

-Welcome Back-

The BennZine Vortex

A Periodic Newsletter of the Bennington College M.A./M.F.A. Writing Program
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MFA writing program swells to 76

In its fourth semester, low-residency enrollment near max

BENNINGTON -- Less than two years after an anxious class of 25 writers and poets braved a harsh winter to inaugurate the low-residency MA/MFA Writing Program at Bennington College, the student body has more than tripled to 76 students and the faculty has doubled.

Indeed, the enrollment of 56 women and 20 men for the June 1995 semester is just four shy of the projected maximum enrollment of 80, officials said.

The growing numbers are also underscored by the evolving realization that the experience is a temporary one. The first class is slated to graduate in just six short months.

While the rapid growth of the writing program has occurred in a relatively short time, some of the first students are referring back to the first semester with a distant historical perspective. It was, to be sure, a different time -- punctuated by such events as a lamb dinner at the house of College President Elizabeth Coleman, cross-country skiing at dawn, and lectures on the translations of Anna Achmatova by the late Jane Kenyon.

"It will be lacking the closeness we had during that first residency," said Tamara Hollins from her home in Savannah, Ga. "But with the influx of all the new people, there's bound to be new ideas they can share with us, not only about writing but about how to run the program."

Renee Bowles, a third-semester student, likened the growth of the MFA program to

the growth in the number of patients she sees as a nurse in Charlotte, N.C. "In the beginning there were just a few patients," Renee said. "Now there are hallways and hallways full of them."

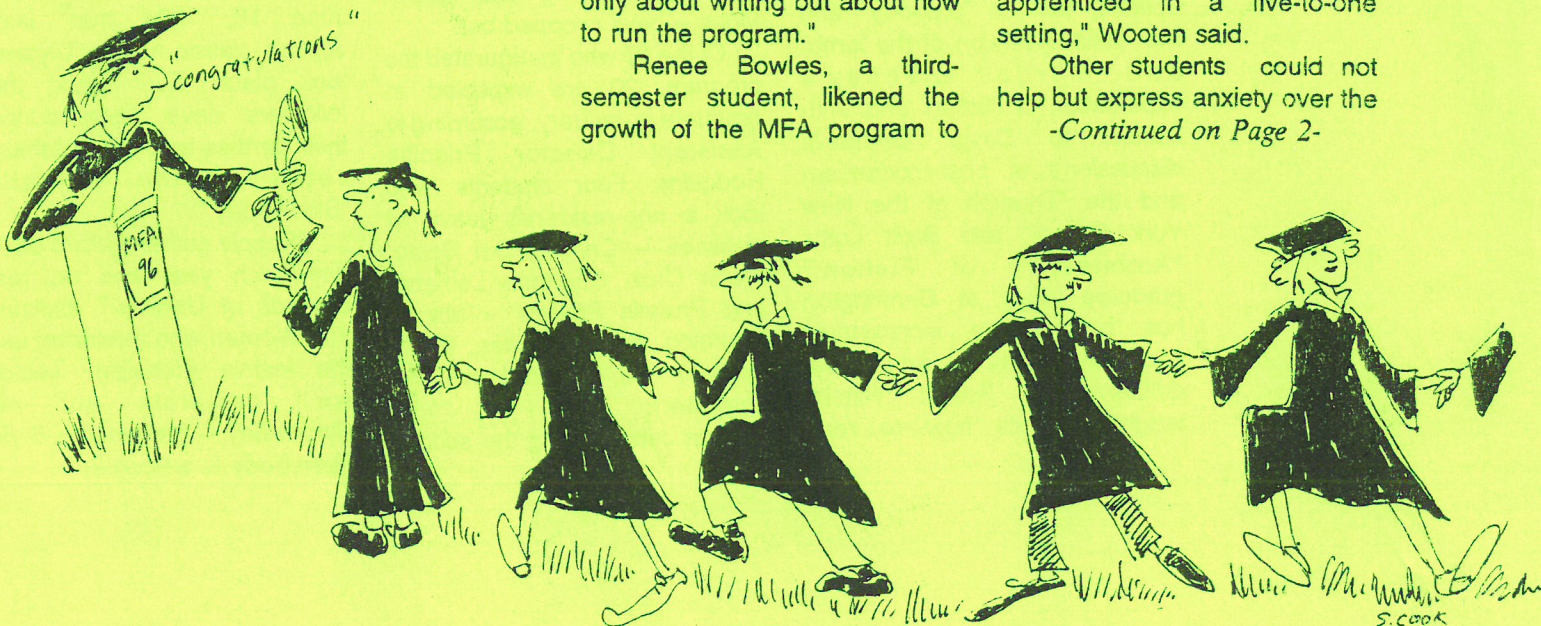
And she added: "Not everybody's going to get their pillow fluffed."

