

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:

We continue to require fifteen hours of courses in literature, language, and pedagogy in our plan of study, and our students continue to do well in those courses. Students enrolled in classes this past year have cumulatively completed 105 hours of courses in this part of the curriculum with a cumulative GPA of 3.97.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Significant Coursework in Literature, Language, and Pedagogy

Action Description:

We will continue to require this 15-hour component in our plan of study, remaining flexible to meet the needs of particular students.

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:

With smaller class sizes this past year, there were fewer opportunities for students to provide feedback to other students. Students enrolled in the fiction workshops (there were two) reported an average of 36 critiques (18 per workshop), while students enrolled in the poetry workshop reported an average of 45 poems read and critiqued.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3**Opportunities to Provide Critical Feedback on Creative Work****Action Description:**

We will continue this as is.

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:

Students enrolled in fiction workshops this past year (there were two) reported an average of three stories submitted and workshopped per class; students in the poetry workshop reported just over five poems and five to nine pages of poetry per final portfolio.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3**Opportunities to Receive Critical Feedback on Creative Work****Action Description:**

We will continue this as is. We need to continue to recruit more poets into the program, so that we can be sure to offer a poetry workshop each semester.

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:

Students enrolled in thesis this past year (which included three) reported an average of 14.33 hours of contact per semester with their thesis advisor, which is consistent with our expectations.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Contact Hours with Thesis Director

Action Description:

We continue to remain proud of the hands-on contact hours our thesis students receive. It is another hallmark of our program.

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 worksop, 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:

Students enrolled in fiction workshops this past year (there were two) reported an average of three stories submitted and workshopped per class; students in the poetry workshop reported just over five poems and five to nine pages of poetry per final portfolio.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Nature Of Writing Workshop Experiences

Action Description:

Our workshops remain central to our mission and operations. In the coming year, we will also be experimenting with a different type of workshop model (collaborative), led by Drs. Ko and Shinkle.

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:

With a slightly lower than normal enrollment this past year (we lost two new admits early in the fall semester for personal reasons), fulfilling this goal has remained a challenge. We were able to offer fiction workshops each semester (which has been and continues to be the case), but only one poetry workshop. The lack of poetry-focused students remains a challenge for recruitment, though we are aided by the requirement that all students must take at least one poetry workshop. We are offering both a fiction and a poetry workshop this coming fall.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Workshop Offerings And Opportunities

Action Description:

We will continue to be strategic about workshop offerings, particularly poetry. While we've always been able to offer a prose workshop every semester, the poetry workshops have struggled to make. Partly, this is a recruitment issue and reflects a need to draw more poets into the program. To be clear, nationally, there are far more prose applicants than poetry applicants, but we need to be able make sure there are a sufficient number of students taking poetry workshops that we can offer the course each semester. This will also require strategic thinking about the number of MFA courses offered each semester.

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.

Target Description:

Our target is to offer some funding for all students who are participating in professional conferences.

Results Description:

We were able to fund six students for travel to the Association of Writers and Writing Programs' Annual Conference this year in Seattle. We also had students travel to the Louisiana Book Festival and the Texas Book Festival as well as the Houston BookFest.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Action - Conference Travel

Action Description:

We should continue to fund student opportunities for AWP's annual conference in particular (as many students as possible each year, but fundamentally assuring that all students have at least one opportunity to travel to and participate in AWP's conference during their time as an MFA student). We should also seek to help fund students' participation in other professional conference, especially within the region. Additionally, we should continue to encourage our students to apply to the Graduate School to support their travel, a fund that is often not fully tapped.

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.

Target Description:

MFA cohort will represent diversity of thought, background, and experience.

Results Description:

We had nine applicants in this most recent cycle. Those applicants self-identified as five women and four men (including one trans man). Seven identified as white and one as black, while the race of the other is unknown. In terms of age and life experience, the vast majority are relatively recent college graduates from Texas, though two applicants were from out-of-state.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Diversity of Student Population

Action Description:

We remain more dependent upon our local, that is SHSU undergraduate, population for applications to our MFA program than we wish we were. We need to continue to find ways to reach populations both from other Texas universities and from other states across the Gulf Coast region. We also need to continue to pursue applicants from underrepresented groups so that we better match our region (which is well reflected in our undergraduate population). In the coming year, we will be seeking to make adjustments in our marketing and promotion to reflect this need.

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.

