

## *TWO-YEAR COLLEGES*

Most of the research on creative writing focuses on students enrolled in either four-year colleges and universities or graduate programs. In sharp contrast, there is very little material about teaching creative writing at the community college level, although most two-year college English departments offer creative writing courses. Because there is so much basic research yet to do, two-year colleges are a potentially rich source for future investigation. This entry will be limited to an examination of four significant aspects of community college creative writing courses: staffing, resources, student population, and student motivations and goals.

### **STAFFING**

A large research university, especially one that supports a graduate creative writing program, can hire an entire creative writing department. Such programs may have individual writers who specialize not only in poetry, drama, and fiction but also in literary journalism, nature writing, screenwriting, and so on. And within the confines of individual genres, individual faculty members will have differing aesthetics. Students, in short, receive a range of approaches to writing creatively. Even a small liberal arts college generally has one member of the English faculty whose primary responsibility is teaching creative writing. That person may well have resources to periodically bring visiting writers to campus and perhaps to sponsor a writing conference. In the four-year college, creative writing has a real and varied presence: it is a viable entity with a face, or faces, to make it substantial and human.

Community colleges, on the other hand, don't normally have a surfeit of creative writing teachers. Indeed, faculty who teach the courses may not self-identify primarily as creative writers, and typically there are only one or two such courses offered each semester. Therefore, the creative writing teacher must not only introduce students to her own particular ideas and attitudes, she must also fairly represent the sorts of writing that she herself does not do or does not like. Moreover, if an instructor is

part-time and she has no full-time colleagues who are creative writers, she clearly faces challenges in establishing creative writing as a significant part of the curriculum. Part of her mission will be to remind other members of her department how important it is for *all* students to have the opportunity to write creatively, even if, as Ed Davis acknowledges in “Our Corner of the Sky,” “courses at community colleges may not grow much beyond what we have now” (Waggoner 2001, 68).

## RESOURCES

As every elementary and secondary schoolteacher knows too well, class size dictates course design. In four-year institutions, introductory creative writing courses range from fifteen to twenty-five students. Instructors of these courses tend to take certain things for granted. They may, for instance, assume that every student will be able to have every significant assignment workshopped by the entire class. However, in the two-year college, it is not uncommon for a writing course to have thirty or forty students. There simply isn’t enough time (or resources) to critique every person’s short story as a full class. It’s unrealistic to think that students who are sometimes just barely making ends meet can afford to make thirty photocopies of a 10-page story. At most copy shops that’s \$24—the day’s food budget for many two-year college students. Community college teachers also quickly learn how crucial it is to select textbooks wisely; they take no expense for granted.

Of course a well-stocked library can supplement required classroom texts, but two-year college library collections are nearly always much smaller than those of universities. Granted, this may mean more in theory than in practice. Most four-year college students don’t read extensively outside their assigned syllabi; however, they *do* have the option to do so, to delve deeper into a single author, to read around, to browse. Even a mediocre research library allows students the important insight that T. S. Eliot was not the last American poet, that the art of the novel did not die with Ernest Hemingway.

If modest library holdings mean students won’t be able to read and review volumes of contemporary poetry and fiction, they also mean students will have limited access to literary periodicals. Research libraries can subscribe to a range of journals, showcasing writers from different schools and different geographies. Community college periodical collections focus more on general-interest magazines than discipline-specific journals. These libraries can only afford a few, if any, literary journals—a circumstance that tends to foreshorten students’ ideas of what it is

possible to write. Yes, the *New Yorker* and *Poetry* magazine contain quality creative writing, but they give students the idea that entry to the world of publication is through a very narrow door, indeed.

Two-year college students don't expect their institutions to have the same resources as land-grant research universities, but they *do* expect something like the education they would get at a four-year school. Not every student is so cash-strapped that he can't afford a textbook—although at some community colleges this is a real problem—but instructors should remember that a wealth of canonical and contemporary literature is now online. Since Web access on campus is not a problem at most community colleges, teachers may either supplement or replace their textbooks by creating a course home page with appropriate links. The quality of literary Webzines has improved markedly over the past five years, and most reputable print journals now include at least some full-text poems, stories, and essays on their Web sites. The literary journals on [webdelSol.com](http://webdelSol.com) alone could easily make for a semester's worth of exciting multicultural, multigenre reading for a financially stressed class.

