

**VISUAL ARTS PROGRAMME  
REVIEW**

**PANEL REPORT  
FALL 2002**

## INTRODUCTION

The review panel included Professors James Greenlee (chair) and Michael Parker, both of Grenfell College, along with Jan Peacock of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. We conducted our site visit between 14 and 16 November 2002. Our report is based on the **Self Study** provided by the unit, as well as on tours of the facilities and extensive interviews with faculty, staff, students, and administrators associated with Visual Arts. Beyond this, with the gracious assistance of the Divisional Head and Secretary, we consulted additional information concerning class sizes, student grades, and the budget for the period 1999 to 2002. The Head, also at our request, conducted a survey of the Canadian Association of Fine Arts Deans (CAFAD) to determine what faculty workload norms might be across the country. We thank all involved for the courtesy, co-operation, and spirit of engagement displayed during our visit.

## MISSIONS AND GOALS

It is our opinion that the Visual Arts programme meshes nicely with the goals of the University. In the first instance, it serves fundamental cultural, social, and educational needs of this Province. Indeed, it offers the only BFA (Visual) degree available in Newfoundland and Labrador. Its graduates are intended to be the artists, art educators, graphic designers, and entrepreneurs of a province increasingly dependent on the so-called “cultural industries”. Beyond this primary duty, the programme also answers the University’s call for “improving our image with the outside world”. Thus, faculty, staff, and students have exhibited, taught, or studied at venues as far afield as Japan, Germany, and Britain. Similarly, visitors regularly come from other parts of Canada and abroad to enrich the programme here. In sum, while responsive to the demonstrable needs of its home community, the programme also enhances Memorial’s national and international profile.

Where Grenfell College is concerned, we feel that the programme is in close harmony with the strategic directions outlined for the institution as a whole. Most obviously, along with Theatre, Visual Arts has helped to “develop and promote a distinctive image” for the College. Similarly, the tradition of personalized teaching is very strong and reinforced by an exemplary student advising system. Meanwhile, the programme’s philosophy is well suited to the ethos of the College. Emphasizing a well-rounded, multi-disciplinary approach, rather than single-medium specialization, the programme operates within the liberal spirit that animates the College. This has the added benefit of preparing flexible graduates to meet the manifold cultural and educational needs of the Province.

## WAYS AND MEANS

We think this emphasis on producing informed “generalists” a wise one and our advice is to **“focus on that which you do best”**. Thus, we note with satisfaction the elimination of studio majors and the reduction in credit hours which followed the last review. On this score, we would urge faculty to continue concentrating on their established mandate. Indeed, we hope that they will find ways to blend new technologies and changing practices into the core studios, rather than looking to new courses and additional appointments as the only routes to effective academic planning. The record illustrates that the faculty have been flexible, creative, and collegial in managing change over the years. Those qualities will be required during the next few years as they try to balance innovation and continuity.

That said, it must be remembered that one of the stated goals of Memorial University is to **“achieve the full potential of the professional schools”**. Visual Arts must be assessed in this light, since it is defined as professional programme in the Grenfell College vision statement (Appendix “B”, section 1.3). It is, moreover, unique to the University and the Province. As such, the programme must be nurtured carefully, especially since recruiters regularly identify it, along with Theatre Arts, as one of the most distinctive attractions of the College. Accordingly, while we urge faculty to be prudent in planning for the future, we simultaneously draw the University’s attention to the urgent need for **investment in excellence**. Such investment as we will recommend need not be massive, but it is necessary in targeted areas if Visual Arts is to achieve anything close to its true potential.

We hope that the reasoning behind our introductory comments will be apparent in the assessment that follows.

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## THE PROGRAMME

The programme appears well designed to meet its stated goal of turning out “well-rounded generalists”. This liberal approach has been greatly enhanced by the elimination of studio majors and linked courses which, at one time, encouraged greater student specialization. As things currently stand, compulsory drawing classes in each of the first three years ensure a solid grounding in the “basics”, while individuals are required to undertake meaningful study in no fewer than three core studio disciplines. This scheme, which promotes a **structured eclecticism**, was pronounced popular by the several students we interviewed. In addition to studio work, all students must complete eight courses in Art History to add academic depth and perspective to their pursuits. Initiatives recently undertaken to develop a minor in Art History are wise and will meet a standing request from Visual Art and other students at the College. We note also that the reduction of required credit hours to 120 has had a positive effect, in that more students now complete their studies in the normal four-year period and at less cost than was previously the case. Altogether, programme members seem committed to a process of constantly refining the structure of the degree. This may account for a steadily improving rate of retention.

