

Chapter Thirteen

The Master of Fine Arts at Lesley University

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Lesley University houses two Master of Fine Arts programs—the Low-Residency MFA Program in Creative Writing and the Low-Residency MFA Program in the Visual Arts. Both programs were born in 2003, the Visual Arts Program inaugurating its first residency in the winter, the Creative Writing Program welcoming its first entering class in the summer. These two programs are not identical, or even fraternal, twins. It's better to think of them as siblings: in most ways they behave differently, but they share a family name and some resemblances.

Creative writing and visual arts programs follow the studio arts model of teaching and learning. The assumption underpinning both is that a fresh mode of artistic mastery is own justification. Both programs, then, focus on teaching students how to turn demonstrable promise into settled—or perhaps more realistically and usefully, *unsettled*—accomplishment.

Both programs also share a viewpoint regarding, for lack of a better term, the “social utility” of the visual and verbal arts. In his celebrated elegy, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” W.H. Auden (1979) famously wrote that “poetry makes nothing happen” (p. 82). Taken out of context, this mordant claim—an artist consigning to inconsequence the very art he practices—seems a kind of self-abnegating nihilism. But Auden makes the further assertion, not so much counter as complementary, that “[poetry] survives/In the valley of its saying . . . [a] way of happening, a mouth” (p. 82). Auden’s full articulation praises the true artist’s tough-minded and disabused idealism about his or her art. This open-eyed self-reliance both programs seek to instill in their students.

The chapter that follows tells the story of how two distinct “ways of happening” happened.

The MFA in Fine or Visual Arts

The definition of what constitutes a great MFA Program in fine or visual arts is continuously evolving, and it is up to each MFA Program to be responsive to how the artists/students in the program understand their MFA education as well as to aid the artists/students in making the most use of their MFA degrees.

Hence, each semester in the MFA program at AIB/Lesley, we explore a variety of issues having to do with this question both as a faculty and in an informal way with our student advisees. The question of the evolving MFA circulates around several issues that have to do with our mission statement:

- What is art? How are the definitions that circulate around the notions of ‘what is art’ changing as art becomes more trans-disciplinary and more global in its

reach? For instance, can new forms of art practice now be seen, as some advocate, as a form of research and development for culture at large? If so, then should we insure that our students receive grounding in research methodologies?

- Can art be taught and if so, how? Further, what do our artists need from an MFA program and how can we best provide it?
- What is the place of a skill set or craft skills within a postindustrial/postmodern/ and now global art world?
- How can we give our artists access to useful strategies for making productive lives out of creative impulses?
- What can and does holding an MFA degree mean in today's art world? What privileges will an MFA confer on the holder of this degree?

To put these questions into perspective I will discuss this through the lens of my own history. I began showing my work in the international art world when I was still a student in the late 1970's. In those days the first question above was the one most debated by MFA students. In the late '70's, an MFA education was much less expensive and as it was well before the mid-'80's art world boom, every art student knew that being an artist was a life style choice and not synonymous with stardom, glamour, and money. The dialogue that circulated then concerned issues of how something might take on the status of being called art as well as simultaneously the questions of both if and then how art might be taught. Was being an artist something that you could actually learn in school? As a young artist I learned as much from my peers as I did from my teachers. I think that is still true today.

John Baldassari, then teaching at California Arts in Los Angeles and building on the legacy of Black Mountain College, used to say that he didn't think art could in fact be taught, but that he as a teacher could make a place where art could happen. He also said that if he had seen art that he had liked, he wouldn't have felt the necessity to make his own. Hence his famous quip, "I will not make any more boring art." He, along with the artist Michael Asher, were in the forefront of the 'post-studio practice' debate that can to be associated with the rise of postmodernism in art, but which has a much longer history within the realm of alternative art practices beginning with Dada at the beginning of the 20th century and continuing up through various, mostly European, art movements, and finally taking hold in the US in the late 1950's with *Happenings* and other forms of art that eschewed painting, sculpture and other traditional forms.