#### STUDENT POPULATION

In most places, the two-year college population is far more diverse than in the four-year college. In these courses (to cite an example of one of our recent classes), the international student from Korea sits next to the Anglo student from the 'burbs who sits next to the Latina student from the barrio. The student who can't afford the textbook is sitting next to the student whose parents just bought him a new BMW. The student who's been struggling with a learning disability for the past six years as she tries to earn her AA sits next to the retired businesswoman with an MBA from UCLA. Incidentally, students enrolling in community college creative writing classes with BAs already in hand are not uncommon. These students normally come to class with positive attitudes and solid leadership experience, and they often have considerable experience as writers, even if they've only shared their writing with friends and family.

This diversity of student population provides both the greatest rewards and the greatest challenges for the two-year college creative writing teacher. The rewards are obvious. For every struggling writer there is one who shows flashes of brilliance. Class members learn that perspectives vary with race, culture, age, class, and sexual orientation. Because it is more flexible than expository prose, creative writing allows English as a Second

Language (ESL) students to more fully engage in their first-language discourse patterns. All students can abandon the stiff formality they associate with academic prose and embrace the role of *vates* or raconteur: they can, in short, find their own voices.

The challenges come in the form of designing assignments that are stimulating to the brightest students yet manageable for slower learners. Experienced instructors recommend breaking into small groups whenever possible so that stronger writers can help the less skilled. However, even in the unlikely event that most students are writing at approximately the same level, their reading background will probably be less extensive than that of their peers at the university. The majority of students in a four-year college creative writing course are English majors. Even if they're not, they're likely to have taken a literature course or two. The same assumption cannot be made about two-year college students, who have probably read less in canonical English literature, though they may be much better read in genre fiction like horror and sci-fi. Ultimately, as Steve Abbott notes, "it's less what two-year schools have to offer than *who* they offer it to" (Waggoner 2001, 60).

#### MOTIVATIONS AND GOALS

If there are so many differences between two- and four-year colleges, should community college instructors expect the same from their students as their colleagues at the university? The answer is yes, especially if their courses will earn transfer credit. Fortunately, the level of engagement of most two-year students justifies this rigor. Although it may seem counterintuitive, many community college students are more serious than their four-year peers. One reason is that two-year college students are less likely to take a creative writing course as an elective. Those who intend to transfer to a four-year college—the vast majority, that is—have less flexibility in their schedules than students already enrolled in the university. In general, they take the courses they *need* rather than the courses they *want*. Therefore, students who do take creative writing as an elective tend to be more committed—they truly want to improve as writers. And of course students who already have their bachelor's degrees—who come in for a three-hour night class after a full day of work—are clearly enrolled in the course because they're there to become writers.

There *is* usually a small contingent that enrolls in the course on a whim, but the workload tends to drive them off. Once they realize their

instructor has real goals for them as writers—that they need to write, read, and come to class—students who don't want to make a serious commitment simply drop the class.

### CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most important thing to remember about the community college creative writing classroom is how essential it is to the community itself. Above all, it is a true bargain. As Ed Davis says in “Our Corner of the Sky,” “We’re kind of like a well-kept secret and people haven’t caught on that they can have a creative writing teacher of quality for less than a hundred bucks” (Waggoner 2001, 68). In many parts of the country, there aren’t many other affordable options for aspiring writers who aren’t full-time students at a university.

Prior to the publication of books like *Released into Language* (Bishop 1998), *Creative Writing in America* (Moxley 1989), and *Colors of a Different Horse* (Bishop and Ostrom 1994), four-year college and graduate school creative writing professors suffered from a dearth of pertinent research. Two-year college instructors are currently in a similar predicament. Whether they’ve secretly wanted to be writers for thirty years, or just been told by their English teachers that they’ve got some talent, community college students *do* want to learn. The important work of finding effective ways to serve this vulnerable population is largely still to come.