

May 7, 2010

Tracy Pellett  
Associate Vice President for Undergraduate Studies  
Central Washington University  
Ellensburg, WA 98926-7503  
*tracy.pellett@cwu.edu*

Dear Dr. Pellett,

Thank you for the opportunity to serve as an external reviewer for your Department of Theatre Arts. I was familiar with the department through my activities with the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival (KCACTF), and had been on campus when you hosted Region 7's conference two years ago, however I had only passing familiarity with your faculty and knew next to nothing about the program itself. The review process has been an edifying and surprisingly delightful experience. I felt welcomed by all I spoke with – in the department and in the administration – and was impressed by everyone's genuine engagement in this process. I came away from the campus visit with a clear sense of a strong, small program that merits the recognition it garners locally, and which aspires to expand that recognition to horizons beyond – to a more national profile.

I think the department's ambitions are appropriately lofty, but seriously naïve unless substantive changes continue to be discussed and then instituted. The department needs to be careful not to rest on their laurels: they have made significant progress from the external review five years ago, but must not ignore how many of the issues then raised still persist. Each member of the faculty and staff contributes a significant piece to the whole, but in a way that is idiosyncratically irreplaceable. A cohesive curriculum that can hold its own, whether specific individuals are there or not, is still lacking. If you alter the equation of individuals the structure of the department and its curriculum has the potential to collapse. Without Dave Barnett all safety disappears in an instant and no shows get built on time, if at all. Without Terri and Dave Brown there is no music theatre program. Without Cat McMillen all dyeing, painting, millinery or wig expertise (and excellence) goes away. Without Nadine Pederson there is no cohesive guidance for graduate scholarship. Without Laura Reinstatler all sewing classes disappear. You get the point – I mean no disrespect or exclusion of those omitted from the litany – the list is comprehensive.

But above and beyond the (incomplete) list above is the department chair, Scott Robinson. Without Scott Robinson there is nothing. Not to make too fine a point, Scott is the glue that holds faculty, staff, curriculum, program, *et al* together. Were it not for the underlying work that he does (balancing work load units, hoarding dollars, mollifying bad moods, negotiating spaces or scholarships) there would be an embarrassingly muddy confusion of communication with collaboration; there would be a loud chorus of resentful staff, visibly disengaged faculty, and

unhappy students. There would be no production season, and only an ambitious listing of courses that play to individual strengths of territorial faculty. There would be no department at all. Instead you have a campus jewel, a group of pleasant & productive people – good citizens who work on overload – who are nevertheless constantly on the verge of collapsing or quitting for any one of a number of reasons. Many of those reasons converge in an overwhelming sense of tired frustration. The whole department is trapped in the voracious and accelerating activity of “doing” – there is no time or energy for contemplation of change, let alone the institution of any changes. The “doing” is an exhaustive list of teaching, balancing resources, production work, and assessment.

Those most overwhelmed by the vortex of doing are the design and technology faculty and staff. Design/technology personnel are in a perpetual state of servitude – they typically design two shows a year while faculty who direct only do so once a year. While design/technology folk may garner personal satisfaction from their significant accomplishments, such accomplishments have more to do with reaching the finish-line than with teaching or learning. Whilst working on building one show, designers and technicians are always behind on research and planning for the next show. In fact, the technical staff work on all the shows all the time, overseeing more than one area (scenery/props/paint/sound all lumped together, likewise costume/makeup/crafts/wigs) at a time. Production work in the department should be able to focus on learning and not just be about getting done. The department is in dire need of additional design/technology faculty.

I believe it is essential for safety and the future development of the department to add three *faculty* members in the areas of costume, production management, and sound/IT. While such positions need not be tenure-track it is imperative for pedagogic reasons and the continued validity of the BFA that these positions *not* be administrative exempt *staff* lines. A bottom-heavy staff-supported curriculum will likely fail NAST accreditation. These lines are necessary to continue doing what is already being done – but in a safe and appropriate way. Course offerings need to be expanded; design assignments need to be more evenly distributed; multiple lab venues need multiple monitors to function effectively and simultaneously. There is too much focus on survival and getting done. Conversations center too much on product without acknowledging the importance of process; shows seem determined by director’s fiat, without any sense of integration with design, academics, or to other units on campus. Shows are actor-driven or director-centered; they are chosen for audience marketability. The rule of law appears to be popularity not pedagogy. Growth is measured by quantity rather than quality. Not once in two and a half days did a single person *volunteer* even one word about process or aesthetic.

While the *people* in the department of Theatre Arts at CWU are committed, passionate and clear about their teaching goals and their contributions to the department as individuals the *spaces* (classrooms, performance facilities, offices, *and* technical equipment) leave a great deal to be desired. I think it is disingenuous at best and blatant misrepresentation at worst to tout “state-of-the-art” facilities on the department’s web site. Many issues have been resolved since the last external review – in particular the renovations to McConnell Hall and the Costume Shop – but they are far from state-of-the-art! The lighting inventory is a haphazard collection of uneven and

antiquated (museum grade perhaps) instruments; the grid in Herz Hall is unsafe, and may well be old enough to have asbestos in it. 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.