This craft debate most recently referred to as 'skilling and de-skilling' in John Roberts (2007) useful book with the same title is still very much with us. However, it continuously evolves in relation to the social circumstances of each brief epoch. At stake is the philosophical question, which must be continuously addressed by every artist, "What does it mean to be an artist, today, right now?" How artists ask and then answer this question affects the work that they will make as well as the kind of art world they will inhabit. In our MFA program we strive to be trans-disciplinary with a strong recognition that the skills sets artists need evolve in relation to their artistic practices and may even be outside the field of what is currently considered art. Hence, we encourage our artists to learn the skill sets they need with the recognition that this is an on-going process. Further we encourage our artists to use the art-making strategies

they have acquired over the course of their lives creatively within all their endeavors as we recognize that the model of art practice, as a way of thinking, does have value in today's current economic climate. All of this determines what they need to learn during their MFA education as well what they need to learn in the art worlds they will inhabit locally, nationally, and internationally.

The latter two questions listed below are more recent issues that arguably began to circulate in the mid-'80s as the art world was booming.

- How can we give our artists access to useful strategies for making productive lives out of creative impulses?
- What does an MFA mean in today's art world and beyond? What privileges will an MFA confer on the holder of this degree?

After the boom in the art market in the 1980s, art making as a career suddenly seemed like a viable aspiration and there was an exponential growth in the number of MFA programs offering the MFA in fine or visual arts. Increasingly, to be considered for a full-time, tenured-track college-level teaching job in art departments, the MFA as the terminal degree in the field, was required. While an MFA is an enabling tool for competing for a teaching job, the main reason most artists seek an MFA degree is because they want to take their work to the next level. The focus and intensity of an MFA program allows them to do this while they are earning an advanced degree. Additionally, art making in one form or another, including and along-side the MFA, can now be seen as an alternative to working in corporate culture. For a brief moment, in 2004, the MFA was considered by some MBA Programs and, touted as such, as 'the new MBA.' This phenomenon is perhaps best described under the rubric of 'the rise of corporate creative' for while Harvard Business Review took these claims very seriously, there is very little mention of the MFA as the new MBA among MFA programs in fine or visual art. But perhaps this moment is now to be short-lived as some US institutions have begun to offer a studio-based Ph.D. programs as a way to recognize as well as train artists to bring social science research methodologies into their art practices. This would be one way of legitimating what artists perhaps already perform as the research and design of the culture at large. While this studio based doctorate is still in its infancy in the US, current thinking about the status of MFA is somewhat embroiled in the debate about how this new model of art education will transform the landscape of the 'art world.'

The MFA at AIB/Lesley

The Master of Fine Arts program in Visual Arts at The Art Institute of Boston at Lesley University is dedicated to encouraging the creation of an artistic practice that sustains growth and exploration not only while the student is enrolled in the MFA program, but over a lifetime of creative work. As a low residency MFA program, it proposes a fundamentally different model of education than the traditional MFA residency program. While students in AIB/Lesley's MFA program are full-time, they perform their semester's work in their home communities, often far from Boston and other large metropolitan areas. Our program encourages students to build on their

experience in their home communities as it prepares them to enter the ‘art world,’ however they choose to define that, and as they integrate their MFA experience into the fabric of their daily lives. During the two year, 60 credit program they attend five 10 day residencies, work with nationally or internationally known mentors, and formulate their own positions about how to best participate in the contemporary art worlds¹ Hence, the disconnection that is often felt by recently graduated MFA students as they leave school and struggle to define themselves out of school is mitigated by our very different approach to the MFA process at AIB/Lesley.

