

Boost your career with a low-residency MFA

THE LOW-RESIDENCY creative-writing MFA is an exceptional option for writers who wish to pursue a graduate degree while tending to other life responsibilities. On-campus and low-residency programs are similar in that they each provide students with writing workshops and assigned readings and culminate with the development of a thesis.

In a low-residency program, students attend a brief residency at the start of each term, then complete coursework from a distance throughout the year. Many programs include an online component for critiques, general comments and peer interaction. As such, students and faculty can connect at any time of day to benefit from group discussions.

In addition to flexible learning modules, the low-residency MFA presents an opportunity to develop one-on-one relationships with published writers. An award-winning author of six poetry collections, instructor Molly Peacock appreciates the “nurturing environment” of the low-residency MFA at Spalding University. “It’s a

warm, intimate learning environment,” Peacock says. “I usually work with my students on the phone so I can sense whether they’re understanding my comments. Students love the back and forth of the phone work.”

Some low-residency MFAs provide additional networking opportunities for students. The Whidbey Writers Workshop, for example, offers seminars and courses during the brief residency. One such course is “The Profession of Writing,” which, director Wayne Ude says, “brings to each residency editors of large and small magazines and presses, agents both regional and national, publicists and writers who speak about their experiences as professionals seeking to make a living.” Such opportunities are particularly advantageous for students eager to maximize their career potential through networking.

Ude is proud of yet another Whidbey innovation: “We also offer our graduating students a nine-day seminar on ‘pitching’ the books they’ve written as their creative theses, whether in fiction, nonfic-

tion or poetry. These seminars are taught by poetry editors and literary agents and are intended to help our students move from publishing in periodicals to publishing in book form.”

Author Stefanie Freele has benefited from these Whidbey seminars. “I’ve met some agents and editors at the residencies and got to know them on a personal level,” Freele says. “The networking and support from the faculty, board and fellow students is extremely beneficial.”

“Low-res” programs are also becoming competitive in offering pedagogical training. Spalding University has a teaching curriculum for its students, Whidbey Writers Workshop offers an elective course in “Methods of Teaching Creative Writing,” and Lesley University offers a two-year post-graduate fellowship in teaching.

Of his student experience at Lesley, author Scott McCabe says, “Low residencies, or at least Lesley, do offer or help facilitate teaching opportunities and readings ... though in most cases a student will have to be more proactive about pursuing certain opportunities. In some eyes this may seem a drawback, but it can also be good preparation for how to manage the creative life once outside

the shelter of academia.”

While there is perhaps a greater degree of self-discipline required for low-residency students, the distance-studies format is especially beneficial for students juggling other responsibilities. The low-residency MFA offers students the flexibility of learning at geographically distant institutions without leaving home for more than a week or two of on-campus residency each term.

Thus, “low-res” students can boost their writing career without moving to distant locations or asking their families to do the same. The low-residency program offers a flexible option for career-minded students who wish to take advantage of one-on-one mentorship with published writers, pedagogical training and networking opportunities with publishing-industry professionals.

—Lori A. May is a poet, novelist and freelance writer whose work has appeared in publications such as Aesthetica, Zygote and The Manhattan Syndicate and in various anthologies. She is also the author of three poetry chapbooks, and two novels, The Profiler and Moving Target. Web: www.loriamay.com.