

# **Master of Fine Arts**

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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 seven MFA students (one was an MFA/MA degree seeker) and five theses for students who graduated either in December 2012 or May 2013. Faculty also considered student responses to exit survey questionnaires.

## **Discoveries**

1. The theses were all of high quality. Four were nonfiction and one was fiction. All showed publication potential. An essay from one of the nonfiction theses and a story from the fiction thesis have earned national recognition through AWP writing contests for writers at the start of their career (The nonfiction entry won the prize in that category; the story earned an honorable mention).
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 2012 in fiction and nonfiction showed that the majority of the MFA students were able to write clearly and engagingly about literature

in their genres. Of the seven students who sat the examination (three in fiction, four in nonfiction), one student failed (fiction). The failing exam demonstrated an inability to clearly and cogently respond to the examination questions, or to adequately address the issues under consideration.

4. Three of the graduating students completed their courses of study in a timely manner. One needed an additional semester, and the other—the MFA/MA—took the full year (See comments on the MFA/MA below). These last two graduate students received a one-semester Thesis Completion Fellowship from the Graduate School to support their writing in Fall 2012.

5. The Exit Survey asks respondents to evaluate the statement: “I feel prepared for the next step in my professional life.” Two strongly agreed, two agreed, and one was neutral. The two “strongly agree” marked “taking a job for which my graduate degree is a requirement”; the neutral respondent marked “taking a job for which my graduate degree is irrelevant.” All five either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “My writing received sufficient attention and advice from faculty members.” That students in this group have won writing awards (See #1) is one sign of readiness for and a likely commitment to a career in writing.

6. 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. All 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; nearly all ratings on the twenty questions were ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree.’ All 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-3—responses to the ‘enthusiastically recommend’ query and a fuller range (ie disagree, strongly disagree) to some of the others. The addition of a nonfiction specialist in 2012-11 to an established faculty has benefited the creative writing program generally.

It is worth noting a few 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**

One of this year’s graduates received an MFA/MA degree, the dual degree that prepares the student as both scholar and creative writer. This graduate is the fourth to earn such a degree—two in 2011, one in 2012, and one this year. 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 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 took the extra year, this year’s graduate noting on the survey that “it is a lot of work to complete in just three years.” The 2013-14 school year must include a faculty discussion about this degree. A fifth student will complete next year (also in year four of his study) and three other MFA/MA students will be among our graduate student population. This year’s graduate application pool included a substantial number of applications for the dual degree (10+). The English Department needs to assess the future of this degree program; we must decide the extent to which we will support the MFA/MA degree.