

**SCHOOL OF ART ASSESSMENT**  
**M.F.A. in Art**

May 2019

This document is intended to be both reflective and forward looking. It illustrates a moment in time, but also acknowledges its own elasticity and changeability. Assessment in the School of Art does not fit into a traditional model, just as some of art's practices and procedures eschew many academic paradigms. A collaborative effort between School of Art faculty and administration, this document was initiated by posing a series of questions, such as *What does it mean to succeed in a studio course, art history course, graphic design course, art teacher education course? How does a student receive a passing grade and how is his/her learning measured? What tools are used to disseminate information, inspire independent thinking, and encourage students to make connections between concepts introduced in their courses? What might improve students' learning experience?*

### **MFA in Art**

Graduate students in the MFA program must perform successfully in the degree's recommended initial courses (Interdisciplinary Graduate Critique Class, MFA Seminar) as well as those required in their studio emphasis, theory, and art history. This performance is measurable by passing grades of C or better. However, if an MFA student wishes to receive financial assistance throughout the six-semester program, he/she must execute a 20 hour/week graduate assistantship or teaching assistantship to the satisfaction of the faculty and maintain a 3.0 GPA (a B average).

MFA students are expected to demonstrate artistic proficiency in at least one of the following disciplines: painting and drawing, sculpture and expanded media, printmaking, video, ceramics, photography, or glass. Artistic proficiency can refer to many things including technical skill, clarity of original ideas, material fluency, conceptual development, supportive research, and extensive production.

In order to proceed through the increasing rigors of the MFA program, students must engage with School of Art faculty in five graduate reviews, one in each of the five of six semesters in the program. Each review is accompanied by a written component. At the third review, students must receive permission to form a graduate committee by articulating the ideas, intentions and goals for their work, as well as showing work that displays an ongoing evolution and growth. Student success or failure is measureable by discussion and vote amongst School of Art graduate faculty. If a student is not given permission to form a graduate committee, he/she may try again during the fourth review, and if the student is not able to form a committee at that time he/she is released from the MFA program. At the fifth review students are meant to demonstrate that they are prepared to fully engage with their thesis exhibition and written accompaniment.

Graduate faculty do not vote but rather discuss the student's progress and advises the student's graduate committee. If the fifth review is successful, the MFA student becomes an MFA candidate.

With the idea that this document might serve perspective graduate students, or graduate students preparing for the graduate review process, Professor Sarah Smelser transcribed questions that were asked by faculty at the Fall 2017 reviews: *What does the work suggest? What is the goal of the work? How can the work be interpreted? What are the work's pitfalls and challenges? What is the viewer's experience? How do you (the artist) think about this work? What is in the artist's control? How does the work relate to the current writing? What or who has influenced the work? What questions do you (the artist) ask yourself? What does the work reference? What is the work doing, how does it operate?*

*What is the art now, after you (the artist) have experienced making it?* These questions are often followed by another: *so what?* Certainly, questions overlap and vary significantly, but these are a sampling of the ways in which graduate students are asked to explain their studio activities, address their goals, and hold themselves accountable to the rigors of the graduate program.

The qualities and characteristics that students are asked to discuss in their reviews are as follows: content, color, mood, narrative, allusion, conscious choice, composition, materiality, identity, context, light, status, suggestion, access, hierarchy, mystery, effect, parallels, interactions, complexity, visual vocabulary, presentation, intimacy, inquiry, rules, experiments, systems, humor, sympathy, process, connections, contradictions, paradox, sincerity, pictorial space, physical space, investigation, balance, volume, articulation, fine tuning, and care. This is by no means a comprehensive or standard list, but rather examples of topics and ideas covered in different reviews in the fall of 2017. Furthermore, different oppositional or conflicting ideas were discussed: size vs. scale, personal vs. public, baggage vs. associations, reference vs. embodiment, sublime vs. ordinary, process vs. product, temporary vs. permanent, monumental vs. monument, and backstory vs. output.

The goals of a graduate review are many. The review is one way that faculty outside of the student's area can see and discuss the work. It is also a way for the whole faculty to monitor, evaluate, and discuss the graduate student's progress through the program.

Moreover, a graduate review is an opportunity for graduates to show their competency in discussing and writing about what they make. It is their way to show they know what they are doing, have researched their subject, and have experimented with varied approaches to voice their content through making imagery and objects.

After the fifth graduate review, with counsel from his/her graduate committee, the MFA candidate builds a coherent body of original studio work that is the thesis exhibition. It is installed during the final semester of the program. Once the thesis exhibition is on display in a gallery, the MFA candidate must successfully defend it. During the thesis defense, students must clearly and fluently discuss the ideas, intentions, goals and achievements of the work in the thesis exhibition. The graduate committee measures the success or failure of the defense and signs paperwork accordingly.

The written supportive statement should be nearly complete at the time of thesis defense. With feedback from the graduate committee, the MFA candidate revises, edits, and fixes the statement until it clearly states the artist's ideas, intentions, and goals including a detailed, insightful understanding of what the artist's work accomplishes technically, aesthetically and conceptually. The goals behind a thesis exhibition and accompanying written statement are not terribly dissimilar to that of a dissertation: to create novel research on a certain subject. If the thesis committee agrees that the graduate student has accomplished such goals, it will give the student permission to submit the writing to the Graduate School. The Graduate School honors the decision of the committee and, unless there is a problem with format or copyright, the graduate student completes the electronic filing of the written statement. Hardbound copies of MFA supportive statements are available to check out from the School of Art office or Milner Library. Electronic statements are accessible online in varying degrees, depending on what kind of search engines the graduate student specifies upon filing.

