External Review of the: Bachelor of Science in Digital Arts & Design at Dakota State University

Results of on-site visit April 30, 2010

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I. Executive Summary of Findings

The Digital Arts and Design Program at Dakota State University is a new program aimed at producing graduates who will be prepared to design and construct content for digital distribution. The program has well-qualified, dedicated faculty and administrators who have made a good start towards constructing a high-quality program.

The focus of the remarks that follow is identifying the problems in the existing program so that it can be strengthened and provide a better environment for both students and faculty.

A professionally oriented program in digital art and design needs a structure to ensure that faculty and administration understand the qualifications expected by the workplace environment. The curriculum should be structured so that students have the skills required to succeed after completing the program. At the moment the program offers students a very wide array of classes that they can take in five different specializations. Given the structure of the program, it is possible for students to be exposed to a wide range of different skill sets without becoming adequately experienced in a specific area. There is also inadequate collaboration and consensus across all areas to ensure that the different skill sets mesh with one another so that students can combine them into a cohesive education that allows them to pursue their individual strengths. At the end of the program, students should have the opportunity to work in teams on large projects with students from other emphases (which is currently the case) but in a way that specifically allows them to hone their own expertise in the context of a larger project. Teamwork and portfolio construction should be taught as part of this final push towards professionalism rather than earlier in the curriculum.

Students and faculty stated that they felt the program lacked rigor and did not adequately prepare students for the world outside the university. Students wanted to be challenged more and to be able to continue developing skill sets learned in one area in as they move forward through the program. They want to have more and stronger work in their portfolio by the time they have completed the program. Faculty would like to see more emphasis on joining professional organizations, formal internships, and travel outside of South Dakota so that students open their minds to the outside world. Several faculty members said that they felt there was pressure to keep students in the classroom and make it possible for them

to pass rather than keeping standards high and challenging students. They were concerned about being penalized for making classes too difficult.

When this reviewer attempted to assess the quality of the program and the work produced by its students from off campus, she found it impossible to do so. A program professing to create digital artists and designers should demonstrate mastery of the medium by having high quality online resources that demonstrate and showcase the expertise of the faculty and the work of the students. No such online resources currently exist.

It is essential that the university indicate its support of the program and the work done by its students by giving the program a dedicated web presence where students and faculty can publish work without have to go through the university web services.

The program lacks a mission statement that clearly outlines the goals of the program as a whole and the ways in which the skills taught in each specialization support the goals. This is critical in an area such as this which is in a constant state of flux due to changes in media technology. Digital media and design is necessarily group work and fundamentally collaborative by nature. At the moment there is little collaboration across specializations and there may even be antagonism between them. There should be regularly scheduled meetings where all faculty come together to discuss how the curricula can be modified so that they remain relevant and how to maximize student growth and expertise as they take classes in different areas.

II. Schedule of on-site visit

Dakota State University
College of Arts and Sciences
Digital Arts and Design Institutional Program Review
Dr. Elena Bertozzi
On-Site Visit
Friday, April 30, 2010

8:00 – 8:30 Dr. Cecelia Wittmayer, Academic Vice President, Heston Hall 314

8:30 – 9:00 Carrie Ahern, Director, Assessment & Institutional Effectiveness, Heston Hall, 309

9:00 – 9:30 Dr. Kari Forbes-Boyte, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, Beadle Hall 114

9:30 – 10:00 Brad Hesser, Tom Jones, Linn Nelson – Computer Graphic Design, Oyate Room, Trojan Center

10:00 – 10:30 Maureen Murphy, Dan Weinstein – Web Design, Oyate Room, Trojan Center

10:30 – 11:00 Dan Mortenson – Audio Production, Oyate Room, Trojan Center

11:00 – 11:30 Scott Mackenzie – Production Animation, Oyate Room, Trojan Center

11:30 – 12:00 Student Interviews – DAD faculty should come up with students, Oyate Room, Trojan Center