Target Description:

Admitting five students per year in the program.

Results Description:

We accepted eight students this enrollment cycle, including three with fellowships and graduate assistantships, and three more with graduate assistantships only. One fellowship-offered student declined our offer to accept a different offer; one fellowship-offered student accepted but then had to withdraw for personal reasons; and one student remains undecided. We anticipate at least five new students to be enrolled in classes this fall.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Student Recruiting

Action Description:

We will be revamping our marketing materials to target students in our immediate region (Houston and Dallas, in particular) as well as along the Gulf Coast. While we will continue to seek to extend our reach beyond SHSU's traditional footprint, we recognize that the vast majority of our students are coming from within that footprint. As such, we will seek to be present and face-to-face as often we can through our participation in local book festivals and other related events, and our marketing materials will emphasize the ability to remain close to home and a part of the East Texas/Gulf Coast region.

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.

Target Description:

We will aim to maintain a minimum 3.00 standard for applications, with an expectation of not more than 15% allowable exemptions.

Results Description:

Eight students were admitted for the Fall of 2023 with an average GPA of 3.44. Only one student had a GPA below 3.00 (but had earned a 3.42 for their most recent 40 hours).

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Incoming Graduate Student GPA

Action Description:

We will continue to use this as a benchmark in the application process.

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.

Target Description:

GRE is no longer required. Will be removed as a KPI.

Results Description:

See above.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Incoming Graduate Student GRE

Action Description:

As noted above, we no longer require the GRE from applicants.

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.

Target Description:

Our target is to offer funding to all MFA students through assistantships and fellowships.

Results Description:

We currently are offering three \$10,000 fellowships (renewable for three years) to incoming students each fall, as well as a total of six new graduate assistantships each year. Our goal remains to have eighteen students enrolled at all times, all supported by at least a graduate assistantship.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

To Provide Financial Aid to Recruit Qualified and Exceptional Students

Action Description:

Our first action here is to insure that we maintain our present levels of financial assistance, specifically the \$10,000 annual fellowships, as well as the ability to provide graduate assistantships to six incoming students per year (all of these renewable for three years). When opportunities arise, we will seek to expand the number of fellowships available, and we will continue to lobby (as we always have) for an increase in the amount of money that constitutes the graduate assistantship--which has remained unchanged for more than twenty years (around \$9,800). In coordination with the chair of the department, we will see more MFA students moved into the classroom as teaching assistants (INRW, 1301, 1302 in particular) so as to justify the additional funds. While the fellowships haven't accomplished all that we had hoped, it is clear that we are drawing a better quality of student (generally speaking) than we did prior to the fellowships being offered.

Update to Previous Cycle's Plan for Continuous Improvement Item

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

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 to ensure that we are 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.

Update of Progress to the Previous Cycle's PCI:

We continue to remain on the path discussed above for the ideal program size and the number of students recruited and supported financially each academic year. One issue that we will need to monitor and be conscious of is what happens when we lose a student (or two) in a cohort and the ways in which that affects each cohort, especially in terms of class enrollments and financial aid. For example, we lost two of our six admits from this past fall within a couple of months—one for health reasons and the other an MFA/MA admit who chose to concentrate on the MA only. Even our initial offers for this coming fall have been

affected by unpredictable issues—in one case, a child-custody case that will prevent one of our fellowship recipients from moving here and enrolling. In a sense, we need to be able to account for at least some attrition that will leave us below our ideal of eighteen students in the program at any one time and of admitting six financially supported students each academic year. Ideally, all fellowship and graduate assistantship recipients would finish the program in three years so that the funds could roll over to the next incoming cohort, but we need to be prepared for instances where that is not the case.

The number of applicants we receive each year remains roughly the same. We're still only getting ten or so applicants per year. We have been meeting more regularly this past year as a faculty and will continue that going forward as we seek concrete means by which to recruit qualified students to our program. As noted above, we're seeing our students and alumni publish more and more widely, and this past year was easily the most successful year we've had in terms of student and alumni publishing. Our students this past year were also more active in giving readings from their work, not just locally but in Houston and at AWP and other conferences. This increased visibility of our students as well as their face-to-face interactions with potential students is perhaps the best marketing tool we have. We are aware that nationally applications to MFA programs are down (for a variety of reasons), but we should be getting more applications than we are, all things considered.

