

Student Learning Assurance Report

AY 2011-2012

MFA in Writing Program

Completed by Catherine Brady, Academic Director

Overview

During the academic year 2011-2012, in addition to direct measures of student learning in courses, we measured student learning by asking thesis readers to complete rubrics for each student, analyzed the results of student surveys, and discussed the best responses to these findings, which included curricular changes. For three years, including the current academic year, at least one of the program's three full-time faculty members has been on sabbatical or on leave. During AY 2011-2012, David Vann was on leave and Aaron Shurin, about to retire, received course release time each semester; practically speaking, only the academic director (Catherine Brady) was functioning in a full-time capacity. Since David Vann has left the university, we'll again be short-staffed in AY 2012-13 as we conduct a search for a replacement. Given the circumstances, Associate Dean Eileen Fung indicated that some assessment tasks might need to be postponed. However, we completed the AY 2011-12 assessment tasks identified in our plan, though we have not yet analyzed and responded to all these findings.

Methods for Evaluating Learning Outcomes

Student evaluations of program courses are excellent. In our unit summary, the MFA program consistently performs better than the university mean. In narrative evaluations for part-time faculty (reviewed by the academic director), students consistently and thoughtfully rate their instructors as highly effective, and they also identify the ways in which the course has contributed to their progress in learning to become better writers (which includes becoming more critical readers). We track the publications of graduations and have noted not only increasing numbers of publications but increasing visibility in terms of awards, national recognition, and so on. Although much of this information must be self-reported by alumni, we can track a general trend of increasing success. Program learning goals and outcomes are attached as an appendix to this report for convenient reference.

Program-wide assessment:

Learning goals 1, 2, 3, and 4:

*Exit surveys: for the first time we implemented exit surveys designed to gauge students' experience of their learning in the program, with questions that addressed all four of our learning goals.

Learning goals 1 and 3:

*Review of thesis letters of evaluation (written by instructors to each student) by the academic director. When these were evaluated, the director analyzed the comprehensiveness of evaluations by part-time "core faculty" (continuing part-time adjuncts who teach regularly in the program) and "additional thesis instructors" (typically hired only during the summer to work one-on-one with students). Letters were evaluated with respect to how specifically they referenced these learning outcomes. *The second thesis reader evaluated each student's performance on the rubrics for learning goal 1 b. and learning goal 3. b. We have tabulated the results for all students so that we can assess student learning program-wide.

Learning goal 2:

*Two-year study of critical writing: We completed the initial stage of a two-year study (to be completed in AY 2012-13) of critical papers submitted in fall semester literature seminars; the sample includes 3 students in each genre. The same students will submit a critical paper written for a fall 2011 and a fall 2012 literature seminar, and analysis will be designed to help us determine whether students have made progress on this learning goal.

Learning goal 4:

*Collated results of feedback surveys for program events that offer professional preparation and results for relevant questions on exit surveys. For the first time, we began tracking student participation in staffing our online journal *Switchback* and evaluating its professional success in terms of visitors to the site.

Findings and Conclusions

Exit Surveys

The exit survey has two parts. Part I asks graduates to rank the importance of specific structural or co-curricular components of the program and their degree

of satisfaction, on a scale of 1-5. In part II, graduates respond to a series of statements identifying learning outcomes with “strongly agree,” “agree,” or “disagree.” Overall, students rank the program highly with respect to class size, the attention paid to thesis instruction over two semesters, faculty engagement, and progress on learning outcomes.

Part I focuses on learning goal 4. Responses to the reading series and teaching assistantships indicated high satisfaction. Lower scores for Life After MFA (I and II) indicate that we can improve these offerings (and have already re-designed them successfully in AY 2011-12). While students ranked their satisfaction with teaching assistantships as high (4.17), they reported low satisfaction (2.5) with the Teaching Creative Writing course offered in spring 2011. However, that semester the course was taught by an inexperienced part-time faculty member, so we will compare this results with this year’s surveys for the course, taught by a full-time faculty member in spring 2012.

In Part II, questions 10-13 asked students to indicate their progress on specific learning goals. These results are provided below, with number of responses followed by percentage, and the relevant learning goal(s) and outcomes identified in brackets.

10. [Learning goals 1a. and b., and 2 a.] The program helped me further my understanding of craft and develop a discipline as a writer:
 Strongly agree 16/19 (84%) Agree 2/19 (10%) Disagree 1/19 (5%)

11. [Learning goal 3.a. and b.] The program helped me improve my skills as the editor of my own work and that of others:
 Strongly agree 17/19 (90%) Agree 1/19 (5%) Disagree 1/19 (5%)

12. [Learning goal 3.a. and b.] The program helped me develop the skills to “read as a writer,” i.e., to study literature with an eye to craft:
 Strongly agree 14/19 (74%) Agree 3/19 (16%) Disagree 2/19 (10%)

13. [Learning goal 4.a] The program helped me learn how to prepare a manuscript and submit work for publication:
 Strongly agree 7/19 (37%) Agree 7/19 (37%) Disagree 5/19 (26%)

