

Creative Writing, Publishing, and Editing MFA
Assessment Plan Summary

Creative Writing, Publishing, and Editing MFA

Develop Skills And Knowledge Base In Creative Writing

Goal Description:

MFA graduates should develop a background in the area of creative writing to embrace writing, teaching, and publishing.

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

Equivalent Coursework And Successful Completion Of Written Comprehensive Exams

Indicator Description:

Students in our MFA Program in Creative Writing, Editing, and Publishing will fulfill the same requirements for the study of literature as the MA students in literature in the Department of English. This includes equivalent coursework (twelve hours of literature classes plus critical theory and narrative and/or poetic theory), as well as the successful completion of the same written comprehensive exams required of the MA students.

Criterion Description:

100% of MFA students will pass all three areas of the comprehensive exams given by the Department of English.

Findings Description:

Six students in the MFA program took comprehensive exams between Summer 2015 and Spring 2016. The results were as follows: two students passed all three exams on the first attempt; three students passed a single failed exam on their second try; and one student failed two sections twice before passing all three (in Summer 2016). In the end, all six students successfully completed the comprehensive exam requirement.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Assess the Role of Comprehensive Exams in the Program

Action Description:

In the course of conducting its internal review, the faculty of the MFA program will evaluate the role of the comprehensive exams. We will also continue to monitor the performance of our students on these exams so that we have a substantial set of data upon which to base our decisions, and we will continue to compare the performances of the MFA students to those of the MA students within the Department of English.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 1

To Offer 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,” we will offer “challenging workshops” each semester in fiction writing. 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.

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 sufficent in poetry workshops

as 12 poems or pages (6 per workshop).

Findings Description:

For the 2015-16 academic school year, we offered two fiction workshops and two poetry workshops. The students in the fiction workshops averaged two stories per workshop, and the students in the poetry workshops averaged 12 pages of poetry submitted per class. This meets our expectation of a "sufficient" amount of workshop attention.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Continue to Offer Workshops in Each Genre

Action Description:

We will continue to offer workshops in each of our three genres (fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction) frequently and consistently so that students may have sufficient opportunities to receive feedback on their projects each semester.

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 and poetry each semester, and eventually the same for creative nonfiction.

Findings Description:

To date, we have offered fiction workshops every fall and spring semester since the inception of the program in the fall of 2012. This past year, we were able to offer poetry workshops in both the fall and spring semester. As the demand has not yet required it, we have not yet offered creative nonfiction on a regular basis.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Continue to Offer Workshops in Each Genre

Action Description:

We will continue to offer workshops in each of our three genres (fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction) frequently and consistently so that students may have sufficient opportunities to receive feedback on their projects each semester.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 1

To Prepare Students For Careers In Editing And Publishing

Learning Objective Description:

Students in the MFA program in creative writing, editing, and publishing will be able to seek careers not only as writers but as editors, book designers, and publishers.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 2

Portfolio Assessment

Indicator Description:

MFA students will submit a portfolio of work that will demonstrate their competencies in each of these three areas: editing, design, and the publishing industry. Three members of the Department of English faculty will evaluate each of these portfolios based on rubrics provided by the professor.

Criterion Description:

Because of the untimely death of a key professor for the course, we will need to revisit and write the criteria for this particular evaluation. We have two new professors coming on board this semester, and the eventual replacement of the above professor who will likely be teaching that course as well.

Findings Description:

When our new faculty are in place, we will revisit the idea of a portfolio assessment for the practicum in publishing course, and either develop the proper criteria to fit the class and how it will be taught going forward, or develop a more appropriate assessment for the class.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Develop Portfolio Assessment Rubric

Action Description:

As noted in our findings, when our new faculty are in place (and when the future of Texas Review Press and its relationship to the MFA program is made clear), we will revisit the idea of a portfolio assessment for the practicum in publishing course, and either develop the proper criteria to fit the class and how it will be taught going forward, or develop a more appropriate assessment for the class.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 1

To Write Literary Short Fiction In A Realist Narrative Mode

Learning Objective Description:

Students in the MFA program in creative writing, editing, and publishing will be able to produce quality literary works of short fiction in a realist narrative mode.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 2

Writing Assessment

Indicator Description:

In the graduate fiction workshop, ENG 5331, students will submit, workshop, and revise three complete short stories. Near the end of the semester, the professor will ask each student to submit one of his or her pieces, written in a realist narrative mode, to be included in the assessment. In the realist mode, writers should be able to create fully imagined and compelling three-dimensional characters; artfully rendered settings, whether of this world or another; surprising and convincing plots and structures; original and texturally rich language, including metaphors and other kinds of figurative language; and, ultimately, stories that either say something new or that find a new way to say something we thought we already knew about the complex human experience.

Criterion Description:

85% of the students will score at least an overall average of 3 (on a 5-point scale).