The low residency model at AIB/Lesley was proposed by Tony Apesos in his first year as chair of AIB’s Fine Arts Department in 1993. As he states,

I presented to then Dean Bob Simon a proposal for a low residency MFA program. After my own experiences in getting my Master’s and from my knowledge of other artists’ experiences, I believed that there was a need for an approach to graduate art education that valued the vision and aesthetic of each individual student, and I realized that AIB had the facilities for such a program. (T. Apesos, personal communication, April 15, 2009)

While there was interest in 1993, this type of program did not receive serious consideration until after the AIB and Lesley merger when Dean Stan Trecker re-introduced it in 2001. It was of particular interest then as Lesley has a great deal of experience with both low residency models and alternative forms of graduate education. In 2003, Tony Apesos as Director of the program and faculty members Shelia Gallagher, Jane Marshing, and Tim Norris welcomed the first 12 students into the Program in January of that year. I began my position full-time in March 2005.

Since I have been at AIB/Lesley the program has grown to its maximum size of 72 full-time students and has now graduated 127 students. The faculty has also grown to between 14 – 16 members, depending on enrollment, and is a mix of nationally and internationally known artists. Each semester I organize an *Art Talks* series to coincide with the residency and invite internationally known artists, and curators, and to come to AIB/Lesley to both lecture and to work with our graduate students. Recent notable visitors include Xu Bing, Marilyn Minter, Andreas Fogarasi, Ellen Harvey, Dan Graham, Barbara London, Adam McEwen, Dike Blair, Rebecca Morris, Barry Schwabsky, Jacqueline Humphries, and Cory Arcangel among many others.

The Art Institute of Boston MFA program is trans-disciplinary and pluralistic: all approaches to visual art are considered valid fields of exploration, including some that would not usually be considered ‘art.’ Artists working in any visual medium may participate in the program, including painting, photography, sculpture, installation, video, new media, graphic design, animation, and bookmaking. Artists are free to explore new ways of combining these mediums into new forms and methods for producing art.

The flexibility of our program makes this range of inquiry possible, and the nature of contemporary art and society makes it imperative. In a community where a diversity of ideas, artistic visions, and technical knowledge are embraced, cross-

¹ I (JB) use the plural here as there are many art worlds now, not just one.

fertilization is inevitable. For example, students who enter the program with a background in photography may explore the use of drawing or painting in conjunction with their photographic images, or painters may wish to utilize computer technologies to enhance their image making. Perhaps more importantly, our interdisciplinary pluralistic community of artists is a place where assumptions can be challenged, revised, or strengthened. Our MFA students push the boundaries of their art-making practices and deepen their artistic vision.

All students develop an individualized plan for studio and academic work in consultation with their faculty advisor during each residency. They accomplish this plan during the six months of their semester's work in their home community, before returning to the next ten-day intensive residency. This self-defined curriculum lets our students relate their academic work directly to their own interests, including bringing in material such asfrom other non-art fields. Most importantly, they accomplish these goals within the context of their lives. As I write this and for the second year in a row, a student artist in our MFA program has been awarded a Joan Mitchell Scholarship Award. Say what the award is. This is quite an accomplishment for a program that was so recently launched.

As a way to illustrate the breadth of the program here are a few profiles of our recent alums.

Patrick Loehr MFA, 2009

“My AIB education has given me a model for how I will pursue my artistic practice from now on.” Patrick enrolled at AIB on the advice of a friend and alum of the program. A self-described, “self-taught artist” who has written and illustrated two popular children's books, Patrick found the formal art education that he sought in AIB's MFA Program. “Being at AIB was the best educational experience that I've ever had, and it was integral in getting hired at my new job.” From self-taught artist to chair of the Department of Art and New Media Design at The Community College of Aurora—Patrick Loehr has come a long way.

“I try to deal with my students the same respectful and open way that my AIB professors worked with me.” Patrick cites the programs, “. . . impressive faculty made up of outstanding artists and scholars,” as a major benefit of studying at AIB. “When I walk into my classes now, I think about the excitement and knowledge that my professors brought and it inspires me to bring the same to my students.”

Anne Baumgartner MFA, 2010

A student travels across the country to find her ideal arts community. For Anne, being at a school with, “. . . amazing people, rigorous standards—and in a great city for the arts,” is entirely worth the trip from her home in Seattle to Boston. Anne came to AIB determined to get all that she could out of her studies, and it has certainly paid off. “Being at AIB has given me an opportunity to immerse in my studio work. I've been challenged and pushed in all ways from both faculty and peers.”