Overall, these responses indicate that students perceive the program as very successful in achieving our learning outcomes but also suggest areas for improvement. Students seem slightly more satisfied with what they learn in workshops (#11) than with what they learn in literature seminars (#12). On question 15 (not included above) 58 percent of students strongly agreed that the introductory summer course was successful, which is not as impressive as their

ratings for workshops and seminars, a result that is relevant to our current planning for curriculum changes. With respect to the question of whether students felt they were prepared for a professional life as a writer (#13), only 37 percent strongly agreed, a less positive percentage than for the other key questions. This suggests we might improve on relevant curricular and co-curricular offerings. The students' overwhelmingly positive response to their education is best represented by the fact that 94 percent of respondents indicated they would recommend this program to other writers.

This survey also asked students to rate whether the length of the program was adequate, and 42 percent indicated an interest in attending for one or more additional semesters. The year-round program currently takes two years and three months to complete. The current standard in our field is a three-year degree program, and as we consider the case for changing to this standard, we will take this response into account. However, many students who attend the program chose it because they could earn the degree in less time (ranking its importance 3.74 out of 4.53), which begs the question of whether a three-year program, more in keeping with changes in our field, might attract an equally large, if not larger, pool of applicants—and better serve them in terms of preparing them to succeed as writers.

Evaluation of Thesis Letters of Evaluation

The academic director's analysis of the thesis letters of evaluation, written by each instructor for each student, indicates that part-time core faculty are more comprehensive in their feedback than "additional thesis instructors"; they are better able to address goals for the work as a whole and more likely to evaluate student work in ways that specifically correspond to the rubrics for learning outcomes 1.b. and 3.b. This conclusion is supported by evidence from student evaluations; while most instructors receive good evaluations, core faculty members consistently receive them, and more problems are reported with additional instructors.

Completion of Thesis Rubrics for 25 Theses Submitted in AY 2011-12

The faculty member who served as second reader of each thesis evaluated student performance on the learning rubric for learning goal 1, outcomes a. and b. Aaron Shurin read poetry theses. Karl Soehnlein, Lewis Buzbee, Stephen Beachy, Lisa Harper, and Nina Schuyler read theses in prose (fiction and nonfiction). Of 25 theses, 9 were rated excellent, 9 good, and 7 average for learning outcome a; for learning outcome b, 10 were rated excellent, 9 good, and 6 average. In poetry, all theses were rated excellent on both outcomes.

These findings provide relevant evidence that most students who complete the program demonstrate the desired learning outcome at a good or excellent level. Readers checked off the level of performance for each outcome on the rubric provided. So while this evidence confirms that we are achieving our stated goals, we will consider refining the assessment tool so that readers provide numeric scores on more component parts. This might enhance the objectivity (and potential usefulness) of results, with total scores in all categories being ranked as excellent, good, average, or poor by another faculty member.

Feedback Surveys for Co-curricular Events

Feedback surveys for two program events, Life After MFA I and II, have helped us to evaluate the success of these events and to make changes. In fall 2011, Life After MFA I had been revised in response to negative feedback from students in the prior academic year. Responses on the fall 2011 survey indicated that the program adequately addressed key components of seeking a full-time or part-time teaching job and applying for writing residencies and fellowships. We will retain the new structure and its emphasis on practical advice. In this survey, students were also asked to make suggestions for topics for Life After MFA II (offered during the spring semester), so that we could incorporate some of these topics in that event as well. We have not yet collated and responded to Life After MFA II surveys.

Switchback Statistics

Students who staff this journal may advance as editors in poetry, fiction, or nonfiction or be appointed to the position of managing editor. From January 2011 to December 2011, the number of visits to the site increased from 3,362 visitors per month to 4,717 visitors per month. This year 21 current students and 5 recent graduates serve on the staff of *Switchback*, a very high rate of participation in a student body that currently totals 60.

Changes to Improve Student Learning

Learning goal 1. a. and b.

The exit surveys provide evidence that 42 percent of our students would like to continue for an additional semester or more in the program; anecdotally, many students report that they need more time to work on the thesis. Under our current structure, Thesis I and II take place during the summer, when no full-

time faculty are available to work with students on this most important component of their study. Taking into account evidence from student evaluations and analysis of instructors' letters of evaluation, we have determined that students will be able to demonstrate greater competence on learning outcomes if we re-structure the program to provide greater access to core full- and part-time faculty for thesis instruction. We have obtained approval from the dean's office to make this change. Beginning with the entering class of 2015, students will continue to take Thesis I in the summer of their first year, but will complete Thesis II in the fall semester rather than the summer semester following their second year. Not only does this provide them with more time to compose a complete work, it ensures that both Thesis I students and Thesis II students have greater access to core faculty, "staggering" this work so that we serve half the students in each semester. Full-time faculty can now also participate in Thesis II instruction. This change extends the student's time in the program by just three months, since this new structure replaces the summer introductory course with a literature seminar taken by students in their last semester (concurrently with thesis II). Based on SUMMA evaluations that are lower than those for other literature seminars and lower exit survey ratings for the summer introductory course, we have decided that students are better served by a literature seminar that focuses more intently on the genre of the thesis. We will replace the summer introductory course with a fall orientation that introduces students to craft vocabulary and close reading skills.