Findings Description:

Each of the 10 MFA students enrolled in the graduate fiction workshop in the spring of 2016 provided one story or novel excerpt each. Two readers independent of the course professor read each work and evaluated it on a five-point scale, with five being the highest possible grade. A five represented publishable work, four above average graduate work, three average graduate work, two below average graduate work but with some promise, and a rating of one represented a failure to meet graduate work minimums.

As a group, the stories averaged 2.95 points per reader. Six students (60%) averaged 3.0 or better, and the remaining four (40%) all averaged 2.5.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Continue with Writing Assessment

Action Description:

We will continue each year to collect writing samples from the graduate fiction workshops and to evaluate them holistically, so that we might measure the progress our students make as a group from year to year.

Student Recruitment

Goal Description:

We are a very new program and have only a handful of students enrolled. Our goal is to recruit qualified students to enroll in the MFA program

RELATED ITEMS/ELEMENTS -----

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:

For the 2015-16 academic school year, we admitted four students on regular status and one on probation. The four students on regular admission all maintained at least a 3.00 GPA with an average of 3.38.

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 aim to maintain a minimum score of 500 on the verbal portion of the exam and a total score of 1000, with an expectation of not more than 15% allowable exemptions.

Results Description:

In the 2015-16 academic school year, we admitted four students on regular status and one on probation. Three of the four students on regular status scored above 1100 on the GRE, and one scored below 1000. The four students averaged 1064. The student admitted on probation was given a GRE waiver (in consideration of other advanced degrees).

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:

During the 2015-16 academic school year, we admitted four students on regular status and one on probation. This meets the minimum of our target goal. Recruitment of qualified students will continue to be a point of emphasis in the coming year(s).

Update to Previous Cycle's Plan for Continuous Improvement**Previous Cycle's Plan For Continuous Improvement (Do Not Modify):**

As we enter our fourth year as a program, we celebrate the graduation of our first student, the first person to hold an MFA in creative writing, editing, and publishing from Sam Houston State University. We anticipate the graduation of a handful of students (likely six) in the forthcoming year. To truly assess the quality of our program, it will be necessary to track the careers of these graduates as writers and teachers and active participants in the literary community.

To this end, we have sought to identify and develop assessment tools appropriate to our program. As a relatively new program and as the only fine arts program in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Sam Houston State, we've reached out to both peer and aspirational institutions with established MFA programs in creative writing, and as we move forward, we will be in dialogue with them about the best assessment practices for our discipline. We will also be in conversation with our fine arts peers in SHSU's College of Fine Arts and Mass Communication.

During this cycle, we've developed drafts of the following: a Graduate Student Activity Report (GSAR), an Exit Survey, and an Alumni Survey. The GSAR will be conducted annually with the current graduate students; the Exit Survey will be distributed shortly after each student completes the degree; and the Alumni Survey will be conducted every 3 to 5 years. In each case, we will seek to assess our students' and graduates' successful engagement in the literary, academic, and professional arenas. It is our expectation that these materials will give us a clear picture not only of what we hope our program provides for our students but of what it actually does provide.

We have also begun to develop tools both for internal assessments of our students' creative writing and external assessments. We conducted a trial run of a tool for internal assessment and will make adjustments to that tool for the next cycle. As the number of completed MFA theses grows, we will also seek to develop an assessment tool for outsider reviewers to use.

In addition to our core faculty, we continue to bring visiting writers to campus. Our current MFA students benefit from the presence of these nationally recognized writers and the diversity of work and perspectives that they add to the MFA experience. For potential students, the presence of a strong visiting writers series functions as a powerful recruitment tool. During the 2014-15 academic year, we brought to campus seven visiting writers and one nationally prominent editor. Most notable among our visiting writers events is our continued association with the National Book Foundation and the National Book Awards at Sam Houston. For a second consecutive year, we welcomed National Book Award finalists to campus and the community for a series of events. Our partnership has been strengthened by the hiring in the Department of English of a clinical assistant professor whose responsibilities include this partnership and this event. Additionally, this past year, for the first time, an MFA student was assigned as a research assistant (10 hours per week) to assist the event's coordinator. The program itself will continue to benefit regionally and nationally from the exposure our partnership brings. University funding for the National Book Awards event rose from \$25,000 to \$30,000 from 2014 to 2015; our departmental budget for the other visiting writer events will double from \$3,000 in 2014-15 to \$6,000 in 2015-16.

As our first cohort of MFA students moves toward completion of the degree, we've been encouraging them to become active in submitting to publications and presenting at conferences. In the past academic year, our students published two short stories and presented at four academic conferences. Six students participated in public readings of their creative work.

The Texas Review Press continues to provide extensive hands-on experience in publishing for our students. The press published twenty-four titles in 2014 and will publish another twenty-four titles in 2015. These include novels, short-story collections, and novellas; full-length poetry books and chapbooks; essays and memoirs; a departmental history and even a cookbook (with recipes from poets). The MFA students, through both the practicum in publishing class and research assistantships, partake in every aspect of the publishing process.

