Film and Television Program Review
2015

Western Carolina University (WCU)

Submitted by:
Dean Bob Bassett, Chapman University
Professor Don Zirpola, Loyola Marymount University
Associate Professor Mary Anna LaFratta, School of Art and Design, WCU
Dr. Matthew Rave, Chemistry and Physics Department, WCU
2015 Review Team Report
Film and Television Production (FTP) Program
Western Carolina University

Preface

The recommendations contained in this report are based on a reading of the program review conducted in 2009, the self-study written by the faculty of FTP in 2014, WCU Alumni List, and the series of meetings held March 15-17, 2015, with various constituencies of the FTP program. We found that little has changed since the previous review.

In general, although we have a number of recommendations to improve and strengthen the program, some of which may prove difficult because of history and academic territoriality, the program has grounds for optimism. New university leadership has been met with great enthusiasm and the promise of change for the better. The faculty members in the program are caring and committed, students are enthusiastic about pursuing a career in the worlds of film and television, and the curriculum has key components in place on which to build.

What follows are a number of suggested strategies for moving the program forward. While every environment is different, we believe these recommendations are applicable to the issues and concerns noted during our visit. Certainly, various elements may need to be revised to fit the specific circumstances of Western Carolina University, but, in general, we believe these recommendations follow accepted curricular practices in film and television education, a comparatively young discipline in the academy, designed to prepare students for the ever-expanding disciplines of the film and television arts.

Analysis of Program

The Undergraduate Program

Being spread across the university physically in seven different locations and programmatically, with required courses in two other departments in another school, hampers the undergraduate program.

First, we recommend that FTP offer its own unique courses and initially hire adjuncts to teach them. This would include:

- A television course that covers developing long-form episodic content, how it is managed by a showrunner and how the business is being shaped by Netflix, Amazon, HBO, AMC and other players
- A two-semester film history course that could address television as well A film aesthetics course that would provide narrative strategies for developing content
- A senior seminar to prepare students exit strategies for entering the business through portfolio and website creation, resume building, and pitching
- A senior capstone class in which every student directs his or her own film. This class will:
  - Support a stronger student production culture
- Provide mentoring of new students by advanced students
- Serve as a good way to assess the program through an evaluation of senior films on a variety of craft and production components, as well as narrative and dramatic success
- Make the program more competitive with other programs that require each student to make a film

The result of adding these new courses will be that it will allow for a larger enrollment in some classes (i.e. 20-35 or greater), which will generate more FTEs and allow some courses, such as certain production courses or screenwriting courses, to be smaller.

We also recommend making adjustments to the sequence of the curriculum and growing the program overall to support more production—out of quantity can come quality.

**First and foremost, entry into the FTP program should begin at the freshman level.**

To support a stronger curricular path, we suggest:

- Create multiple sections of FTP 250 Basic Production Techniques to be offered in the first year. Doing so will hook students into the program and also potentially double the student enrollment, as FTP 250 is a gateway class, a prerequisite for all other production classes.
- Move FTP 250 into the THEA 191 Integrated Arts slot. This move supplants the current situation where students’ first “production” experience in THEA 140 Acting, which does not make sense as a first class in a film and television production program.
- **Get a camera into students hands early**—project-based experience allows students to appreciate and engage with the principles of aesthetics they learn in other classes.
- Continue to offer FTP 150 Thinking Like a Filmmaker, but additional sections taught by an adjunct faculty member.
- Incorporate the 1-unit sections of the Production Practicum into existing courses where crews will be needed for production. This strategy also allows for an additional three credits in the film genre studies or in liberal arts, a course of study which some students cite as a reason they chose to come to WCU.
- Examine where sound is taught in the curriculum, as it needs to be addressed early. Although we did not see syllabi for courses, it is unclear what is covered in MUS 383 Music & Audio in Media; however, as this is placed in the senior year, it does not address the fact that many student films are ruined by poor sound quality as it is often the last element addressed and the one in which students have the least knowledge. We suggest an audio techniques class be offered in the sophomore year covering studio and location sound capture, sound effects and mixing.

