

**External Assessor Report**  
**Whitecliffe College's MFA Winter Seminar: LOCAL/GLOBAL**  
**July 11-16, 2009**

Submitted by  
John S. Gordon, Provost  
Otis College of Art and Design  
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**Introduction**

It was both my pleasure and my honor to serve as the external assessor for Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design's MFA Winter Seminar, which was held from July 11 -16, 2009. In my current capacity as Provost of the Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, I serve as the chief academic officer, responsible for the quality and assessment of 11 Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) degree programs and 4 Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree programs – including one limited-residency graduate program akin to Whitecliffe's MFA program.

As a former member of the Commission on Accreditation of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD), I have assessed the components of the Whitecliffe College MFA program listed below utilizing the Process and Procedures for External Assessment guidelines provided to me in advance by academic leadership of Whitecliffe College. However, my assessment is also informed by the national standards set by NASAD.

I want to thank to thank all members of the Whitecliffe staff and faculty who greeted me so warmly and who made every effort to provide me with the information, data and records necessary to fulfill my responsibilities. Being a member of the Whitecliffe community for this intensive seminar week was a distinct privilege.

**Components Assessed:**

**1. Quality of Students at Various Stages of the Program**

The External Assessor (EA) schedule provided ample opportunity to interact with each level of the MFA program – both in individual critique and group dialogue settings. From this perspective it is clear that the students drawn to Whitecliffe's program are what the educational establishment calls "non-traditional." They are, as a group, a little older than the "traditional" MFA applicant and they appear to come to Whitecliffe from a more diverse educational and professional background. These two factors present the faculty with both special opportunities and challenges. Opportunities, in that these older students bring with them more life experience upon which to draw in their creative practice; and challenges, in that these students may be less familiar with the vocabulary and historical precedent necessary for effective contemporary expression and/or may have skill sets that require updating or replacement.

However, I saw ample evidence that the Whitecliffe faculty is eminently qualified and equipped to work effectively with non-traditional as well as traditional students. The intensive format of the low-residency seminars appears to benefit both student and faculty alike in this regard.

While each student demonstrated both strengths and weaknesses, it is important to note the EA found no student in the program who was not qualified for admission. In addition there appeared to be only 1 or 2 students whose ability to successfully complete the all degree requirements was in question. Nonetheless, given the intense and demanding format of the program, the institution may wish to consider creating an alternative certification to conclude the course of study for those students who prove themselves unable to succeed in the full 2-year course. One could envision the creation of a Graduate Certificate or other similar vehicle for this purpose. Its use, presumably, would be rare, but its existence would offer the both the student and the faculty a graceful and appropriate method with which to conclude the course of study when necessary.

## **2. Student Achievement**

At the conclusion of the Winter Seminar, the EA was struck by the generally high level of ambition that these graduate students bring to their work – regardless of program level. The faculty and staff have succeeded in building an expectation of achievement within the graduate student community, which is then supported and perpetuated by the students themselves. To the institution's credit, they have structured required opportunities for the students to present and analyze their work among their peers, with a corresponding opportunity for feedback from their fellow students. This peer assessment provides an important learning opportunity which is both separate and distinct from the parallel assessments offered by the faculty and the EA.

Student success in the visual arts is often linked directly to a student's willingness to take risks; to venture beyond their already established comfort zone. The Whitecliffe faculty has built a program that offers students several distinct opportunities – all within one week's time – to discover a pathway to a new dimension in their creative exploration. Some discover that path during the seminar week, while others may not find their way until they return home following the seminar.

In this EA's judgment, there were only 1 or 2 students whose resistance to change threatens to delay their progress toward the degree, but that won't be proven until the next assessment.

## **3. Program Delivery**

This evaluator was enormously impressed by the rigor of the Whitecliffe program. Both faculty and students alike are intensely immersed in the process of creative research and evaluation. The momentum is such that there is relatively little opportunity for a student to fail – unless s/he falls ill or otherwise elects to withdraw from the engagement with her/his faculty and peers.

There are well-designed “windows” within the seminar format in which both faculty and students alike pause to listen and learn from visiting artists or scholars whose work may be directly or only tangentially related to the seminar theme. During these near-daily

presentations, one could almost see (or imagine) new ideas or new pathways forming among the members of the community.

It is also important to note and celebrate the important roles that the student's Studio Research Supervisor plays in supporting the growth and development of each graduate student's work. Given the relatively modest size of the full-time faculty, the Studio Research Supervisors play a pivotal role in the delivery and continuity of the program.

#### **4. Internal and External Assessment and Moderation Processes**

The institution has worked thoughtfully with the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) to establish a rigorous and consistent series of internal and external assessment processes throughout the two-year period of required full-time study. These procedures are clearly defined and described in the Master of Fine Arts Course Manual (as amended).

These assessments take two forms: *formative* (formal assessments conducted during the Summer and Winter seminars; and *summative* (a final cumulative assessment conducted at the end of the student's two-year period of study).

Each assessment requires written documentation (often using forms developed for that purpose). This report is one such document.

During the Winter 2009 seminar, this EA participated in two sessions during which final seminar marks were discussed and appropriately moderated by the Head of Department for Fine Arts and by the Dean of Instruction and Undergraduate Studies.

#### **5. Examples of Good Practice**

As indicated above this EA observed consistent and respectful guidance and assessment offered to the graduate students throughout the seminar week. The course followed carefully the program of study as outlined in the published Master of Fine Arts Course Manual (as amended), which is provided to every student.

However, the EA was pleased to observe the Head of Department, Studio Research Supervisor and Dean make the decision to delay the final mark and extended the assessment process for one student whose work was designed from the outset to evolve over the course of the seven-day seminar. In this respect what is normally a formative assessment concluded prior to the close of the seminar became a blend of formative and summative assessment, which did not conclude until the final day of the seminar. This decision was both wise and fair, and an example of good practice that extended beyond customary practice.

## **6. Staffing and Resources**

Every member of the Whitecliffe College staff, from the President to the most recent Lecturer, appears to wear several hats and carries multiple responsibilities. While this EA observed only the Winter Graduate Seminar, it was clear that most members of the Whitecliffe community have responsibilities that shift almost immediately from the intensive low-residency MFA seminar into the regular two-semester BFA course. While that prospect was daunting to this EA, most faculty appear accustomed to the pace and demands of the College.

Certainly the staffing I observed was sufficient to meet the needs and expectations of the 22 graduate students who participated in the Winter Seminar.

The facilities and material resources appear more than adequate to support the work of the College, at least for the week-long seminar format that the graduate program requires. Both the studio and instructional spaces used by the graduate students were ample and appropriate. The institution's Library also appeared adequately equipped and staffed to meet the needs of the program.