Student outcomes vary considerably. As **Appendix “C”** of the *Self Study* illustrates, graduates have found employment in many walks of life. Some have become practicing artists. Others have taken up teaching or the entrepreneurial life. Relatively few have gone on to graduate school. For our part, we do not find this latter point disturbing. After all, the professed goal of the program is to produce generalists capable of applying their art education to many different ends. Indeed, we are impressed precisely by the variety of productive outcomes to which the program has led. A specialized program could be expected to turn out several future professors and practicing “stars”. A program geared to rearing “generalists” should be measured by its capacity to train multi-talented and productive **“artistic citizens”**. We think Memorial’s Visual Arts programme performs this latter task extremely well. When we urge programme members to **“focus on that which you do best”**, this is what we have in mind.

On that score, we note a strong call from graduates, current students and faculty alike, that greater attention be given to training in what might be termed **“The Business of Art”**. If the goal is to produce adaptable professionals, those graduates must be truly “professional”. That is, they must be systematically armed to face the practical demands of a highly competitive, highly entrepreneurial art world. At the moment, the programme attempts to offer students some guidance in dealing with grant applications, galleries, agents, and a wide range of business, ethical, and legal matters central to the life of an informed artist. Such instruction, however, must be more focused and formalized. One of our major recommendations will speak to this point.

Class size seems to be appropriate to the pedagogical goals of the programme, given its facilities and its emphasis on personalized instruction. First-year intake is governed by

considerations of studio space and faculty availability. For some time now, first-year has been fully subscribed. Moreover, enrollment statistics for the last three years show a good distribution of students across all other courses. The same statistics illustrate a steady improvement in retention rates. Indeed, this year, there are twenty one students in fourth year out of an original draft of twenty eight. Furthermore, we find no systemic student criticism of teaching. There is, of course, always room for improvement. Thus, we found that the syllabi in Visual Arts varied considerably in form and content, and did not always conform to the guidelines set out in **section 6.2** of the MUN *Calendar*. In particular, descriptions of assignments with precise due dates and values are often not included. Some students told us that they were not always clearly informed of the number of projects they were expected to complete, and that professors sometimes “changed their minds” in mid-course. This needs to be rectified. Even so, the general evidence indicates that the programme performs its teaching functions conscientiously and effectively.

There is, however, one important curricular problem that has plagued Visual Arts from the outset and has yet to be resolved. This concerns academic electives. The *Calendar* (p. 115) and other documents proclaim that these electives are intended to enhance the BFA experience. Indeed, they are supposed to be selected after a process of careful consultation. We take this to imply that electives are deemed to be integral to a coherent programme. What we find, however, are many student and some faculty complaints that the choice of electives is governed solely by the vagaries of a crowded timetable. The solution to this problem will require considerable thought about the length of studio class periods and close consultation with the Registrar’s Office concerning **targeted elective** courses.

As indicated above, there is strong student demand for this programme. In fact, it regularly receives almost twice the number of first-year applications it can currently accommodate. This is heartening, but things could be much better. Thus, recruits still come overwhelmingly from a regional base. National and international markets have barely been scratched. Furthermore, faculty tell us that the quality of applicants has not risen appreciably. Aggressive recruitment from a broader pool of candidates would go a long way towards raising the quality of entrance-level students. In short, opportunities for the diversification and improvement of the student population are being missed.

All told, we think this programme to be very sound, but still open to improvement. This is especially true in the area of resources.

## RESOURCES

This is a successful programme, but it will require at least a **modestly higher** level of investment on the University's part if it is to remain so. This leads us to an assessment of resources and their deployment. Here, the key considerations involve faculty, staff, space, equipment, Harlow, and the Gallery.

### FACULTY

The faculty are fine teachers. They are also highly productive artists and scholars. Many have exhibited, published, or lectured at some of the world's most prestigious venues. Their collective portfolio and *curriculum vitae* would withstand careful scrutiny anywhere in this country. Several individuals already enjoy substantial international recognition. All, moreover, are members of regional and national professional bodies. Some also participate regularly in international organizations. The programme as a whole has cultivated particularly fruitful ties overseas in Britain and Ireland. Finally, faculty have been generally quite adept at finding external funding for their professional work. All told, the University can be proud of this vigorous group.

In terms of raw numbers, however, the unit is, at best, only adequately staffed to meet its current studio responsibilities and is understaffed in Art History. Our **CAFAD** survey shows that faculty carry a medium-weight load of teaching duties, calculated nationally. In short, they are fully employed. They are, moreover, well deployed across various levels of the curriculum and few confine themselves to one area of expertise. If any expansion of the programme is to occur, more studio faculty will be needed. Yet, even if student numbers remain as they are, academic planning will remain unnecessarily difficult until the position once held by a member now on (seemingly permanent) long-term disability is offered to a candidate in tenure stream. On this point, we feel quite strongly. A relatively small investment by the University here would pay large dividends in programme stability and creative adaptation to changing needs.

