcher at the Smithsonian Institution.

PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

Given the Art History Division’s mission of preparing students for professions in academic and museum institutions, the graduate program will need to maintain a spectrum of specialized fields supported by no fewer than the current eleven faculty lines. AH tenured/tenure-track faculty members possess expertise in discipline-standard fields: African art, American art, Ancient Greek and Roman art, Architecture, Asian art, Eighteenth and Nineteenth-century European art, Baroque art, Italian Renaissance art, Netherlandish Early Modern art, Medieval art, and Modern art. None of these fields of expertise is redundant or can be eliminated without diminishing the value of the AH graduate degree. Indeed, faculty expertise in all major fields of specialization (Western and Non-Western) constitutes a prominent strength of the AH graduate program at the UI. Breadth of course offerings within the curriculum and opportunities for teaching and professional development contribute to the most telling result of the AH program: UI art history graduates get jobs. It is specifically the breadth of the UI curriculum that allows our graduates to find desirable placements in the discipline. As more of the AH faculty approach retirement, it will be important to maintain critical lines so that the comprehensive graduate experience that has made our PhD students successful continues.
The AH graduate program plays a key role in the quality of education received by undergraduates in the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences. AH TAs lead small discussion sections that allow undergraduates directly to engage GE course lecture material, ask questions they may otherwise be reluctant to pose, and help mitigate the anonymity of 200-enrollment lecture courses. These AH TAs represent significant components in the UI’s teaching mission, staffing seven large undergraduate courses. Enrollment figures for the 2008-09 academic year show that 10 AH TAs taught 1034 undergraduates. Art History PhD students also staff “Writing about the Visual Arts,” a new course geared to both studio and art history majors, which embodies the goals of the “Iowa Idea” and the “Writing University.”

Graduate students in the AH program have important resources available to them for advancing their education: a large Art Library; the University of Iowa Museum of Art collection (especially strong in Modern and African art); the Project for the Advanced Study of Art and Life in Africa (PASALA); the Museum Studies Program; and the International Dada Archive. These resources, programs, and collections have attracted some top applicants.

With 35 students currently in the graduate AH program and an FTE of 11 tenured/tenure-track faculty, the faculty/student ratio as of the Fall semester 2009 is 1:3.18. This figure compares favorably to 1:4.2, the average from 2002-2005. For administrative reasons the Graduate College excluded the graduate AH program from the last NRC data gathering enterprise undertaken in 1993 (published in 1995). The program was therefore not in the published national rankings. Whereas 9 out of 11 universities in the Big Ten offer PhD degrees in art history, the UI is the only institution in the state of Iowa offering graduate degrees in art history. Six of our peer institutions have more faculty lines (the University of Michigan is the largest with 23 lines). The average is 14 faculty. Thus, AH at Iowa, with only eleven tenured/tenure-track faculty, is small in comparison to peer institutions. In addition to the traditional fields offered at UI, larger peer institutions employ specialists in Latin-American and Islamic art. Faculty lines in these areas of inquiry would significantly enhance Iowa’s offerings in global visual culture and attract more diverse interest. We also believe that a line in contemporary art and criticism to address the changing role of the artist in society is essential for engagement with topical developments. This would further strengthen our interdisciplinary ties with Studio Division MA/MFA program, as mandated by the “Iowa Idea” of studio/art history collaboration.

While we plan to work with the Graduate College and UI Foundation to improve our funding strategy, our immediate plan of action is to offer more multi-year packages to the top tier of applicants. This may be achieved through a slight reduction in the number of applicants admitted. TTD also remains a concern. The limited funding opportunities after completion of course work, especially during the year or two required for research in foreign museums and archives, indicate a challenge. This is being addressed through mentoring and grant-writing workshops for graduate students to encourage a more active grant-seeking culture among advanced AH students.

The impact of the flood of June 2008 on AH programs has been and remains significant. Faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate majors have been dispersed across the campus. Students lack a physical and psychological departmental home. The technology needed for projecting images in lectures too often fails and it is at times difficult to put a good face on the situation for prospective graduate students. We went from having perhaps the best AH facilities in the country in the Spring 2008 to a dramatically substandard environment (at least in comparison to peer institutions) in the Fall 2008, where we remain today. From the information we have, however, we should be back in Art Building West within a year and a half. That should generate a significant boost for recruitment.

CONCLUSION

Outcomes show the AH graduate program at the UI to be a robust unit, but, to maintain curricular vitality as faculty retire, there needs to be a sustained commitment of resources. To become more competitive for the best graduate applicants and to recover from the threats to retention and recruiting presented by the flood of 2008, additional funding will be required. Faculty lines in Latin-American, Islamic, and Contemporary Art remain an aspiration that, when achieved, will advance AH at Iowa into a still more competitive position in relation to its most distinguished peers.