

# Creative Writing, Publishing, and Editing MFA

## Develop Skills And Knowledge Base In Creative Writing

### Goal Description:

MFA graduates should be well prepared to pursue careers and vocations in creative writing, editing, and publishing.

**Providing Department:** Creative Writing, Publishing, and Editing MFA

**Progress:** Completed

### RELATED ITEMS/ELEMENTS

#### RELATED ITEM LEVEL 1

##### To Engage In Extensive Literary Study

##### Learning Objective Description:

In accordance with the Association of Writers & Writing Programs' Hallmarks of a Successful MFA Program in Creative Writing, our program will require "extensive literary study," as writers must become "expert and wide-ranging reader(s)" in order to become successful writers. Our curriculum will "balance the practice of the art of writing with the study of literature."

#### RELATED ITEM LEVEL 2

##### Significant Coursework in Literature, Language, and Pedagogy

##### Indicator Description:

All students in the MFA program shall be required to earn at least 15 hours of graduate credit in literature, language, and pedagogy courses.

##### Criterion Description:

100% of MFA students shall average at least a B for those 15 hours of graduate credit in literature and language courses.

##### Findings Description:

Our students continue to perform well in literature, language, and pedagogy courses. We graduated three students this year who earned a cumulative GPA of 4.0 in their language, literature, and pedagogy courses. For all students enrolled in courses during the fall of 2021, spring of 2022, and summer of 2022, one student earned a B in two separate such courses, while the remaining students achieved a cumulative 4.0 GPA for literature, language, and pedagogy courses.

#### RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

##### Significant Coursework in Literature, Language, and Pedagogy

##### Action Description:

Our students both continue to perform well in these classes and to see them as an important part of their MFA training. We might need to think about how the department's technical writing courses might serve at least a certain subset of our MFA students and whether those (or some of those) classes should be made an option in this category.

#### RELATED ITEM LEVEL 1

##### To Produce Creative Work of Publishable Quality

##### Learning Objective Description:

Students in the MFA program will be able to produce quality literary works of publishable quality.

#### RELATED ITEM LEVEL 2

##### Opportunities to Provide Critical Feedback on Creative Work

##### Indicator Description:

A vital pedagogical element of the workshop is the opportunity to provide feedback on the in-process work of student peers. The opportunity to provide this feedback enables students to sharpen their own critical eye not only in regard to the work of others, but to their own work.

**Criterion Description:**

Each year, the students enrolled in the graduate writing workshops will provide a sufficient amount of thoughtful and engaging critiques of each other's work, as reported on the GSAR. "Sufficient" is defined in prose workshops as at least 48 critiques (24 per workshop), and "sufficient" in poetry workshops is defined as 60 poems or pages (30 per workshop).

**Findings Description:**

Because we were only able to offer one fiction workshop and one poetry workshop this past academic year, students did not have as many opportunities to offer critiques of each other's work. The students in the fiction workshops did have 15 opportunities to offer critiques of the work of their peers, while the poets offered critiques on approximately 50 poems (and 100 pages of poetry).

**RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3**

**Opportunities to Provide Critical Feedback on Creative Work**

**Action Description:**

No particular changes necessary here.

**RELATED ITEM LEVEL 2**

**Opportunities to Receive Critical Feedback on Creative Work**

**Indicator Description:**

These writing-intensive workshop courses will offer students multiple opportunities for submission and revision of their work. The range of commentary from close and attentive readers will provide the authors with essential feedback, both objective and subjective, for the revision and completion of their work.

**Criterion Description:**

Each year, the students enrolled in the graduate writing workshops will submit a sufficient amount of writing to the workshop, as reported on the GSAR. "Sufficient" is defined in prose workshops as 4 stories, essays, or novel excerpts (2 per workshop), and "sufficient" in poetry workshops is defined as 12 poems or pages (6 per workshop).

**Findings Description:**

Because we were only able to offer one workshop in fiction and one workshop in poetry this past academic year, we did not meet our expectations in this category. Each student in the fiction workshop did have 3 opportunities to workshop stories or novel excerpts, and those students averaged just over 50 pages workshoped apiece. The poets each submitted for critique a chapbook's worth of poems, averaging more than 20 pages apiece.

**RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3**

**Opportunities to Receive Critical Feedback on Creative Work**

**Action Description:**

No particular changes necessary here. We continue to meet our expectations.

**RELATED ITEM LEVEL 1**

**To Provide Students with Strong Thesis Advising**

**Learning Objective Description:**

In accordance with AWP Hallmarks, faculty members will "excel in providing both holistic and line-specific suggestions for revision to each student's thesis."

**RELATED ITEM LEVEL 2**

**Contact Hours with Thesis Director**

**Indicator Description:**

Faculty members who are directing theses will meet individually on a regular basis with their students.

**Criterion Description:**

Thesis students will have a sufficient number of contact hours during Thesis I and Thesis II semesters with their thesis directors. “Sufficient” will be defined as 15 hours per semester (an average of one hour per week), as reported on the GSAR.

**Findings Description:**

Thesis students continue to report an average of at least one hour per week of contact (more than 15 hours per semester) with their thesis advisors, both in Thesis I and II. We continue to take pride in the level of access we provide to our students in the thesis process.

**RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3**

**Contact Hours with Thesis Director**

**Action Description:**

We continue to offer strong and consistent advising to our thesis students. The standard we've established--at least one hour of direct contact each week throughout the process--is something we intend to hold ourselves to.

**RELATED ITEM LEVEL 1**

**To Undertake Challenging Workshops Consistently And Frequently**

**Learning Objective Description:**

In accordance with the Association of Writers & Writing Programs’ Hallmarks of a Successful MFA Program in Creative Writing, our program will offer “challenging workshops” each semester in fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction. These writing-intensive courses will offer students multiple opportunities for submission and revision of their work. In keeping with the fundamental nature of workshop, the students will provide and receive critical feedback not only from the professor but from fellow students. The range of commentary from close and attentive readers will provide the authors with essential feedback, both objective and subjective, for the revision and completion of their stories, poems, and essays.

**RELATED ITEM LEVEL 2**

**Nature Of Writing Workshop Experiences**

**Indicator Description:**

These writing-intensive courses will offer students multiple opportunities for submission and revision of their work. The range of commentary from close and attentive readers will provide the authors with essential feedback, both objective and subjective, for the revision and completion of their writing.

**Criterion Description:**

Each year, students in enrolled in the graduate writing workshops will submit a sufficient amount of writing to the workshop, as reported on the GSAR. "Sufficient" is defined in prose workshops as 4 stories or novel excerpts (2 per workshop), and sufficient in poetry workshops as 12 poems or pages (6 per workshop).

**Findings Description:**

Because we were only able to offer one workshop in fiction and one workshop in poetry this past academic year, we did not meet our expectations in this category. Each student in the fiction workshop did have 3 opportunities to workshop stories or novel excerpts, and those students averaged just over 50 pages workshoped apiece. The poets each submitted for critique a chapbook's worth of poems, averaging more than 20 pages apiece.

### RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

#### **Nature Of Writing Workshop Experiences**

##### **Action Description:**

We will continue to offer workshops, which are the core of what we do in terms of curriculum, and we will continue to offer a diverse set of approaches to the workshops, reflecting our own faculty's distinctive pedagogies.

### RELATED ITEM LEVEL 2

#### **Workshop Offerings And Opportunities**

##### **Indicator Description:**

As the workshops form the core of the MFA curriculum and since each student must take fifteen hours of workshops, it is essential that our students be able to depend upon regular workshop course offerings so as to be able to make steady progress toward the degree.

##### **Criterion Description:**

We want to be able to offer graduate-level workshops in fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction each semester.

##### **Findings Description:**

We offered workshops in fiction and poetry in the fall of 2021, but were unable to offer any workshops in the spring. Offering poetry workshops remains a challenge because of the lack of poetry students in the program, while the fiction class offered failed to make--in part because the majority of prose students were taking narrative theory, which we only offer every two years. In general, our enrollment numbers need to be a few higher than they currently offer to protect us against these bumps--which can negatively impact a student's progress toward the degree.

### RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

#### **Workshop Offerings And Opportunities**

##### **Action Description:**

We need to be able to offer the workshops consistently and predictably. For the most part, we've been able to achieve this with the prose offerings, but it has remained a challenge with poetry. This is directly tied to enrollment and recruitment. We remain several students shy of our ideal size, and those few students make a difference in our ability to offer these classes consistently and to have sufficient numbers to permit the class to make. So we need to continue to work on recruiting in general and of poets in particular.

### RELATED ITEM LEVEL 1

#### **To Support Our Students' Travel to Regional and National Conferences**

##### **Performance Objective Description:**

Recognizing the value of regional and national conferences in our students' professionalization, we will seek to provide financial support to enable our students to travel and fully participate in these conferences.

### RELATED ITEM LEVEL 2

#### **KPI - Conference Travel**

##### **KPI Description:**

We will continue to seek opportunities to support our students' registration, travel, and hotel for conferences, workshops, and book festivals in the state, region, and nation.

##### **Results Description:**

We were able to send support the registration, travel, and hotel for four students this year to the annual Association of Writers and Writing Programs' Conference (in Philadelphia). While this wasn't as many as we were able to take to San Antonio two years ago (because it was in-state), we continue

to seek to provide this opportunity to our students, which they consistently rank as one of their best experiences in the program.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Action - Conference Travel

Action Description:

We will continue to fund student travel to AWP with the goal of insuring that all students have at least one opportunity to travel to the conference with the full support of the department. We will also continue to seek new avenues of funding to support this effort as well as helping our students to tap other resources on campus, such as the Graduate School, for further assistance.

Student Recruitment

Goal Description:

We are a young program with a low ratio of applicants to admits. Our goal is increase the number of applicants so that we might become more selective in our admits.

Providing Department: Creative Writing, Publishing, and Editing MFA

Progress: Completed

RELATED ITEMS/ELEMENTS -----

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 1

A Diverse Student Population

Performance Objective Description:

Consistent with our mission as a regional state institution and AWP Hallmarks, we will seek to create a diverse population of qualified students of different backgrounds, social classes, and races.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 2

Diversity of Student Population

KPI Description:

Consistent with the AWP Hallmarks, we seek a diverse student population, including but not limited to race and gender, reflecting the region that we serve.

Results Description:

Twelve students earned credits toward the MFA degree this past academic year. Of those, seven self-identify as female, five as male, and one as non-binary; four self-identify as non-white; and six self-identify with the LGBTQ+ community.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Diversity of Student Population

Action Description:

We are certainly not alone, on campus or in our discipline, in our quest to draw a diverse body of students to our program. We've made some small strides in that regard (four of the fifteen students who will be enrolled this fall identify as African American or Latina). But we also need to work to make sure that our minority students have a good experience once on campus and in the program, and that we remain sensitive to the particular challenges these students (as well as our LGBTQ+ and first-generation students) face. This includes retention, of course, but it goes beyond that. Our curriculum, our approaches in the classroom, our programming needs to reflect a diverse student body--both the one we have and the one we hope to have.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 2

Student Recruiting

KPI Description:

Through visits and advertising campaigns to English majors and minors, to undergraduate creative writing classes, in venues such as *Poets & Writers* and *The Writer's Chronicle*, and via tables at the

annual *Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference and Bookfair*; we hope to recruit between five and ten students to begin the MFA at SHSU. Additionally, we expect our annual visiting writers series to contribute to our recruitment efforts.

### **Results Description:**

Recruitment remains our top priority. Even with the impact of Covid and the economy, we still had 17 students apply for admission to the program (18 the year prior). Yet we only admitted four with one withdrawing her application after accepting another offer and three enrolling. We do believe that our continued presence at the AWP Conference has long-term benefits, though the conference was held virtually in 2021 and had about half its usual number of attendees this past year in Philadelphia. We're continuing to monitor the effectiveness of traditional print advertising since we're not convinced that current applicants use those mediums for learning about programs. Applicants now have a more diversified and dispersed set of online places to learn about programs.

#### **RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3**

### **Student Recruiting**

#### **Action Description:**

We will seek this coming year to boost our digital and social media presence with an emphasis on highlighting recent contributions from alumni, students, and faculty. We need to be better now at trumpeting what our students, in particular, have achieved. We do continue to expect that the improved funding situation (fellowships in particular) will enable us to be more competitive for the students we're seeking. We need to continue to make sure the funding they have is secure and to seek opportunities to expand that funding.