At faculty meetings, faculty collaborated on refining the definition of learning outcomes and rubrics for learning goals 1 and 2. We also deliberated strategies for ensuring the success of thesis instruction, which entailed revising guidelines provided to students and instructors and deciding to switch to the new curricular cycle. We are also considering proposing a three-year program, researching best practices at other nationally recognized programs and working with the dean's office to identify necessary resources and possible constraints. During our upcoming program review, we'll seek the advice of outside reviewers on this proposal.

Learning goal 1. b. and Learning goal 3. b.

We plan to revise the thesis rubric used by the second reader of the thesis, so that when we next implement this assessment measure, we can gain more useful, detailed, and objective information about student competence.

Learning goal 1.a, Learning goal 2. a. and b., and Learning goal 3 a. and b.

In order to assess how well our courses align with program learning goals and outcomes, we set aside time at several faculty meetings for discussion of learning assurance. In spring 2012 we discussed the need to provide detailed, precise learning outcomes in each syllabus. In fall 2013 we'll reconsider the learning outcomes (somewhat revised), specifically to help faculty members articulate specific learning outcomes that clearly reference the learning outcomes for the program as a whole. In syllabi review, the genre coordinators will ask for revisions when learning outcomes are not clearly defined.

Learning goal 2.a. and 2. b.

Curriculum committees have made revisions to course descriptions or generated new courses so that literature seminars are focused more closely on intended goals for these courses. We have revised the poetry seminars so that we have distinguished courses focusing clearly on literary tradition (Poetics, American Poetry) from those that emphasize contemporary practice and/or craft principles (Prosody, International Poetry), which aligns with the emphasis in our prose courses and ensures that we address the different aims for learning outcomes 2. a. and b. In addition, we have gained approval from the university's curriculum committee for a new course offering in nonfiction, *Constructing the World: Time and Space in Nonfiction*, that covers a specific set of craft principles and strategies for nonfiction students, replacing a course that was vague in focus and did not clearly define craft considerations.

Learning goal 4.a.

Collectively, we have not yet analyzed these findings, but event organizers are incorporating student feedback in future versions of these events. During this academic year, we will discuss these findings and consider the possibility of scheduling more time in workshops to discuss submitting work to agents and editors and try to identify the best ways to do so.

Learning goal 4. b.

Because we could demonstrate the increasing visibility of our on-line journal *Switchback*, we were able to obtain more funding for advertising the journal and for supporting student participation. At least in part, the success of the journal

can be assessed in relation to the number of visitors, and the faculty adviser, academic director, and administrative director consult with the editor on plans for increasing the quality of the journal.

APPENDIX: STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

Learning Goal 1

Students will demonstrate a working knowledge of the fundamentals of artistic composition and craft.

Learning Outcomes:

- a. Students can apply craft principles to formal elements (e.g., plot, characterization, exposition, poetic line, imagery) to determine appropriate craft strategies as they compose and revise stories, chapters, essays, or poems that possess literal coherence and generate figurative (implicit) meaning.
- b. By completing a book-length work (creative thesis), students demonstrate their ability to organize material, shape it into a whole, and sustain creative choices about content, style, and form.

Learning Goal 2

Students will be able to read as writers, applying a critical craft vocabulary as they analyze the ways in which literary meaning is made in the works of published authors.

Learning outcomes:

- a. Students can identify how craft strategies serve craft principles and analyze the relation between literary form and literary content (theme, subject) in the work of published writers.
- b. Students can evaluate aesthetic choices in literary works across diverse historical and cultural traditions.

Learning Goal 3

Using a critical craft vocabulary, students will be able to evaluate and analyze the techniques and intentions of developmental drafts, including their own, and to participate in constructive critical discussion of works-in-progress.

Learning Outcomes:

- a. In responding to a draft manuscript, students can evaluate whether the writer's craft choices serve the intentions of the work and can compare the draft to works with similar themes, form, or style. Students can synthesize specific observations made in close reading of a manuscript to evaluate how it works as a whole and to make suggestions for revision.

b. Students can integrate written and verbal critiques from peers and instructors when revising their own manuscripts, making selective decisions about how to improve the writing.

Learning Goal 4

Students are prepared for participation in the public life of literature, which includes locating their own work in the context of contemporary professional practice, preparing and submitting their work for publication according to professional standards, acquiring skills for writing-related professions (including teaching creative writing), and participating in diverse literary communities.

Learning Outcomes:

- a. Students appraise their own work in relation to contemporary professional practice and understand how to submit work to journals and publishers in accordance with standards in the field.
- b. Students demonstrate competence in written communication that has application for professional writing and editing.
- c. Students who wish to pursue a teaching career acquire a comprehensive knowledge of craft principles and pedagogy from teaching assistantships and core courses.