PROPOSAL

Development of Academic Major Programs to Promote Retention and Graduation
(Title III)

submitted by
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Major Program: B. A. Theatre

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Major Program Capacity:  
The B.A. in Theatre is one of two major programs offered by the Performing Arts Department (the other being Music). Currently the Theatre program faculty consists of 5 FT and 3 PT professors. The project directors of this proposal are 2 FT faculty members, though the project will draw on the expertise of all FT faculty and has as a major goal the encouragement of PT faculty to adopt the objectives of promoting student success and increasing retention and timely graduation rates. No additional resources or facilities are anticipated in carrying out this project.

The B.A. in Theatre was implemented in Fall 2009 as a program Modification. Prior to Fall 2009, students pursuing theatre studies declared a B.A. in Performing Arts with a Theatre concentration. The Performing Arts degree was implemented in AY 2003; prior to this, students pursuing theatre studies declared a Fine Arts major with a “track” in Theatre (Music, Visual Arts, and Dance were other track possibilities for the Fine Arts degree).

Please note that statistics cited throughout this proposal have been provided by the Office of Planning and Research with much of the much of the data on retention and graduation rates culled from students majoring in either Performing Arts & Fine Art, which have now been phased out (though some students are currently completing Performing Arts/Theatre degrees). In this proposed project, the target cohort population will be students pursuing a B.A. in Theatre.
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Proposal Overview: This proposal seeks funding for the development and implementation of activities that address two goals of the Title III Project:

(1) To increase retention of at-risk students and help them graduate in a timely manner; and,

(2) To promote greater engagement of faculty in new academic support services for at-risk eastern students.

The overall goals of this project meet the “scope of services” described in the proposal guidelines, including:

(1) the development of effective cohort support programs that develop/create major learning communities;

(2) increasing student-faculty interaction; and

(3) assisting students to succeed in completing the program and graduating in a timely manner.

BACKGROUND

With the design and implementation in Fall 2009 of the program modification of the BA in Performing Arts/Theatre to the BA in Theatre, much foundational planning has been established in regard to promoting student success in each area of study, and every course in the program. In fact, the principle reasons for modifying the degree program were to provide opportunities for students to declare one of three areas of concentration (Acting/Directing; Theatre Technology/Design; or History/Theory/Criticism); to develop more logical, progressive course sequencing within those concentrations (and the program overall); and to increase opportunities for students to develop academic skills as well as the skills-sets associated with each concentration. A key feature of the Theatre program has always been individualized mentorship. Performance courses in particular pose unique opportunities for mentoring relationships between faculty and students, and this model is also pursued in theory, history and writing courses. Faculty have also developed assessment rubrics for each course and each of the three concentrations in order to measure student learning outcomes and program efficacy. Theatre faculty has established as high priorities the development and implementation of a retention and timely-graduation plan, and the identification of “at-risk” students; Freshmen success is of particular concern.

This proposal identifies three major areas that we have determined need to be addressed in the promotion of student success and increasing retention and timely graduation rates. In each of the three areas, supporting data will be provided along with descriptions of activities currently in
place, as well as the specific project components that Title III funding will support. These three target areas are:

1) Increasing the retention rate of Theatre majors from Freshman to Sophomore year by establishing a Freshman learning community;

2) Increasing timely (4-year) graduation rate through Faculty Mentorship Program; and

3) Promoting student success and identifying “at-risk” students by enfranchising part-time faculty in line with the learning goals and objectives of courses and the program.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1) Increasing Retention Rate of Theatre Majors from Freshman to Sophomore Year by Establishing a Freshman Learning Community.

One of the strengths of the Theatre program is that students can participate in all levels of production from the time that they are freshmen. Most students declare theatre as a major not only because of an interest in performance, but also because of the possibilities of engaging in specific areas of production (e.g. acting, technical crews, stage management, etc). Unlike larger programs or programs with graduate degrees attached to them, Eastern’s Theatre program encourages and provides myriad opportunities for majors (and minors) to become involved in production; in fact students must complete at least 3 practicum credits related to production as part of the major degree requirements. 

We believe this is one of the primary reasons the Theatre program has an above average rate of entering freshmen who declare a theatre major (or previously, a track or concentration) when compared to other majors (approximately 60%). For example, of the current 67 performing arts majors (which includes roughly half of music majors), 39 entered as first time freshmen (58%); 11 entered as non matriculated students (16%); 15 entered as transfer students (22%), while 2 had a break in enrollment, (3%). In the absence of other factors that typically attract students to theatre programs (e.g. proximity to centers of professional theatre activity; superior theatre facilities), Eastern’s theatre program has established a reputation of offering myriad opportunities to engage in production from the very start of the college experience. This immersion in experiential learning, coupled with solid academic and classroom/studio experiences has resulted in 7 students in the past 5 years.
entering graduate training programs in theatre, as well as several others who have directly entered theatre and related fields professionally.