#### **RELATED ITEM LEVEL 1**

### **To Recruit Qualified And Exceptional Students**

#### **Performance Objective Description:**

We will recruit and accept into the program only those students, ideally between five and ten a year, who can reasonably be expected to complete it.

#### **RELATED ITEM LEVEL 2**

### **Incoming Graduate Student GPA**

#### **KPI Description:**

The program will use incoming GPA scores as one indicator of likely student success. We will aim to maintain a minimum 3.00 standard for applications, with an expectation of not more than 15% allowable exemptions.

### **Results Description:**

Our three incoming MFA students for the fall of 2022 enter with undergraduate GPAs between 3.45 and 3.96.

#### **RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3**

### **Incoming Graduate Student GPA**

#### **Action Description:**

We will continue to use GPA as a consideration in our assessment of applicants, though we're aware of its limitations. We do believe it is a fair indicator of a student's prospects for general academic success, though we often receive applications from potential students who are long removed from their undergraduate days. The writing sample, the statement of purpose, and the letters of recommendation will remain the strongest weights in our consideration of an application.

## RELATED ITEM LEVEL 2

### **Incoming Graduate Student GRE**

#### **KPI Description:**

In its early development, the program will use GRE scores (with emphasis on the Verbal section) as an indicator of likely student success. We will give a strong preference to a minimum score of 153 on the verbal portion of the exam, with an expectation of not more than 15% allowable exemptions.

#### **Results Description:**

We no longer require the GRE for the application or admission. We need to strike this entry from the plan.

## RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

### **Incoming Graduate Student GRE**

#### **Action Description:**

We no longer require the submission of GRE scores by our applicants. We will strike this item from future assessment plans.

## RELATED ITEM LEVEL 2

### **To Provide Financial Aid to Recruit Qualified and Exceptional Students**

#### **KPI Description:**

Recognizing the role that financial aid in the form of graduate assistantships serves in recruiting qualified and exceptional students into the program, we will seek to support as many of our students in this manner and to the best of our resources as we can.

#### **Results Description:**

Significantly, we have, through the efforts of the department chair, Dr. Blevins, secured future funding for the three \$10,000 fellowships (each renewable for three years) that were initially seeded by the Graduate School. Our goal is to be able to offer the fellowships annually, as well as graduate assistantships to all incoming MFA students. That will be the case this year. We will continue to advocate at all administrative levels for a raise in the graduate stipend from its approximate \$9,800 for the academic year--a level at which it has remained for nearly two decades now (if not longer), while tuition, which our students are still responsible for, continues to rise, swallowing ever more of that \$9,800.

## RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

### **To Provide Financial Aid to Recruit Qualified and Exceptional Students**

#### **Action Description:**

Together with Dr. Blevins, we're working to establish a predictable and steady program size and support level. We should be able, going forward, to award all incoming students (six per year) with graduate assistantships, with half of those students (three per year) also receiving the \$10,000 fellowships (renewable for three years). Certainly, our longer-term goal would be to provide all our students with both a graduate assistantship and a fellowship. We will continue to work creatively to find ways to make that happen.

## **Update to Previous Cycle's Plan for Continuous Improvement Item**

### **Previous Cycle's Plan For Continuous Improvement (Do Not Modify):**

#### **Closing Summary**

As we move forward, we know that improving our recruitment strategies remains a priority in several respects: 1) Increasing the number of applicants; 2) Improving the quality of applicants; 3) Increasing the diversity of applicants; and 4) Drawing more applications from poets. We will draw upon the insights and suggestions of Dr. Shinkle and Dr. Ko, who formed a committee to look into this last spring. We are also assigning them a graduate assistant this year to specifically assist them as we implement their suggestions.

The number of applicants this past academic year was the most we've ever received (18), and we believe it was the strongest set of applicants we've had, but we'd still like to see those numbers go higher, and we'd like to continue to expand the geographical footprint of those students who are drawn to apply. We do think financial assistance, in the form of fellowships and graduate assistantships, remains key here. Our goal, as it has been, has been to be a fully funded program, and we are making strides in that direction, thanks largely to our chair, Dr. Blevins.

