

**External Review of the Department of Theatre and Dance
Sonoma State University**

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Introduction

The Department of Theatre and Dance at Sonoma State University is a thriving, successful program driven by a hard working, ambitious faculty, a diligent and committed staff and, critical to this success, a motivated and idealistic student body. The self-study, authored as a requirement of this review process, reveals a department that has built a conservatory-style program in its performance and production concentrations and produces a seven show season with limited staffing. Additionally, faculty in the Theatre Studies concentration provide a critical academic component with courses in dramatic literature, theory and dramaturgy. Any objective observer with experience in academic theatre programs will read the self-study and quickly recognize that there is much to admire in the department.

This is not to say that there aren't gaps and weaknesses that should be addressed. The department relies heavily on the presence of part-time lecturers to deliver many of its courses and any logical assessment reveals a great need for additional tenure track faculty positions. Teaching an overload as some faculty do, obviously inhibits the ability to conduct their own creative research, pursue further growth as a teacher, artist or scholar, adequately advise students or supervise student work on productions. Theatre and dance are labor-intensive practices and while most professionals and academics in the field accept this, there are limits to the range of responsibilities and hours anyone can spend in the theatre, studio or in individual sessions with students before the quality begins to erode. Being spread too thin is not a prescription for high quality.

Technical staff physically build the sets and costumes, hang and focus lights, manage the logistics and even run a revenue producing costume rental operation. The sheer scale of the raked stage built for the department's production of *Hamlet* is a testament to the workload of the scene shop workers, especially when considered that it was the seventh set built in the season. The costume shop is also building costumes from scratch at a rate that is beyond comparable shops.

The overarching theme of strain, stress and overwork extends to students as well. Faculty and staff report, anecdotally but convincingly, that they see an upswing in symptoms of stress in student work and behavior. They recount a sharp increase in the number of students they must walk over to student psychological services, students who must drop out of productions because of the need to work (frequently citing the rise in tuition as a leading factor in this), or overloaded students coming up short on class and production assignments.

Faculty and staff are cognizant of the issues surrounding ambitious curriculum and production programming. There is clearly a desire to fulfill the enthusiastic aims of a student body hungry for production experience and a wide range of course work. A recognition of the limits of time and energy, however, is also beginning to emerge and faculty are starting to reconsider what is reasonably possible and pedagogically sound. At what point does doing too much begin to yield diminishing returns? Do students need more flexibility in course selection? Is the potential for burn-out among faculty and staff worth risking as the department strives to serve all of the perceived needs?

Major topics:

Acting

The acting concentration has a neatly structured curriculum driven by an enlightened set of learning objectives that are clearly articulated in the self-study. The area offers an impressive range of courses that explore the acting of contemporary and classical plays and clearly aims to introduce students to the contemporary theatre world both through class and in productions.

For seventeen years, the department has offered what it terms a “block” system modeled on an intensive conservatory structure with classes offered in a list of courses the faculty deems critical for actor training. When a student elects to join the acting concentration he or she buys into the program the department has created and the curriculum for the study of acting is set for them. They are in class with the same cohort of students for the two years that it takes to complete the series. Unlike many conservatory style programs, there is no audition required for admission. The vast majority of similar undergraduate programs offer a curriculum like this in a BFA degree program with entrance by audition only.

The acting concentration is primarily taught and administered by a single tenured faculty member (concurrently serving as Director of Sustainability for the campus), augmented by part-time lecturers, some of whom have been teaching in the department for many years. A visit to an acting class focusing on Shakespeare taught by a long-time lecturer showed a level of expertise, organization and commitment that one would expect of a tenured faculty member and if other lecturers operate at a similar level, the department’s acting classes would appear to be in good hands. This however, was a cursory visit and assumptions about an army of lecturers cannot be applied wholesale. Lecturers are not likely to receive the same level of support, maintain the same degree of commitment, are not subject to the same scrutiny or contribute the same amount of service to the department or the campus as permanent faculty are expected to.

