

Submission date: February 11, 2020

Program/s in this review: Creative Writing and Literary Arts MFA in Creative Writing

Specialized accrediting agency (if applicable):

Campuses where the program is delivered: Anchorage

Members of the program review committee:

David Bowie, Chair and Professor, ANC

David Stevenson, Professor and CWLA Coordinator, ANC

1. Centrality of Program Mission and Supporting Role (700 words or less)

The Master of Fine Arts in creative writing is a low-residency program. Students attend a 13-day residency on campus over three summers and return a fourth summer to present their theses in a colloquium. Students study at distance one-on-one with a faculty member in fall and spring semester. The program has historically accepted an average of five new students per year in each of three genres: fiction, literary nonfiction, and poetry. Thus, dating back to 2008, at any given time the program has approximately 40-45 active students (trending downward since 2018, currently at 36). Acceptance into the program is competitive: receiving about 2 to 2.5 applications per single acceptance (over last five years). About twenty percent of students are from out-of-state.

The program is designed to serve “non-traditional” students who live at home and work in their established careers. Student demographics include a typical core of half a dozen Anchorage residents, as well as students from across Alaska, including rural Alaskan communities. Currently 17% of students are of diverse cultures/races. Veteran/military enrollment also stands at about 17%. Over two-thirds of our students are women.

The program has no graduate or teaching assistantships and no tuition waivers.

Two measures by which CWLA program relevancy may be assessed are the number of different Alaskan communities in which our students reside and our numbers of annual applicants.

A. Demographics: Serving Alaskans

The CWLA program currently have students who are full-time residents in 12 different Alaskan communities, including Kotzebue, Bethel, Homer, Nome, Kodiak, Haines, Fritz Creek, Kasilof, among others. These are students who, if not for our low-residency program, would have to go out of state for a much more expensive low-residency program. They are nontraditional students who, for whatever personal reason, cannot temporarily abandon their current lives and move to different city for two or three years. Ultimately, they bring home a strong sense of what it means to contribute and participate in a literary community.

B. Competition for Program Admission

The program typically receives more than two to two and half times the number of applications more than it is able to accept for admission into the program. The program receives these applications despite the fact that it does not offer graduate or teaching assistantships or tuition waivers. Note: enrollment was limited by CAS fiat in 2018 and 2019; current application numbers are trending significantlty downward in Spring 2020.

C. Community Collaborations

Students and alumni have longstanding relationships with the Alaska Center for the Book, Kachemak Bay Writers Conference, the UAA Bookstore, and particularly 49 Writers, the Anchorage-based community writers organization. Graduates have served as executive directors, staff, board members, and have taught several classes

for 49 Writers. In addition the program sponsors many local literary events open to the public, including ten events well-attended events during the summer residency. All students are required to take a five credit hour Literary Practicum (CWLA 695) which very often results in these kind of alliances. The Practicum is designed individually by students and usually takes the form of project best described as community-engaged, or service learning.

D. Extramural Funding

CWLA works with University Advancement, the CAS Development Officer, and the University of Alaska Foundation to secure additional private funding from individuals, corporations and foundations in support of our students and programs. Support ranges from annual fund giving to event support to major gifts and more. The Visiting Writers account finances our literary guests at the summer Residencies. The Jason Wenger account, named in memory of a program student randomly murdered on the streets of Anchorage in 2008, awards cash to three graduating students every year for “excellence in thesis.” The newest foundation account, begun in 2016 in the name of Eva Saulitis, program colleague who passed away from cancer in early 2016, has quickly risen to over \$30,000. This account funds a cash award for an incoming (first year) student who demonstrates service to a community traditionally under-represented in the university.

E. Student Goals

Students undertaking the MFA in creative writing have few to no expectations of “employment opportunities relevant to the program.” Students come to the program to improve their writing with the goal of publication on the national level. This is accomplished with the help of faculty and peers in a structured environment that provides deadlines and requirements, critique and encouragement.

2. Program Demand (including service to other programs), Efficiency, and Productivity (7 year trend; 1400 words or less)

a. Overview

All CWLA students begin the program in the summer semester and work at the rate of five credit hours per semester for nine semesters. Students present a colloquium in the tenth semester (but are otherwise not enrolled) and present their theses to the university in the eleventh semester: thus, by design, eleven semesters is the fastest a student can make their way through the program.