Crucial, however, is the need to appoint a **second art historian**. The study of art history is indispensable in any well-rounded Visual Arts education. Since its inception, the programme at Memorial has had only one position in this vital field. Vast in expanse and rich in interpretive theory, art history cannot be presented adequately to students, especially a growing body of students, by any single individual, however gifted he or she may be. We concur with the **Self Study** in asserting that, as things now stand, "it is difficult to address the basic core courses **and** regularly offer advanced ones". A second art historian is needed to ensure that students receive instruction that is balanced across all major methodologies, theories, periods, and levels. This would be imperative were art history being offered only to Visual Arts majors. It is doubly so considering that it is servicing three other degree programmes ( Theatre Arts, Historical Studies, and Humanities), as well as providing a minor field option to the general Grenfell population.

The popularity of and demand for this discipline have been amply demonstrated by regular waitlists. The time to move on this issue is now.

In a similar vein, we think it time to provide regular budgetary support for the **Visiting Artists** element of the programme. While not “faculty” in the strict sense, visiting artists form a vital element of any post-secondary education in art. In specialized colleges or in universities; in isolated locales or in the heart of New York City, visiting artists are everywhere called upon to provide a number of absolutely essential functions that are unavailable in any other way. These functions include specialized technical workshops, critiques of studio work, first-hand commentary on changing discourses and practices, and other personalized collaborative exchanges. All this broadens the skills of students and faculty, as well as providing them with immediate access to competing perspectives in a way that is not available in publications. Visiting artists have also been important vehicles for engaging the general public in the life of the programme, since they regularly attract large audiences to evening talks. The value of this kind of outreach, both to the programme and the University, should not be underestimated.

Unfortunately, this valuable, multi-purpose aspect of Visual Arts stands in jeopardy. It has always depended on funding from the Canada Council’s Visiting Artists Programme. Recently, the regulations governing application for these federal moneys have changed, requiring the hosting institution to provide matching funds. This new development has left Visual Arts in a very difficult position. Thus, much valuable time is consumed making internal funding applications. Meanwhile, planning has become a nightmare. We will recommend, therefore, that a line, comparable to the **Master Teacher** line in Theatre Arts, be added to the Visual Arts budget. This would appear to be the equitable thing to do within the context of the Division of Fine Arts. It would also be a wise and quite modest investment in the quality of the programme, helping to keep it competitive with others in the Atlantic region.

## **STAFF**

Truly serious shortages appear where the support staff is concerned, so much so that a Master Printer has to assist in photography, while the Gallery Director cannot take earned vacation time! The **Self Study** calls for additional staff in areas where, currently, there is none. This includes Photography, the Slide Library, Digital Imaging, and the Gallery. We concur that, in order to reach its full potential, the programme requires dedicated support in these areas. We do not, however, think that the call for four new staff appointments is realistic under present financial conditions. Accordingly, we will recommend that one position be filled by an **art resources professional** able to perform several of these necessary roles. The best strategic move, in this regard, might be to fill the currently vacant post of Gallery Registrar. An individual qualified for this post would also have the training to offer the “Business of Art” instruction, mentioned above, or could free the Gallery Director to do so. In this way, several, although not all, of the needed birds could be killed with one stone. The programme would also greatly benefit from the grant of more MUCEP assistants.

## SPACE

The **Self Study** affirms that no meaningful new academic planning, let alone significant expansion of student numbers, will be possible without additional space, as well as additional faculty. While sympathetic to a point, we are not in complete agreement with these assertions. On the one hand, we agree that some modification of the present space, as outlined in the **Self Study**, would be helpful. On the other, we think it unrealistic to argue that a truly significant portion of the proposed Exhibition Centre will be dedicated to solving the programme's problems with space. Too many competing interests are involved to make that likely. Similarly, it seems improbable that the College or the University will have the capital resources necessary to erect large additions to the standing facility. The only viable option, at the moment, would seem to be reconfiguration of the space now available. In this connection and where possible, we would urge the University to consider some of the suggestions outlined in the **Self Study**. Consideration of this issue, meanwhile, leads us to a more general observation, one touching both curriculum adaptation and spatial concerns.

