

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Academic Program Review

DEPARTMENT/PROGRAM

Master in Fine Arts in Writing

EXTERNAL REVIEWERS

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CAMPUS VISIT:

March 2-4, 2015

The review team read the self-study written by the faculty in the department; reviewed the curriculum, course syllabi and evaluations; conducted class visits; interviewed faculty, students and staff; and met with the Dean, Associate Deans, and other relevant members of the campus community. Prior to their visit, the reviewers were provided with USF's Vision, Mission and Values Statement, the department's self-study, and other university materials.

1. How did the external review committee rate the quality of the program – excellent, very good, good, adequate, or poor? How does the program compare with benchmark top-tier programs nationally? Please provide a brief rationale for the external review committee's rating.

The external review team recommended a rating of "Adequate" for the program. The rating was largely based on lack of financial resources, particularly the limited funding available for students, and structural challenges, such as the weak chair model. The reviewers added that "it is our conviction that [the positive] qualities, plus a commitment (by faculty and administration) to excellence and a willingness to explore new revenue streams and other changes ... can push the USF MFA program toward premier status." The program's strengths included its San Francisco location, the online journal and literary reading series, a new academic director who is "nationally-known" and "highly-regarded," and a creative writing faculty with "excellent" credentials.

2. What are the most important general issues that emerged from the external review process?

- The program enjoyed great success during the 1990s and into the early 2000s, with a higher national profile than it has now. It has failed to "thrive" more recently, when most creative writing programs are thriving.
- Strengths of the program include: an academic director and faculty with excellent reputation and credentials, high student satisfaction with the program, a student-staffed online journal, a literary reading series, a nice office space, and a genuinely supportive Dean.
- The "primary and overwhelming weakness" is financial, with inadequate funding adversely affecting almost every aspect of the program.
- As the reviewers stated: "High achieving and talented students go where the funding is. The very limited funding in the USF MFA puts the program at disadvantage – a disadvantage that is amplified by the high cost of living in the Bay Area." programs offer every student some support.

- The program’s mission is clear and concise, but needs to be revised to better distinguish the USF program from the other MFA programs at institutions nearby, as well as to put it on a path “ushering in, leading, and envisioning a new San Francisco literary community.”
- There is redundancy in the administrative structure inside the program with co-directors, and in the academic structure of the program, with the separation of the MFA program and Creative Writing Program within the English Department.
- The weak chair model “appears to inadvertently encourage tentativeness on the part of department and program chairs, and might actually discourage the robust advocacy and strong leadership that the MFA needs in order to reinvent itself.”

3. **What specific recommendations for improving the program’s quality has the external review committee made to the Dean?**

The committee divided their recommendations into three categories: (1) financial, (2) administrative and academic structure of the program, and (3) curriculum and teaching, including faculty and Student Life.

Financial

- Reduce the 2.5-year program to a more traditional 2-year program.
- Develop a 5 to 10-year plan to increase the number and type of scholarships available.
- Increase the hourly rate for teaching assistantships.
- Fund a named faculty chair in Creative Writing, with the released funds to be applied to graduate fellowships and support for starting new related programs -- this should be made a top priority in the upcoming capital campaign. Make the program a partner in the work with the Development Office.
- Realign the budget using the reviewers’ recommendations.
- Consider the revenue-generating suggestions provided by the reviewers, including a Summer Institute, one- or two-week residential writing programs for high school students, “low residency” master’s programs. Feasibility studies should be done and PHP faculty should be considered for new positions in these programs.

Administrative and Academic Structure of the Program

- Move the MFA program to within the English Department, while “preserving its special status as the department’s sole graduate program, and retaining its own graduate program director (the current academic director), and its self-governing status.” The move would allow administration to reduce staff redundancy.
- Recognize the possible impact of the “weak chair” model on the program’s ability to address its challenges.
- Replace the dual directorship structure with a faculty academic directorship only structure.
- Redefine the program’s staff assistant duties to include some of the current administrative duties and provide the academic director with more mentoring.

Curriculum and Teaching, including Faculty and Student Life

- As a matter of university-wide policy, “scholarly and creative work” or “research and creative work” should be used, rather than “research,” in all statements concerning job descriptions, requirements for promotion and tenure, and other expectations for faculty.
- Have a mandatory faculty retreat to work on curricular changes, including revising the thesis courses and review process.
- Continue the new Teaching Assistant program.

- The “program and College should build on this restructuring and evaluate all of the recommendations articulated in the report above” during its assessment activities.

4. In the opinion of the external review committee is the program following the University’s strategic initiative in that it is;

a. *Recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty of outstanding teachers and scholars.*

As mentioned above, the faculty in both the MFA program and the Creative Writing area in the English Department have excellent credentials. The academic director is “a faculty member who has a significant national reputation” and the MFA “current faculty—tenure line, PHP, and adjunct—are all capable and highly qualified to teach both at the graduate and undergraduate level.”

b. *Enrolling, supporting and graduating a diverse student body that demonstrates high academic achievement, strong leadership capabilities, a concern for others, and a sense of responsibility for the weak and vulnerable.*

The graduate programs have been asked to enroll larger numbers of students. However, reviewers expressed concern about the quality of some students now enrolled in the MFA program. The reviewers state that despite “the obvious classroom talents of the faculty, and their commitment to bringing weaker students along, the substantial numbers of students who are neither strong writers nor experienced, high-level readers of literature has a markedly harmful effect on the experience of their more talented and better-prepared classmates.”

c. *Providing the environment necessary to promote student learning in the program.*

The reviewers commended “the MFA program culture, which nurtures and challenges students in their workshop and seminar courses” and “the sense of community that so many report as a key characteristic of the program.” They saw real strengths in the curriculum that were “grounded in the good faith, hard work, and evident teaching talent of both full- and part-time faculty, both those in the MFA in Writing program and those in the English Department.” The team was also “impressed with the flexibility at which students can cross genres during their study.”

5. In what way is the program contributing to the goal of making the University of San Francisco a premier Jesuit, Catholic urban university with a global perspective that educates leaders who will fashion a more humane and just world?

The reviewers found the need to enroll many students, some under- or unqualified, to be “grossly at odds” with the university’s stated mission as a Jesuit institution. The reviewers also recognized that problems the program faced were “grounded in issues around revenue,” and offered suggestions for “spin-off programs that would suit USF’s mission, history, location, and great potential.”

6. What is the timetable for the response to the external review committee’s recommendations for program improvement? What can the Office of the Provost do to appropriately respond to the review?

The next step is for the Dean and Associate Deans to meet with the Department and discuss the action plan based on the self-study and reviewers’ report. Based on the reviewers’ suggestions, the Office of the Provost could assist the program by supporting: 1) increased financial support for students, 2)

curricular and structural changes decided by the program faculty and the Dean; 3) the development of links between the program with the Development Office, and 4) a university-wide policy that replaces the term “research” with “scholarly and creative work” or “research and creative work.”

7. What general comments or issues, if any, are crucial to understanding the reviewers report?

No additional information is needed.