Anne saw her vision and work expand when pushed to consider new perspectives in group discussions. The program's strong emphasis on critique and mentoring created a space where each voice became a valuable asset for growth. "The residency atmosphere is intense with non-stop honest input and feedback. The combined voices of my advisors, studio mentors and classmates have brought big changes in my work. I've never worked harder."

Jane Rainwater MFA, 2007

"I ask questions with my art that will challenge people's thinking." Jane's art get attention. "Curators at galleries where I show my installations tell me that it draws in more people than they have had before." The installation that draws people in? It's her AIB thesis project, "The Golden Pawn Shop," a collection of objects gilded in gold on display in the façade of a pawnshop. Jane has shown the work, which she says is ever evolving, in multiple shows since graduating from AIB. "It's a display of the dark side of beauty. We think gold is perfect and valuable, but once it's in a pawnshop, all of the sentimental value is gone."

The art world has certainly noticed the value of Jane's work. Jane is a 2009 recipient of the Radius Emerging Artist Award from The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art. "I never would have done the work I'm doing if I hadn't gone to graduate school. AIB's interdisciplinary approach and outstanding faculty opened me up to reach new places in my art.

These short profiles, three very different stories, demonstrate the range of our MFA students. Recently, we have also had two students receive prestigious Joan Mitchell Scholarship Awards. These \$20,000 grants are given to graduating artists to aid them in their transition out of grad school and into the art world. The competition for this is very stiff and our students successfully competed with top students from residency MFA Programs in the US. While there is not enough room in this article to write about each of our 108 alums, all of their stories are testaments to how a flexible structure for delivering an MFA can achieve remarkable results.

The Low Residency MFA Program in Creative Writing

Before the birth and maturity of the Internet, you could count on one hand the number of low-residency MFA programs in creative writing in the United States. In 2001, when the proposal for such a program at Lesley University received accreditation from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, roughly fifteen analogous programs existed. In 2003, when Lesley's MFA in Creative Writing welcomed its first entering class of twenty-two students, there were around twenty MFA creative writing programs that used the low-residency model. In 2009, as this chapter is being written, it would take all fingers on at least eight hands to count the number of these programs, in the United States, Canada, and England.

Clearly, to survive, let alone thrive, in such a competitive field, a program needs not just some distinguishing features, but a distinctive ethos. Lesley's program has both. First among its distinguishing features is, of course, the distinction of its faculty: passionate writers and teachers who produce their own stunning work in five genres: fiction, nonfiction, poetry, writing for stage and screen, and writing for young people.

Second, Lesley University's program is the only one of its kind situated *in*, not just *near*, a major American literary city (some would argue *the* major American literary city). Third, Lesley's program presupposes, and makes concrete in its curriculum, the notion that all writers are "interdisciplinary"; that is, by nature and by habit, they need consistently to look up from the page in order to infuse that page with the writer's most essential technique–life experience.

The program's ethos, while less easily quantified, is no less specific. To borrow from Seamus Heaney's (2002) brilliant essay, in any rigorous creative writing program, "a fair and honest estimate of the student's gifts—good or bad—has to be communicated, but the communication must be done with respect and a care for the emotional tissues" (pp. 76-77). Good writers know they must not settle for anything but their best, but they also need the spirit to put one word in front of the other, for a lifetime. Every faculty member who teaches in Lesley's program understands this exasperating but life- and art-sustaining paradox. In the residencies and distance-learning semesters, the Lesley program focuses on the individual student's developing gifts, particular craft challenges, and aesthetic aspirations. All the faculty mentors provide useful critique that is artistically rigorous, and often painful for the student to hear, but never personally ruthless. What may be initially painful to hear gets metabolized, as it were, by the self-reliant apprentice artist, building and toning the aesthetic muscles. And that's how the aspiring artist grows, and the work gets strong. As one of our faculty members recently wrote in an email to a very gifted but somewhat defensive student, "criticism means I care."