Tim Wooten, a fourth semester student from Maine, echoed the mixed reaction to the program's growth, referring to the "intimacy" that has made Bennington's program an "ideal learning experience."

"One of our great strengths that we have over traditional MA/MFA graduate programs is the tremendous sense of being apprenticed in a five-to-one setting," Wooten said.

Other students could not help but express anxiety over the

-Continued on Page 2-



MFA student enrollment more than triples

Students recount beginnings of the writing program

--Continued from page 1--

growth of the program, and the simultaneous realization of the writing obligations which lie ahead for graduating seniors entering their final semester.

"My stomach's in a knot," was how Carole Merritt put it, in a brief interview from her home in Marina Del Rey, California.

Since the first 25 students arrived on the ice and snow-laden Bennington campus in January of 1994, Bennington College itself has undergone a financial storm, and by most accounts weathered it formidably. Last summer, program director Liam Rector found himself assailing the fears and concerns of MFA students who had read one or more accounts of the College's sweeping discharge of faculty, abolition of tenure and restructuring of its academic programs.

Lecture subjects have become increasingly worldly and diverse since the first semester. From Donald Hall's uplifting talk on "prosody" and the "initial inversion of the iamb" and Margot Livesey's exploitation of "fiction and anti-fiction" to David Lehman's discussions of post-modernism and the "Triumph of the New York School" and Brett Lott's "Architecture of Fiction," graduate study at Bennington has become an increasingly appetizing menu of intellectual deliberations. Robert Pinsky taught students how to read

poems aloud. Katha Pollitt attacked the "misnomer" of "non-fiction" and the world of "gender politics." Robert Creeley showed how an "auto-didactic" poet interprets Olsen and Crane. Bruce Duffy told us about ducks, rabbits and world philosophy. And Sven Birkerts put Lionel Trilling in his place while introducing us to the anti-technology movement.

The low-residency MFA program has not been without growing pains too. Members of the inaugural class have complained about the loss of the intimacy they experienced in January of 1994. Others have complained about housing arrangements and the presence of musicians and Thespians on the Bennington campus. Different styles among faculty members and inconsistent deadline management by students led in part to the preparation of a set of program rules and regulations earlier this year, although it is still largely unknown how, when and to what degree they will be enforced.

Overwhelmingly, however, students are reporting happiness with the program. To date, only three students who attended at least one residency -- Joanne Clarke, Bee Ring and Allison Mock -- have dropped out.

Of the 25 who inaugurated the program, 20 are expected to graduate in January, according to Assistant Director Priscilla Hodgkins. Four students who took a one-residency leave of absence -- Cristina Del Sesto, Victor Cruz, Charlotte Lemann, and Pamela Powers -- are all returning this semester. (Betty Kronskey will be on leave this semester).

Last June, during the second

residency, students formed an informal student government committee, known as the "Student Life Committee," and under its sponsorship, the BennZine Vortex began publishing. A number of other events, from student readings to happy hours and dance parties, were successfully managed. Earlier this year, during the January residency, a literary magazine dubbed "b" made its debut and quickly recruited a number of volunteer editors.

In its time, the MFA program has attracted a wide range of professionals, specialists and tradesmen from diverse fields. The current student body includes a psychiatrist and several therapists, at least three lawyers and a court reporter, a police detective, an ex-Marine, a journalist, a producer, several college professors and school teachers, a nurse and a labor negotiator.

It's Bloomsday! And tonight we will celebrate Joyce's Ulysses

It was 91 years ago today, on June 16, 1904 that James Joyce's classic novel, "Ulysses," took place. Ever since then, followers have been donning their derbies and eye patches to celebrate the so-called "Bloomsday."

"People gather around on this day each year and do read-arounds of Ulysses," explained Tim Wooten who reminded us of the festive occasion. Tonight, we'll celebrate our own Bloomsday -- Bennington Style. Everybody is welcome.

Guess who's coming to dinner

*Now there's a Baker and a Cook,
a Hill and Pitts, a Cathryn, a Kathryn,
a Cathy and a Carrie, 2 Carols and a Carole,
a Debra, a Debora and a Deborah...*

The 76 writers and poets in the low-residency writing program come from as far away as Belgium, Puerto Rico and Canada and as nearby as Charlotte, Vt. and North Adams, Mass.

Eleven are from New York, nine are from Massachusetts and seven are from California. Now, too, there are two representatives of Idaho, and one from North Dakota.

With the 21 new writers this

semester, the student body boasts a colorful demographic mixture (not to mention a colorful assortment of names).

Moreover, women outnumber men by a ratio of nearly three to one.

