

Creative Writing, Publishing, and Editing MFA

Develop Skills And Knowledge Base In Creative Writing

Goal Description:

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

Significant Coursework in Literature and Language

Indicator Description:

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

Three students completed the MFA degree during the 2016–17 school year. These three students as a group completed 54 hours of literature and language courses with a composite 3.67 grade-point average.

It is worth noting as well that during the 2016–17 school year, MFA students completed 75 hours of courses in literature and language with a composite 3.52 grade-point average.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Implement Changes to the Literature and Language Component of the Curriculum

Action Description:

Beginning with the 2018–19 academic year, the students will be operating under a revised plan of study. We will continue to require 15 hours of literature and language courses, but students will no longer be required to fulfill coursework in each of five "blocks," and we will no longer require Critical Theory. Over the next few years, we will monitor the impact of this change on their grade point averages.

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

Holistic Evaluation of Creative Work

Indicator Description:

From the graduate workshops each semester, professors will provide a randomly generated sample of submissions to the workshop. Using a double-blind, the samples will be read anonymously by the professors in the program and evaluated holistically on a four-point scale.

Criterion Description:

80% of the samples will score at least an average at least a 3.0.

Findings Description:

For the 2016–17, writing samples (poems, short fiction, essays) were collected randomly from the three workshops, and read anonymously by members of the creative writing faculty. Each was assigned a score of 1 to 4 according to the following rubric:

- 4: Of publishable quality
- 3: Of high quality for a graduate workshop; perhaps publishable with revisions
- 2: Meets minimum graduate workshop standards

1: Fails to meet graduate workshop standards

7 of 13 samples averaged at least a 3.0.

A total of 13 samples were evaluated and the average score was 2.62.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Continue Holistic Evaluation of Creative Work

Action Description:

We will continue to annually evaluate creative work from our students on a holistic basis so that we might, if necessary, recommend changes to the curriculum and/or the workshops as necessary.

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:

We offered two graduate-level prose workshops during the 2016–17 academic year, and each of the students submitted three stories, essays, and/or excerpts in each class. According to the Graduate Student Annual Assessment, the prose students submitted an average of 42.3 pages per course to the workshop. This is in line with our goals.

We offered one graduate-level poetry workshop during the 2016–17 academic year, and according to the Graduate Student Annual Assessments, the poetry students submitted an average of six poems (and eight pages) of poetry to the workshop. This is slightly shy of our goals, although the sample is limited.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Continue to Offer Creative Writing Workshops

Action Description:

We will continue to offer creative writing workshops on a regular basis with significant opportunities for each student to receive and provide critical feedback on creative work.

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:

For the 2016–17 academic year, we were able to offer a graduate-level workshops in creative nonfiction, fiction, and poetry, in each case a single course. We continue to struggle with enrollment numbers in poetry, and though we don't have any students yet pursuing a creative nonfiction thesis, we were pleased to be able to extend the opportunity to all our students to be able to take a CNF workshop. We do hope that the forthcoming changes to the curriculum, which loosen the genre-specific requirements for workshops, will assist in us in this regard.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

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Action Description:

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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.

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:

For the 2016–17 academic year, 21 students were enrolled in courses in the MFA program. Fourteen of those 21 students were women; 6 of 21 were minority students. Of the new students enrolling in the program to begin in the fall of 2017, 2 of 3 are women and 1 of 3 is a minority student.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Continue to Develop a Strong Annual Reading Series

Action Description:

We will continue to bring outstanding writers and scholars to campus with an emphasis on an accomplished and diverse list so that our students may be exposed to the wide range and great depth of writers and writing that is available to them.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Internship Opportunities with the Texas Review and Texas Review Press

Action Description:

We will continue to offer graduate assistantships that will allow select students to work with the Texas Review and Texas Review Press.

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:

For admission beginning in the fall of 2017, we received eight completed applications. We accepted five for admission and rejected three. Of the five admissions, three have enrolled. It is worth noting that the applicants ranked No. 1 and 2 by the admission committee did not enroll. Our top-ranked candidate accepted an offer elsewhere. All three students who enrolled completed their undergraduate degrees at Sam Houston State University. This underscores our need to find better ways to recruit students from other undergraduate programs, and from across the state and region.

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Update to Previous Cycle's Plan for Continuous Improvement

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

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.

