Name of Proposed New Unit: University of Arizona Literary Arts Emphasis

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Team Developing the Proposal:

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Units to be Consolidated:

University of Arizona Poetry Center
Creative Writing MFA Program
The UA Poetry Center and the MFA in Creative Writing Program propose forming a strategic partnership that would become a special emphasis within a newly formed College. The purpose of this union is to increase excellence within both units, allowing the MFA program to strengthen its reputation as one of the top creative writing programs in the country, and for the Poetry Center to flourish as an internationally acclaimed center for literature in the Helen S. Schaefer Building.

The Poetry Center and the MFA program already enjoy complementary missions. In combining efforts, they will establish a world-class literary center, raising the profile of both entities, as well as creating an exceptional fundraising opportunity. The Iowa Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa and The Michener Center at the University of Texas at Austin are both highly ranked MFA programs with affiliated reading series and/or libraries, but this proposal takes this kind of literary partnership a step further. No other University in the country combines a graduate creative writing program with a poetry center containing a contemporary library collection housed in a landmark building. Together, the MFA program and the Poetry Center are poised to join forces in a mission of literary excellence, outreach, and exploration, providing new opportunities for interdisciplinary learning, a thriving and growing community of writers from diverse aesthetic and cultural backgrounds, and a strong mission of outreach and education in Tucson and beyond.

Supported by a $1.3 million acquisitions endowment and directed by our acclaimed senior librarian, Rodney Phillips, former curator of the Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library, the book and audio/video collection at the Poetry Center continues to grow in significance and prestige. As a literary arts center, the Poetry Center has a Reading Series that began shortly after the Center’s founding in 1960, and is one of the longest running series in the nation. The addition of a biennial symposium (recent topics include “Native Voices: Indigenous Language Poetry” and the forthcoming “Eco-Poetics”), has reinforced the Poetry Center as an international center for the study of contemporary poetics and new literary forms.

As a special emphasis of the College of Humanities since 2000, the Poetry Center galvanized the local arts community to commit $4.9 million in private contributions to build the award-winning Helen S. Schaefer Building. For the past several decades, the Poetry Center has consistently demonstrated its ability to raise funds for a wide range of program offerings through a network of literary arts funding resources and individual relationships. These monies have been raised, in very large part, due to the Poetry Center’s extensive outreach programs aimed at cultivating literary readership throughout our state. Its commitment to such programs as K-13 and adult education is in accordance with the UA 2009-2013 Strategic Plan to prepare Arizona’s youth; provide a world class institution that improves the human condition in Arizona and beyond; and to partner with and serve the people of Arizona.

In its last national survey in 1997, U.S. News & World Report ranked the University of Arizona ninth of nearly 200 creative writing programs (top 5%). Poets and Writers, the most highly regarded national publication in the field, cites UA as one of nine “distinguished” programs in the United States (2004). The faculty are active, engaged writers with national reputations, having been awarded three Guggenheims, multiple NEAs and Pushcart Prizes, the O. Henry Prize, the Lambda Literary Awards, and the Graywolf Nonfiction Prize, among others. In the past nine years, MFA alumni have received Stanford University’s prestigious Stegner Fellowship seven times, the Yale Younger Series of Poets Prize twice, a Pulitzer Prize, a MacArthur Fellowship, the Iowa Poetry Prize, the Rona Jaffee Fellowship, and the John Burroughs Medal for Distinguished Natural History Writing. Books published by the UA MFA program’s graduates number in the hundreds.

The primary goal of the MFA program is to provide a means by which talented young writers can develop their writing skills to the fullest, leaving with an understanding of the craft of writing and how it
manifests itself in contemporary literature, as well as the ability to use this knowledge in the production of meaningful works of poetry, fiction, memoir, or essay. The 36-credit program includes workshops, craft courses, and electives, culminating in the production of a publishable thesis. MFA students teach introductory courses in creative writing, volunteer in prisons and schools, and take on internships with ArtsReach, GearUp, and other organizations serving the youth of this region. The role of the writer in society is the parallel “course of study” that inevitably takes place even as the student contemplates his or her own writing, its subject, its depth, and its relevance.

Because the influential U.S. News & World Report ranking is now eleven years old, it is crucial that the MFA program act decisively and boldly to position itself at the forefront of an ever more competitive field of creative writing programs, and to do so it must maintain its high-quality faculty, attract and retain the best young writers, and reinvent and strengthen its academic core. The program is offering a course now in screenwriting, and, after a successful experiment in 2007, will also offer a novel writing workshop annually to better serve the MFA students and distinguish itself from other programs. A private donor has made it possible for the program to produce a book of graduating student work to attract the attention of literary agents and publishers, the “MFA Look Book.” Additional initiatives will become possible with a Poetry Center/MFA alliance, allowing MFA students to participate even more widely in community outreach and augment their study of creative writing with synergistic offerings in relevant fields.