To support and enhance the student experience along the way, we suggest reviewing the existing student fee of $125 per program, per semester. Given the expenses of production, of buying and maintaining equipment and software, we recommend the program explore adding fees to specific classes according to expected expenses, or if that is not permitted, then increase the student fee per semester to $250.

To take what the students learn in class and apply it in a larger context, we recommend identifying new internship opportunities and linking them to production jobs each internship experience could support.
Reaching out to area production companies as well as alumni could provide an increased network of internships.

Student Body

Other than the handful of students with whom we met during the site visit, we really have no criteria by which to evaluate the makeup of the student body or its fit for the program or its mission. However, we did observe that both the student body and the faculty lack diversity, another area where expansion of the program might bring improvement.

Based on our conversations with the students, we also recommend:

- Supporting student interest in a club devoted to their interests, particularly as extra-curricular activities support student engagement and retention
- Creating a student council where students meet regularly with the dean and/or program head to provide feedback on what’s working and what isn’t. This gives students a sense of ownership in the school and their education as well as providing insights that faculty and administrators often do not glean from casual conversations with students.

There needs to be an analysis of retention. The university registrar should have these numbers so that the program can review where and when it is losing students, if retention is an issue. Retention figures will also reveal student satisfaction, if retention is high. If possible, conducting a survey or exit interview with students who do leave the program may reveal where there are issues that could be addressed to increase retention.

Assessment

In the course of our visit, we were not provided with any materials regarding assessment, therefore we can only offer general observations. The FTP program needs to define program outcomes and learning outcomes for each course, if these do not exist. The structure of the curriculum and course content should be evaluated against the program outcomes—do the courses deliver what is needed for students to succeed in the field and is the curriculum structured in such a way as to introduce, reinforce and develop mastery of the needed knowledge and skills in a clear and linear fashion. Assessment strategies, procedures and measures should be reviewed and executed on a regular basis.

Planning

Essentially, the program, as is, is too small to support the variety of interests and collaboration needed in film and television production. To work well and produce quality work, the program needs to grow to about 250 students and to attract students interested in producing, writing, directing and editing, of course, but also in production design, production management and costume/makeup/hair design.

In order to reach this goal of a critical mass of 250 students, we recommend FTP recruit and accept an additional 30 students next year, 40 the following year and 50 and 60 after that.

To support these developments, we recommend that the FTP faculty create a five-year plan. Incorporated into that plan should be the following new hires:

- Year One—2016-17:
A post-production/editorial faculty member, full-time, tenure track
A staff position to manage equipment and facilities
Adjuncts and/or 1-2-year contract faculty (one each year, continuing)

- Year Two—2017-18:
  - A producing faculty member, full-time, tenure track to teach the business of the industry

These suggestions would be the minimum, as a starting point. From this point on, a visioning process should take place among the dean, chair and the FTP faculty. Of course, every five-year plan ultimately is a one-year plan, as the long-term five-year plan would be revised on a yearly basis.

**Analysis of Faculty**

Looking at their professional qualifications, the existing faculty is eminently qualified. In film and television education, experience in the field is often considered the equivalent of an advanced or terminal degree, and rightly so.

To strengthen what these faculty do, we suggest that they communicate and meet on a regular basis to discuss curricular development and assessment criteria.

- The FTP faculty need to meet regularly/weekly
- The FTP faculty should meet regularly with the Stage and Screen faculty (monthly?)
- The FTP faculty should meet with faculty who teach related courses and support courses to stay abreast of and articulate course content and connections

**Faculty need to be directly engaged in assessment.** This includes:

- Developing criteria for assessing student work, including rubrics and plans for collecting and evaluating data
- Articulating grading requirements for courses and the program

In addition, faculty need to articulate program learning outcomes, which detail how they are preparing students for work in the local industry. Part of this work should include actively tracking alumni and asking for feedback as to how their education prepared them for the various positions they hold.

**Analysis of Operational Facilities and Budget**

Our initial observations here are that the FTP program lacks the needed facilities and budget to offer a high quality program. The current facilities and equipment are adequate, but modest. In some instances they certainly include some of the latest technology, but there are still huge areas that need improvement.