Update of Progress to the Previous Cycle's PCI:

The past year represented a major transition for the MFA program, even in its brief history, and for the creative writing program, and its longer history, in general. The program welcomed two new tenure-track colleagues this past fall, Dr. Ching-In Chen and Dr. Olivia Clare; Prof. Nick Lantz assumed leadership of the Texas Review as its new editor-in-chief, replacing the late Dr. Paul Ruffin (the search continues to replace Dr. Ruffin's editorship of the Texas Review Press); the program conducted an internal review resulting in a number of proposed changes to the curriculum; and the program served as host for more visiting writers and public readings than it ever has before. It's clear there's an energy and an enthusiasm for the program internally that continues to rise.

It's also clear, however, that the primary challenge the program has faced in its initial years remains the same: recruitment. And recruitment is directly tied to funding. And our funding remains inadequate for the program's goals. A consistent theme in queries from prospective students—the first question, often the only question—regards the level of funding available. We continue to be able to offer a number of graduate assistantships that provide a stipend of around \$9,800 per academic year (fall/spring), but once the tuition bill is paid, students are left with only around \$3,800. This simply isn't an attractive offer in the competitive world of MFA recruitment. We were not able to secure our top-ranked applicant this year (and easily are top-ranked applicant), as she—an out-of-state applicant—accepted a better offer elsewhere. The three students we have secured for fall admission all earned their BAs from Sam Houston State University, and while we're pleased to welcome them, as we have been with other MFA students who emerged from our own program, it is not a viable long-term strategy for securing the MFA program in terms of enrollment, or in terms of drawing the caliber of student we desire into the program. The struggles in recruitment are most felt within the genre of poetry, as our poetry workshops continue to struggle to find sufficient enrollment each time we offer them. This is not the case with our prose workshops where numbers remain more than adequate.

We have been pleased with the growing financial support for the program, including the generous funding that permitted us to take all the creative writing faculty, Kim Davis from TRP, and four graduate students to the Association of Writers and Writing Program's annual conference in Washington, D.C., this past spring. Such experiences are very rewarding and invigorating for our graduate students, and it is our desire that each of our graduate students should get to experience AWP at least once during their tenure with us. Our presence at conferences such as AWP is vital for our recruitment efforts, as these conferences make us visible, not so much directly to potential graduate students, but through our visibility to, and networking with, other creative writing instructors, presses, journals, organizations, and such across the country. But regardless of our physical presence and the personal persuasiveness of our faculty members, the top priority for most MFA applicants remains funding, and our funding situation remains a key weakness to our program.

On a limited budget and with increased support from the chair and the dean, we were able to welcome a host of visiting writers to campus this past year. We held more events than ever before, and brought a more diverse set of writers to campus than ever before. Of course, the highlight of the year was the presence of Rep. John Lewis as part of the National Book Awards Festival in April, which featured the Civil Rights Movement icon and his co-author and illustrator of *March*, the graphic novel trilogy that is the story of Lewis and the movement. We are also pleased to know that thanks to the hardwork of Dr. Amanda Nowlin-O'Banion and with the support of Dean Abby Zink, the National Book Awards Festival now stands on much firmer financial ground. Additionally, led by Dr. Chen, we also partnered with the CHSS Diversity and Inclusion Committee to support a handful of visiting writers and events, and Dr. Clare initiated a student-faculty reading series that assembled off-campus at the (now unfortunately defunct) Vortexan. The Wynne Home Arts Center continues to be a feather in the program's cap, with both Dr. Kaukonen and Dr. Clare now holding their graduate workshops in its beautiful facility, and hosting public readings at the end of those semesters, featuring student work. All these readings are important not only for our own students, but for our relationship to the broader campus and Huntsville community.

In the wake of Dr. Ruffin's death in the spring of 2016, there's been a need for new leadership at the Texas Review Press and the *Texas Review*. Prof. Nick Lantz, previously the Review's poetry editor, has accepted the mantle of leadership with the latter, and has been joined on the staff by all the creative writers in the SHSU program, including Drs. Nowlin-O'Banion, Kaukonen, Clare, and Chen. This is a promising development in terms of the journal's integration with the MFA program. The changes at the bi-annual literary journal are substantive, as the journal seeks to publish a more diverse range of authors, both in terms of representation and aesthetics, and as Lantz leads an overhaul of the design and submission process. All of this will make the *Texas Review* a more attractive venue both for authors and for readers, and the MFA program will, by extension, benefit from the journal's higher level of visibility and broader appeal.