In this new alliance, the creative writing faculty lines will remain housed within English and in service of the undergraduate creative writing program. MFA students will continue to take courses in English, and they will continue to teach the introductory courses in Poetry, Fiction, and Creative Nonfiction, as well as teach in The Writing Program. Additionally, the intention will be to raise the quality of the undergraduate program, as we bring new resources, energy, funding, and initiatives to the MFA. This proposal seeks to help, and by no means undervalue, this important ongoing relationship.

The Literary Arts Emphasis requires a full time executive director of the Poetry Center whose responsibility it will be to supervise all the activities of the Center and serve as development officer for the entity. A creative writing faculty member will serve as Creative Writing program director, and as such will oversee educational priorities and curriculum at the MFA level, provide a liaison between the Center and the MFA faculty, consult on outreach education, supervise student recruitment, advise students, and collaborate on fundraising. By refocusing fundraising efforts, the Poetry Center and Creative Writing Program will form a strong development team to secure new financial resources within and outside the University, supported by an exciting range of programming, as follows.

- The Poetry Center’s Reading Series and Creative Writing’s Prose Series will be consolidated into one series that presents poetry, fiction and non-fiction writers, including some internationally renowned authors whose fees are often outside the scope of present funding. Corporate support of a high profile reading series is likely.
- This fundraising alliance will support the MFA program’s longstanding desire to hire visiting writers regularly and/or when faculty members take leaves. This would allow the program to diversify offerings, heighten national profile, and utilize funds now reallocated elsewhere to strengthen the program.
- The Literary Arts Emphasis will build upon interdisciplinary collaborations the Poetry Center has pursued for decades, and on the diverse elective base the MFA students currently enjoy. We will identify compelling offerings for MFA students interested in consolidating electives into unified or thematic sequences. Such sequences will invite collaboration with other units within the College of Liberal Arts and other Colleges. Specializations might include world literatures and cultures, poetry and science, literature and painting, translation, and border studies. It’s possible these specializations could eventually lead to dual degree offerings.
• The alliance with the Creative Writing Program gives the Poetry Center’s considerable K-12 outreach invaluable support and energy. Together, we will serve Arizona’s youth by providing resources to cultivate a new generation of literary readers, an essential service in these demanding times. Preliminary ideas include building on the Creative Writing program’s new course offering “At the Intersection of Writing and Teaching: Creative Writing in K-5 Classrooms,” to provide middle and high school training. MFA students will serve as writers-in-residence throughout Southern Arizona; offer summer Creative Writing programs for youth at the Poetry Center; and professional development workshops for K-12 teachers. Our fundraising priority here is to develop scholarships that support our student teachers.

• In addition to teaching opportunities, student internships in arts administration, library collections, marketing and fundraising will be offered. For example, Sonora Review, a literary journal affiliated with the MFA Creative Writing program and housed in the English Department, is an undervalued resource that would find additional support through the new alliance. Founded in 1980, Sonora Review is the oldest student-run literary journal in the country. Besides editorial experience, staff members could also gain knowledge of publishing, book making, small press distribution and marketing.

• Creative Writing Faculty will support the outreach mission by offering programs that sustain an intellectual and creative conversation between University and community. Faculty members may offer an annual literary seminar to the general public, teach in the Poetry Center’s community classes and workshops program, or offer courses in the Humanities Seminars Program (a non-credit, lifelong learning program for retirees, also housed in the Helen S. Schaefer Building). These will be revenue generating programs for the new emphasis.

Consultation Process

This proposal arose through conversations between Creative Writing Program director, Aurelie Sheehan, and Poetry Center executive director, Gail Browne. Gail Browne presented the plan to College of Humanities interim Dean, Mary Wildner-Bassett, on October 2 and received her full support. The Creative Writing Program faculty met on October 8 and unanimously supported the plan. Gail Browne presented the plan to Poetry Center staff on October 3 and to individual members of the Poetry Center’s Advisory Board and Development Committee, including chair Helen S. Schaefer and co-chair, Randall Rodman Holdridge. Browne and Sheehan have also consulted with students, Michael Sheehan, editor of Sonora Review and Joshua Garcia, second year MFA student and member of the Poetry Center Advisory Board.
Budget

Potential fundraising opportunities and revenue increases made possible through consolidation of the Poetry Center and Creative Writing MFA Program

- Corporate/Donor sponsorship of Reading Series - $30,000 to $50,000
- International Visiting Reader Sponsor (committed) - $10,000
- Visiting Writer/Teacher (one semester) - $50,000
- Scholarship support for students - $50,000
- Student outreach support (local foundations) - $50,000
- Annual Community Seminar (fee-based) - $2,500
- Annual Benefit Performance (ticket/sponsorships) - $25,000
- Program grant funding - $50,000 (increase)
- Consolidation of Annual Appeal Campaigns (Poetry Center and Creative Writing alumni) – $10,000 (increase)
- Community Classes and Workshops program - $5,000 (increase)
- Biennial Symposia - $5,000 (increase)

Total Projected Income $307,500

Savings

- Consolidate marketing efforts
- Consolidate Reading Series programming efforts