

Creating a Career

When Brian Clements speaks about Western Connecticut State University's new Master of Fine Arts in Professional Writing program, he tantalizingly describes it as providing "food for the table and food for the soul."

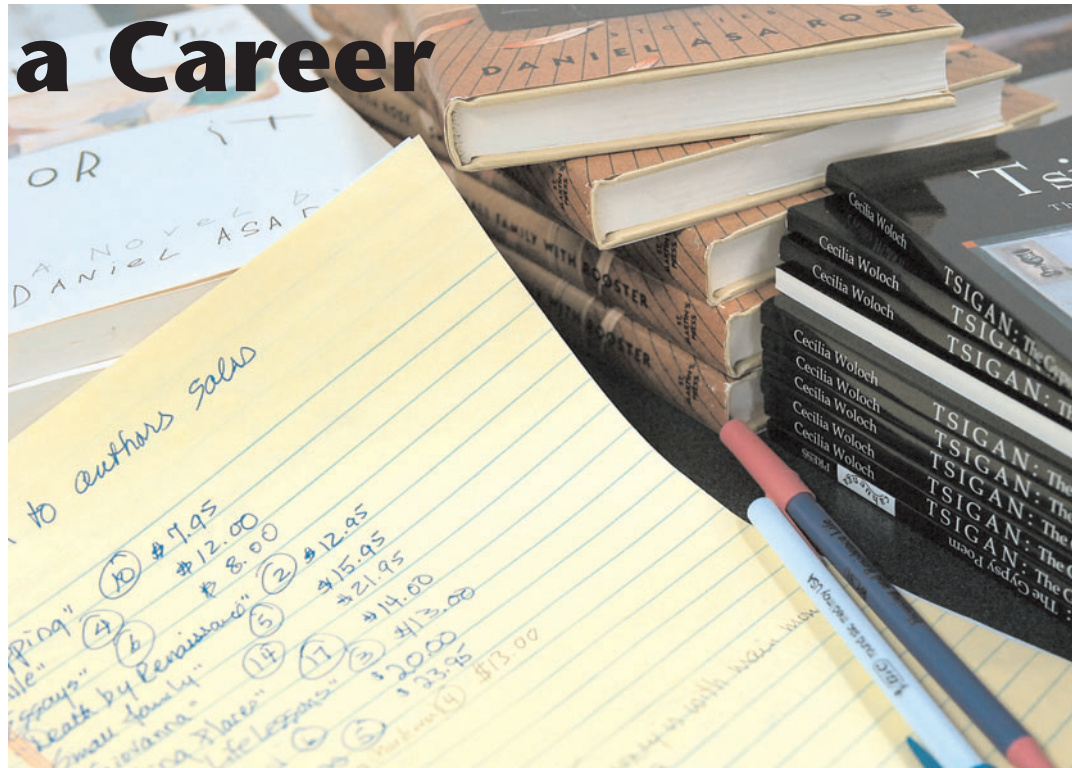
"Our MFA program," explains Clements, who serves as the program's coordinator, "allows students to attain a career that will support them financially and also help them grow creatively."

The program was launched in fall 2005 in response to a growing demand for MFA degrees. The *Harvard Business Review* noted the growing appeal of MFA degrees in February 2004 when it reported, "The MFA is the new MBA." To back its claim, the *Review* cited growing interest by corporate recruiters in graduates of prominent art schools, such as the Rhode Island School of Design and the School of Art Institute of Chicago.

When designing Western's program, its creators — WCSU English professors John Briggs, Edward Hagan, Oscar De Lo Santos and James Scrimgeour — decided to incorporate a few creative twists.

"It is absolutely a unique program — the only one like it in the country," remarks Clements. "Some programs offer low residency and others focus on creative writing, but this is the only program in the nation that offers a low-residency requirement with a professional writing advanced degree."

Students in the program are required to meet on WestConn's campus for only one week each January and August for workshops, networking and academic planning. Designed to be completed in two, three or four years, the program



The MFA in Professional Writing program at Western Connecticut State University enables students to be both creative and practical as they prepare for the future. Guiding the students are experienced writers, some of whose works are pictured here.

Photo: Peggy Stewart

employs a combination of online study and one-to-one mentorships. The result is a unique blend of students and faculty from around the globe.

"I like the program because you can live anywhere on the planet, in my case Hawaii, and travel twice a year to Connecticut for a great intensive one-week session," says Charles Henderson, a 57-year-old retired medical journalist from Maui. "I've had a 20-year writing career, but I am eager to learn to write in a new and different way. I want to become more creative."

The MFA is a terminal-degree program, the equivalent of a Ph.D. in other fields of study, and graduates are qualified to teach at the university level. But with limited creative writing teaching positions available, students in the program are required to focus on two genres: creative, such as poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, drama or screenwriting; and practical, such as journalism, investigative reporting, public relations, marketing, advertising, historical biography, and technical, science or medical writing.

"Where else can you study poetry and marketing at the same time?" asks Henderson, whose primary genre is creative nonfiction and secondary genre is specialty journalism.

"We want to train the students for a job after the degree," explains Clements. "The reality is that those who don't get teaching positions get jobs in public relations, marketing, business communications or technical writing jobs. Our students also get the skills to get jobs immediately in those fields."

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The unique structure of the program also allows for the recruiting of a wide variety of faculty and writing mentors, as well as a diverse group of writers-in-residence.

“I like that I am able to teach in both fiction and nonfiction,” explains author-in-residence Mark Sundeen, the author of *The Making of Toro* (Simon & Schuster, 2003) and *Car Camping* (HarperCollins, 2000). His work appears in *Outside*, *Men’s Journal*, *National Geographic Adventure*, *Preservation* and the *New York Times Magazine*. “A lot of the programs are interested in one and not the other — they don’t see the similarities and value of teaching both simultaneously. The majority of the programs focus on one genre. But I don’t think it makes much sense to differentiate the two; the techniques are very much the same.”

The keys to the success of WestConn’s MFA in Professional Writing program are its experienced faculty and mentors and its committed students. John Dennis (top left) is an experienced playwright who is working as a mentor, while Daniel Asa Rose (bottom left) is a published author and essayist who has been involved as an author-in-residence. The experience of the faculty and mentors has been a key to keeping students (right) engaged and focused.

Photos: Peggy Stewart



Other authors-in-residence include writer/producer/director Mimi Kelly, author/essayist Daniel Asa Rose, author/winner of the Yale Younger Poets prize Peter Streckfus, poet Cecilia Woloch and author/memoirist Don Snyder. The program also includes a half dozen permanent WestConn English professors and 20 writing mentors, who work with the students to create individual reading lists, projects and internships.

“It is hard as a writer to turn away from an opportunity to be in a community of people who are serious about writing. All your life you search for those people. You find people who are serious and you latch on to them. It doesn’t matter the genre. They want to get better, to be better writers,” Snyder says.

“The program is designed to be student centered and student driven. If there is a genre they want to work in, say television writing, we have the flexibility to go find someone in the field to work with the student,” Clements adds.

To round out the program, all students are required to do an internship or teaching practicum in their third semester, and they must propose, design and complete a project not directly related to writing projects but which enriches the students as writers. Projects might involve volunteering for a charitable literary organization, learning a foreign language or starting an online literary publication.

“I feel lucky to have been accepted into the program,” Henderson concludes. “It offers a chance to study everything you can think of as it pertains to professional writing — from marketing to screenplays, and from women’s articles to how-to books. It is wide open and very much based in the real world. And more importantly, there is a really sincere interest among the mentors in seeing us become successful.” ❖