



**Periodic Program Review**

**Documentary Media**

School of Image Arts

Faculty of Communication and Design

**FINAL ASSESSMENT REPORT (FAR)**

January 17, 2017

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The School of Image Arts offers a **Masters of Fine Arts in Documentary Media**. The field involves the history, theory and practice of documentary media forms in photographic, film/video and digital media applications. Innovative in approach, this studio-based program offers students the possibility of working across media. Exploring a range of non-fiction subject matter, students work toward the Master's Project (MRP), which may take any number of forms. Core academic courses in the history and theory of documentary take place in the first two semesters, establishing a common frame of reference for production courses and the MRP. Given the School's renown in both film and photography, studio practices in the school have evolved from the tradition of analogue into a digital media environment, yet the school retains its facilities in historic analogue processes, ensuring the viability of both traditional and innovative hybrid approaches and practices. Multiplatform, interactive and/or web applications often complement or expand projects produced for the screen, publication and/or exhibition.

The Learning Outcomes in the Master in Fine Arts in Documentary Media Program all point to the student's development, completion, and public presentation of a Master's Project (MRP), which is under the creative control of the student. The MRP is based on a non-fiction idea conceived by the student, which is "work-shopped" and developed over time in relation to the core curriculum. Projects are developed and critiqued throughout the two years in the context of production classes, project development seminars, and the Master Class Seminar. In the context of classes and critiques students receive formal and ongoing feedback from professors, supervisors, advisors, and peers. After final preparations in the spring course in year one, students carry out fieldwork during the 2½-month summer period. In year two, editing and refinement take place in the Master's Project Production courses, culminating in the graduate exhibition called the DocNow Festival, where works are presented in public galleries, publications, websites, and/or screenings.

A "Project Paper" accompanies the project. An Oral Examination completes program requirements (more commonly known in MFA programs as a "critique"). The defense of the project takes place before a faculty examination committee comprised of the project Supervisor, Secondary Advisor, and the GPD or designate as Chair, in either June or August.

## DM PROGRAM IDENTIFIED STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND OPPORTUNITIES

### Strengths

The DM interdisciplinary curriculum was developed and is taught by award winning and highly productive faculty with extensive professional backgrounds and scholarly accomplishments. The curriculum is timely, given the present global interest in non-fiction and documentary across a spectrum of fields in an increasingly interconnected media landscape. The program is well conceived, introducing students to a wide variety of subjects and approaches in documentary practice and history, presented over a six-semester period.

The first year establishes a strong foundation through core courses that provide a balance of practice and theory, supporting visual arts practice as a form of knowledge. Offering many opportunities for developing theoretical knowledge in the field, the program is academically rigorous while allowing students a great deal of freedom in developing their artistic projects. Taught by scholars and artists with national and international exhibition, screening, conference and publication records, the curriculum exposes students to a multitude of approaches, technologies and theories. The MRP Milestone project, culminating in a public presentation, introduces an experiential and collaborative learning opportunity, providing many real-world lessons in project development and refinement, exhibition/screening presentation, and the practical application of fundraising and marketing campaign strategies.

The MRP Project Paper draws upon students' subject research, methodology and the documentary relevance of the project and affords students the opportunity to articulate and contextualize their work within a cultural, historical, and theoretical framework. The Oral Examination provides a context for reflection on the MFA learning experience as a whole. A range of electives and the Master Class Seminar, which brings professionals, industry experts, and practitioners into the school, complements the core courses. Faculty-led courses are also supplemented by lectures and workshops with guest experts and digital resources such as Lynda.com to support a variety of production techniques and strategies.

Set within the culturally vibrant and diverse urban environment of Toronto, with its museums, galleries, festivals, and many cultural resources, the program provides students with two dedicated Graduate labs, 24-hour school/grad lab access, and an excellent selection of professional equipment, labs, and facilities. Long-term loans of specialized equipment are made for the MRP fieldwork, and excellent digital and hard copy collections of films, photo books, archives, and Special Collections are available through the Ryerson library. The program also cultivates a strong peer-to-peer learning experience. Enriching these resources are the Documentary Media Research Centre (DMRC) located in IMA 120, a newly established research centre and seminar space, hosting and initiating conferences (such as Critical Topography, May 2015 and Visible Evidence, August 2015), and a guest lecture program. The DMRC Faculty are engaged in producing, writing and organizing events and conference opportunities for faculty, researchers, post-graduates, and fellows. Another unique resource in the school is the Ryerson Image Centre (RIC), a world-class exhibition centre hosting lectures, visiting artists, curators, and conferences. The collections in the RIC are available to graduate student researchers and the resource centre supports a full

spectrum of research activities. The Faculty of Communication & Design (FCAD) also provides extensive facilities for students, including 3D printing facilities, a virtual reality lab, the Digital Media Zone, and sound recording and mixing studios.