### **Indirect Assessment**

Faculty discuss student learning informally: in friendly conversation, comparing teaching methods, or even talking about how students they share process information and perform differently in different courses. Less casual discussion might occur in the context of curricular revision or student retention.

The School of Art seeks student perceptions of their learning in varied ways. The School of Art Director conducts exit interviews with MFA Studio students. In the most recent exit interview, students said that they felt they had been thoroughly and fairly assessed throughout their three-year program. However, they also suggested that Art 451A88, Graduate Interdisciplinary Critique Class, be offered every semester and recommended for the entirety of a graduate student's first year. This class is unique because it rotates through the Studio faculty; is often team-taught; and focuses on discussing studio work, studio practice, and writing that is generated by students without prompts or assignments. Art 451A88 is a vehicle for graduate students to assess their own work, assess the work of their peers, and have their work assessed by their peers and faculty. In other words, the School of Art Director heard that students felt the *quality* of questioning, conversation, advice, encouragement, scrutiny, and evaluation was good, but the *quantity* could be improved. This is extremely helpful feedback from graduates and will be given consideration.

In other contexts, such as area meetings and studio discipline meetings/critiques, student perceptions of their learning are gathered by faculty and considered on a micro-level. For example, at the end of each semester, the printmaking faculty meet individually with their graduates and advanced students to recap the semester and look toward the future. This is a good time to ask students about the overall quality of their experience and how assessment enhances it or detracts from it.

Another manner to collect feedback, especially undergraduate feedback, is through student response forms; students are asked to describe the extent of their learning in a course as well as faculty grading. By extension, faculty can also address student perceptions of their learning in annual dossiers.

Gathering and studying student perceptions of their learning necessitates tracking students who have graduated. Again, this is an informal process. Faculty who have established long-lasting relationships with their students are a kind of student tracking device, and faculty who are contacted as references can stay abreast of student goals, activities, and accomplishments. Social media is another informal way to keep in touch with alumni.

In any way the School of Art gathers information about student perceptions of their learning - or about their lives in general – there is currently a focus on student successes rather than those who do not continue to make art, teach, or work in art related fields. There are certainly many ways to gage “success” among School of Art alumni; creative problem-solving skills, work ethic, analytical ability, and professional bravery are strengths in many facets of the working world. Art students learn and possess a plethora of transferable skills and these often go unnoticed if the only recognized goal is graduating students who continue to work in creative or visual art fields.

The School of Art has worked with Alumni Relations to survey alumni, but with very little response and not in recent years. Generating a tool to survey or track School of Art alums would not be easy, and building a reliable, thorough database of alumni contact information would also be quite difficult. Nevertheless, learning more about alums could benefit the School of Art immeasurably.

### **Assessment Sustainability**

The word “assessment” is not part of the everyday vocabulary of the faculty, staff, or administration of the School of Art. The only area that truly understands its meaning, outside of its dictionary definition, is Art Teacher Education because of assessment’s essential nature in state licensure. School of Art faculty assess. However, assessment is not discussed, tracked, or addressed in ways that may be commonplace in other schools and departments on campus. If this document is to be used, kept up to date, and adopted into School of Art culture, the onus is on the faculty, staff, and administration. The worth of those efforts has yet to be determined.

For better or worse, the School of Art has established itself as an exception to many of the actualities of University culture. One small example is that most faculty shun their academic titles in class; students and faculty address each other using first names. This is perhaps a result of the small studio classes. In the facilities in the Center for Visual Arts, there can be as few as 8 or as many as sixteen in a hands-on, process intensive class such as ceramics or printmaking. Another example is discussed in the section “MFA in Studio Art.” At the end of their three-year program, MFA studio students exhibit their thesis body of art work. The accompanying statement, which can be upwards of 30 pages, is approved by the Graduate School and published by ProQuest along with the written theses and dissertations of other graduate students. However, the faculty make it clear to the students that the art work is their thesis, which they present and discuss during their thesis defense. Furthermore, faculty debate with and relate to their students, and each other, in a way that might not exist in the College of Business or the College of Nursing; the creative nature of artistic practice encourages its participants to be different, to stand out. Some might even call the School of Art abnormal.

This document is the first of its kind in the School of Art, so its continued use and sustainability are largely unexplored. In its writing, it has already been of use; faculty have put into words the hurdles, modes of evaluation, and goals for students and the resulting self-studies are united into one end-product. This exercise, in and of itself, is of use. Further uses are up for debate.

This document can apply to curricular/programmatic research and revision. In studying assessment, part of the exercise is looking at *how* students are encouraged to learn. One might also ask *what* students learn, and what might be missing in their educational experience. Recently, after a faculty-wide conversation, faculty started to require that their students attend artist lectures at University Galleries. The School of Art has an extensive line-up of lectures scheduled every year; visiting artists, faculty, visiting curators, and artists exhibiting in University Galleries share their research with the general public. However, students are often absent at these lectures and miss out on seeing artwork, hearing about the studio practice and ideas of others, and understanding what their faculty do when not in the classroom. Requiring attendance and a written response encourages students to think beyond their immediate experience, see examples of successful artists, and perhaps even set

professional goals.

This document can also be used as a recruitment and informational tool. The faculty have already discussed using excerpts to address and introduce assessment to potential students, especially those who are looking at the MFA Studio program. However, at this time it seems that the most obvious use for this document is to prove to the University that the School of Art does indeed employ assessment in its programs.