We didn't make any changes to the curriculum this year, though we'll be re-examining the portfolio system this coming year for potential tweaks. We need to be able to offer poetry workshops consistently, and we need to offer the teaching of creative writing course, which has been on the books but never successfully offered. All of this ties to enrollment, which again goes back to recruiting.

Even without the National Book Awards Festival this past academic year (as we move it to a fall semester event, beginning in the fall of 2023), we still served as hosts to six events featuring readers from outside our campus. These included Pulitzer Prize-winner Adam Johnson and National Book Award-finalist Diana Khoi Nguyen, but also Jennifer Sperry Steinorth and Tim Jones-Yelvington, a pair of authors with TRP, as well as bestseller Sequoia Nagamatsu and a trio of horror-genre writers around Halloween. We should also add here the appearance via Zoom (for Dr. April Shemak's Caribbean lit class) of Prof. Chenelle John-Heard, a graduate of our program and currently a professor in the Virgin Islands. Additionally, our students remain active in giving readings on campus and around, through the annual Fishbowl reading, the Wynne Home Readings, and their own student-initiated reading series at Sam's Table downtown. These remain good opportunities for our students to promote community within the program as well as to gain experience.

We had a significant presence at AWP in Seattle this past year, and our placement at the bookfair—very near the main entrance—was the best we've ever had. In conjunction with the Texas Review Press, which did tremendously well in sales, we were able to take a large contingent of faculty, staff, and students, who not only participated in panels and readings and the bookfair, but made us highly visible in their interactions with faculty and students from other universities, including potential MFA students. The booth drew a steady stream of people interested in the press and its authors as well as the MFA program. With TRP, we also had students present at the Louisiana Book Festival and the Texas Book Festival (Austin), and we had students and faculty participate in the Houston Poetry & Arts Festival (which one of our students helped to organize) at one of the Houston Community College branches. All three events help to promote us regionally and in a personal, face-to-face manner.

New Plan for Continuous Improvement Item

Closing Summary:

The start of the 2023–24 academic year will represent a transition point for the MFA program in creative writing, editing, and publishing, as Prof. Nick Lantz takes over as director, replacing Dr. Scott Kaukonen, who has been the director since the program's inception in 2010. Hopefully, a new director will provide some new perspective and new energy to the position.

The most significant challenge the program faces continues to be recruitment (and retention). Clearly, we haven't solved the challenge. We continue to accept and enroll a sufficient number of students, but we'd like to increase the number of applicants so that we always choose our students from the strongest pool possible. We're always sensitive to our desire to have a program whose student body reflects the full diversity of our region, which is to say Texas and the Gulf Coast. We're also aware of the challenges and obstacles that traditionally underrepresented groups face when it comes to graduate programs, MFA programs in particular. It begins with awareness--what are MFA programs, what can they do for you, what can they not do for you, what might they do for you, where are they--and preparation (what do I need to do to apply, what does it take to be admitted, what will the atmosphere be like in an MFA program), but it also includes, significantly, financial and time obstacles. Anything we can do to lower these barriers for the best students possible is not only in their interest but in our interest as a program. Going forward, we will seek tangible ways to address these concerns--from our marketing materials to our financial aid to our pedagogy.

We look forward this fall to the return of the National Book Awards Festival and to a continued lineup of diverse writers visiting our campus. We continue to believe that our students need to be exposed to a wide-range of writers, not just in terms of genre and forms and identities, but in terms of life experiences as writers. Not all our students will go on to live as teachers of creative writing (or teachers at all), and so the writers we bring to campus need to include those who have taken other paths.

As noted above, we will be reviewing our portfolio system for tweaks and revisions. We do think that the portfolio system is doing what we had intended for it to do, but it's something we should be reviewing on our regular basis to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of our students, especially with their eyes to post-MFA life.

We will be strategic, in conjunction with the chair of the Department of English, about our course offerings, and the ways in which we can maximize enrollments in each class and yet ensure that our students have the offerings they need each semester so that they might all graduate on time. We will also remain flexible for our students in terms of their individual needs and goals so that the program is always serving the best interests of our students and not some other entity.

We will also celebrate our successes. It was noted above that we've had more student publications this year than any other year. We're also seeing the alumni of our graduate creative writing program begin to publish books and land academic jobs. It's not something we've always been able to say, but moving forward we expect to be able to say it more often and more loudly, in ways that will make us a more attractive program to prospective students.