## Weaknesses

The biggest gap in student satisfaction in the program has focused on two related areas: First, there has been a perception that students should be acquiring “job skills” or “training” that will directly translate into a job as an outcome of the MFA degree. Along these lines students have asked for more “production-based workshops.” The second issue is based on a perception that the program places too much emphasis on “theory” or academic courses in history and theory, with an emphasis on critical reading and writing, taking away from the project development and production. There is also a sense that focus on the project comes too late in first year, especially due to the fact that the four-course load in winter of first year is quite heavy. There are questions about a lack of flexibility in the course structure and the fact that students would like to be able to take both film and photography, but must choose between the two.

Additionally, students have expressed the need for more focus to be placed on industry skills and practices (producing, pitching, production skills). Although DM does not advertise that they are a “documentary film,” program, DM realize the need to better communicate the identity, values, and mission of the program. The fact that Documentary Media offers a two-year, interdisciplinary, fine arts degree means that the focus is not on film industry jobs or training students to be professional filmmakers or photographers. Rather, the program offers students an opportunity to develop research skills and a self-directed creative practice through mentorship and by providing critical feedback, and helping them develop resources and find the tools they need. The need to effectively communicate the value of the program and “why theory matters” is important as is the need to find ways to eliminate areas of repetition and overlap in the curriculum, while seeking out collaborations with professional and industry-based organizations such as HotDocs to better satisfy students’ desire to learn about industry practices. DM identifies the need to address the real challenges of trying to complete a professionally-made film in two years, especially if one does not have a production background. Many graduate students would like an opportunity to get some teaching experience during their two years in the program. Thus, ways to offer TA and GA opportunities—since many students plan to teach in future, must be found.

The program is also working to develop more effective incremental milestones for the MRP project and paper in the second year. Milestones are not sufficiently integrated into the curriculum. Timing of the oral examination and paper (summer) is also separated from the principal concluding activities of the MFA, which are the spring film/exhibition events, thus the examination can focus more on the paper than the project. Finally, some students have expressed frustration about having to organize the thesis presentation/exhibition in the framework of a course. For some students, the DocNow presentation takes time away from their individual project work and they would prefer that those students most interested should undertake the organization of the festival, perhaps even earning credit for it.

## Opportunities

DM examined the SWOT and especially the “Weaknesses” as potential opportunities for improving the program and better meeting learning objectives. Those “Opportunities” became the basis for DM short-term goals. DM currently is adopting many of the improvements identified such as adjusting the exam towards a critique immediately after the launch of the public presentations, which will provide students with more immediate feedback on projects. DM is also rewriting our progress reports to incorporate clearer steps toward completion of the Project Paper. Faculty shared research with students in the beginning of the year in order to show new students what they each do in their own practices. Most importantly, clear and timely communication has become a priority. Some of the weaknesses identified have been eliminated in the new curriculum, which is now in full effect.

## SUMMARY OF THE PEER REVIEWER TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS WITH RESPONSES FROM DOCUMENTARY MEDIA (DM) AND YSGS

The Peer Response Team for the Periodic Review of the Master of Fine Arts in Documentary Media (DM) program was conducted on February 29 and March 1, 2016. The PRT comprised of Dr. Carol Payne, Associate Professor, Art History, School for Studies in Art and Culture, Carleton University; Dr. Angelica Fenner, Associate Professor, German and Cinema Studies, University of Toronto; and Dr. Paul Moore, Associate Professor, Sociology, Ryerson University. The PRT report was communicated to the Associate Dean, YSGS on April 11, 2016, and the response to the report from DM was communicated on May 11, 2016.

The PRT cited several strengths in their report, stating that they were impressed by the program and the innovative work done in DM. In particular, the PRT noted that both faculty and students in the program were highly engaged, were impressed overall by the program, and commended faculty for the innovative work they are doing. The PRT report includes several recommendations, which are discussed below.

As mandated by Ryerson Senate Policy 126, what follows is the YSGS-level response to both the PRT report, and the response to the report of DM. Summarized below are the recommendations and responses, divided into two broad categories: academic and administrative/financial.

### Academic Recommendations

#### i. Curriculum

The PRT communicated that they were impressed with how proactive the program has been in refining curriculum. But as with any program, more can be done. They recommend that greater attention be paid to the sequencing of courses throughout the program. In addition, they suggest the development of more independent work and coursework directly focused toward research projects in the second year of the program. While a relatively minor point, there is little allowance for electives and out of program choices, which would be important for any students interested in proceeding to PhD programs, but we recognize this is difficult within the intensive two-year MFA program.

