

The History of the Drew Arts & Letters Program

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The story of the Master's and Doctor of Letters (MLitt/DLitt) begins with the Independent College and University Assistance Act (the ICUAA). In the late 1960s, the state colleges were expanding from being mainly teacher colleges to becoming comprehensive colleges and universities and adding the numerous programs required to accomplish that. In 1972, when the Speaker of the Assembly was future Drew president Tom Kean, the state decided to aid the independents by providing some financial support for starting new programs that demonstrated they fulfilled a societal need. Drew in 1974 selected a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies under the leadership of Bard Thompson, our dean from 1968-1986, for whom Thompson Graduate Commons is named. What was the societal need this program fulfilled? Providing teachers with graduate-level interdisciplinary studies in the humanities instead of more professional coursework in education and as an alternative to the narrower focus of Masters of Arts degrees in English or History. Within a few years, both the colleges and the state decided that this was an inefficient use of state funds and decided to amend the ICUAA to utilize a student-based formula determined by a number of NJ residents, students receiving Pell grants and other criteria. Dean Thompson, knowing that the program would now need to stand on its own merits if it were to survive and with key support from Dr. James Pain, the second Drew professor after Will Herberg to be a member of all three faculties and our fourth CSGS dean, moved to re-envision the program as the Master of Letters, which it was renamed in 1978.

Why an MLitt? This is where the genius of Dean Thompson and Dr. Pain comes into play. Not only did choosing this new design for the degree help it to stand out through the name itself, but also the history and focus of the degree differentiated it from generic Master of Liberal Studies programs. The degree is well known in the British Commonwealth nations, existing at many of their universities. Dr. Pain's experiences in earning his doctorate at Oxford surely informed his thinking. In the United Kingdom it is not necessarily considered a professional degree, although it can be.

According to one UK source, the main difference that distinguishes a Master of Letters from a Master of Arts is its specific nature:

An M.Litt. degree, while requiring similar coursework to an M.A. degree, can be much more specific with its field and coursework. For example, an M.Litt. degree from Mary Baldwin's (University) Shakespeare & Performance program can

qualify an individual to teach English and Theater, since the degree is essentially a hybrid between the two fields.

We would revise this attempt to differentiate an M.Litt. from an MA by defining the “specificity” this source cites as interdisciplinarity, i.e., the Mary Baldwin degree in Shakespeare AND Performance. That definitely sounds like a topic someone might pursue in our Arts & Letters program, as does the M.Litt. in Comics and Graphic Novels at the University of Dundee in Scotland, and many others. Some of the schools that have the M.Litt., and indeed, the D.Litt., include St. Andrew’s, the University of Edinburgh, the University of Sydney, Cambridge University, Trinity College Dublin and Maynooth University in Ireland, and Oxford University since 1900. If you search websites about master’s degrees in the UK, they list the ranking of them as MA, M. Phil, and then the M.Litt. degree as the highest.

Speaking of the D.Litt., how did we come to expand the M.Litt. to the doctoral level? The M.Litt. had developed into a real, if modest, success for the Graduate School. Over the years, it had grown to average about 50-60 students, mostly teachers but also a slowly increasing number of other professionals – doctors, lawyers, business people, engineers, and others. Dr. Pain, who became dean of the CSGS in 1993, long harbored the notion of adding the Doctor of Letters to our offerings, and in 1996, he commissioned Peter Ochs, another member of all three faculties, to develop a proposal for a doctor of letters program.

After long discussions within the Graduate Faculty, the D.Litt. proposal passed quite easily. Just as Dean Pain expected, the degree program was a tremendous success. In Spring 1997 we advertised the new program only to our M.Litt. alumni, for whom we had addresses for around 130, and 17 of them immediately enrolled for that semester – a rate of around 13%. The program has grown since then. We are happy that under the leadership and hard work of the current faculty, our Dean Ryan Hinrichs, our program director, Professor Leslie Sprout, and the director of graduate academic services, Dr. Hilary McKane, the Arts & Letters program has earned its rightful place as a gem in Drew’s academic offerings, with a current total of around 120 Arts & Letters students enrolled in the M.Litt. and D.Litt. programs.

As just one sign of the program’s impact, for the strategic plan labeled Drew 2017, we surveyed our Arts & Letters students and alums and discovered that over 30 were full-time faculty at colleges and universities, mostly at community colleges, but certainly not all. We know in the 10 years since, that number has only increased. Here’s another – we can’t count the number of history and English teachers who have told us they have incorporated lesson plans based upon material they first encountered in an Arts & Letters class. People from all walks of life, from their early 20s to mid-80s, from domestic to international students and from an array of diverse backgrounds and academic interests have without a doubt proven what Bard Thompson and Jim Pain

surmised 50 years ago: there is a hunger for advanced interdisciplinary study in the humanities that cannot be fulfilled simply by reading on one's own.

Finally, why is this program so special? Well, of course, it is the people – the students, the alumni, the faculty, the staff, and all those who have come before us – who make it so, but there is also something exceptionally compelling about what we do each week in the classroom. For what we do is we explore what we would argue is the most important subject of all – the human experience – together as colleagues in an atmosphere of wonder, civility, humor, and seriousness of purpose, all to truly better ourselves as human beings and citizens of the world.