So, obviously, careful, challenging feedback from distinguished writers and dedicated teachers is crucial to any aspiring writer's growth. But what else feeds an apprentice's writing? No less obviously, to the writer who wants to engage in *art*, not just self-expression, a diet of challenging yet nourishing reading is crucial. At Lesley, students engage in creative *reading* as well as creative writing (art breeds art) and they are encouraged—no, *required*—to read on the edges of their seats. As the poet Marvin Bell (1991) has written, "The writer is looking for what he or she can use . . . The writer goes slowly, and doubles back" (p. 221).

Less obviously, however, something individual and often eccentric also feeds a writer's work or, as is often the case with the graduate student, that writer's aspirations to work in a literary field after graduation. The Lesley program's interdisciplinary component honors just how widely that "something" can vary. Whether it's a publishing internship, learning how to conduct insightful author interviews, reviewing books, teaching workshops, researching subjects relevant to a student's work-in-progress, or simply getting one's hands into clay, our students enhance their ongoing writing, or their aspirations for future writing careers, through this unique component.

Lesley's program now has well over one-hundred alumni and approximately one-hundred continuing students. Tom Kealey's *The Creative Writing MFA Handbook* (2005) named the Lesley program "among the more distinguished low-residency programs" (p. 53). What specific work went into creating the program, and what decisions shaped its trajectory along the way?

History of the Program

Developed by the Lesley University Provost and Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences (GSASS) Lesley University's Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing envisioned four genres of concentration; fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and writing for young people, as well as an interdisciplinary component. The Massachusetts Board of Education approved proposal in late 2001. For just over a year, however administrative changes in the University—resulting in the decision to house the program in the GSASS Division of Interdisciplinary Inquiry—and a prolonged search for a Program Director delayed implementation. In January 2003, the newly hired Program Director, Steven Cramer, began to flesh out the following programmatic concepts:

- the low-residency delivery system involving one-on-one mentoring via semester-long distance-learning
- specific curriculum for two annual residencies that would form the basis of the distance-learning semesters
- a structure and faculty to support and develop the program's unique interdisciplinary studies (I.S.) component

In addition to these curricular elements, between January and the first residency in August 2003, the program director hired fifteen distinguished writers as teaching faculty and, along with the Assistant Director for Student Services, Jana Van der Veer, wrote promotional materials, including brochures, advertising copy, and a viable website in order to attract qualified applicants to take a chance on an untried program.

The program faculty reviewed applications for an inaugural August 2003 residency and fall 2003 semester while also developing a coherent, seminar-based residency curriculum and a distance-learning structure. Twenty-two students enrolled for the August residency: nine days of workshops, seminars, individual study-plan conferences, and panels; and presentation by faculty and two visiting writers—Robert Pinsky and Maurice Sendak.

The program grew with each residency and semester and, in January 2005, graduated 19 of those original 22 students. For the January 2009 residency and spring 2009 semester, we had an entering class of 22, and a total of 95 students and 31 faculty. For the June/Fall 2009 residency and semester, the program welcomed an entering class of 31 students, chosen from over 130 applications.

Current Context

While the fundamentals of the program have remained constant, many spontaneous discoveries and changes have developed along the way. Currently, there are two 9-day residencies, one in early January and one in late June. The residency curriculum has developed both in complexity and rigor. Crucially, the MFA writing faculty has grown into a diverse, distinguished, and unusually international group of passionate teachers/practitioners.

In July 2006, half-time Assistant Coordinator Janet Pocerobba was hired as core faculty with administrative duties to take on all aspects of the I.S. component. In January

2008, the MFA program added a fifth writing genre, *Writing for Stage and Screen* (WSS). One and half years into the new track, 14 students enrolled in the fall 09 semester. We have incorporated films and staged readings to our evening faculty events, and held panels on fiction-to-film adaptation and WSS publication. In 2009, three further residency innovations were developed: the Interdisciplinary Fair; the writer's toolbox sessions; and *Your First Foot Forward*, an innovative publishing event. These additions will be described in detail later in this chapter.

