

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**  
***Academic Program Review***  
**Master of Fine Arts in Writing**

**EXTERNAL REVIEWERS**

Mary Jo Bang, Professor of English and Director of the Writing Program,  
Washington University, St. Louis

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**CAMPUS VISIT:**

April 23-25, 2007.

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, 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 reviewers felt that the program could take “justifiable pride in its accomplishments”. While staying true to its original commitment to nontraditional students and its belief that “being a member of a community of writers is important for the growth of a complete writer”, the program had expanded and grown to become “a professional arts program”. While not specifically comparing the department to top-tier liberal arts colleges and universities, the implication is that they rated the department and its programs as GOOD.

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

- The reviewers noted that the program faced “some significant challenges, challenges brought on, in part, because of its success”. Nonetheless, the reviewers felt that the program's “core commitment to fostering and supporting a community of writers should guide its response to the challenges that it faces”, while at the same time recognizing that the program's growth necessitated incorporating “some of the practices of a more rigorous MFA program”.
- In the view of the review team, many of the challenges facing the program arise from “an administrative structure that contributes to miscommunication and that has led well-intended faculty to become distrustful of each other”.
- Nonetheless, the reviewers found a community “proud of its achievements, deeply loyal to the program, and willing to accept the challenge of improving the program

while preserving its core identity". In addition, the students were "emphatically positive" about many aspects of their educational experience at USF, particularly the intimate atmosphere of the program.

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

#### a) Curriculum

The reviewers felt that the "curriculum as it now stands is not consistently geared to students working at the graduate level". They made some very specific recommendations in order that courses and reading lists be raised to the level of graduate study so that students "gain a much broader understanding of their craft". Their key recommendations were in the following areas:

- Genre specific admissions: The program should move from open admissions to genre-specific admissions (in poetry, fiction and non-fiction). By shifting to genre driven admissions, "the curriculum could be revised to set in motion basic requirements...for each discipline, ensuring a level of rigor and study appropriate to graduate study."
- Major projects: The reviewers noted that neither the students, program directors nor faculty were satisfied with the major projects. They recommended the following;
  - a. A new hire in non-fiction so that genre heads in each area would teach the final Master project courses.
  - b. That PHP adjunct faculty be paid to teach Master Project summer sessions as full courses.
  - c. Offer Masters Project I as a thesis preparation workshop and preserve Masters Project II for one-on-one study during a student's final semester.
  - d. Revise the way in which students are matched with a Masters Project advisor.
- Introductory Autobiography Class: The reviewers recommended that the role of this course be reconsidered and that students not be required to write first-person narratives. The students would be better served by reshaping the current course should into a reading section and writing workshop that allows students to "focus on those genres they choose to examine in depth during their course of study".
- Creative Non-fiction Track: The reviewers were struck by number of students choosing to focus on non-fiction writing yet the program did not have a full-time tenure track non-fiction writer on the faculty. They recommended hiring a new faculty member in this area and that the non-fiction track be strengthened in terms of greater course offerings with more breadth and depth with "more options to study the mechanics of research for in-depth essay writing and reporting".
- Assessment: The review team recommended the "implementation of a more thorough system of course assessment and evaluation". This was important to any writing program and it was "very difficult to evaluate how effectively the students are being instructed not only in developing reading skills as writers but also in developing the craft techniques necessary to deepen and refine their skills as writers".
- Advising: The reviewers recognized the role that advising has played in the program and expressed the hope that the curricular recommendations would make advising "more manageable and efficient".
- Student Concerns: While noting the high regard students had for the program, the reviewers indicated that students had concerns regarding the availability and allocation of teaching assistantships; the scheduling of readings during class time;

the need for a more variety in fiction classes and greater diversity in non-fiction classes; the low visibility of the program; more information on how to get published and a concern with the racial and ethnic diversity of the program.

#### b) Faculty

The reviewers were impressed with the good relationship between the faculty and students but noted that there “were issues surrounding the faculty that need to be addressed” if the program was remain true to its vision and respond to the changes that were now impacting it. The reviewers made specific recommendations to address these concerns:

- Hire a full-time, tenure track faculty member in nonfiction: This would not only redress a serious curricular need but would help “establish a new balance among the current faculty” that could a very healthy development.
- Convert term positions to tenured or tenure-track positions: The reviewers noted that the stated rationale for term positions is that the position is primarily a teaching position. However, in their view, this runs counter to an essential requirement of any creative writing program, namely that “the faculty must be actively publishing writers”. Without denying the importance of teaching, they argued “that any writing program that does not give at least equal weight to the importance of its faculty writing simply will not be a competitive program”.
- PHP faculty: The reviewers found the reliance on adjunct faculty “troubling” and they made two main recommendations:
  - a. that a “reasonable expectation” of publication be included in the criteria for awarding PHP status in creative writing. The current PHP faculty should be given a grace period (e.g., five years) to meet a minimum publication requirement that should be met by the full time faculty (with the ideal minimum being two books);
  - b. that PHP faculty be given the equivalent of one regular course assignment for overseeing five major projects.
- Relationship between the creative writing faculty in the MFA program and the Department of English: The reviewers noted that currently this was “a troubled relationship, one damaged by miscommunication and mistrust” in part due to “a lack of clarity as to where appropriate duties, responsibilities and authority” reside. They recommended the following;
  - a. that the Dean’s Office issues a statement clarifying the specific responsibilities of these two groups of faculty, including the non-governmental role of English faculty in the MFA program.
  - b. that there be a clear understanding that tenure-track faculty from the English Department teaching in the MFA program have a “different status” from PHP faculty and supervisory norms change accordingly.
  - c. that the two groups of faculty work on a common project, e.g. a national search for a visiting minority scholar.
- Joint visiting position: The review team urged the University to consider a joint semester long visiting position for a writer of color who would teach one course for the MFA program and one for English. This would begin to address the relative absence of students and faculty of color.

#### c) Program Administration

The reviewers argued that the structure of two co-directors and one faculty member “creates an imbalance that is almost fated to lead to misunderstanding” and is a further example of a program “administratively burdened by practices that may have had a purpose in the past

but that now seem to be creating unnecessary work". The recommended changes would make the faculty as a whole the "communal governing body of the program". The reviewers recommended the following:

- Appoint an Administrative Director: This person would "assume primary responsibility for the day-to-day running of the program and for carrying out the program's policies".
- Appoint faculty heads for fiction, non-fiction and poetry: The heads of the different genres in the program would, together with the administrative director, constitute the governing body of the program. The genre heads "would assume primary responsibility for overseeing the curriculum in their genre".
- Appoint an Executive Program Director: One of the genre heads would assume the title of Executive Program Director and this position would rotate among the genre heads every three years. The Executive Program Director would call meetings and represent the program to the University and the community.
- Admissions: The reviewers were not convinced that the current practice of interviewing a large number of prospective applicants is a good use of faculty time. They suggested some alternatives including group open houses and focusing interviews only on those students the program had admitted and wanted to enroll.

#### d) Facilities and Resources

- Space: The reviewers expressed concern that there be adequate office space not only for full-time faculty but also for adjunct faculty. In addition, the program needed lounge space for the students thus "providing a gathering place for the community".
- Fellowship: The review team was very impressed with new fellowship money recently allocated to the MFA program.
- Fundraising: The reviewers noted that a commitment to fundraising by the College and the program – from individuals, foundations, and government agencies – would benefit students and faculty.
- Teaching Assistantships: Students had expressed disappointment to the reviewers that there were not more teaching opportunities available to them.

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

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

- The review team noted that MFA program had established a "unique position for itself in the highly competitive arena of quality Creative Writing programs in the larger San Francisco Bay Area". One of the major reasons for this was the hard of its co-directors, faculty and part-time faculty.
- Students commented that instructors were generous with their time and were clear and capable.

*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.*

- Over the last twenty years, the MFA program had worked hard to professionalize itself. The reviewers that while it has not fully succeeded in achieving the diversity among its faculty and students that it would like, "it continues to work on this issue".

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

- The review team noted that it was clear “that the program’s commitment to quality teaching has played an important role in creating an environment in which teaching is taken seriously and in which student feel that they are receiving the benefits of this commitment”.

**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 MFA program “embodies the University of San Francisco’s commitment to serving its community by educating the whole person and by enabling its students to see writing as a practice occurring within and among a community of writers”.

**6. What is the timetable for the response to the external review committee’s recommendations for program improvement? What can the AVP’s office do to appropriately respond to the review?**

- Provide resources to enable the program to hire a non-fiction writer.
- Support the program’s attempts to re-organize its administrative structure.
- Support and advise the program on its faculty and curricular changes.
- Help ensure that new facilities facilitate building and sustaining community.

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

- The current structure and practices of the MFA program have been instrumental in its evolution from a writing program rooted in adult education to an MFA program.
- However, as the reviewers noted, “the success of a structure ends up changing the conditions under which it functions and that necessitates a subsequent modifying of the structure”.
- The program faces the challenge of “preserving its core commitments” while realizing that its growth entails it recognizing that it must also incorporate some of the practices of a more rigorous MFA program”.
- The reviewers argued that this change “need not threaten its identity but instead call forth a creative merger of what is unique and what must be held in common”. This will ensure that the program “continues to provide a nurturing, supportive and challenging learning environment for students of great promise and talent”.