Response to the Graduate Education Program Assessment of the Training in the Theatre Arts Department

The faculty of the Theatre Arts Department was pleased to receive a ‘High Quality’ ranking from the Graduate College Task Force. We take great pride in the training that we provide future theatre artists.

The assessment noted that ‘Diversity is an issue that the program is aware of,’ and pointed out that ‘Financial support is modest for MFA students.’ To prepare this response, Alan MacVey, the department DEO, and I discussed these two interconnected issues. The department’s commitment to diversity is extremely strong. Indeed, it was recognized by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences with a special award a few years ago. Of 14 tenure-track faculty members, three are African-American and one is Latino. In the last five years, 40% of graduate students in the Acting program were from under-represented minorities. Over the last nine years, Playwriting drew 20% of its students from diverse ethnicities, Dramaturgy 14%, and Directing 10%. In addition, three of our programs have strong majority of female students: Dramaturgy (two of three), Design (six of nine) and Stage Management (seven of seven).

Since 2001 I have attended the annual national auditions for design students, through the University/Resident Theatre Association (U/RTA). For Design, Stage Management and Acting programs, U/RTA is the primary recruiting and interviewing tool. Out of 220 students annually interviewed by the 24 member institutions, there have been no more than four African-American design students and a handful of Latino students interviewing. In the past four years of Stage Management interviews only 2% of U/RTA participants have been from under-represented minorities. In every case, we could not make a competitive offer or the student’s abilities were not as strong as those of our other applicants.

What can the University do to help? Funding for students is essential to stay competitive, especially for minority students. Unfortunately, it is very difficult for Theatre Arts to recommend a student for the Dean’s Scholarship because under the U/RTA timetable we are unable to make offers until mid-February and students have two more weeks before they must make a decision. It would be very helpful to have the flexibility to know that we can offer a student a highly competitive award package on February 15 – in other words, to have at least one Dean’s Scholarship annually available to the department, as is the case with Iowa Arts Fellowships.

What can the Department do to increase applications from members of underrepresented minorities? We will continue to ensure that our peer institutions know of the high quality education we offer, and build on the connections of our diverse group of faculty, students, and alumni.

R. Eric Stone, Director of Graduates Studies