Over half of the program (25 of 45 credit hours) is conducted in a one-on-one mentorship between student and professor.

The low-residency program began with a core faculty consisting of two tenured faculty working at 51% and 60% FTE, and two term faculty working at 60% FTE. Of these one tenured professor (at 60% FTE) remains. The program also employs as many as 11 adjunct faculty who work one-on-one mentoring with students and who are paid per student. All adjunct faculty are working writers with distinguished publishing histories.

Program Design—the one-on-one student to faculty ratio—accounts for the many of the data sets provided in the IR Report.

b. Program Size

The average program size of the last seven years is 43 students. The program maintains this average as it sees approximately 10 graduates every year and strives to provide a balance of students for each program emphasis: fiction, non-fiction, and poetry.

c. Seven Year Degree Trends

The program has seen an average of about 10 graduates per year (over the last seven years). The Graduation Efficiency Measures in IR is misleading in our case. The average terms to completion numbers do not include

summer terms, during which all our students are enrolled. Thus the data in this category does not reflect the program timeline very accurately. Typically, students finish their coursework in nine consecutive semesters, including summer and then spend two more semesters presenting their colloquium and formatting their thesis.

d. **Productivity Trends**

Most of the data in the Productivity Trends table results from our non-traditional low-residency design. Twenty-five credit hours (of the required 45) are taught in a one-faculty to one-student mentorship.

i. **Enrollment/Full Time Equivalent Faculty (FTEF)**

1. Averages 18 over the seven-year period.

ii. **SCH/FTEF**

1. Averages 77 over the seven-year period.
2. Both Enrollment per FTEF and SCH per FTEF are dictated by program design. Students take a fixed number of credits, 45 at five per semester and 25 of the 45 hours are taught one-on-one.

iii. **Seven Year Student Credit Hour (SCH)** is, by design, relatively stable.

iv. **Percent of Capacity (utilization)** The average class capacity over the last 7 years is 24.7%. This is due to the fact that class capacities are much higher than the reality that most of the teaching is done one-on-one. The closest analogy would be to an Individual Study course.

v. **Average Class Size:** Reflects the individualized study model of the program.

e. **Tuition Revenue vs. Faculty List**

- i. IR Productivity data shows that program spending is projected to be trending downward in expenses. In 2019 Instructional Costs were \$251,000 and full tuition revenue at \$190,000 (a spending deficit of \$61,000). This represents a significant decrease in expenses over 2015 (IR data prior to that is missing). In 2015 Instructional Costs were \$399,000 and full tuition revenue was at \$234,000 (a deficit of \$165,000). These cost savings measures were accomplished largely by replacing term and tenure faculty retirements (three part-time positions) with adjunct faculty and by eliminating the full-time program coordinator position.

3. Program Quality, Improvement and Student Success (1500 words or less)

There is no formal national accrediting body for graduate creative writing programs. We are institutional members of the Association of Writing Programs and operate under the principles delineated in the AWP document: *The Hallmarks of a Successful Graduate Writing Program in Creative Writing* (2008). We track program goals and Student Learning Outcome issues through a continual set of narrative evaluations reported by both students and their individual mentor each semester. In addition, we have a lengthy (mandatory) response document for feedback about our summer Residencies. Students are in constant contact with their mentors and with their Academic Advisor. All CWLA courses are designated closed enrollment and students must have an override entered to enroll.

Program goals

- To graduate writers capable of producing publishable creative work in their chosen genres. (UAA Core Theme 2: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity)
- To prepare students for a serious writing life and/or literary opportunities in a variety of fields. (Core Theme 2: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity)
- To offer a cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural curriculum taught by an established faculty and a rotating guest faculty of writers, scientists, artists, humanities scholars, and musicians. (Core Theme 1: Teaching and Learning)
- To create a collaborative community of new and experienced writers from Alaska and elsewhere. (Core Theme 4: UAA Community)

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- To continue UAA’s policy of inviting public participation at selected readings, presentations, and educational opportunities generated through the program’s offerings. (Core Theme 5: Public Square)