Many suggestions as to the revitalization of the programme, encountered both in documents and site interviews, focused on media, materials, and processes not currently available in standing courses for a variety of reasons. This is to be expected, given the ever-changing nature of the arts. The temptation here is to think in terms of adding space, acquiring new equipment, creating new courses, and hiring new faculty. We have been asked, for example, to consider the addition of both bronze casting and expansion in digital media. Students, meanwhile call for video and film to be added. We feel that some of these practices would be too expensive and would create unrealistic demands for equipment and space. Where marble and birch are free, why should a "generalist" programme involve itself in so specialized a practice as bronze casting? Fortunately, some faculty have already recognized both the logic and constraints implicit in offering a small, generalized programme. These people are incorporating new strategies and approaches, such as digital imaging, into existing core courses. We endorse this strategy of adaptative integration and feel that it can only reinforce, while enhancing, the philosophy of a programme that aims to provide "a solid grounding in **main** studio areas". Thus, we say again: "**focus on that which you do best**".

This is not to argue that space poses no problem for the programme. We do, however, feel that **some** difficulties can be overcome. Thus, the University should consider funding the gradual reconfiguration of space. Furthermore, there should be a **semester-to-semester review and allocation of space** by a committee that maintains a flexible approach to the use of studio areas, based on actual enrollments and a mutual understanding of needs. Precedents and "ownership" should play no part in such deliberations. Finally, Visual Arts should have a permanent representative on any advisory committee struck to oversee use of the Exhibition Centre.



## **EQUIPMENT, MAINTENANCE, AND SAFETY**

While urging faculty prudence in many ways, we take very seriously the call for closer attention to the repair or replacement of the many pieces of worn or outdated equipment noted in the **Self Study**. The programme may be small and “general” in nature, but it should be kept in top working order if we wish to attract top “generalist” candidates. The depreciation of capital items should be **closely monitored and systematically compensated for as a matter of routine planning**. Such depreciation is a fact of life in an technology-dependent programme. For a detailed list of the equipment and maintenance needs of the programme, see pages 25-26 of the **Self Study**. Priorities would have to be negotiated on these items, given their range and expense. Again, gradual, planned refurbishment is urged. In the final analysis, however, it remains true that a physical plant, once state-of-the-art, is now quite run down. We fear that retention is bound to suffer in the long run, unless that plant is kept competitive with comparable facilities elsewhere.

Where **safety** is concerned, we note several **alarming deficiencies**. Most notable among these is the problem of adequate ventilation in some studios. This is especially disturbing in the case of the sculpture facilities, which require immediate inspection. With its low ceilings, heavy production of particulate matter, and ill-conceived ventilation “system”, the sculpture studio requires expeditious attention. More generally, we hear reasonable calls for more first aid and eyewashing stations throughout the building. Altogether, we will recommend a **thorough review of safety conditions** in Visual Arts.

## **STRUCTURED OFF-CAMPUS STUDENT EXPERIENCES**

Well-structured off-campus student experiences in major cultural centres constitute a distinctive, attractive, and **advertised** element of the Memorial Visual Arts programme. Faculty, the Panel, and, above all, students agree that such experiences are absolutely vital to recruitment and retention. Since the beginning of the programme in 1988, off-campus experience has been realized in a variety of ways, including short field trips to (Toronto, Montreal, Halifax, and New York), six-week summer courses at Harlow, and the Falmouth exchange. Recently, the prospect of exchanges with American colleges has arisen. Seen through the eyes of an isolated and largely untraveled student population, **structured** ventures, such as these, are more within reach, financially and emotionally, than individual travel. They are also more productive. Thus, to cite one student whom we interviewed: “I never realized that you had to be taught how to approach a big gallery until the prof showed me.” We think that it is necessary to do more of this at Grenfell than would be the case in major cultural centres. Such experiences, in any event, help students make the necessary transition to professional life in the larger cultural sector.

Most recently, the programme has offered three Art History courses every other summer at Memorial’s Harlow campus. The trip is always fully subscribed, with an average of twenty students enrolling. For six weeks, they attend classes, visit museums, galleries,

artists' studios, and other art schools. Some take sidetrips to the Continent to collect material for course work. Upon their return to Grenfell, they have an additional six weeks of study to complete their assignments. It has evolved that one faculty member has taken primary responsibility in developing, delivering, and recruiting for these courses. This includes the onerous task of fundraising, as well. While we admire such energy, labour, and initiative, it is important to remember that Harlow semesters and any other forms of off-campus experience are studies underwritten by the Visual Arts programme as a whole. Consequently, it is the Visual Arts faculty, as a unit, that must assume a **collective** role in the planning and realization of these studies. **Working together** to plan policy, staffing, and offerings, programme members may well develop innovative ways of delivering, not only the Harlow courses, but other enriching off-campus experiences.