Purpose and Goals

A Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing is recognized by the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) as the terminal degree for the creative writing practitioner and teacher. The Lesley MFA Program in Creative Writing prepares students to become active literary professionals through a rigorous course that emphasizes:

- The development of craft skills in the student's chosen writing genre
- The capacity to think and write critically about their chosen literary genre
- Experiential knowledge in working as a public writer: teaching, publishing, reviewing, etc.
- Expansion of their abilities as writers through an interdisciplinary component that encourages experimentation and innovation

Description of Program Structure

In a program designed for intensive residencies, one-on-one mentoring, and a wide range of interdisciplinary studies (I.S.) projects, conventional course-based syllabi can't adequately support the learning model. Rather, three key components constitute the MFA program's academic structure, requirements, and policies: a) the *MFA Low-Residency Program in Creative Writing Handbook*; b) the individualized study plan contracts students prepare with their MFA writing faculty mentors and I.S. advisors; and c) the residency seminar descriptions and required readings.

Therefore, rather than relying on the classroom, the program is better described as a learning community, consisting of a balance between community-oriented residencies twice a year and six-month distance-learning semesters. At residencies, students have the support and instruction of faculty, both formally and informally, as well as fruitful interactions with fellow students in other genres, graduating students, and program staff. Thus, the distance-learning semester of one-on-one mentoring is regularly "refueled" by the experience of the intensive group-work of the residencies.

Residencies

The residency curriculum includes seminars for first, second, third, and fourth-semester cohorts; genre seminars reserved for all students working in a given writing concentration; elective seminars; graduating student seminars; faculty readings and events; presentations by visiting faculty; and intensive writing workshops. Workshops meet in large and small group formats over the course of the same nine days.

Before arriving on campus, students are paired with faculty mentors who lead the workshop discussions of the students' writing and meet in conference to create individualized, nine credit study plans for the distance learning semester. These study plans tailor creative writing submissions to the student's particular aspirations and challenges, incorporate rigorous reading lists of books to support and accelerate the student's artistic growth, and require a series of craft annotations (short critical papers) that emphasize literary analysis from a writer's perspective. Students' three credit interdisciplinary study projects, each of which also requires a detailed study plan contract, cover a wide range of projects, from internships to independent research.

In the fourth semester, students earn 12 credits focusing on their creative writing, creative thesis, and preparation of their graduating seminar. Following the fourth semester, graduating MFA candidates return for a portion of a fifth residency. During this residency, as a final requirement for graduation, MFA candidates present the graduating student seminar they prepared. This presentation, a noncredit graduating requirement, is monitored by an MFA writing faculty member. Immediately after the seminar, the MFA writing faculty monitor evaluates the presentation in a brief conversation with the student.

Residency Curriculum

Whereas many low-residency programs rely on an *ad hoc* mixture of large group faculty lectures, team-taught writing workshops, and visiting presentations, the Lesley program has opted for a system of small group meetings which are logistically complex but pedagogically rich.

Residency Seminars. Lesley's program uses a system of "tiered" seminars in the first- through fourth semesters, which offer students increasingly sophisticated techniques for mastering the writer's craft. First semester seminars emphasize first principles of the writer's toolbox. Second semester seminars focus on revision and more complex ways of thinking about the writer's craft. In their third residencies, students encounter yet more subtle techniques and approaches, and begin to prepare for their thesis semesters. Fourth semester students move to more speculative and more practical topics, preparing for a semester in which they concentrate on their thesis and their graduating seminar.

In all residencies, the craft curriculum incorporates a multi-genre approach. For example, the course *The Art of Juxtaposition* investigates its subject via poems, a novel excerpt, a section from a play, and a picture book. Genre-specific seminars allow poets explore their art with other poets, fiction writers with fiction writers, etc. In this way, the residencies provide both cross-fertilization among the five genres and appropriate focus within a single concentration. The residency structure of seminars also recognizes the qualitative difference between a student's first and second year, both in the first and second year genre seminars, and in meetings with program staff and third and fourth semester students to discuss the graduating requirements and procedures for completing the creative thesis and graduating seminar.