Student Learning Outcomes

- Students will develop and demonstrate a thorough understanding of historical context, traditions, and contemporary issues in form and theory by situating the content of their own work within their genre. (Assessment will be based on the quality and extent of the annotated bibliography, the quality and originality of the *thesis essay* component of the thesis, and the presentation and discussion of their work during the thesis colloquium.) (Core Themes 1 & 2: Teaching & Learning and Research, Scholarship and Creative Activity)
- Students will develop and demonstrate their skills in craft by producing a substantial body of original creative work and by articulating the craft elements in their genre. (Assessment will be based on the quality and scope of the creative component of the thesis, the accompanying discussion in the thesis essay, and the presentation and discussion of their work during the thesis colloquium.) Core Theme 5: Research, Scholarship and Creative Activity)
- Students will develop and demonstrate skills necessary for professional employment in literary fields such as writing and editing by planning, organizing, and presenting works or projects of literary and public value. (Assessment will be based on the design and execution of a practicum project.) (Core Theme 2: Student Success)

A. Student Engagement

NOTE: All students alluded to in these sections have *not* requested confidentiality concerning their UAA records.

Students devote much of their second year to proposing, devising, and completing a literary practicum of at least 225 hours. These practica combine service learning, field placements, and community outreach in a variety of literary, arts, educational, and public venues. Groups served include veterans, seniors, prisoners, schoolchildren, novice writers, and teachers. Many projects are cross-disciplinary in nature, and some students have continued volunteering even after graduation. Among the many examples of practicum projects, students:

- Organized a two-day writing workshop, “Danger Close: Alaska,” attended by 13 current and veteran military personnel and 11 civilians, sponsored by 49 Writers, Words and War, and Alaska Humanities Forum, and taught by nationally known writers.
- Served on editorial boards or as manuscript reviewers for several literary journals and for the University of Alaska Press and High Plains Press.
- Organized the visit of poet Roger Reeves to Juneau’s alternative high school.
- Volunteered as special projects director for Alaska Women Speak, and wrote and received \$1,000 grant from the Alaska Humanities Forum.
- Served on the Publisher’s Preview Committee for children’s and young adult books at the Juneau Public Library.
- Coached middle-school students in Nome to write and produce a podcast about their experiences.
- Taught literacy classes in Kodiak.
- Led community writing workshops at Hiland Mountain Correctional Center, the 2017 Alaskan Art Education Conference, a Tucson public library, the Opportunities for Lifelong Education program, and Kachemak Bay Writers Conference, among others. (Some workshops met weekly for as long as two months.)
- Established a “Writing as Therapy” program at the Bellingham Vet Center, which was featured on KOMO News in Seattle.

B. Selected Student Accomplishments

Publications (note: these publications are reputable, often national in scale, and are commensurate to creative work that counts toward Promotion and Tenure at UAA)

Nearly all of these books are based on thesis work:

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- A 2017 graduate's novel *Sia Martinez and the Moonlit Beginning of Everything* will be published this summer (2020) and has made several "Books to Watch for in 2020" lists.. The book was sold to Simon and Schuster in a two book deal and its rights were sold to Annapurna TV for development as a television series.
- Two students were named co-winners of the Split Rock Press Chapbook Contest. Their books *Living with Glaciers* and *The Last Glacier at the End of the World* will be published in 2020. One student is from our 2019 graduating class, the other from our first, 2011. This is the later student's fifth book since graduation.
- A 2016 graduate's book, *Open the Dark, poetry* is forthcoming from Boreal Books, Red Hen Press, 2020.
- A 2017 graduate published *Dirt and Honey*, poetry (Green Writers Press, 2018).
- A 2015 graduate published *Entangled: People and Ecological Change in Alaska's Kachemak Bay*, nonfiction (University of Alaska Press, 2018).
- A 2016 graduate published two books of poetry, *Something Yet to be Named* (Aldrich Press, 2017); *What Caught Raven's Eye* (Petroglyph Press 2018).
- A 2011 graduate published fiction, *The Dead Go to Seattle* (Boreal Books, 2017).
- A 2014 graduate published, nonfiction, *Threadbare: Class and Crime in Urban Alaska* (University of Alaska Press, 2017). Note: book was chosen by UAA/APU as a Book of the Year in 2018.
- A 2017 graduate published, nonfiction, *The Consecrated Ones: Garlen Ananian's Path* (Abril Books, 2017).
- A 2015 graduate published two books of, poetry, *Uniform* (Aldrich Press, 2016) and *Permanent Change of Station* (Middle West Press, 2018)/.
- A 2011 graduate published, nonfiction, *Find the Good: Unexpected Life Lessons from a Small-Town Obituary Writer* (Algonquin Books, 2015), their third published book.
- A 2012 graduate published nonfiction, *Pacific Northwest Road Trip* (Moon Travel, 2015).
- A 2017 graduate published fiction, *Mary's Wild Winter Feast* (University of Alaska Press, 2014).
- A 2015 graduate published fiction, *Highway One, Antarctica* (Madhat Press, 2014).
- A 2011 graduate published nonfiction, *Gaining Daylight: Life on Two Islands* (University of Alaska Press, 2014), which earned a starred review by Publisher's Weekly.
- A 2011 graduate published poetry, *The Hide of My Tongue: Ax L'óot' Doogú* (Plain View Press, 2012).
- A 2011 graduate published fiction, *Keeper of the Directions* (Euterpa, 2012).