Noteworthy since the external review of 2005 is the progress in faculty development activities off-campus. The dollars that go directly to the department from the summer MA in Theatre Practice have been put to excellent use in this regard. The MA contributes funding that, joined with creative scheduling around the quarter system, allows faculty to pursue significant and important opportunities away from campus. These activities will no doubt continue to enhance the department's ability to retain faculty and to tenure and promote them. However, I must point out that the current curricula vitae I was provided for this review were close to incomprehensible in their formatting. I suspect there is a campus requirement of some sort, which does not easily fit how Theatre records activities. My campus has a similar, cumbersome and unhelpful format for annual faculty reports, but these are separate from and submitted in addition to one's formal curriculum vitae. Had I received any of your faculty's vitae in the context of reviewing files for tenure or promotion they would not have "made the grade". Tragically this would have been entirely due to an impenetrable layout – not unworthy content!

Also of merit since the last external review are the developments of the BFA degrees in Design/Technology, Musical Theatre, and Performance; and the addition of the MA in Theatre Studies. These have made extremely solid beginnings in a very short time. CWU is now competing to matriculate performance students with some of the best theatre programs in the country: Boston University, Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, University of Evansville, and the University of Wyoming-Laramie. However, work is still needed to reach genuine equivalency, especially in Design/Technology. If too incautious, or too self-indulgent with the flush of early success in performance, the department will endanger the value of overall future growth by ignoring the inherent need for equal development in all areas. It is undeniable that current faculty numbers and available spaces are inappropriate and intolerable for teaching performance or for rehearsing productions. It is equally undeniable that too many performance students will create a snowball of need – for more and bigger productions. Unfettered growth in student numbers should be guarded against for at least two reasons. First, it is *imperative* that due weight is given to production needs (equipment requirements, safety issues, and budget concerns; not to mention considerations of pedagogy, and the need for additional faculty) *before* "growing" performance beyond its current capacity. Second, it is important to ensure that all programs have shape, rigor, and sophistication before expanding further – aim for quality not quantity.

All the BFA programs are losing top students to the schools mentioned above because of a lack of scholarship support from CWU. Campus culture waits to offer monies to incoming students until need can be determined from FASFA results. This is especially frustrating to the development of

excellence in Theatre Arts since the department's major (new) competitors have the ability to offer significant financial packets well before CWU deadlines. It is a shame that not even the offer of a tuition waiver is available; such an option might make a difference in many cases, even if it did not match offers from elsewhere – since students with need (and talent) would be happy to stay closer to home, but cannot afford to do so.

Happily it is the presence of real financial support for the MA in Theatre Studies that has had the most impact for the launch of that program. Here the funding is both generous and extremely competitive: this level of financial support is more commonly reserved for PhD candidates. Indeed, the Theatre MA at CWU is positioned to be *the* premier-funded MA program in the country, and is thus poised to attract truly top-flight students. The inaugural class has already gained recognition from the Fulbright committee, who chose to place a student in Theatre Arts at CWU over New York University. But, as with the BFA, premature celebration about this program encourages turning a blind eye to its growing pains. Care should be taken that the new MA in Theatre Studies and the “old” MA in Theatre Practice do not grow further apart – from each other or the undergraduate program. It is worth investigating ways to have these degrees at least interact more, if not eventually blend together. The trend across the country seems to be to develop degree programs that integrate theory and scholarship with practice. CWU could be among the leaders in this movement, but it will take a mammoth cultural shift (the current existence of two tracks is difficult to change or give up because of habit and the complexities of where dollars come from or go to: tuition versus salaries versus department versus graduate school...) to make the needed headway.

As with the undergraduate programs, there are major curricular issues to be addressed in the graduate program. Not least of these is the need for clarity regarding course requirements versus requirements to “earn” Teaching Assistantship dollars. On the one hand the introduction to rigorous scholarship and the financial support package are exemplary; on the other hand the expectation that graduate students teach a full 100-person+ class by themselves is close to abusive. Without more graduate faculty or more time and guidance for preparation, the current practice is more in line with the expected abilities of a third-year PhD student. It would be more appropriate, and perhaps more effective, to have the large lecture sections taught by (many) faculty as guest lectures throughout the semester, with graduate TAs providing continuity – and writing labs (a skill that will get them hired and/or accepted to rigorous PhD programs) – to “smaller” sections of 50 or so students at a time. Discussions for revising both undergraduate and graduate curricula could coincide by looking at how the department delivers TH 101 (Appreciation of Theatre & Film) and TH 107 (Introduction to Theatre). These large classes serve the campus as a whole, and are central to the department's income; they should be as integral to the department's mission statement as productions are.