*DM: The Documentary Media Graduate Program Director will work with faculty to find means for students to develop individual research agendas.*

*YSGS: YSGS supports enhancing curriculum in the program that encourages SRC activities for students, especially those activities that encourage independent work. YSGS will work with Documentary Media to consider options for this enhancement.*

## Administrative and Financial Recommendations

### i. Promotion of the Program

The PRT recommends that Ryerson promote the program more extensively. With HotDocs, TIFF and the Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto is emerging as an international hub of documentary activity. Within that milieu, the Documentary Media program should be better known.

*DM: The DM GPD will work with IMA Chair, FCAD Dean and YSGS to better coordinate promotion efforts. We are also planning an “Open House” with involvement from MFA students to be pitched to 3rd and 4th year undergrads in area schools.*

*YSGS: YSGS provides marketing support for all graduate programming at Ryerson, and will continue to collaborate with DM, FCAD, and CGCE in this regard. YSGS supports the proposed Open House as described in the DM response.*

### ii. Research Travel Funding for Students

The ambitious projects undertaken by Documentary Media students require more funding than is presently offered. A key gap we have identified is the lack of funds necessary for research, production and screening or exhibiting travel. We think this will be relatively easy to address. Since the Yeates School of Graduate Studies and other offices across campus have conference and research funds available to students for academic conference travel, we recommend that the criteria for these awards be extended to include costs for research fieldwork, production, and travel for screening or exhibiting creative works.

*DM: The GPD will work with FCAD Dean, YSGS and David Begg at International Office to urge shift in criteria to include research and production travel, etc.*

*YSGS: YSGS provides limited travel funding for graduate students, as does the RSU and President’s office. Given budget constraints, priority is to dissemination costs, rather than to production or research costs.*

### iii. Increased Scholarship Funding

Compared to MFA programs in Ontario and across Canada, Documentary Media students receive relatively limited scholarship funding. Enhancing financial support will not only enable students’ work but also help to recruit the best students.

*DM: The GPD will work with IMA Chair, YSGS, FCAD, & Advancement officers to develop more scholarships.*

*YSGS: Scholarships are linked to student enrollment, and are provided through centrally mandated funding, and through external agencies such as Tri-Council. YSGS*

*encourage DM to have their students apply for external scholarships, and will work with all stakeholders to address internal scholarship funding. YSGS supports efforts to enhance endowed scholarships within DM and FCAD.*

#### **iv. GA and RA Positions**

The Peer Review Team was surprised to learn how few GA-ships were available to Documentary Media students, and how little the MFA students were integrated into the delivery of the undergrad studio and studies curriculum in the School of the Image Arts. As in scholarship and research funding, GA-ships are important for student support and are a routine part of an admissions package at most graduate programs. But GA-ships also provide students with crucial teaching experience while fostering mentoring skill, technique and research relationships between faculty and graduate studies, as well as between undergraduate and graduate students. The PRT recognizes that increasing the number of GA-ships will require greater harmonization between undergraduate programs and the MFA in Documentary Media, but think that this would be greatly beneficial to all.

The PRT also strongly recommend an increase in RA-ships in Documentary Media. This will not only address the limited funding available to students but will also provide much needed research support, particularly to faculty engaged with the DMRC and others with external research-creation grants. Further, the engagement in faculty research will enrich these students' own research experience, skills and technique.

*DM: The GPD will work with IMA Chair, school, faculty and FCAD Dean to develop more GA positions.*

*YSGS: YSGS supports the PRT recommendation and program response. GAs provide valuable learning and teaching opportunities for graduate students.*

#### **v. Further Faculty Hiring in Documentary Media**

As noted above, with retirements expected in the next couple of years, it is crucial that the SIA be allocated new faculty lines that will be integral to the MFA in DocMedia. We agree with the Self Study that attention to diversity in faculty should be a concern in future tenure- track hiring.

*DM: The GPD will work with other school GPDs, IMA Chair, DHC and Dean to advocate for hires.*

*YSGS: New hires are allotted by the Provost and Faculty Dean's. YSGS supports the principles of EDI for hiring of all faculty and staff at Ryerson.*

#### **vi. Funding for DMRC, possibly a Research Chair**

Related to the above point about faculty support and renewal, we urge Ryerson to offer more support to the DMRC. In the brief period of its existence, this research centre

has been highly successful in SSHRCC-supported research and conference initiatives, all of which enhance the program's and the university's reputation. Indeed, there is potential for a strong Canada Research Chair application linked to the DMRC. Should a research chair not be pursued, we still recommend enhanced structural funding for the DMRC, and also that the research centre integrate its work more concertedly with the curriculum and student activities in DocMedia.