On the macro level, having FTP students and faculty using facilities spread across seven different buildings undercuts any real coherence or presence for the program, as it basically lacks an identifiable home. At the same time, this diluted presence makes it impossible for students to capitalize on the kind of creative collaboration that arises spontaneously when they constantly work together in the same spaces. Although we are uncertain what can be done about this situation, everyone involved in the FTP program would benefit from having a larger, communal home for the program.
As the program lacks a screening room, we recommend capitalizing on room 130 BAC for film history/aesthetics course and screenings.

The program needs **better equipment planning and management**. Specifically:

- No plan exists for equipment upgrades/or maintenance—it is imperative to create a purchasing and maintenance plan that looks to the future as part of the five-year plan
- Equipment needs replacement/upgrades on a regular basis
- The program should work to create a centralized equipment storage location for camera and sound and a checkout space where students can inspect and test equipment that they check out for a shoot

Similar long-term planning should be implemented to address computer and software needs. In addition, **steps should be taken to create a uniform computer environment and assist students in learning technically demanding software**. We recommend:

- Requiring students to purchase specific computers to create a more homogeneous work environment that will enable easy file-sharing and encourage students to teach/assist each other
- Providing software through Adobe site license
- Providing Lynda.com access to students and faculty for free through an affordable university site license where almost every piece of software needed is taught by experts in a competency-based curriculum. That puts the burden of mastering software on the shoulders of students, leaving classroom time for discussion of aesthetics, critiques of work in progress, script analysis and other activities more appropriate to faculty mentorship
- Providing a dedicated server for all post-production activity

Although financial resources are always limited, the FTP program should investigate tapping into existing revenue sources at the university and exploring fund-raising options. We recommend:

- Taking advantage of the university work study program for hiring work study students within FTP as student assistants (less cost to program)
- We commend the FTP faculty for creating the Controlled Chaos Film Festival, bringing both resources and recognition to the university and cultivating Friends of the Arts patrons; consider how this program might be expanded to increase revenues

**Summary of Program Strengths and Areas for Improvement**

The FTP has very **clear strengths** that put it in good stead for the future. These include:

- The combination/synergy with Theater within the School of Stage and Screen
- The emphasis on production and hands on approach to learning
- The Liberal Arts university experience

Nevertheless, we see significant growth in the number of students as essential to the program’s future and continued success. In addition to adding its own classes, adding more sections of classes, and hiring more faculty, as discussed earlier, we recommend the following strategies to help spur growth:
• Add a portfolio component to the admissions process for FTP because, by and large, creativity is not something that can be evaluated strictly by SAT scores and GPAs. Students should submit some kind of creative work, not necessarily a film or media project, but photography, poetry, a screenplay or photos of art work, for example. Faculty will need to review this material. By raising the bar for admission, students will place added value on acceptance to WCU.

• Create summer programs for juniors in high school. This should be a residential summer production program for high school juniors aimed at interesting and recruiting top students through a two-week taste of immersive, collaborative learning.

• Create a **brand identity for the FTP program** at WCU, i.e., take advantage of regional cultural realities and express those in branding materials and messages
  - Southern Appalachia
  - Cherokee Indian Reservation
  - Demographics of the area

• Collect scripts as an important resource for students and locate them in the library (Checkout Drew’s Script-o-Rama)

• Hire staff to handle alumni connections, networking, fundraising, Facebook, and Twitter as **building and maintaining connections with interested parties** will be fundamental to increasing revenues and spreading the word about the great work being done in the FTP program

**Summary of Recommendations**

To grow and improve the program, FTP needs more faculty, greater financial resources, and a refocusing that will bring key classes under the purview of FTP and remove the scattered approach currently in place. A greater emphasis on individual student films at the senior level is critical to building a stronger culture of production that will ultimately lead to better student work, attract higher quality students and bring greater recognition to the program and the university.

Growth in the number of students in the program will provide the income to pay for needed program support, and therefore growth can, in essence, create a self-funding program.

Finally, we recommend that the FTP program administrators and faculty **write a five-year strategic plan** that is consonant with the university’s five-year strategic plan.