

MSU Departmental Assessment Plan 2009-2011

Department: School of Film and Photography

Department Head: Dr. Robert F. Arnold

Assessment Coordinator: Dr. Robert F. Arnold, Director, and Christina Z. Anderson, Photography Option Coordinator

Degrees/Majors/Options Offered by Department

Major: Film and Photography

Students choose one of two options:
Motion Picture/Video/Theatre Option
Photography Option

Master of Fine Arts in Science and Natural History Filmmaking

2009 Assessment Update and Report

School of Film & Photography (Formerly the Department of Media and Theatre Arts)

Prepared by: Dr. Robert F. Arnold, Director, and Christina Z. Anderson, Photography Option Coordinator

September 15, 2009

The School of Film and Photography

The Department of Media and Theatre Arts was designated as the School of Film and Photography in spring, 2009. The change in designation from department to school coincided with changes to the degrees offered. As before, for students under catalogs up to the 2008-2010 catalog, the School of Film and Photography grants one undergraduate degree, a B.A. in Media and Theatre Arts, with concentrations in Motion Pictures, Video & Theatre (MPVT) and Photography, and one graduate degree, an M.F.A. in Science and Natural History Filmmaking. For students entering under or electing the 2008-2010 catalog, the school grants one undergraduate degree, a B.A. in Film and Photography, with concentrations in either Film or Photography, and one graduate degree, an M.F.A. in Science and Natural History Filmmaking. Furthermore, the school is currently moving from the more general B.A. degree to the more specialized B.F.A. degree, befitting the professional orientation of its programs and its location within the College of Arts & Architecture. The School's academic programs and its faculty's research interests include fiction and documentary film production, photography, film and media studies, theatre production, video and television production, and science and natural filmmaking.

Program Assessment Review and Plans

The current state of assessment in the school is somewhat confusing. The School came under the leadership of a new Director, Dr. Robert Arnold, in July 2009. The former Department Head, Walter Metz, left Montana State University around the same time. This transition resulted in some temporary lack of organization and supervision of assessment. No annual assessment report was compiled in the spring of 2009. The most recent report we have on file, therefore, is the Spring 2007 Report, oddly dated February 11, 2008.

According to the most recent assessment plan that was submitted in summer 2008, the School uses exit surveys and graduate tracking, and senior capstone and graduate thesis projects, as assessment mechanism in all areas. The 2008 Plan includes a much more detailed assessment program pertaining to the Photography option.

I intend to update our current assessment plan to bring the film and photo options more into line. Photography may have provided too much detail making it difficult to see the forest for the trees. Film may have provided too little, with respect to specific competencies related to specific courses. I also think it would be appropriate to add specificity to the assessment goals and mechanisms of the M.F.A. program in Science and Natural History Filmmaking, to distinguish it from the undergraduate film option. I also hope to unify these updated plans in relation to the shared goals that define the School of Film and Photography. Individual program assessment plans will not address how effectively the programs work *together* and contribute meaningfully to the experience of our students. To further this end, I hope to draft a mission statement for the School, as suggested by the most recent assessment evaluation. As a newly constituted School under new leadership, this

is an ideal time to frame such a document and this step will be particularly useful to us for the development of the B.F.A. curricula.

There are other areas of our assessment plan that appear lacking. Both the graduate and undergraduate Film options require courses in film history, criticism and theory yet there is no assessment outcome or mechanism associated with the skills developed in these courses. It seems appropriate that we identify the competencies these courses serve to develop, such as a general knowledge of film history and familiarity with issues that have shaped the development of the medium, and the ability to think critically and write effectively.

Finally, as indicated below, we need to improve our procedures for collecting and archiving assessment data. As this report clearly indicates, the new Director has had a very difficult time finding assessment documentation. We will do better.

Internal Program Review, November 2007

It is surprising to me that our assessment documents make no mention of the Internal Program Review, conducted by two MSU professors not affiliated with the department, which was completed in November 2007. This review represents a substantial process of assessment that yielded a lot of very useful data for evaluating and improving our programs.

This comprehensive review examined curricula and syllabi and incorporated meetings with students and faculty, as well as several surveys with students and faculty.

The review offered several observations and recommendations concerning the health and future of the Department of Media and Theatre Arts. Some of these recommendations, such as considering a name change to better reflect the growing stature of the photography component of the department, have been acted upon. The review also recommended more interaction between film and photography, supported by student survey results indicating that students felt such interaction was desirable. Some efforts have been made in this direction.

Some other results of the review have not yet been acted upon. While praising the quality of professional training, the review expressed concern for the inflexibility of our curriculum that prevents students and faculty from feeling integrated with the rest of the university. This concern was supported by student survey data that showed that 87% of students at that time felt that it was important to be integrated with the university and 65% indicated that there was not enough flexibility in the curriculum. The review also encouraged the department to develop a mission statement and a long term set of objectives.

The review pointed out that the frequent changes to leadership in the department have been detrimental to long term planning. Perhaps in response to this, the department hired an outside director who started in July 2009. Under new leadership, we will endeavor to assess and follow through upon the remaining recommendations of the review. Many of these recommendations, such as the need for a mission statement and a more flexible curriculum, are highly relevant to our ongoing efforts to move from the BA to the BFA degrees in Film and Photography.