After an external review of the Texas Review Press was conducted in the late fall of 2016 and its report provided in early 2017, a search for a new director was initiated. However, as of this report, the position remains unfilled, as the search for associate/full professor and director came up empty this past summer. It is imperative for the MFA program, which will be closely intertwined with the functioning of the press (and the *Review*) through its practicum in publishing courses and graduate assistantships and internships, that the position not only be filled, but be filled by someone capable of leading the press in a challenging time for presses in general, university presses in particular. It is also essential that the director have a good, working relationship with members of the MFA program and students within the program. The search will be re-opened this fall with some adjustments made to the job ad, which, we hope will result in a more expansive pool (as will the better timing of the job ads posting and subsequent search timeline).

Three students earned their MFA degrees this past academic year; in terms of attrition, two students withdrew from the program due to family/time commitment conflicts. Additionally, one student has failed out of the program.

This past fall, the MFA faculty members conducted an internal review of the program, which had entered its fifth year, had only one remaining member of the original three faculty members, and now had a new chair, Dr. Jacob Blevins, who had come to us from McNeese State University where he had directed its MFA program. We also had a desire to revisit some of the program's curriculum and structure, in light of our experiences these first few years. The internal review has led to a number of proposed changes, which will be implemented beginning in the fall of 2018. These include, in brief summary, the following: 1) the replacement of the graduate research and bibliography course requirement, which served as an introduction to graduate studies in English but was primarily aimed at literature students, with an equivalent course more appropriate for MFA students, called The Writer's Life; 2) the elimination of the so-called Block requirement for MFA students, a requirement that, again, seemed more appropriate for literature students than for MFA students; the change will now give MFA students greater flexibility in selecting the literature they wish to study as part of the degree; and 3) eliminating the comprehensive exam requirement (again, more appropriate for literature students) and replacing it with a portfolio system that seeks to pragmatically prepare our students for life beyond the MFA. We do believe that these changes will make our program more attractive to prospective students, will increase the likelihood that students admitted to the program will finish the program, and finally—and most importantly—our students will be better prepared as writers for post-MFA life.

Plan for Continuous Improvement

Closing Summary:

As noted in the update to the previous plan for continuous improvement, the MFA program remains in a period of transition, although we expect that we'll be able to implement a number of the changes that were proposed in the previous year.

As noted previously as well, it's also clear, however, that the primary challenge the program has faced in its initial years remains the same: recruitment. And recruitment is directly tied to funding. And our funding remains inadequate for the program's goals. A consistent theme in queries from prospective students—the first question, often the only question—regards the level of funding available. We continue to be able to offer a number of graduate assistantships that provide a stipend of around \$9,800 per academic year (fall/spring), but once the tuition bill is paid, students are left with only around \$3,800. This simply isn't an attractive offer in the competitive world of MFA recruitment. We were not able to secure our top-ranked applicant this year (and easily are top-ranked applicant), as she—an out-of-state applicant—accepted a better offer elsewhere. The three students we have secured for fall admission all earned their BAs from Sam Houston State University, and while we're pleased to welcome them, as we have been with other MFA students who emerged from our own program, it is not a viable long-term strategy for securing the MFA program in terms of enrollment, or in terms of drawing the caliber of student we desire into the program. The struggles in recruitment are most felt within the genre of poetry, as our poetry workshops continue to struggle to find sufficient enrollment each time we offer them. This is not the case with our prose workshops where numbers remain more than adequate. We are encouraged by additional scholarship opportunities from both the Office of Graduate Studies and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. We've had several students receive scholarships this past year from those programs, and we will continue to encourage our students to apply.

We have been pleased with the growing financial support for the program, including the generous funding that permitted us to take all the creative writing faculty, Kim Davis from TRP, and four graduate students to the Association of Writers and Writing Program's annual conference in Washington, D.C., this past spring. We hope to be able to do the same thing this year in Tampa. Such experiences are very rewarding and invigorating for our graduate students, and it is our desire that each of our graduate students should get to experience AWP at least once during their tenure with us. Our presence at conferences such as AWP is vital for our recruitment efforts, as these conferences make us visible, not so much directly to potential graduate students, but through our visibility to, and networking with, other creative writing instructors, presses, journals, organizations, and such across the country. But regardless of our physical presence and the personal persuasiveness of our faculty members, the top priority for most MFA applicants remains funding, and our funding situation remains a key weakness to our program.

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