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Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing: outcomes assessment 2015-2016

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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 six MFA students (one of these students is seeking an MFA/MA degree) and seven theses for students who graduated either in December 2015 or May 2016. Faculty also considered student responses to exit survey questionnaires.

Discoveries

1. The theses were all of high quality. Four were fiction, one non-fiction, and two poetry. All showed publication potential.

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 2016 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 six students who sat the examination (one in fiction, two in non-fiction, three in poetry), all passed.
4. Four of the theses were in fiction, one in non-fiction, and two in poetry. Three of the graduating students completed their courses of study in a timely manner. A further four took additional time to complete their degrees, including one student completing an MFA/MA who took one extra semester, and two MFA students who had been awarded a one-semester thesis completion fellowship. **N.B.** 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, makes it difficult to graduate on time.

6. The Exit Survey asks respondents to evaluate the statement: “I feel prepared for the next step in my professional life.” One marked neutral, and one disagreed. The one who marked “neutral” indicated that s/he would be pursuing “other” options upon graduation. The other respondent did not give a response. One of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement, “My writing received sufficient attention and advice from faculty members,” while the other 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 all in the “strongly agree” or “agree” categories. Both 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, ranging from ‘agree’ to ‘strongly agree.’ Both 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,” “visiting writers/scholars greatly enriched my education,” etc. One respondent observed that “The TA mentoring program has improved vastly since I arrived.” This respondent also emphasized the importance of the comprehensive exam to his/her intellectual and creative development.

It is worth noting a few areas in which enthusiasm was not as uniform. Both respondents highlighted the limitations of the English Department with respect to graduate course offerings, degree requirements, and faculty expertise. One respondent located the source of the problem in the current budget climate, opining that “the university is beginning to gut this program by not filling empty faculty positions and putting too much workload on existing faculty.” In general, though, the exit surveys indicate a strong level of satisfaction with MFA degree program both at the general and particular levels.