As noted elsewhere in the assessment, our most important challenge in terms of curriculum is recruiting enough poets so that the poetry workshops might be offered on a more regular basis.

In the coming months, we do need to clarify our relationship with the National Book Foundation and the National Book Awards Festival. The pandemic led to necessary adjustment in the NBF's approach to this event (and its kind), and we're not certain how the NBF will see this post-pandemic or how it sees its relationship with SHSU. Regardless, we need to be able to have a marquee event as part of our visiting writers series, both in terms of our students (both graduate and undergraduate), our community, and our recruiting strategies. The visiting writers series will continue to seek a diverse set of writers, both to reflect the writing world and to allow our students to interact with and hear from a wide range of writers.

We will be moving forward with a new editorial and production model for the *Texas Review*, with the journal's production and marketing moving back under the oversight of the Texas Review Press, while editorial responsibility will fall primarily on a guest-editor model with oversight by the MFA faculty. We believe this will be a better workload situation, given the loss of the course release that had been associated with the position of editor-in-chief.

The pandemic has brought about challenges to the sense of community we like to see as part of our MFA program. One goal for the coming year, regardless of the situation we will find ourselves in, is to find ways to provide those opportunities for community within our MFA program. It's more challenging in Zoom life (for example, I (Kaukonen) haven't been face-to-face with two of my MFA colleagues in over a year-and-a-half and have only recently happened to run into the third colleague by chance on two occasions. We know that peer relationships are particularly important for our students, and we're anxious to once again create events, social and professional, that allow our students to partake more fully in the MFA experience.

Another goal as we move forward is to urge our students to submit works for publication. We're beginning to see this already with current students and recent graduates finding venues (and good ones) in which to place their works (both with journals and presses). If the best way to judge a program is the publications of its students, then we're headed in the right direction.

Hopefully this year as well we'll be able to return to traveling for conferences. Most notably, we hope that we'll be able to take students to the annual AWP conference--this year in Philadelphia. It's a great experience for our students, and the circumstances last year prevented this from happening.

In short, the goal for this coming year would be to regain the momentum the program had when Covid hit.

#### **Update of Progress to the Previous Cycle's PCI:**

In terms of student recruitment, it remains our top priority and our biggest challenge. I'll echo what we said last year, and say that these remain our goals: 1) Increasing the number of applicants; 2) Improving the quality of applicants; 3) Increasing the diversity of applicants; and 4) drawing more applications from poets. The committee formed by Dr. Shinkle and Dr. Ko recognize the challenge of recruitment in the current environment--both short-term (Covid, the economy) and long-term (the lessening impact of traditional places for advertising MFA programs, the increasingly dispersed and revolving online sites where students seek information, the impact of online MFA programs). We assigned a graduate assistant this past year to specifically assist them as we implemented their suggestions, but our graduate students tend not to have a broad sense of the recruitment landscape. The number of applicants this past academic

year was seventeen, the second most we've ever received (following 18 the previous year), and we're pleased with those we accepted, but we'd still like to see those numbers go higher, and we'd like to continue to expand the geographical footprint of those students who are drawn to apply. We do think financial assistance, in the form of fellowships and graduate assistantships, remains key here. Our goal, as it has been, has been to be a fully funded program, and thanks to the efforts of Dr. Blevins, we'll be able to continue offering the \$10,000 fellowships (renewable for three years) to three incoming students each year, and to offer graduate assistantships to all new admits.

Recruiting poets remains the biggest challenge, primarily so we can offer poetry workshops and classes on a consistent basis so that those poets we do have can complete the program in a timely fashion.

We have clarified our relationship with the National Book Foundation and the National Book Awards Festival, thanks to Dr. Blevins. We were able to hold our Spring 2022 event after Covid-impacted cancellations in 2020 and 2021. Still, one of our visiting writers had to "attend" by Zoom after contracting Covid. We will be moving the event to the fall, beginning in 2023, so there will be no NBAF event this coming academic year. We believe this will fit better with our own schedule (which is always much busier in the spring than in the fall), as well as for the community and the writers we bring to campus. We were able to hold a variety of events this past spring, both face-to-face and hybrid, thanks to decline in Covid cases, and we look to carry that momentum into the new year.

