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Program Outcomes for the MFA in Creative Writing are as follows:

1. Students should be able to produce material in their chosen genre of a quality that is comparable to the material being published in contemporary literary magazines and journals.

2. Students should have a broad theoretical and technical understanding of their chosen discipline and of at least one secondary creative discipline.

3. Students should be able to write clear and engaging prose about writing craft and literary analysis and be able to produce sustained and coherent critical papers at an appropriate level of sophistication.

4. Students should complete their courses of study in a rigorous and timely manner.

5. Students should be adequately prepared for a career in writing and publishing, including an ability to recognize the strengths and weaknesses in their own work, a sense of the literary marketplace, and a plan for seeking publication.

6. Students should be able to evaluate writing in a way that might serve through teaching or community writing/literacy programs.

Data

Faculty evaluated the comprehensive exams of twelve MFA students (none were seeking an MFA/MA degree) and five theses for students who graduated either in December 2013 or May 2014 (one of whom earned an MFA/MA). Faculty also considered student responses to exit survey questionnaires.

Discoveries

1. The theses were all of high quality. Three were poetry (one of which was for the MFA/MA) and two were fiction. All showed publication potential. Two of the poetry students published their work while in the program and have been accepted at PhD programs with full funding.

2. The graduating students showed in their written work a broad grasp of their chosen area; their successful completion of a forms class outside of their discipline gave them a further theoretical and technical understanding.
3. The comprehensive exams administered in February 2014 in fiction, nonfiction and poetry showed that the majority of the MFA students were able to write clearly and engagingly about literature in their genres. Of the twelve students who sat the examination (five in fiction, four in nonfiction, three in poetry), all passed. One of these examinees had failed the exam in 2013, and showed substantial progress this year.

4. Three of the graduating students completed their courses of study in a timely manner. Two of the graduating students had taken additional time to complete their degrees, one of whom was an MFA/MA student who graduated at the end of his seventh semester. The other student had taken a job after the end of his third year and graduated three years later. Two MFA students in their third year have not yet graduated, in large part because of the nature of their thesis work. Both had committed to writing a novel and took considerable time to shape their projects; both were awarded one-semester thesis completion fellowships from the Graduate School to support their work in fall 2014. Faculty advise students, and have advised them for many years now, that starting their third year without a full draft of their thesis, or close to it, could make it difficult to graduate on time.

5. One student was dismissed from the program in December 2013. The student had failed her comprehensive examination for the second time in spring 2013. She had been given written warnings of her lack of substantive progress in her thesis, and a December deadline to demonstrate her ability to write a defense-quality thesis and two pass-quality comprehensive examination responses. Her graduate committee judged that the work she submitted in December did not meet either standard, and a request was made to the Graduate School to initiate dismissal. The student appealed the decision, but the Academic Appeals Committee upheld the dismissal.

6. The Exit Survey asks respondents to evaluate the statement: “I feel prepared for the next step in my professional life.” Three strongly agreed, and two agreed. Of the two who marked “agree,” one indicated that s/he would be “taking a job for which my graduate degree is a requirement”, the other that s/he would be pursuing a Ph.D. Of the three who indicated “strongly agree,” one did not give a response, one marked “Other,” and the third will enter a PhD program. Four of the five respondents strongly agreed with the statement, “My writing received sufficient attention and advice from faculty members,” while the fifth agreed.

7. Student ability to evaluate writing through teaching or community writing/literacy programs can be evidenced through their evaluation of relevant program features in the Exit Survey: “The quality of instruction was high,” “Fellow students provided me with intellectual stimulation,” “The process of constructing a thesis was valuable”; responses were nearly all in the ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ categories. Four of the five respondents were graduate teaching assistants for three years—teaching one writing course per term and tutoring five hours each week in the UAF Writing Center.
Responses to the survey were mostly positive; most ratings on the twenty questions were ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree.’ Three would “enthusiastically recommend” the degree program to others, and the rest of the responses continue in that vein, as students agree-strongly agree that ‘the quality of instruction … was high,” “faculty … were accessible,” “the comprehensive exam allowed me … to demonstrate my learning,” etc. These surveys stand in contrast to those completed in the middle of the past decade, when reviewers would expect a few neutral responses to the ‘enthusiastically recommend’ query and a fuller range (i.e. disagree, strongly disagree) to some of the others. The addition of a nonfiction specialist in 2010-11 to an established faculty has benefited the creative writing program generally. Two of these respondents would not “enthusiastically recommend” the program: one was neutral, the other strongly disagreed. Those same two respondents marked “disagree” with the statement, “The range of faculty expertise in the department was adequate.” These negative responses amid the positive merit explanation, albeit speculative. The English Department has lost five faculty since 2012, including tenured professors in fiction and poetry; term faculty filled those positions in 2013-14, and as term faculty, they were limited institutionally. Poetry students faced special challenges with the one tenured poetry faculty taking sabbatical in 2014-15. Graduate students expressed concern throughout the school year at the lack of faculty members available this year and in the years to come.

It is worth noting a few other areas in which enthusiasm was not as uniform. One respondent strongly disagreed with “My TA training was adequate,” while another was neutral on the topic. The TA Orientation and Training is a continuing challenge to the Composition Director, as she must prepare new graduate students to become classroom managers for a first-year writing class in a matter of days. It is, however, a challenge to which nearly all TAs respond; one of the graduating students commented that “teaching undergrad” was among the most valuable aspects of the program. Three of the respondents were neutral on the “Visiting writers/scholars” greatly enriched my education. In general, the exit surveys indicate a strong level of satisfaction with MFA degree program both at the general and particular levels.

MFA/MA Degree—A Note

The MFA/MA degree was originally promoted as a degree for candidates who enjoyed both literature and creative writing and would likely wish to pursue a doctorate in a field of English or writing on completion. In the 2008-9 school year our first three dual degree seekers entered the graduate program. One of this year’s graduates received an MFA/MA degree. He finished at the end of the fall semester in his fourth year. This graduate is the fifth to earn such a degree—two graduated in 2011, one in 2012, and one in 2013. The degree was designed as a three-year degree encompassing a variety of literature and creative writing courses, completion of the MA and the appropriate MFA comprehensive exam, two theses, and a ninety-minute thesis defense that addresses both manuscripts. The first two graduates completed the degree in a timely fashion; the other two plus this year’s graduate finished in their fourth year. Three other students who had been enrolled in the combined degree opted to complete only either the MFA (one current
student, one student who graduated in fall 13) or the MA (one student who will graduate in fall 2014). The combined degree currently only has one student, in her first year.

In its sixth year the MFA/MA claims a fairly secure place as one of the English Department’s degree offerings (N.B. The Fall 2013 graduate is the first to move on to a doctoral program). This year’s graduate application pool included thirteen applications for the dual degree, a substantial number of our total applicants (60+). However, a significant proportion of students are not graduating with the combined degree, or are not graduating on time. The English Department did not assess the future of this degree program in 13-14; during 14-15 we must review it, in particular the extent to which we can support it and the demands it makes on our students if they are to graduate in three years.