

May 2018 assessment based on data from 2016-17 and 2017-18

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing: outcomes assessment 17-18

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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 13 MFA students (7 from 16-17, including one student seeking an MFA/MA; and 6 from 2017-18) plus 11 theses (7 for students who graduated in 2016-17, including 2 graduating with an MFA/MA; and 4 for students graduating in 2017-18). Faculty also considered student responses to exit survey questionnaires.

Discoveries

1. With the move to submission and library storage of theses as digital documents, accessibility has become a problem. Of the seven theses from 2016-17, two could not be accessed through the library and faculty had to ask the students to provide them.. The work of students who opt for an “embargo” when submitting their theses cannot be accessed (and so cannot be used for assessment) for as long as two years. Since the embargo is becoming the norm for MFA theses, the English Department should follow the existing policy in its Policies and Procedures of requiring graduating students to provide the department with a copy of their thesis. This policy has not been complied with.

The theses comprised three that were fiction, three that were non-fiction and five that were poetry. The theses were all of high quality. All were either of publishable quality, or showed publication potential. Several students from both years that were assessed had had portions of

their theses published. In the future, the department could collect such data for assessment (and for other purposes).

2. The graduating students showed in their written work a broad grasp of their chosen area: all students must pass a forms class in their genre; 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 2017 (in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry) and February 2018 (in fiction, nonfiction, and screenwriting), showed that the majority of the MFA students were able to write clearly and engagingly about literature in their genres. One MFA/MA student from 2017 and one MFA from 2018 failed both the February exam and the April supplemental exam. The former withdrew from the MFA program; the latter will re-sit the exam in February 2019.

4. Eight of the graduating students completed their courses of study in a timely manner, including one student completing the combined MFA/MA program who graduated in 2017. A further three took additional time to complete their degrees, including an MFA/MA student who graduated in summer 2017 (instead of May 2017), an MFA student studying part time in the program, and a student who had completed all coursework two years earlier but only defended his thesis in 2017. (**N.B.** Faculty advise students, and have advised them for many years now, that in order to graduate by the end of their third year, they need to have a full draft of their thesis by the start of that year, at the latest.)

5. Exit surveys for 16-17 were not available for this assessment (turn-over in English Department administrative staff meant that the surveys were either not administered or could not be found). The committee evaluated the four exit surveys for the four MFA students graduating in May 2018 and found the following:

(i) The Exit Survey asks respondents to evaluate the statement: “I feel prepared for the next step in my professional life.” One strongly agreed, one agreed, one was neutral, and one disagreed. The “strongly agree” student indicated that (s)he would be attending a PhD program in the fall; the “agree” student was applying to a “variety of jobs (mostly staff jobs at universities)”; the “neutral” student would be applying for PhD programs for Fall 2019; and the “disagree” student planned to “pursue academic careers.”

(ii) Two of the four respondents strongly agreed with the statement, “I had sufficient faculty guidance and advice in shaping my thesis”; the other respondents either agreed or were neutral.

(iii) Responses to all eighteen of our survey questions, except two, were in the 4.25 to 5.0 range (“strongly agree” to “agree” about the strength of various aspects of the program). There were two exceptions:

(a) a score of 3.5 on “I feel prepared for the next step in my professional life”: the issue of our students feeling prepared for the next step in their lives should certainly be considered by the faculty; initiating an internship in scholarly publishing next year may help address this issue.

(b) a score of 4 on “The range of faculty expertise available in the department was adequate.” The latter is most likely related to the drop in faculty numbers. Whereas four years ago the creative writing program had one tenured faculty member and one term faculty member specializing in fiction, two in poetry, and one each in creative non-fiction and dramatic writing (the latter being a 25% position), numbers have been reduced. In 2017-18 the program was staffed by one full-time tenured professor, one 25% tenured professor and two term faculty (one full-time tenured faculty member was on sabbatical, and a full-time tenure-track faculty member on a leave of absence that has been extended through May 2019).

(iv) “The quality of instruction was high” question received three “strongly agree” responses from students, and one “neutral” response. For “Fellow students provided me with intellectual stimulation,” two students strongly agreed, one agreed, and one was neutral. For the question, “The process of constructing a thesis was valuable,” responses were unanimously “strongly agree.”

(v) All respondents either strongly agree or agree that they would recommend the degree program to others, and many of the responses continue in that vein, as students agree/strongly agree that “faculty ... were accessible,” “the comprehensive exam allowed me ... to demonstrate my learning,” “the process of constructing a thesis was valuable,” their “work received useful feedback from faculty members,” and “Visiting writers/scholars enriched my education.”

(vi) It is worth noting a few areas in which enthusiasm was not as uniform. (a) One respondent was neutral in response to “My TA training was helpful,” while the other three strongly agreed. The TA Orientation and Training is a continuing challenge to the Director of University Writing, 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. (b) Two respondents strongly agreed that “The range of courses offered was appropriate,” one agreed, and one was neutral.

In general, the exit surveys indicate a strong level of satisfaction with MFA degree program both at the general and particular levels.

6. Student ability to evaluate writing through teaching or community writing/literacy programs can be evidenced through: (i) their participation in graduate-level writing workshops, in which they assess and critique the work of their peers; (ii) their work as graduate teaching assistants for the English Department (all but one of the graduating MFA students had been teaching assistants for three years, teaching one writing course per term and tutoring five hours each week in the UAF Writing Center); and (iii) participation of the majority of the students in the English Department's annual Celebration of Writing, an event that invites and encourages members of the public to write, by designing and running workshop and other activities. N.B. the committee recommends changing this outcome for future assessments since its intent is no longer clear, and materials to assess it are not available.

MFA/MA Degree—A Note

The combined degree was designed to be completed in three-years and encompasses 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. One student scheduled to graduate in spring 2018 opted not to do so because of the pressures of completing the combined degree, and has opted to defend her thesis in fall 2018. Another student, who graduated with an MFA/MA in spring 2017, did so on time, completing the degree within the three years of funding currently offered. The English Department has not evaluated the future of this dual-degree track but should, and 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.