*DM: The GPD will work with IMA Chair, and FCAD Associate Dean and Dean, and DMRC to develop proposals for funding a research chair or distinguished visiting professor for DMRC.*

*YSGS: YSGS supports the PRT recommendation and program response.*

### **vii. Studio Space**

Studio space was an issue mentioned repeatedly by some of the students with whom we spoke. They expressed the desire to engage their projects in a sustained way that would not involve packing up for other occupants of the same space. The two designated studio spaces are currently each shared by all of the students in a given class and, in addition, they periodically serve as classrooms. Considering the type of in depth studio work these students are undertaking, adequate studio space is crucial. While we recognize what a difficult problem space is to solve on an urban campus, we recommend that this concern be addressed.

*DM: The GPD will work with IMA Chair, faculty and operations manager to develop solutions to meet curricular needs in this area.*

*YSGS: Given the production aspect of the DM program, YSGS encourages the further development of such studio spaces.*

### **viii. Faculty Workload**

The Peer Review Team was also struck by the heavy workload undertaken by faculty members. The labour intensive nature of thesis/final project supervision is particularly onerous for relatively few faculty. We feel that this issue, especially pertaining to supervision, needs to be solved. However, we also note that faculty, who are admirably devoted to their students, are resistant to cutting back on time devoted to student advising.

*DM: The GPD will work with IMA Chair, and FCAD Associate Dean and Dean to develop proposals for workload solutions for the school.*

*YSGS: Faculty workload is mandated by the RFA Collective agreement, and teaching assignment is directed by the Faculty Dean in conjunction with the School Director.*

## IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Academic Recommendations	Proposed Follow-up	Responsibility for Leading Follow-up	Timeline for Addressing Recommendation
<p>i. Develop curriculum allowing for more independent work.</p>	<p>The GPD will work with faculty and curriculum committee to find means for students to develop individual research agendas.</p>	<p>Graduate Program Director, DM</p>	<p>January 2017</p>
Administrative and Financial Recommendations	Proposed Follow-up	Responsibility for Leading Follow-up	Timeline for Addressing Recommendation
<p>i. There should be better overall promotion of the program by the university.</p>	<p>The GPD will work with IMA Chair, FCAD Dean and YSGS to better coordinate promotion efforts. We are also planning an “Open House” with involvement from MFA students to be pitched to 3rd and 4th year undergrads in area schools.</p>	<p>Graduate Program Director, DM</p>	<p>Fall 2016 Review in June 2018</p>
<p>ii. Enhance research travel funds for graduate student research and project development.</p>	<p>The GPD will work with FCAD Dean, YSGS and David Begg at International Office to urge shift in criteria to include research and production travel, etc.</p>	<p>Graduate Program Director, DM</p>	<p>Fall 2016 Review in June 2018</p>
<p>iii. Increase scholarship funding.</p>	<p>The GPD will work with IMA Chair, YSGS, FCAD, &amp; Advancement officers to develop more scholarships.</p>	<p>Graduate Program Director, DM</p>	<p>Fall 2017 to Winter 2018 with Review in June 2018</p>
<p>iv. Provide funding for GA and RA Positions for Ryerson’s only</p>	<p>The GPD will work with IMA Chair, school faculty and FCAD Dean</p>	<p>Graduate Program</p>	<p>Fall 2016 with Review in June</p>

	MFA – a field in which this is the terminal degree.	to develop more GA positions.	Director, DM	2017
v.	Consider further faculty hires that better reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of our students.	The GPD will work with other school GPD, IMA Chair, DHC and Dean to advocate for hires.	Graduate Program Director, DM	January 2017 with Review in June 2018.
vi.	Provide funding for the faculty-run Documentary Media Research Centre.	The GPD will work with IMA Chair, and FCAD Associate Dean and Dean and DMRC to develop proposals for funding a research chair or distinguished visiting professor for DMRC.	Graduate Program Director, DM	January 2017 with Review in June 2018.
vii.	Enhance or create studio spaces, allowing for better access to resources.	The GPD will work with IMA Chair, faculty and operations manager to develop solutions to meet curricular needs in this area.	Graduate Program Director, DM	Fall 2016 with Review June 2017.
viii.	Adjust faculty workload and provide recognition/credit for graduate supervisions.	The GPD will work with IMA Chair, and FCAD Associate Dean and Dean to develop proposals for workload solutions for the school.*  <i>* Pending ratification of a new 2+2 workload the question of supervisory compensation is resolved.</i>	Graduate Program Director, DM	Fall 2017 with Review in June 2018