

July 2010

To: Wayne Quirk, Provost
Tracy Pellett, AVP for Undergraduate Studies

From: Marji Morgan, Dean, College of Arts and Humanities

Re: 2009-2010 Program Review, Theatre Arts

c: Scott Robinson, Chair, Department of Theatre Arts

I write to provide commendations and recommendations as part of the program review process for the Department of Theatre Arts. These remarks are based on the Program's Self-Study and the external reviewer's evaluation, and take into account college mission and resources. I have not yet had time to meet with the theatre arts faculty about the review. I will do so early in Fall quarter. I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone involved in this review process, especially Scott Robinson, theatre arts faculty and staff, and Professor Catherine Norgren, as I know how very time consuming the review process is for everyone involved. The Department Self-Study was outstanding, and I want to commend Chair Robinson and other theatre arts faculty for their careful attention to this important document.

COMMENDATIONS

Professor Norgren noted that the Theatre Arts Department offers a strong, small program that enjoys significant local recognition. She highlighted several strengths in particular. First, she recognized the progress made since the last review with respect to faculty getting off campus for critically important faculty development activities. This was not happening at all five years ago, and happens regularly now, which is essential if faculty are to keep current in their fields. The development of BFA degrees in design/technology, musical theatre, and performance is also a strength, especially since there are no such degrees offered by any other public institution in the state. Professor Norgren did highlight the importance of not letting the performance or any other area grow beyond the capacity of faculty and space resources, and I couldn't agree more. Her point about quality being more important than quantity is a key one. Finally, Professor Norgren spoke very positively about the new MA in Theatre Studies, suggesting that it "is positioned to be *the* premier-funded MA program in the country, and is thus poised to attract truly top-flight students." The program has already attracted excellent students nationally and even internationally in just its first year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The external reviewer offered recommendations in six areas, and I will address all below.

- 1. Unified Identity** - Professor Norgren perceives that the department is lacking in any foundation for coherence and unity, and suggests that the lack of coherence/unity manifests itself in several ways: a department of "idiosyncratically irreplaceable" individuals that is dependent for its operation on the specific individuals, rather than on a force for coherence such as curriculum or production seasons; a Chair who provides the glue holding things together, without whom "there is nothing"; and a lack of a systematic framework for choosing and working on productions.

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It seems to me that Professor Norgren is exaggerating in ways that make her evaluation less effective than it might be. While I believe that Chair Robinson is an excellent leader for the department, there is very much a team effort that makes the department work, it seems to me. It also seems to me that any arts department is very dependent on specific individuals and their talents and skills, in ways that are not true for humanities departments that do not have ensembles and productions to produce for public consumption. I do think Professor Norgren raises a very valid point about the lack of any systematic framework for choosing productions, and I agree with her that such a framework could and should go a long way towards helping to provide coherence and unity for the department. I believe this is a key thing the department needs to work on, and this issue is related to others I will discuss below.

2. **Assessment** - Professor Norgren notes in her review, “I have never experienced such a sense of obsessive, on-going, *over*-assessment as that at CWU.” I have made a similar point since coming to CWU, though I admit that our latest contract has streamlined faculty assessment. Her more important point for theatre arts is that there is both too much and too little assessment going on. There is a flurry of activity, but the plans themselves are flawed, and so don’t reveal anything very meaningful for the department. The department needs to really take ownership of program and departmental assessment, and create a plan that will produce information useful for improving programs, productions, and so forth. The process of assessment needs to be seen as being primarily *for the department* – not for some external office or agency.
3. **Curriculum** – This is one of the key areas Norgren sees as needing to be improved as a result of more robust and meaningful assessment. Most of her comments regarding curriculum have to do with the graduate program. She is particularly concerned about the separation of tracks in theatre studies and the more practical track in production, as the national trend is to do more integrating of theory/scholarship and practice. It is my understanding that the department is working on this type of integration, at least with respect to involving the theatre studies students in production analysis and activities. Given that the summer production students are high school teachers, it may be less critical to incorporate theory and scholarship into their program. Norgren is also concerned about MA students teaching large lecture classes, and recommends that they have more preparation before doing such teaching, or that they teach smaller writing labs for regular faculty who actually do the lecturing in the large class setting. Having graduate assistants teach classes in Theatre is not new, but most previous assistants were experienced teachers. Now that we have graduate assistants with little or no teaching experience, it is essential that we provide much more robust mentoring and support.