The range of non-tenure track teaching specialties is wide and this has benefitted the department. The department can choose from a healthy smorgasbord of skills

and approaches to acting while fashioning a comprehensive and eclectic training regimen, but given the limitations inherent in relying on lecturers, mentioned above, the department's Action Plan listing a tenure-track position in Movement and Voice is easily justified. It is safe to say that acting is the biggest draw among students in most theatre departments and it would be a mistake to leave the acting concentration understaffed. Not only do the students themselves deserve a more complete faculty in the acting area so does the department's faculty who would see increased cohesion and further permanent faculty member.

A faculty member in Movement and Voice could encompass a good number of classes currently taught by lecturers and bring needed continuity to the training. Someone equipped to teach essential performance skills, such as speech, vocal production, classical text analysis, stage combat, physical characterization and physical theatre could be indispensable in the production season, providing additional supervision and assist, on a technical level, in the development of individual performances. A full teaching load could be easily constructed from the department's needs and curricular and production oversight could be increased immediately.

The faculty is also considering a re-structuring of the block system to add flexibility to student schedules and course selection. The number of units required will remain the same, but more electives will be allowed and the block timetable won't be monolithic, allowing students more ability to schedule required courses from outside and inside the department. This plan is still in the early stages but the thinking behind it appears sound.

Hamlet

A production of *Hamlet* playing during the campus visit proved to be lively and well conceived. The department should be commended for pursuing such a challenge. The actors could be heard and understood throughout, a major accomplishment with this play, and a full audience of students responded vigorously to the major revelations in the play. The sword fight at the end was surprisingly well executed. The gender of several principle characters was changed for this production, a smart choice given the number of women in the program and the dearth of good roles for women in this play. The department chose to have a 15 week rehearsal period for this project, a sound choice educationally and practically. This is a very challenging play and time is needed to fully understand the text and to develop the technical capacity for actors to manage it.

Dance

The Dance concentration appears to be very strong. Observation of an advanced class showed that there are a good number of advanced dancers in the department. In conversation with these dancers following the class they registered happiness with classes and performance opportunities. As in other dance programs, some of

these dancers have migrated from other majors across campus and changed their major to dance or added dance to become a double major. This is a sign that courses in the area are attracting talented people, and in a departure from many dance programs, an unusual number of strong male dancers. Connections to hip-hop groups on campus have helped to draw talented movers into classes and the major. The dance class observed benefited not only from good teaching technique and high standards, but also from the presence of an excellent and versatile live musician. Students are fortunate to have such a musician in class—this is not the case for many university dance classes.

Dancers in this class said there are some classes they would like to see added to the list of courses including, anatomy, kinesiology, expressive arts therapy, and courses or workshops in grant-writing, managing non-profits and producing, all skills dancers need to work in the dance world. Classes in hip-hop and other genres of dance beside modern would also help fill out the course offerings, according to these students. Some students also mentioned the need for a class in dance education (also referred to as a need in the self-study) and teaching or assisting opportunities to help build teaching experience for dancers moving into the field. As the self-study states both Dance Education and Dances of the World are courses that have been taught in the past and the department has a desire to bring them back. Dances of the World could be especially useful as an outreach tool to the rest of the campus as courses such as this tend to bring in students from varying backgrounds.

Dance students are happy with the one on one evaluations of their work that they receive from faculty and with the attention of faculty in general.

It is clear to everyone that the addition of a tenure track faculty member to the area has had the positive effect strengthening advising, oversight of student work, adding curricular continuity and predictability.

Design/Technology

During the campus visit, it became clear that that this area desperately needs a second faculty position, or at the very least, part-time lecturers who can fill gaps in expertise. There are discreet sub-fields within Design/Technology which require entirely different skills. No single faculty member can be expected to provide courses on scenic design, costume, lighting and sound and yet, that is the case here. Part-time lecturers offering courses outside the expertise of the existing design faculty member could be a stop-gap measure, but long term vision and increased production support is needed, so the ideal solution is a new faculty member.