. Their short stories, essays, poems, and reviews have appeared in numerous national, international, and Alaska journals, magazines, and newspapers. Among some 80 others, examples include:

The New York Times, *The Georgia Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Foreign Policy*, *War, Literature and the Arts*, *The Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*.

Anthologies in which student work appears: *Tahoe Blues* (Bona Fide Books, 2012); *Sudden Flash Youth: 65 Short-Short Stories* (Persea Books, 2012); *The Better Bombshell* (Wolfram Productions, 2013); *Adrienne Rich: A Tribute Anthology* (Split Oak Press, 2012); *Songs for a Passbook Torch: Anthology on Nelson Mandela* (Cherry Castle Publishing, forthcoming); *The Burden of Light: Poems on Illness and Loss* (Short Fuse Publishing, 2014); *The Cost of Paper: Volume II* (Black Hills Press, 2015); *Songs That Shake the Earth, Vol. 2* (Woosh Kinaadeiyí, 2015); *Denali Climate Change Anthology* (National Park Service, 2015); *Along the Shore: Poems of the Sea by Selected International Poets* (CreateSpace, 2017).

Awards and Accomplishments

Selected Highlights include:

- A 2015 graduate was awarded the prestigious John Burroughs Medal for a "distinguished book of nature writing" in 2020 for *Entangled: People and Ecological Change in Alaska's Kachemak Bay*.
- A 2019 graduate published in the *New York Times* and *Reader's Digest* and also performed her work at Arctic Entries in Anchorage.
- A current student became a columnist at *Edible Alaska* magazine and published a new audio chapbook "How to Fold Fitted Sheet" on Flag Day Records.
- A current student was sent by Planned Parenthood as a member of a five person delegation that visited

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- Lisa Murkowski in Washington D.C. to speak in LBGQT issues. She also received an academic scholarship for \$4,000 from the Pride Foundation for her work in social justice during her time as student in our program.
- A 2018 graduate won first place in the Fairbank's Arts Council's Statewide Poetry Contest for "back then, ak." They were chosen to read from her work at the Graduate Hooding Ceremony in December 2018.
- A 2017 graduate received a Pulitzer Travel Award to research his essay on the Japanese tsunami that would eventually be published in *Longreads*.
- A 2011 graduate has received The Governor's Award from the Alaska State Council for the Arts 2017 for Distinguished Service to the Humanities.
- A 2018 graduate's play was accepted into the 2017 Last Frontier Theatre Conference, and they received a Women Writer's Fellowship from Oregon Literary Arts.
- A 2015 student's thesis, *Entangled: People and Ecological Change in Alaska's Kachemak Bay* was UAA's nomination for the Western Association of Graduate School's Distinguished Thesis Award.
- A 2012 graduate won the 2014 Willa Award in creative nonfiction for her essay collection (book), *Gaining Daylight*, sponsored by Women Writing the West.
- A 2011 graduate's novel, *The Sunflower Wife*, was a runner-up in the 2012 The AWP Award Series for the Novel, a national contest that attracted at least 10,000 entries.
- A 2014 graduate's novel *Dispatches from the SpEd Department* was a finalist in the 2017 Knut House Press annual contest.
- A 2014 graduate won the Nicole Blizzard Short Story Contest.
- A 2017 graduate was the 2015 Grand Prize winner of the Anchorage Daily News creative writing contest (and the winner of the Nonfiction Open to the Public category).
- Poems, essays, and fiction by several students have been named as finalists or runners-up in literary contests at *Fourth Genre*, *Ninth Letters*, *Nimrod*, *The Iowa Review*, and the Next Gen Indie Book Awards, among others.
- Three graduates have been awarded individual artist grants from the Rasmuson Foundation to complete a children's opera, a novel, and a poetry manuscript.
- Three graduates each won \$5,000 Literary Awards from the Alaska State Council on the Arts in 2017, and an additional alumnus was awarded one in 2016. In the four years this program has existed seven of the twenty awards have gone to our alumni, faculty, or program guests.
- At least three students have been nominated for prestigious Pushcart Prizes based on published work in literary journals (one of them twice).