Professor Norgren notes that Youth Theatre is one of the highlights of the undergraduate program and one that could really blossom with the right focus. But she clearly thinks that the current focus panders too much to audience expectations and not enough to controversial issues that might take young people out of their comfort zone. She also notes that the program might pioneer commissions and programming that is bilingual. I think Norgren missed an important point here: this *is* a pioneering program that is commissioning new work in a very innovative way. And, as far as I know, the next original youth play focuses on Latino/a characters and culture. Furthermore, to communities that have no opportunity to see live theatre, the controversial nature of the subject matter seems much less important than the experience of seeing live theatre that is engaging and memorable. I think it is very commendable that this program has become a center for producing new and original youth plays.

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4. **Community and Campus Engagement** – In discussing the Youth Theatre program, Norgren suggested enhancing the department’s engagement with interdisciplinary programs such as Africana and Black Studies, Asia-Pacific Studies, Latino and Latin American Studies and American Indian Studies. I believe that this is a key suggestion for the department generally—not just for the Youth Theatre program, though I want to recognize the strong connections that do exist between the department and the Asia-Pacific Studies program. In general, I believe that the department needs to become more collaborative in working with not only interdisciplinary programs, but also other programs such as music and film and video studies. Enhancing such collaboration will be a key topic at our fall retreat for chairs and interdisciplinary directors. It is important for our entire college, and for CWU as a whole. Common college or even campus/community themes and stronger collaborations might become part of the systematic framework for determining productions.

5. **Staffing** – A loud and clear message from Norgren’s review is that the theatre faculty and staff are running on overload in such a frantic fashion that there is no time or energy for contemplation of goals, change, and so forth. She suggests that the quarter system is one reason for the unreasonably frantic pace of work in the department, and this is undoubtedly true, though not within our power to change easily. Another reason is lack of staff, particularly in the areas of costume, production management, and sound/IT. For safety reasons alone, Professor Norgren argues that it is essential to add three faculty—not necessarily tenure track—in the areas mentioned above. She says, “These lines are necessary to continue doing what is already being done—but in a safe and appropriate way.” I certainly agree that we need additional help in the design/technology areas, but with the current budget situation, we are not likely to get additional funds soon. All the more reason for the department to be mindful of Norgren’s advice about limiting student growth and giving priority to quality rather than quantity. Accreditation will likely require additional faculty, as Norgren suggests, but until this can happen, we might make use, where possible, of student interns or perhaps community volunteers of the kind that work on summer theatre productions. They might help to lighten the load of the faculty.

6. **Facilities** – Professor Norgren spent considerable time highlighting what are the most serious facilities issues in the College of Arts and Humanities—the lack of space in terms of quantity and quality for theatre activities, whether teaching, performing, doing office work, or carrying out shop work. I am most concerned about the safety issues that she emphasizes. In her words, “The scene shop is cramped, with an improbably low ceiling and little room for actually building anything. Serious injury has only been avoided because of Dave Barnett’s extensive safety awareness and practice. CWU Theatre shops are the *safest* lousy spaces I have ever seen. Even so, were I a parent of a prospective student I would not want to have them work there. On this matter of facilities alone I believe the department would fail to gain NAST accreditation.” Professor Norgren also notes that the lighting inventory is very haphazard and “the grid in Herz Hall is unsafe.”

These are serious facilities issues, as is the lack of dedicated space for theatre teaching and rehearsing, especially in musical theatre, dance and combat activities. To have a program that is distinct in the state for musical theatre and a BFA degree operating with such lousy facilities is an embarrassment to CWU that needs to be addressed as soon as possible. The President suggested we might consider downtown space, and I think we should keep pursuing this idea. We should also meet with Doug Ryder in light of this review, to outline a plan for facilities upgrades.

SUMMARY

I agree with Professor Norgren that the Theatre Arts Department has the potential to be recognized nationally. But in order to achieve this goal, there is serious work to do in the areas of creating a more unified identity and a more systematic method for choosing and working on productions, assessing student learning and department progress, obtaining additional funding for faculty, and improving facilities. The Department does amazing work with the minimal human and space resources that it does have, and it has positioned itself very well in the state with distinct programs and degrees. The recent enhancement of tuition waivers for recruiting theatre students is a very positive development—in fact, essential if the department is to maintain recognition locally, let alone achieve a reputation nationally. We have made a good start in this area and must continue to boost resources for these much needed waivers. I am grateful for the dedication and excellent work of theatre arts faculty and staff, and look forward to working with them to make the theatre arts program even better than it is at present.