Despite the shortage of faculty specialists in design and technology, there are signs of health and potential in the area. The population of students is comparable to that of other areas and there is clear motivation among the students to acquire skills and knowledge to take into the field after graduation. Students are driven to participate in student generated projects and desire more contact with actors and

dancers in the hopes that a better interdisciplinary network will bring design opportunities to them. One upcoming graduate has been accepted into a large graduate program and others are beginning to investigate that possibility. Additional mentorship of students on post-graduation options would be helpful. Students also report that their partnership with the production staff is good and that they serve as an extension of the faculty. There is some frustration that the artistic needs of designers are not considered when the department chooses plays for its season.

Students lament that the studio in which they have most of their classes is in a space that is on the bottom floor of Ives Hall. They don't have much interaction with other students in the department because of this physical separation. Increased contact with other students could lead to more collaboration on student generated projects. There may be other ways of integrating design/technology students that the department may want to consider.

The staff production manager, a trained stage manager, is now teaching a stage management course. This much needed development should provide more links between aspiring directors, choreographers and designers since stage managers frequently act as the connective tissue in the creative team. Students interested in stage management have materialized and a professional perspective is being brought to the study of this important and very marketable pursuit. Having a strong stage management program will positively impact all aspects of the department's production program.

Theatre Studies

With the addition a few years ago of a tenure track faculty member in Theatre Studies (balancing the retirement of a faculty member who taught in the area), the area continues to fulfill its promise as a source of the literary and intellectual underpinning that is essential for a liberal arts environment. The Theatre Studies faculty teaches a course in the Freshmen Learning Communities, giving the department a valuable presence in a program that draws non-majors from across campus. Theatre Studies has diversified its course offerings in the past few years to include courses such as Dramaturgy and Race and Gender and Performance, courses that represent emerging ideas in the academic theatre world. It is critical that liberal arts students in theatre and dance be exposed to cutting edge scholarship and the department seems committed to doing that.

Currently the faculty member in this area teaches four courses per semester. This is a heavy load for a teacher in this field.

Production season and staff

Production staff in the department are tasked with building and mounting seven productions. While the staff consistently pulls off this feat, it is taxing and stressful. Issues for the production staff include:

- Who has direct oversight on safety during the tech and performance process? While the production staff can supervise students in the shop during regular working hours and during technical rehearsals, it is a question as to who provides oversight while shows are running. Safety is a concern for staff.
- Student design assignments could, from the staff's viewpoint, be made more strategically, with discussions between faculty and staff so that the people with the right set of experiences are given the right assignments.

Still, organization of the production calendar and the planning of scenery and costume construction has apparently improved in recent years, even as faculty have undertaken, with solid educational justification, a shift in the annual production template which provides variety in the way seasons are laid out and equity from concentration to concentration. This change however, necessitates collaboration with production staff so that they can anticipate and plan for variation in production requirements from year to year.

Facilities

The condition of facilities is a mixed bag. A recent update of the Person Theatre has livened the house, but other buildings are showing their age. Classroom and studio spaces in Ives Hall are adequate but dark and tired. Faculty report that heating and cooling in the building is uneven. The small studio theatre space provides a venue for student generated projects, which is essential, but it is quite small, oddly shaped and has limited seating. The need is not for a large, high tech space—learning how to function in a bare bones space is necessary for anyone entering the theatre—but a little more flexibility in the space and some more technical capabilities can only enhance the experiences for students, especially those in design.

The dance studio is spacious and has a good floor for dance class, but during the observed class, the space became very hot. This is, according to the students, a common condition. There is also the fact that the dance building is across campus from Ives Hall where the department is centered. This geographic separation is not conducive to department collaboration, unity or for the encouragement of interdisciplinary projects. If it were possible to have a dance studio in or closer to Ives Hall, this would be advantageous to the department. Similarly (as noted above) the design/technology students say that their classroom space is physically isolated from the rest of the department and serves to separate them from the rest of the department.