Update of Progress to the Previous Cycle's PCI:

After shepherding our first graduate through the program during 2014–15, we saw three students graduate this past year. Since it will be important to track their progress post-MFA, as of the fall of 2016, one serves as interim director of Texas Review Press; one teaches as an adjunct in the Department of English at SHSU; one teaches high school literature at Magnolia (Tx) High School; and one is retired.

For the first time, at the end of this year academic year, we distributed a Graduate Student Activity Report (roughly half of the current students completed the report). The GSAR asks our students to catalog such items as conference presentations, creative work submitted, accepted, and published, books read for classes, stories and poems written and workshopped, etc. The report will help us to evaluate the work being done by our students, but—as it made clear to one MFA student—it will also help our students understand the expectations of the profession. When combined with Exit Surveys and Alumni Surveys (both yet to come), it will allow us better assess our students' and graduates' successful engagement in literary, academic, and professional arenas. One of the areas of emphasis in our internal review will be the ways in which we can better assist our students in terms of their professionalization as writers, teachers, and editors. In the past academic year, our students presented at four academic conferences and symposiums. More than half of our students participated in public readings of their creative work.

We continue to advertise regionally and nationally. We welcomed ten visiting writers to campus for events we either sponsored or co-sponsored, including three National Book Award finalists.

We hired two new tenure-track writers who will begin this fall.

Texas Review Press published more than twenty books this past. It also lost its founder and editor, Dr. Paul Ruffin, who died in April.

Plan for Continuous Improvement

Closing Summary:

As we move into 2016–17, our fifth year as a program, we enter a time of transition. This past spring, we lost Dr. Paul Ruffin, who had been a member of the creative writing program since the mid-1970s and who was the founder and editor of Texas Review Press and *Texas Review*. This fall we've also added two new tenure-track faculty members, Dr. Olivia Clare and Dr. Ching-In Chen. Additionally, the Department of English, to which we belong, has a new chair, Dr. Jacob Blevins, the former director of the MFA program in creative writing at McNeese State University (among other things). So this seems like an important moment to evaluate the MFA program's first few years, to consider how well certain elements of the program are working, and to chart new directions that reflect both our experiences to date and our changing faculty.

In the year to come, we have been charged by Dr. Blevins with conducting an internal review of the program. We intend, among other things, to examine the curriculum, the role of comprehensive exams, approaches to marketing and recruitment, our visiting writers series, our relationship with the National Book Foundation, tools for assessment, possible avenues for raising the stipends offered to our graduate assistants, and the role of our rotating visiting assistant professor position. In the near future, we will seek an external review as well.

This past year, we graduated two students from the MFA program and had two students who had planned to graduate delay their degree completion until this fall. We have admitted four new students for the fall semester on regular status as well as an additional probationary student. We admitted one new student for the spring semester of 2016. While we continue to admit 5 to 6 students on average each year, we would prefer a number closer to 10. We currently have 22 students active in the program. We are particularly lean on students who declare poetry as their primary genre. We recognize, too, that at this stage of the program, we continue to balance our desire to maintain standards with our need to assure that the program has sufficient enrollments for the classes we need to offer. As we continue to seek students we believe will thrive in our program, we also continue to deny entrance to students whose application materials are not promising.

We continue to advertise the program nationally, in such venues as *Poets & Writers* and the *Writers' Chronicle*. Our faculty members were present at various conferences and festivals around the nation this year. It is hoped that with the expanded number of faculty members (and three books forthcoming in the next year from our creative writing faculty) that we will have more opportunities to network with prospective students and to raise the program's profile locally, regionally, and nationally. As part of our internal review, we will consider the role of the Woodlands Center in the program.

Although the exact future of the Texas Review Press is yet to be determined by the university, it will be important for the MFA program to maintain a close relationship with the press and its operations. One of the distinguishing markers of the program in its creation and in its first years has been the internship opportunities at the press, and we wish for this to continue. *Texas Review* will continue, now under the editorship of Prof. Nick Lantz, but it will be re-branded and re-launched with an emphasis on a greater diversity of writers and aesthetic forms. Prof. Lantz also intends to fully integrate the faculty of the MFA program into the journal's operations. Whereas in the past, for example, genre editors were primarily associated with other universities, going forward, each member of the MFA faculty will have a contributing role in the journal. We are both excited and cautious about the prospects that these changes at the press and the journal might warrant for the program.

A key component of the program remains the visiting writers series, highlighted by the National Book Awards Festival, which was held for the third year this past spring. Our association with the National Book Foundation remains a fruitful endeavor, and we will take part in the Foundation's 50th Anniversary gala this coming spring at AWP in Washington, D.C., another opportunity for that relationship to produce benefits for the program. If we are to continue our partnership with the NBF, it will be vital for us to secure sufficient funding on campus and in the community.