Despite the attractiveness of Eastern’s theatre program as well as the steady increase in students admitted to or transferring into the program from community colleges and other universities, (which we anticipate will further increase upon more widespread awareness of the modified BA degree program is circulated, and when the new Fine Arts Instructional Facility becomes a reality), we are mindful that we need to do a better job of retaining students majoring in Theatre from freshmen to sophomore year (and beyond). Data collected regarding students collected from AY 2008 reveals that 21% of declared Performing Arts/Theatre majors left Eastern by the end of the first semester of their sophomore year, with another 30% changing their majors by the same period of time. While these rates are fairly consistent with other majors, because many aspects of the Theatre Program have recently come under review or have been re-designed, we are in a unique position to implement mechanisms that might redress the loss of students from the University and/or the major. While we have no solid data about why students decide to leave the program or the major, a number of possibilities have been raised to explain the data. Some students may wish to pursue what might be perceived as more “fiscally viable/responsible” major programs. Parental pressure might be a factor particularly in regard to a high student population of first-generation college students. Also, a high percentage of students enrolled as Theatre majors may be classified as “at-risk” students. For example, as of Fall 2008, of 67 Performing Arts majors, 34 students were from minority populations (approximately 50%), while the male : female ration is about even.

**PROPOSED ACTION: FRESHMAN SHOWCASE**

We propose that the Theatre program institute a Freshman Year Showcase in which all incoming declared Theatre majors must partake on some level or another in both the planning and production phase. Incoming students will be drawn into this project from the first weeks of Freshman year, with Sophomore-level students working in key leadership and support positions. (The first year of this program will be planned by the 2 Project Directors, who will recruit upper-classmen from all levels to function in planning and support positions). While the first phase will be devoted to planning and initial
After rehearsals, the second phase will be the incorporation of family and friends into a public performance of the Freshman showcase.

It is hoped that this project will foster a greater sense of belonging and participation in the Theatre program from the very start of the college experience, while also giving each year’s entering class a distinct identity (based, in part, on the unique dimensions of the freshman showcase).

The various components, goals and anticipated outcomes of this aspect of the project are summarized in the following table:

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<tr>
<th>PHASE</th>
<th>Goal 1</th>
<th>EXPECTED OUTCOMES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase A: Development of a fall semester freshman showcase (led by Sophomores in key planning and production positions)</td>
<td>Increase retention by strengthening student’s connection to Theatre program and Eastern</td>
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<td>▪ Students engage in a departmental/group/social activity early in their academic career</td>
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<td>▪ Serves to cement sophomore sense of commitment to group/department</td>
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<td>▪ Student/Faculty Interaction</td>
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<td>▪ Students immediately work with all members of the Faculty</td>
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<td>▪ Support staff for showcase is sophomores (previous class) – retention of whom is also an issue</td>
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<td>Phase B: Freshman Showcase soiree for Parents</td>
<td>▪ Family visits the campus and/or dorm several weeks after student has begun to settle in</td>
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<td>▪ Family witnesses student functioning within the major</td>
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<td>▪ Family meets/interacts with Faculty</td>
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<td>▪ Faculty has the opportunity to discuss questions about the post-graduation industry with family</td>
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<td>▪ At-Risk parents acquaint themselves with the student’s success probability within their chosen course of study</td>
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2) Increasing Timely (4-YEAR) Graduation Rate through Faculty Mentorship Program

