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Creative Writing Department Assessment Survey Results, AY 2011

To: Linda Buckley, Associate Vice President
Academic Planning and Educational Effectiveness

From: Maxine Chernoff, Chair and Professor, Creative Writing Department

Date: May 31, 2011

Subject: Creative Writing Department Assessment Survey Results 2010-2011

CC: Paul Sherwin, Dean, College of Humanities

Susan Shimanoff, Associate Dean, College of Humanities

Program Description:

The Creative Writing Department offers three degrees: the Bachelor of Arts in English, with an emphasis in Creative Writing; the Master of Arts in English, with an emphasis in Creative Writing; the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. The undergraduate major in Creative Writing currently has 382 declared majors. The Creative Writing graduate programs currently have 39 students enrolled in the MA program and 126 students enrolled in the MFA program, and a number of students continuing important work on their theses, but not currently enrolled in classes. All three degree programs are staffed by full-time, tenure-track faculty and part-time lecturers with specialties in fiction, playwriting and poetry.

Assessment method and goals: Our method in our second assessment of sixteen students, eight high achieving and eight lower achieving students, was to compile the results of their final projects in CW 601, Work-in-Progress, our capstone course. Students in this course should be at the end of their major, though in reality some take it while still enrolled in a number of concurrent CW major classes.

All department members (tenured and tenure track) and those lecturers involved in the teaching of undergraduate creative writing classes met as a group to discuss our findings and relate them to our own knowledge of the field and of our own practice as writers. All of the tenured and tenure track faculty had read the sixteen samples ranging in length from 14 to 29 pages. Some of the lecturers had also read them and all of them had received written summaries of the characteristics that made them either "high" or "low" writing.

The meeting was a productive discussion lasting several hours at our May 3, 2011, department meeting. Below we have summarized the conclusions of our discussion of student writing as well as our department suggestions to respond to some of the issues raised by our assessment.

Low Level Writing Samples:

- 1.) Genre issues. Students in this group tend to write science fiction or fantasy driven by television, video games, films, pulp fiction. Lack of touch with “the real,” use of received “experience” filtered by the media. Shallow representational efforts.
 - A. *Recommendation for department:* Do a better job of motivating and requiring students to read “classic” and “serious” literature and model their writing after those genres. Quickly and early in the curriculum discourage students from practicing further in “popular” genres we do not teach here or that any creative writing department at a university usually teaches. Rely on frequent and essential reading of “master” writers in all classes for students to model. Present students with better examples of genre fiction such as Raymond Chandler, Philip K. Dick, Ray Bradbury, Ursula LeGuin, Angela Carter, and Octavia Butler in response to their weaker models.
- 2.) Little in way of outline and structure. Dialogue purposeless. Narrative development slow, little sense of continuity. Author struggles to make point again and again.
 - B. *Recommendation for department:* Emphasize pattern and structure in all classes, particularly workshops and craft classes. Make sure students understand the elements and conditions needed for a successful poem, play, or story. Make certain that rewriting is a part of every class, that bringing poems, stories, and plays to closure is a rewarded activity. Make certain that with an openness and pleasure about process, we also include the rewards of conclusion of projects, fulfilling the promise of a literary work.
- 3.) Metaphors when used are ill-selected. Limited ability to use figurative language to draw character and event together. No building of patterns with metaphor or other uses of language devices.
 - C. *Recommendation for department:* Beginning with CW 301, our foundation course, emphasize figurative language and patterns and nets of development of such in plays, poems, and stories. Give exercises involving the use and revision of metaphoric content at all levels. Study thorough units on figurative language in the craft classes. Have students in the GVAR requirement writing analyze and focus on such language.
- 4.) Poor mechanics and vocabulary.
 - D. *Recommendation:* Make certain that all students have had the proper sequence of Eng 114 and 214 and completed them successfully. Make certain in the GVAR craft classes that these elements are addressed in the writing and revision process. Send students needing additional help to the various tutoring resources available on campus. Make students through proofreading and copyediting exercises in such classes as CW 640, *Transfer Magazine*, as serious about editing their work and the work of others as they are about writing it.

High Level Writing Samples:

- 1.) Serious literary intentions, students trying to do “hard things” in writing with commitment and skill, willingness to linger and “burrow in,” letting each impulse create form.
- 2.) Success with metaphor and figurative language patterns, writers willing to “linger in world” and explore ideas through craft elements of language.
- 3.) Lack of self-consciousness, willingness to risk to write imaginatively, creatively, without fear. Willing to risk sentimentality in exploration of emotion and how language investigates without self-consciousness and avoids clichés of expression, image, and action.
- 4.) Clarity about the work’s limitations, commitment to revision and development in the future evident in the contour and necessary limits of the piece.
- 5.) Experimentation with voice and point of view, not forcing trivial connections, transitions, explanations or resolutions. Writing “outside one’s skin”—stretching beyond personal experience.

E. Recommendation: Continue to enforce these skills in our range of workshop and process classes. Hold the better writers up in a kind and exemplary way to the “weaker” writers to model. Continue to require this level of development for successful completion of program and “launching” into the next phase of their lives as creative writing graduates as graduate students, employees in language-based industries such as editing, publishing, grant-writing, etc., and, of course, as successful writers beginning their careers. Continue to “reward” our best writing with publication in *Transfer Magazine* and at department-sponsored readings and events.