12:00 – 1:00 Lunch with DAD faculty

1:00 – 1:30 Angela Behrends, Alan Montgomery, Joe Staudenbaur – Computer Graphic Design – traditional art, Oyate Room, Trojan Center

1:30 – 2:00 Risë Smith, Digital Design & Access Librarian, Karl Mundt Library

2:00 – 2:30 Bob Jackson, Sue Conover – Digital Storytelling, Oyate Room, Trojan Center

3:00 – 3:30 Exit Interview with Dr. Wittmayer and Dr. Forbes-Boyte, Heston Hall 314

III. Program Evaluation

- Program Goals and Strategic Planning

1. Appropriateness of goals

The program seeks to prepare graduates for:

> careers as graphic designers, multimedia artists and animators, performers, set/exhibit designers, web designers and videographers. Students acquire technical skills, training and experiences preparing them to move into the rapidly expanding sectors of New Media Arts & Design, including animation/motion graphics, digital storytelling, web design, audio production and computer graphics. The program also emphasizes the '"soft skills" so desired by New Media Arts and Design, including creativity, team building, critical thinking and problem solving (from the catalog).

And "Graduates of this program will be knowledgeable in graphics, computer graphics, art techniques and technology and will be prepared for entry level positions in advertising, business, educational institutions and government" (from the goals statement). These are very broad sets of goals that encompass skills traditionally taught in multiple departments on a university campus. It is not possible to cover so many different areas in depth in one program given the staff, size of department, and resources available at DSU. At the moment the program appears to be attempting to conflate the skills normally taught in art, music, theater and communication departments into 5 specializations, some having as few as one permanent faculty member. A potential problem with such a strategy is that students learn a little bit about many subject areas while developing in-depth expertise in none. The goal of producing videographers is not reflected in the existing curricular structure.

Some of the emphases areas appear to be doing an excellent job of ensuring that the students in that specialization develop marketable expertise, while others are less successful.

2. Program goals relative to institutional mission

The DSU mission statement states that: "The legislature established Dakota State University as an institution specializing in programs in computer management, computer information systems and other related undergraduate and graduate programs as outlined in SDCL 13-59-2.2." Accordingly, we would expect that the Digital Arts & Design program train students in art and design for digitally mediated delivery. Students should

be trained in how to create digital media and modify analog media for dissemination through computers. Additionally student and faculty work should be published on and easily accessed through digital media.

In order to be able to create high quality art and design intended for digital media, students need a grounding in the analog art and design traditions. Thus it is important that in addition to computer labs, students and faculty be provided with the appropriate spaces and materials to study and produce traditional art and design. Given the excessively broad nature of the departmental goals, it is not currently possible for DSU to adequately provide all the specializations with the resources they require. Some of the departmental goals, specifically: performance and set design, do not readily translate into digital media or appear to fit within the guidelines of the university mission statement.

3. Program goals relative to national trends and forecasts for discipline.

There is strong demand for students with in-depth skill sets in four of the five specializations. This is especially true for the following:

Graphic design for digitally mediated environments
2D vector animation for storytelling, advertising, motion graphics
3D modeling and animation, ability to use textures, lighting, shadow, etc.
Web design and development- interface construction, testing and evaluation
Composition and Editing of music, audio and sound effects for digital media
Photograph/Video for web and other digital media

In my experience, the term "digital storytelling" is used to refer to the production of interactive narrative environments--hyperfiction, for example. Although this was once considered a promising area of growth in the discipline, it has failed to develop.

- Program Resources

1. Effective use of resources to meet program goals

The program appears to be using available resources effectively to meet program goals in some areas. There are issues related to the problem of scope mentioned above. The program is attempting to teach too many

different subject areas and does not have the staff training, facilities and other resources to do so effectively.

The Audio specialization, for example, needs more facilities and classes to provide students with the basics and foundations of classical music in order to provide them with a basis for creating high quality digital audio. The band, choir and other programs which would help provide students with these skills have been eliminated.