We continue to move forward with a new editorial and production model for the *Texas Review*, with the journal's production and marketing moving back under the oversight of the Texas Review Press, while editorial responsibility will fall primarily on a guest-editor model with oversight by the MFA faculty. We believe this will be a better workload situation, given the loss of the course release that had been associated with the position of editor-in-chief.

As noted above, things really began to shift to "normal" in the spring semester, and that permitted us to do some of the community-oriented programming that we see as vital to our MFA program. We know that peer relationships are particularly important for our students, and we want our students to be able to participate in events, social and professional, formal and informal that provide a full MFA experience.

As noted above, we've been urging our students to submit works for publication. The current crop of students has really taken this to heart--and is beginning to reap the rewards. We had at least three poets submit works at least 90 times (one student has submitted over 200 times), and they've had more than 30 works accepted this past year and more than 20 published. The prose writers have been submitting as well (even if in not the quite same numbers!), and three different students had works accepted.

We did provide financial support for four students to travel to the annual AWP Conference, this year in Philadelphia. Several students traveled as well on their own, adding to our presence at the conference. This is good both for the students, who have a great time of learning and networking, and for the program (the students work the booth for the program and Texas Review Press and help to raise our visibility to faculty across the country).

## **New Plan for Continuous Improvement Item**

### **Closing Summary:**

The most pressing item for us is recruitment. We have in mind an ideal model for the program, which is to recruit six new students each year and to be able to retain all of them through graduation in a three-year cycle. This would mean we'd have eighteen students in the program at any given time, which seems a reasonable number for a faculty of four. At the moment, we expect to be able to provide each of those students with a graduate assistantship (roughly \$9,800) and half of those students (three each year) with

additional \$10,000 fellowships (renewable for three years). We will continue to press upper administration to increase the stipends for graduate assistantships, which have remained the same for more than two decades now, while the tuition and fees students are then expected to pay continues to rise, having more than doubled since 2006 and now consuming more than two-thirds of the annual stipend.

We were able to admit six students for this coming academic year. This level of numbers is necessary for us to be able ensure that we able to offer our core courses (the workshops, the writer's life, the narrative and poetic theory courses, in particular) on a regular rotation and with certainty. In the current environment, with a greatly dispersed target audience and declining applications to MFA programs generally, the challenge of reaching potential students remains the same. We will seek this year to increase our digital and social media presence with an emphasis on highlighting the achievements of our alumni, students, and faculty. We've begun to see our alumni and students publish more widely and in more notable venues, to move on to highly competitive PhD programs, and to land jobs--as publishers, as editors, as professors. In addition to our funding situation, we need to be able to shout about these things.

Still, our goal remains to recruit highly qualified students that we will believe will succeed in our program (and beyond). We do not wish to fill slots merely to fill slots.

At the moment, we're pretty pleased with the curriculum, including the portfolio system and thesis process. The writer's life course that we began offering a few years ago is serving just as we hoped it would.

Our visiting writers series hopes to once again find its footing after the interruptions of Covid. Most notably, the National Book Awards Festival will be moving to fall semesters, beginning in 2023, so there will be no event in spring of 2023. Still, the visits of Diana Nguyen and Adam Johnson will give us two high-profile writers who will be visiting campus in this fall. As Covid (hopefully) fades in its impact, we hope to be able to hold more face-to-face events for our students, helping us to further build the community that has always been the program's vision.

We will also return once more to AWP's annual conference as a sponsor. While this event is of particular importance to the Texas Review Press and its authors, it is also a great space in which we build the program's name recognition. It is a place to highlight our ongoing achievements and to make prospective students--and even more importantly, faculty across the nation--aware of the things that are offered here and can be accomplished here. Our best recruitment tool is to have our faculty and our students face-to-face with students who might come here or faculty who might send their best undergraduates our way. In another way, too, the conference is a terrific experience for the students we send with our conference and travel support. We continue to seek to make sure that all our MFA students have at least one opportunity to travel to AWP with the full financial support of the program.

Hopefully, as we move forward, we will have stability in our faculty ranks. This, too, provides us with the stability a still young, still growing program needs.