

A PRE-THESIS LEARNING COMMUNITY IN POETRY WRITING
(AND SEQUENCING OF RELATED COURSES)

The Poetry Center Committee unanimously and enthusiastically supports the following proposal. Student participation could be on a not-for-credit or on a for-credit basis. We far prefer the latter, but of course that would be contingent on interest and support from the English Department.

For quite some time, we've been aware of a general yearning among students for the college to nurture and to give more weight to creative work in the humanities, and for special studies and honors theses in these areas to be more central to the curriculum, rather than approved only in "exceptional circumstances." We regularly hear complaints about the current curricular offerings in creative writing. Incoming students often expect more opportunities to hone their poetry writing skills, and are dismayed to find that the liveliness and centrality of poetry they surmised from the Poetry Center's website is not adequately reflected in course offerings.

We propose a sequencing of the poetry writing courses, so that students can move from Reading & Writing Short Poems to Intermediate Poetry Writing (a new addition Spring 07) to Advanced Poetry Writing to (new idea) a small learning community preliminary to creative thesis applications. This would allow more students to explore and improve their writing in a focused setting, rather than relegating their creative endeavors to an activity pursued only in their spare time. We imagine many students would find this menu of classes sufficient, stopping somewhere along the way; only the extraordinary ones would go on to creative theses, and would be well known to the faculty by the time they apply.

The Pre-Thesis learning community would fall somewhere between a special studies and a poetry writing workshop; class meetings would alternate between the group as a whole, which would meet to develop goals and share results, and smaller satellite groups of twos and threes which would focus on a particular form of prosody or craft issue or thematic element identified and chosen by the students with the instructor's help during the first meetings of the class. Outside readings and writing assignments might differ group to group. This collective but individualized learning model allows for deeply focused work in areas of particular interest and importance to the students, and, in the process, fosters student agency and leadership.

The Pre-Thesis Learning Community falls under at least 3 of the Strategic Planning Initiatives:

Promote a Culture of Research, Inquiry, & Discovery – emphasizing “the importance of original intellectual contributions,” this individually-designed, inquiry-based learning model culminates in the opportunity for an independent project.

Encourage Purposeful Engagement with Society's Challenges – fostering “active engagement with aesthetic issues,” giving them the weight they deserve, this proposal recognizes the power of creative writing to explore social, political, cultural issues in a personally engaged way.

Prepare Women for Rewarding Lives in a Rapidly Changing World – this proposal represents “a curricular initiative that encourages students to integrate and synthesize their multiple experiences at Smith.” Inherently a process of integration and synthesis, creative writing mines and demands honest examination of the student's innermost self, her values, intellectual aspirations and pursuits, her emotional life and social experiences, and her growing sense of being a part of a diverse and challenging world.

Respectfully Submitted by Ellen Watson, on behalf of The Poetry Center Committee