The Green Music Center has been used as a venue for collaboration with faculty from the Music Department and else where and its possible that it could continue to be used for particular projects. These collaborations represent a

Assessment/Evaluation

In addition to standard grading assessment and evaluation of students is thorough and the one on one discussions of their work with faculty are much appreciated by the students themselves. The current evaluation process is well worth maintaining, but the department may want to develop a system that does provide some data on student progress. Could this be done by creating a standard set of categories that would be addressed in the one on one evaluations that could also be assigned a rating? This rating could be used as a set of benchmarks for students to measure themselves in future semesters and also be retained as data for the department to track. Oral evaluations would not have to be limited to the central categories – a free flowing conversation is clearly important to the process, but some ability to follow certain benchmarks could be useful.

Faculty

Faculty in all areas maintain laudable goals. Part-time faculty are talented and dedicated but fill too many of the gaps. While permanent faculty seem happy with the work of these lecturers, they recognize that part-time faculty members don't contribute to continuity, long term vision and commitment to the department. Further, while all these lecturers conduct courses the department must teach, the lack of permanent faculty leaves too few people to perform important departmental and campus service.

With the recent addition of a junior faculty member in dance and the potential of adding one or two faculty members in other areas, the department should remain cognizant of the nurturing of faculty over the long term. Matching theatre and dance course credits to those across campus would help to standardize course loads with colleagues in other departments and carefully calibrating the value of production supervision and how it factors in the WTU could help give faculty credit for the labor intensive tasks of training young artists.

The department may also find value in formally assigning new faculty a mentor from another department to lend advice on the steps toward and requirements of achieving tenure. This mentorship could also reduce stress, increase confidence in the process and produce better results for new faculty.

Collaborative projects that have occurred in cooperation with the Green Center offer excellent interdisciplinary opportunities, supplemented by grants from the campus are very positive and give faculty a way to create new projects with colleagues right on campus. While the Green Center does not have theatre or dance specific spaces, with some imagination their venues could be used for certain projects. The new

amphitheater may be a place that dance faculty could explore as a performance space.

Recommendations and Considerations

The Action Plan outlined in section H of the self-study is a good one. In order for the department to grow and offer a vibrant program, two more faculty positions are sorely needed. Based on discussions and observation, other suggestions are offered here.

-- A position in the acting area that focuses on Movement and Voice could help lift the training and given the number of students served, provide an important boost to the department as a whole. One permanent faculty member in acting is not adequate to operate a program with the aspirations that have been expressed by the faculty. Performance skills could be elevated and the department would have an additional performance faculty member to help direct or supervise productions. Additional course offerings could immediately increase student enrollments in the department.

-- Another faculty member in the Design/Technology is also imperative. One faculty member in the area is not sufficient for the range of discreet disciplines and skill sets required of faculty in this area. Another faculty member in Design/Technology could introduce new technologies currently not available including computer assisted design, digital media (projections) and sound design. These are all disciplines that are taken for granted in many undergraduate programs and would help the Design/Technology concentration more thoroughly serve its students and be more competitive with other theatre departments. With these skills Design/Technology graduates leaving SSU will see employment possibilities widen.

-- Currently faculty members in some areas teach four courses per semester. This is a heavy load for a teacher in any field, particularly academic courses such as theatre studies. Finding a way to rectify this situation is critical.

-- Is seven too many productions for the year? While its understandable that the department wants to explore a range of genres in its selection of plays for the season and provide as many opportunities for students as possible, this must be weighed against the reality of the burden this places on production staff. The role of faculty in production oversight is somewhat unclear, but surely mounting this many productions with a small faculty represents a challenge that could be easily mitigated with one fewer major production a year. This issue could also be addressed by designating one or two productions per year to be of limited design scope.

-- Regarding assessment, it could be useful to create a standard set of categories that receive ratings following every term. This system would not be a substitute for the

frank one on one discussions between professors and students, but would be an objective guide and a starting point for examining student work. Some data could be gathered and a benchmark for the student established for future semesters.

-- The assigning of a mentor for newly appointed faculty members could ease the tenure process for junior faculty. Mentors could be from another department.