Workshops. The writing workshops are the hub of the residency experience. In large group workshops overseen by at least two faculty members, students receive workshop criticism from their peers and from their assigned faculty mentor, but also have the opportunity to see how other faculty members teach workshop. Small group

workshops (the MFA faculty mentor and his or her distance-learning students only) take place later in the residency, and tend to provide discussion of students' more inchoate works-in-progress.

Faculty readings and visiting writers. Evening readings by MFA writing faculty and visiting writers form a vital part of the MFA program's curriculum. Faculty often read from early drafts of work-in-progress, literary performance itself becoming a teaching strategy. Typically, two visiting writers are invited to each residency, and the program works to ensure that, over the long term, all five genres benefit equally from the fresh input of visiting faculty. Visitors are especially accomplished and celebrated writers in their field. In the years since Pinsky and Sendak joined our first residency, our visitors have included writers such as M. T. Anderson, Andre Dubus III, Louise Glück, Vivian Gornick, Robie H. Harris, Marie Howe, Lois Lowry, Sue Miller, and Tom Perrotta.

Two special residency events. In the June 2009 residency, we inaugurated a series of 50 minute "Writer's Toolbox" sessions over lunch and dessert in which we invited program alumni to teach some of their skills as a writer-in-the-world in such as: "Queries & Hooks," "How to Start a Lit Mag," "Conferences & Residencies," "Websites and Blogging," "Freelancing Tips," and "Creating Community," among others. There were eight back-to-back sessions which students chose as electives. Each session, experiential and skill-based, gave alumni the unique opportunity to mentor current MFA students and pass on what they have learned, what they wish they knew, and what it's like out there in the "real" writing world.

These sessions culminated in a new event with editors and agents called "Your First Foot Forward," in which students had a chance to read a brief passage aloud to an editor or agent in the room. The agent or editor responded to the student's work from a professional viewpoint: Would I read more? Do I want to know what happens? What grabbed me or didn't? Listeners in the room also benefited from the feedback. The event impressively achieved its goal which was to create a forum for students to participate in the publishing process in a more hands-on way than merely attending a talk or panel.

The Distance-Learning Semester

Creative Writing and Craft & Reflection. To codify the distance-learning work students do for classes in *Creative Writing* and *Craft & Reflection*, faculty and students collaborate on detailed study plans developed during the residency and submitted to the program office. Students entering their fourth semester complete a separate Thesis Study Plan. During the distance-learning semester, students make four submissions of creative writing and craft annotations to their faculty mentor, along with a detailed cover letter that reflects on their artistic progress.

Interdisciplinary Studies. Interdisciplinary projects include interviewing well-known authors (the results of which often find publication; four or five having appeared in the *AWP Writers Chronicle*, courtesy of the students' talent and persistence); teaching in public or private schools; designing writing workshops for special populations; taking courses or designing independent studies in women's studies, psychology, editing, theater, and art history; and taking studio art courses at the Art Institute of Boston/Lesley. More and more, our students are finding teaching assistantships in the Lesley Humanities

division or using their skills as professional development in colleges and schools where they teach.

As the IS component has grown or expanded, new kinds of classes are being offered that focus on ever more subtle and specific writing tools and techniques. The Art of the English Sentence, a hands-on Elective Seminar on diction and syntax, has been wildly popular. Two more seminars that focus on storytelling and how to develop the writer's powers of observation, imagination, curiosity, and the subconscious have been added. In addition, a more in-depth publishing track promises to grow out of the interdisciplinary studies component.

At the June 2009 Residency, we held our first Interdisciplinary Fair, in which students, faculty, and staff showcased their work in other genres, forms, and fields. During one afternoon of the residency, poster sessions, talks, presentations, and performances filled the Stebbins classroom building and all participants had a fresh chance to find out "What I.S. possible!" as one student said. Booths exhibited paintings, prints, photographs, a knitting project, and a handmade book. Talks and presentations included poetry or play readings, a mini writing lesson, yoga poses, a slide show, and a musical demonstration. The event spoke eloquently to how the unique interdisciplinary component of the Lesley MFA Creative Writing Program has come to be one of its most defining features.