The Web Design specialization needs online access to software which allows students to integrate writing with the graphic design skills they should acquire in art classes. These include: Dreamweaver, Photoshop, Gimp, PHP 5+, and MSQL 5. It is essential that they have FTP access to a local server on which to publish their work.

All areas need more web storage for students. Students should be provided with adequate university-provided server storage to keep copies of the material they are working on as well as web-accessible space to publish their work. Students should be required to publish their work on university servers to maximize hits for search engines and increase the university's presence in on-line search results.

Some classes are using Director software. Although this software was once widely used, it is no longer current and used by only a small subset of companies in the industry. Additionally, the content produced in this program is not viewable over the web without plugins that are no longer commonly available. Given the cost of this software, it is probably not in the best interests of students to be trained in it.

2. Staffing levels and credentials

Within each specialization there are strong faculty. They are especially effective when teaching within their area of expertise. Given the excessively broad nature of the curriculum, faculty are often asked to teach outside of their area of expertise. Both faculty and students expressed dismay about this phenomenon. Such classes are not effective teaching and learning environments.

Audio Specialization: The single faculty member in this area appears to have a solid skill set in music and digital audio and is appreciated by the students. The reviewer was not able to view or hear any student work to assess quality.

Computer Graphics Specialization: There are multiple faculty working in this area who are attempting to teach many of the subject areas of a traditional art school (sculpture, ceramics, painting, drawing, photography) in addition to translating these skills into digital media. All faculty appear to have appropriate skill sets for what they are teaching, however they are also teaching classes that they are not qualified to teach. Student work in this area is strong. Some faculty have websites that demonstrate their expertise.

Digital Storytelling Specialization: There are issues in this area related to the lack of clarity of the mission and desired outcomes for graduates. Faculty are trained in theater and communication. It is not clear how these skills are being effectively transmitted through digital media. It was suggested that this emphasis shift to visual storytelling through photography and videography, however the faculty in this area do not have expertise in either of these.

Production Animation Specialization: The single faculty member in this area demonstrated ample expertise in 3D modeling, animation and motion graphics
Students expressed satisfaction with the teaching and facilities in these areas. Student work in this area is excellent. This specialization (in collaboration with Computer Graphics) should also be teaching 2D animation and design using programs such as Flash. At the moment there is no professor in any emphasis with adequate competence in 2D. The new hire should remedy the situation.

Web Design and Production Specialization: Although the faculty members in this area are trained in English rather than formally trained in web design, they appear to be doing an excellent job of providing students with the appropriate skills in coding web sites. Students are hand-coding sites and using code that meets WWW3 Consortium guidelines (which are the standard in the industry). Student work is strong in this area. Skills are strong in writing for the web and in usability testing. This emphasis would be much stronger if faculty in this area worked in collaboration with the faculty in the Computer Graphics specialization so that students can combine their technical skills with art and graphic design skills to produce more visually appealing products.

3. Classroom facilities
   These are adequate, however many faculty expressed the desire for more space and for space dedicated to specific tasks. Several faculty lamented the fact that it is necessary to teach classes in ceramics in the same space that photography is being taught. Several Computer graphics faculty have had to teach in labs inadequately equipped for the class they were being asked to teach. Again this appears to be related to the excessively wide range of classes being taught throughout the specializations.
4. Lab facilities
   Most lab facilities are adequate, however the university is behind schedule in keeping the labs updated with adequate software. The PC labs are slightly behind schedule. The Mac labs are years behind schedule. The students spoke very loudly about their desire for more Mac labs and for the ability to use Mac tablets rather than PCs. They feel, correctly, that many professional studios doing digital arts and media design use Macintosh computers and therefore students need to be trained on both platforms. This could be partly addressed by having dual boot machines in some labs. The Production animation specialization needs more servers dedicated exclusively to rendering. At the moment there is only one render box and 5 are required.
5. Financial support
   More funding is needed to support the software and facilities updates suggested above.

   Additional funding should be allocated for the campus gallery- which should serve as a means of showcasing student and faculty work to those already on campus, and for online galleries in each specialization so that parents, potential students and employers can see the level of work being produced by students and faculty.