Theatre faculty has reviewed the data regarding graduation rates based on statistical trends for Fine Arts/Theatre track and Performing Arts/Theatre concentration, all of which suggests that steps must be taken to promote timely graduation. For example, for performing arts majors concentrating in theatre who were awarded degrees between May 2006 and December 2009, 1 entered as a transfer student and graduated in three years; 1 entered as a non-matriculated student and graduated in six years; 12 entered as first time freshmen. Of the 12 first time freshmen, 1 left and returned to graduate following an extended break in enrollment. Of the remaining 11 graduates who entered as first time freshmen, 4 graduated in 4 years; 6 graduated in 5 years and 1 graduated in 6 years (The student taking the extended break graduated ten years after entry.) Furthermore, data collected suggests the following trend as to the status of students enrolled in Fall 2010: if time to graduation for first time freshmen remained consistent and all currently enrolled students were retained then 36% or 8 students would be expected to graduate in 4 years, 55% or 13 students would be expected to graduate in 5 years and 9% or 2 students would be expected to graduate in 6 years. We believe that the Theatre program can do a better job promoting more timely graduation rates for its majors. One important way is to strengthen academic advising so as to provide structured, frequent and comprehensive feedback to students at every level as they progress through the major. Faculty-student conferences will be scheduled on the reading days at the end of the spring semester for Freshmen, Sophomores, and Juniors to discuss progress, provide feedback, and troubleshoot problem areas. Seniors will receive even more personalized mentorship through faculty supervision of special projects and internships, and will also be required to engage in an oral ‘exit interview’ and will be encouraged to participate in university-wide questionnaires regarding Theatre courses, productions work, and experiential learning opportunities in order to help faculty gauge strengths and weakness of the program. In theatre performance courses, a number of mechanisms to measure students’ mastery of competencies have been, or will be implemented. These include assessments of progress in auditions, studio classes, productions, co-curricular activities, and senior showcases. Applied research opportunities (such as dramaturgical projects and conference presentations will provide a means to assess “Theory and History” track students. In addition, all Theatre students will be required to maintain a writing portfolio. Furthermore, we have determined that Student Requirements, Course Expectations
and Attendance Policies should be clearly stated on each syllabus constructed by both full-time and part-time faculty, including grading criteria, student responsibilities, and attendance policies. We believe that additional measures must be considered to promote regular attendance in class and also at departmental concerts and performances.

In general, we believe that in order to effect these changes, it is important not only to make clear programmatic expectations to students at every level as they progress through the program, but also that the department must effect a “cultural shift” that places the responsibility for promoting excellence on the students as well as faculty. In this respect, it is important to engage every member of the programmatic “learning community” including part-time faculty and exemplary upper-classmen who might serve as mentors to freshmen and sophomores.

**PROPOSED ACTION: Establishment of a Mentorship Program**

In rotation, each Full-Time faculty member will mentor an entire freshman class for two years. This is in addition to regularly-assigned one-on-one advisor assignments. Mentors ensure continuity from Freshman to Sophomore year (and beyond). Mentors will contact students on a regular basis whether or not they remain in the major, switch concentrations, or change advisors. They will also hold one group meeting for each “mentored class” they are assigned each semester to discuss program issues, production possibilities, and encourage feedback about programmatic, production, and departmental components.

3) **Promoting Student Success and Identifying “at-risk” students by Enfranchising Part-Time Faculty in line with the Learning Goals and Objectives of Courses and the Program.**

The Theatre Program has been fortunate to have secured the services of very-well qualified Part-Time Faculty members who teach many of the introductory-level courses (primarily to Freshmen and Liberal Arts students), and who also regularly contribute to the production/performance functions of the program as acting coaches, directors, and other guest artist functions depending on their professional expertise. Because Part-Time faculty constitute a dynamic component of the learning and artistic community, their efforts, particularly in the classroom, would be fortified by taking advantage of training opportunities offered by Academic Advising, the Center for Educational Excellence, and other professional development opportunities offered campus-wide. Furthermore, part-time faculty need to
be made aware of the specific learning objectives and course expectations for the classes they teach, and adopt the assessment rubrics established for each, both in relation to students’ mastery of academic skills and discrete skill in production and performance areas. They also must be encouraged to utilize the ‘at-risk’ notification system, and be thoroughly familiar with the support services offered through Academic Advisement and the Tutorial Services.

**PROPOSED ACTION: Part-Time Faculty Stipends for Assessment & Professional-Pedagogical Development Activities**

This project component seeks to establish incentives via modest stipends for Part-Time faculty members to become more fully-invested in the learning community by participating in pedagogical and professional development opportunities offered university-wide. Stipends will also provide incentives for PT faculty to take on the extra work of incorporating learning objectives (and matching activities) in their syllabi, and adopting measures established in the Theatre program designed to measure student learning outcomes, including tracking and reporting on the data they collect.

**BUDGET PROJECT COSTS**

$400 (x2) = $800  **STIPENDS FOR TWO PROJECT DIRECTORS TO DEVISE, PLAN, AND LAUNCH FIRST FRESHMAN SHOWCASE & STRUCTURE & ASSESS FACULTY-MENTORSHIP PROGRAM**

$400  **STIPEND FOR TECHNICAL SUPPORT CONSULTANT FOR FRESHMAN SHOWCASE**

$250 (x3) = $750  **STIPENDS FOR PART-TIME FACULTY TO:**

1. ATTEND ADVISEMENT AND OTHER UNIVERSITY-SPONSORED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES &
2. ADOPT ESTABLISHED LEARNING OBJECTIVES AND IMPLEMENT & REPORT ON PROGRAMMATICALLY-ESTABLISHED ASSESSMENT RUBRICS FOR EACH COURSE TAUGHT

**TOTAL**  $1,950