There is no doubt, however, that such experience must be offered. Indeed, it is one of the most decisive factors affecting recruitment and retention. **Profound student unease** about the future of Harlow, for example, was palpable during our site visit. As one student from Nova Scotia told us, heartily seconded by many peers in the room, Harlow was the **sole factor** that led her to choose Grenfell over the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Weighing costs against benefits, can the University afford to surrender so clear a competitive advantage? We think not. However, significant thought will have to be devoted to the problem inherent in the Government's recent decision that students must carry four courses to be eligible for a loan in any given semester. This is yet another reason why we call on the entire unit to develop innovative strategies for ensuring meaningful off-campus experience to students.

## **THE GALLERY**

The Gallery supports the programme by exhibiting the work of students, faculty, and visiting artists. It also mounts prestigious special shows and publishes catalogues, as funds permit. In addition, it plays host to numerous public functions. Indeed, the Gallery is the principal contact point between the programme and the general public of this region. That it can play this role effectively is easily demonstrated. Indeed, last Christmas over 2500 people passed through to view the show then on display. Beyond these things, the Gallery has been responsible for numerous outreach efforts in regional schools. Unfortunately, this productive hive of activity was hit hard when the Canada Council instituted its matching funds policy. This has seriously damaged its ability to import the kind of first-rank shows that bring major works to our students and the community. Furthermore, the Gallery can no longer afford to turn out the high quality brochures and catalogues for which it was once justly praised. Beyond this, the facilities themselves stand badly in need of a face-lift. Given its importance to the programme and its high profile in the community, some increased support for this proven institution seems in order.

Definitely required, however, is professional staff support for the Gallery Director. As things currently stand, there are so many year-round calls on the Director's time, that taking a meaningful earned vacation is out of the question. MUCEP assistance helps, but

many tasks require expertise beyond what can be expected of students. The Gallery once had a **Registrar** to provide professional support. As noted above, we believe that filling that post now with a judiciously chosen candidate would help to ease a number of staff problems in the programme.

## SUMMARY REMARKS

Before making recommendations, let us conclude by saying that, since its inception in 1988, the Visual Arts programme has exhibited great flexibility in adapting to changing needs and shrinking budgets. Thus, it has suffered cutbacks, but has maintained its core philosophy and core offerings in good order. It has done so, moreover, while retaining its customary élan and high morale. Meanwhile, student demand is strong and retention rates are sound. We commend programme members on all these counts, even as we urge them to think prudently about elements of their **Self Study**. Yet we also call on the University to think prudently, lest it be penny-wise and pound-foolish with this sterling resource. As it stands, the program is one of the premier attractions of Grenfell College in the public eye. It cannot and must not be allowed to “rust”! In our recommendations, we have tried to balance understandable faculty desires for large-scale expansion against University imperatives involving fiscal constraints. We are firmly of the opinion that the program should confine itself, for now, to **that which it does best**. By the same token, we agree that, unless the University moves to **invest prudently in small-scale excellence**, the program will, indeed, “rust”---- to the benefit of none.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Focus on that which you do best. To ensure this, members should routinely meet to discuss and refine the basic nature of the Visual Arts Programme, with a view to integrating new practices and technologies into core studio courses while conforming to the stated goal of producing well-rounded generalists.
2. Instruction in the “Business of Art” should be formalized in the curriculum.
3. Members should work as a unit to plan policy, staffing, and offerings of off-campus experiences for students. The University should regard such experiences as vital to the Programme.
4. The faculty position of a person currently on permanent long-term disability should be offered to a candidate in the tenure stream.
5. The position of Gallery Registrar, currently vacant, should be filled by a person who could perform several of the support duties urgently required by the Programme.

6. A line-item for Visiting Artists should be added to the budget of the Programme.
7. A second Art Historian should be hired.
8. There must be a thorough review of safety conditions.
9. The Lecture Theatre (224) should be reconfigured to increase seating capacity. The deficiencies in the air quality of the room should also be addressed.
10. Every practical effort should be made to upgrade the physical plant to ensure the competitiveness of the Programme and to allow for maximum recruitment and retention.
11. Greater efforts should be made to recruit the best candidates from the widest possible pool, regionally, nationally, and internationally.
12. Course syllabi must conform more closely with guidelines set out in section 6.2 of the MUN *Calendar*.
13. Members should consult with the Registrar and College Programme Chairs about identifying targeted electives in order to facilitate the needs of the students and the philosophy of the Visual Arts Programme.
14. The Programme should have a permanent seat on any committee overseeing use of the new Exhibition Centre.
15. More MUCEP students should be hired to assist the Gallery and the Programme.