Assessment Report for the B.A. in Motion Picture Video Theatre (MPVT)

The following assessment mechanisms follow the 2008 Plan.

A. The Graduating Student Survey

We collected 31 new graduating student surveys in 2009, 13 clearly identified as Film, 4 clearly identified as Photography, and 14 unidentified by concentration (due to a printing error the question was not clear on many of the forms). Compared to data reported in 2007, although a smaller sample, overall quality of the programs scores remains high and improved slightly (avg. = 4.3 out of 5 compared to 4.1); and satisfaction with departmental career preparation continued to lag behind, although again showing slight improvement (3.1 out of 5 compared to 2.9). Clearly, we need to continue efforts to improve our career development and counseling programs.

B. Graduate Tracking

Although there is a lot of informal communication with program graduates, including annual or semi-annual meetings with the alumni Advisory Council, as well as other events such as the recent 50th Anniversary Celebration of the department that was attended by over 50 alumni, I have not been able to find any formal tracking data as described in the 2008 Plan. Nevertheless, our ongoing conversations with alumni indicate that their education continues to serve them very well in their professional lives and that new graduates continue to be sought after by established alumni, who report that their preparation, especially their versatility, continues to sustain our excellent reputation. Furthermore, the wide variety of ways our alumni have found to put their educations to use, not only in the film industry, is itself a very positive measure of the effectiveness of our programs.

If we continue to follow the assessment procedures of the 2008 Plan we need to do a better job of formalizing graduate tracking, however.

C. Curriculum Review

As I mentioned above, the faculty adopted changes to the undergraduate programs in Film and Photography in the spring of 2009, based in large part upon student input. However, upon my arrival as new Director in July 2009, I decided that the curriculum needed further review owing to several factors. Some proposed new courses were closely tied to individual faculty who had left the university. Another key factor was that as a professional school within the College of Arts & Architecture, the faculty had also elected to transition from the more general B.A. degree to the more specialized B.F.A. degree with a target implementation date of 2011. Given the fact that significant revisions to the curricula will have to be made in order to meet the standards of the B.F.A. degrees in Film and Photography, as separate degrees rather than concentrations within the same degree, it seemed unnecessary and potentially confusing to introduce a new B.A. curriculum only to change it again in short order to introduce new B.F.A. curricula. The process of developing the B.F.A. curricula in Film and Photography is currently underway.

The program also undertook plans to develop a new option in Film Studies that was supported by an affirmative survey response from students, although it met with resistance from some faculty. These plans are currently on hold, however, due to the recent change in leadership at the department and Provost levels and the departure of the one tenure track faculty member in Film Studies.

Student input collected through surveys has become a key factor in curricular development.

D. Capstone Projects

The 2007 Report refers to faculty comments and discussion in response to capstone projects that were tabulated as evidence of program effectiveness. Unfortunately, I am unaware if such comments were collected and discussions were held in 2008 or 2009. I do not have any similar data and I lack the experience to speak about any evidence of effectiveness measured by the capstone course outcomes myself.

Clearly, we need to do a better job of maintaining our efforts to evaluate capstone projects for the purpose of assessment, and develop a better system for storing the collected data.

Assessment Report for the B.A. in Photography (prepared by Christina Anderson, Option Coordinator)

The Photography Option has managed to teach what we do teach very well and smoothly. 16 different classes comprise our program. Our goal has been to add more visual literacy, photographic theory, and professional practices in every class. We have done this. As said in the Assessment Plan under **Graduate Tracking**, we communicate with alumni frequently using a spreadsheet database tracking method. The two complaints about our program from exiting seniors have been “not enough studio lighting and not enough preparation for the real world.” We have not only done the above mentioned move towards integrating visual literacy, theory, and professional practices across curriculum but we have moved toward more professional contact with speakers, class visitation, and an increased internship program where our students are paired up with community businesses to work in the real world. This has the added benefit of spreading our reputation outside of the University community.

We have created a “wedding list” of students willing to photograph weddings of locals, and that has met with great success. Locals get wedding photography at a low cost; students get the experience under their belts before they leave. There is no reason, therefore, why a student should feel he/she is not getting enough professional experience/insight while in our program.

We have addressed the studio lighting issue with the hire of our new assistant professor who comes to us with studio experience. We have also addressed the studio lighting issue with the addition of simple lighting across the curriculum, as well as another class offering on location lighting at the junior level, to be added Fall 2010.

There are areas we still need to address further: we do not have a clear transfer student policy in place. Our overseas program is in transition, in need of an overhaul, which we are moving towards this year in time for Fall 2010 we would hope. There are still issues with students leaning towards commercial photography who feel that “all this theory doesn’t apply to me”. There is still, perhaps, a need for another purely Photoshop class/refresher course at the junior level for those students who have not progressed well enough.

The two senior capstone projects that comprise the entire senior year are our best assessments we could have for our students. In those seminar classes we are well aware of which students will remain in the field upon graduation. We find via Graduate Tracking that about 50% of our students remain in the field of photography, and more than that in related fields. We have also increased our

retention rate from 49% to 70% or more, finding that most students, who drop, do so right after their freshman year before they enter sophomore photography classes.

In summary, the photography program may be in transition, but in our internal assessment we are quite pleased with our program, prepared to face the challenge of curriculum changes and BFA addition that is coming ahead.