We also gauge program success by tracking careers and other activities in the literary arts undertaken by current and former students. Among these accomplishments are:

- Managing editor and associate poetry editor of *Cirque: A Literary Journal for the North Pacific Rim*.
- Producer of "Writers' Showcase," aired on 360 North public media, featuring the work of Alaska writers read by actors.
- Writers-in-Residence at Innoko River Wildlife Refuge and at Andrews Forest Spring Creek Project in Oregon.
- Senior editor at *Seattle Met*.
- Faculty at North Words Writers Symposium and Kachemak Bay Writers Conference.
- Columnist for *Woman's Day* magazine.
- Founder and head of Upwords Creative public relations and editing firm.
- Vice president on the 49 Writers board of directors.
- Book reviewer for *The American Alpine Journal*.
- Founder of VP & D Publishing House and owner of the bookstore The Writers Block
- Guest editor of the Island Institute's journal *Connotations*.
- Panelist at the 2016 Native Poetry Symposium.
- Founding editor of Pebblebrook press.
- A collaboration of three graduates on "Wordsworthing," a podcast, blog, and literary magazine.
- Panelists at the annual AWP national conference for writing programs and writers.
- Presenter of paper originally written for the thesis essay at the 25th Annual Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Conference.
- Creative nonfiction editor of *War, Literature, and the Arts* journal.

4. Program Duplication / Distinctiveness (300 words or less)

Although both UAA and UAF offer MFA degrees in creative writing there really exists no “duplication.” The program at UAF is a traditional full-time “residential” program; students move to Fairbanks, often from out of state, and tuition waivers and graduate assistantships are available. Our program, as has been described, is a low-residency program; students work at the rate of 5 credit hours per semester over nine semesters. They live at home with their families, work their jobs with minimal disruption to their lives. The two programs serve two completely different constituencies with our low residency delivery model serving less-traditional, adult learners. In conversation with the MFA program coordinator in Fairbanks we know of no applicant who has applied to both our programs; we serve different needs.

5. Summary Analysis (500 words or less)

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| Strengths | MFA students demonstrate the clearest strengths of the program with their high level of production, theses projects, practicum projects, publications, and awards. The program serves a non-traditional Alaskan student population, students from diverse cultural backgrounds, and a high percentage of military/veteran students. Student practica benefit local, often underserved, communities. Literary readings in Anchorage serve the public square during the summer residency and are well-attended. The CWLA MFA program successes may be seen in our high application numbers, high student retention and graduation rates, and by the very high numbers of publications and awards garnered by our students and alumni. |
| Areas of Concern | The relatively high cost of the program to the university, though trending favorably, is the greatest concern CWLA faces. (Addressed in following box.) |
| Action | As a result of our recent Program Review (2018) and one year follow-up review (2019) the Provost and CAS Dean have directed us to petition the Board of Regents to allow the program to charge a tuition surcharge of 20% as is currently done in the College of Engineering and College of Business and Public Policy. Because so much (25 of 45 credit hours) of our curriculum (25 of 45 credit hours) is delivered in a one-to-one basis between student and faculty, our program has fixed expense that generating more tuition does little to ameliorate. Our tuition is generally lower when compared to other MFA programs in the nation. A tuition surcharge would in effect close the already shrinking gap between tuition-generated monies and the cost of instruction. |
| Other Challenges | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our program faces minor curricular challenges ahead due to our recent shift from a “core faculty” to an over 90% adjunct faculty. • Applications for our incoming class (Summer 2020) are the lowest by far that we have experienced in the history of the program. We need to find ways to rebuild public confidence in the continued viability of the university. |