Where We Are and Who We're Becoming

Ultimately, any program proves itself by the talent of the faculty and students it attracts, and the work that they do. Awards and honors earned by the MFA writing faculty would take up a few pages, but it's worth including some of the most prestigious: the Commonwealth Prize for Poetry; numerous Guggenheim Fellowships and National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships; Canada's Governor General's Award for Literature; the Elliott Norton Award; the Whiting Award; the Koret Foundation Jewish Book Prize; the Lamda Literary Award; the Printz Honor Book Award; Los Angeles Times Book Prize; *Booklist* Editor's Choice Award; Parent's Choice Media Award; finalist citations for the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, Hollywood's Next Success, and the Disney ABC's Screenwriting Fellowship; and citations as "notable," "best," and bestselling books by the American Library Association, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*.

But distinguished writers must be distinguished teachers, and the program they teach for is only as good as the learning environment it creates. Here, it's the program's students who should have their say:

- "The individual conferences with my faculty pinpointed exactly what I needed to work on."
- "The multi-genre and interdisciplinary design is what I love about Lesley's MFA program."
- "The effect the residencies have on my motivation is immeasurable. I don't ever want to leave when I am there, and when I come home I feel so charged to do my best work."

- “The workshops are extremely informative. The collective approach—all of our voices contributing—is a dynamic I find very engaging.”
- “Meeting with fellow students, listening to inspiring and thoughtful talks, going to readings, and talking with faculty make the week so fulfilling for me.”

Finally, it is the achievements of a program’s alumni that best testify to its success. After six years, the MFA Program in Creative Writing’s alumni have begun to make their mark in the literary world. Six have published books and many more have published work in magazines such as Gettysburg Review, Harvard Review, Massachusetts Review, North American Review, Seneca Review, and Slate. Major honors, such as a St. Botolph Club Emerging Artist Grant in Literature; a creative nonfiction prize sponsored by Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art; and a “notable” essay citation in the Best American Essays 2007, have been awarded to our alumni. Others have started small-press or other publishing ventures, and many are now teaching creative writing.

The University’s Mission, and the Program’s Mission

As articulated in its Mission Statement, “Lesley University is committed to active learning, scholarly research, critical inquiry, and diverse forms of artistic practice through close mentoring relationships among students, faculty, and practitioners in the field. Lesley prepares graduates with the knowledge, skill, understanding, and ethical judgment to be catalysts who shape a more just, humane, and sustainable world.” How does such a mission square with the axiom that the true artist’s first responsibility must be always be to the materials of his or her art?

Lesley University’s merger with the Art Institute of Boston, with its own MFA Program in the Visual Arts, and the parallel development of the MFA Program in Creative Writing, raises in new ways this vexed question of the role the artist plays in the larger culture. What William Carlos Williams (1967) famously wrote about poetry applies to all art: “it is difficult/to get the news from poems/yet men die miserably every day/for lack/of what is found there” (pp. 161-162). This qualified “two cheers for art” testifies that creativity can only indirectly shape a more humane world. Less famously, in a reading he gave at Harvard in 1951, Williams also said: “if it ain’t a pleasure, it ain’t a poem.” It’s the miraculous paradox of serious, even tragic, art that its audience *enjoys* it, even considers it “fun.” Should a University teach and offer advanced degrees in the making of something that’s fun? Yes, and *three* cheers for that.

In Conclusion

Lesley’s two MFA programs differ greatly in practice, embracing those differences while endorsing a common premise: the purpose of artists and writers is simply (simply!) to make art and literature. Whether those works “make anything happen” is for others to determine. But of course, art and writing that are true will register a change in the world. Without the self-renewing labor and pleasure that produces new art and literature, a culture loses one fundamental way it sees and says. It is rendered deaf, mute, and blind.

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