   Faculty salaries fall within the national norms for this discipline.

- Program curriculum

  As mentioned in several areas above, the curriculum includes most courses that are appropriate to the discipline. There are too many courses that attempt to cover too many content areas. The result is that students acquire a smattering of skills in many areas and don't have expert preparation in a single area. Electives in each specialization should be

modified so that students take classes in other specializations that strengthen and support their major focus.

At the moment, the courses in Performance, Stagecraft and Acting do not seem to relate to the stated program goals and are not well-integrated into the rest of the program. Storytelling and narrative development are important for the production of digital media, however it is not clear that these classes are taught with this specific focus.

The program does not seem to currently have a location for video production and editing. Web video is a growing area that should be included in the curriculum.

- Technology integration
  See above and below. Comments on technology are mentioned in every section.

- Program assessment

i. *Appropriateness of assessment measures / activities for the discipline*

The program cannot currently assess its success in preparing students because the program goals are too broad. Faculty should meet and develop a coherent mission statement that reflects the high rate of evolution of this field. The program can then determine whether or not graduating seniors meet the standards laid out in the mission statement.

At the moment it is very difficult to assess the merits of the program because there is no formal university publication (on the web or in print) of student and faculty work. This should be addressed as soon as possible.

ii. *Major-field assessment activities, relative to the program goals*

The program needs to develop explicit expectations of graduating seniors and ensure that classes taken during the final year assess student progress towards these goals.

Students who have graduated from the program appear to be finding appropriate work. Alumni should be contacted and asked to assess their level of preparedness for the workforce. Their feedback should be integrated into the mission development process.

- Student support / student enrollments
  This is already a popular program and will certainly grow as the demand for graduates with this skill set is high. The university should do a better job of recognizing the value of this major and publicizing it.

- Program strengths and areas for improvement

The program has strong, dedicated faculty and a supportive administration. Students like the program and have many suggestions for strengthening and improving it. The students repeatedly called for higher standards both for their own work and in expectations of faculty skills. They recognize that they have to produce higher quality work in order to get the jobs they want and they want the program to raise standards.

It is very nice to see students that feel strongly about their education and want to improve it. Students should be consulted with some regularity about the program mission and their representatives should be engaged in the development of goals.

Areas for improvement are discussed in other sections.

IV. Recommendations for Change

The DAD faculty should develop a coherent mission statement in which goals for the program and for the students are clearly defined. Curriculum, staffing and resources should be regularly assessed to ensure that these support the stated goals. At the moment there are few times at which the faculty meet and there is very limited collaboration among faculty. This has lead to the program having a somewhat scattershot approach in which many different courses are covered, but students have little chance to become expert in any particular area. Additionally, students are not encouraged to collaborate across specializations and form teams that leverage the different skill sets in different areas.

Faculty should discuss having minimum GPA requirements for students to be accepted in and move through the program. Program should stress excellence and rigor and ensure that students who make it to graduation have strong preparation.

The focus of the entire program should be on ensuring that students make it to their final year with a solid palette of skills in their chosen area. The last year should be focused on preparing students for what they will find outside the university. This preparation could include:

- Foreign study and travel
- Project-based instruction aimed at meeting the needs of real world clients
- Internships
- Team projects with members on the team from all specialization areas
- Creation of personal portfolios that showcase skills (should be in Flash or equivalent so that they include audio, video, animation, writing, etc.)

- Better utilize the on-campus gallery and create web gallery for showcase of student work.

A program such as this is very dependant on having adequate technology. It is essential that the labs be updated on a more regular schedule, that adequate software and hardware be provided to faculty, and that students and faculty have access to university supplied storage and web publishing.

The Digital Arts & Design program at DSU is off to a very promising start. Students and faculty are very interested in the program and passionate about making it a success. Hopefully these suggestions will help to improve an already strong program.

Respectfully submitted,

Elena Bertozzi