I found the review process thought-provoking and enjoyable, even though I have never experienced such a sense of obsessive, on-going, *over*-assessment as that at CWU. Faculty, staff, students, and administrators pose astute questions; they offer objective criticisms, thoughtful reasoning, and generous observations. In spite of my personal opinion I heard as many

compliments as complaints about the review process, and much pride over the successes of Theatre Arts. However, were I faculty on your campus in the theatre department I might have long ago dug in my heels about yet another round of “checking in”. Clearly this assessment timetable is not going away. But I believe it would be constructive for Theatre Arts to “fail” at assessment rather than succeed (as it currently seems to). They need to find questions and formats that more effectively reflect how the discipline functions, that parallel what the department does. For example, one of the highlights of the undergraduate program is Youth Theatre. But this too is a trap for “laurel-resting”. It is unfortunate that such adept practitioners seem to pander to audience expectation. I perceive that CWYT has a monopoly on reaching under 15-year-olds in their own classrooms. Thus why not investigate “controversial” issues in the community through the stories CWYT tells? Why not find ways to use the many campus “Studies” programs (African & Black; Asia/Pacific; Latino & Latin; American Indian) in scripting children’s stories? Why not pioneer commissions and programming that includes bi-lingual pieces? How “helpful” is assessment if such questions neither come up nor get answered? Here is an opportunity to expand the department’s engagement in interdisciplinary activities, to grow recognition on campus and regionally, to expand programming that is beyond traditional “kids’ theatre” offerings. Youth Theatre strikes me as a program that could blossom.

Another clear indication that the current assessment approach needs revision is its failure to identify the department’s lack of a systematic framework towards choosing and working on productions. In spite of two days of conversations I left campus without an answer to the question: *How is the season of shows determined?* I have no sense of a philosophy behind choosing shows, let alone for how to approach them artistically. I do not know how directors and designers are selected and/or assigned to productions. Who has the final say, *and when*, as to whether a show can be accomplished (in terms of time, personnel, and budget – let alone artistic considerations) or not? There is no apparent methodology for determining if changes need to occur (whether in directorial approach or designer’s solution), and no timetable for discussion or decision-making. Any such adjustments seem to occur arbitrarily, in crisis mode, without regard to aesthetics. The department needs to discuss and agree on a methodology, and a reason, behind selecting shows. Show selection should motivate engagement in the curriculum and unify all areas of the department.

It is my belief that the biggest impediment and the most insurmountable, to progress or change on any of these issues, is one over which Theatre Arts has absolutely no control: the quarter system that rules the academic calendar. The quarter system makes it impossible to prepare for production in a timely manner; the quarter system truncates the entire production process – auditions, rehearsal and building time, and numbers of performances. Quarters exacerbate the need for constant rearranging of work load units and distribution of responsibilities. Quarters pre-empt the possibility of finding time to objectively look at change – everyone is too busy staying caught up; there is no chance to get ahead. Theatre requires time to develop practical skills and intellectual depth – quarters promote a hurried and cursory investigation.

In many ways the department's biggest strengths are also its most serious shortcomings. Everyone *manages* to make do. While this is commendable it is also counter-productive. At some point it is inevitable that something will give way: declining production budgets will create an impasse between casting-needs and design/technology capabilities; a student will be injured in class or during production lab; a rift will develop and widen between undergraduate and graduate programs; "sibling" rivalries will fester among degree programs. There is serious work that must be done to define the department as a single whole. The department holds a well-deserved place in the forefront of local and regional programs but it lacks unified identity and functionality. Without objective soul-searching that finds real unity in process and pedagogy they will have difficulty prioritizing needs. The department will rest there on its laurels rather than reach the national prominence to which it aspires. CWU Theatre Arts has the potential to be a nationally recognized program – I wish you all the best in reaching that goal.

Sincerely,



Catherine F. Norgren  
Professor and Associate Chair

---

Summary/Next Steps:

- Dire need for 3 additional design & technology faculty – for pedagogic *and* safety reasons.
- Need to shrink in size (numbers of students accepted) to grow in excellence.
- Engage in more collaborative production work – focus on process, and make production decisions for aesthetic reasons.
- Desperate need for new lighting inventory and scene shop space.
- Pay attention *as a whole department* to the development & growth of areas, especially Design/Technology, before expanding size or numbers of shows, or roles in them.
- CWU needs to look carefully at scholarship/recruitment policies to help grow undergraduate programs that can compete regionally and nationally.
- Look carefully at how TH 101 and TH 107 are taught – especially in light of growth of both MA programs.
- More time & guidance for preparation of MA teaching large-format classes.
- Find more appropriate and meaningful forms of assessment – that encourage “failure” in order to identify what will help department improve.
- Youth Theatre is an excellent place for community engagement – campus, regional – and opportunity to offer challenging & progressive programming.
- Theatre Arts needs to establish a clear *process* and *philosophy* for season selection.
- CWU should consider abandoning the quarter system in favor of semesters.
- Theatre Arts must articulate & embrace a unified identity that embraces all areas of the department.