

An Interview With

Dr. David Bell

GRADUATE ADVISOR, MFA CREATIVE WRITING

How many students are currently enrolled in the Masters of Fine Arts program at Western Kentucky University?


"We admit 6 every year so there are 12 total at any one time."

Are these mostly students that graduated from Western Kentucky University or do you see a large number of students from other schools?

"Most students come from other schools. We have admitted a couple of Western Kentucky University students each year. In creative writing it's probably a good thing that you go to a different school for graduate school than the school you went to as an undergraduate. If you just go to the same school and apply for a job later someone might say "well, they only like you at this school," as opposed to saying "they did well here and they did well there, we want to hire them."

I understand the standards for the Masters of Fine Arts program at Western Kentucky University are quite strict. Are those the only factors you consider when a student applies?

"We value the writing sample more than we value grades. Somebody might have lousy grades, even below the minimum grade we ask for, but if they are a really talented writer, we are going to let them into the program. So, yes, definitely, at least in creative writing, some of the things like test scores and grade point average aren't as important."



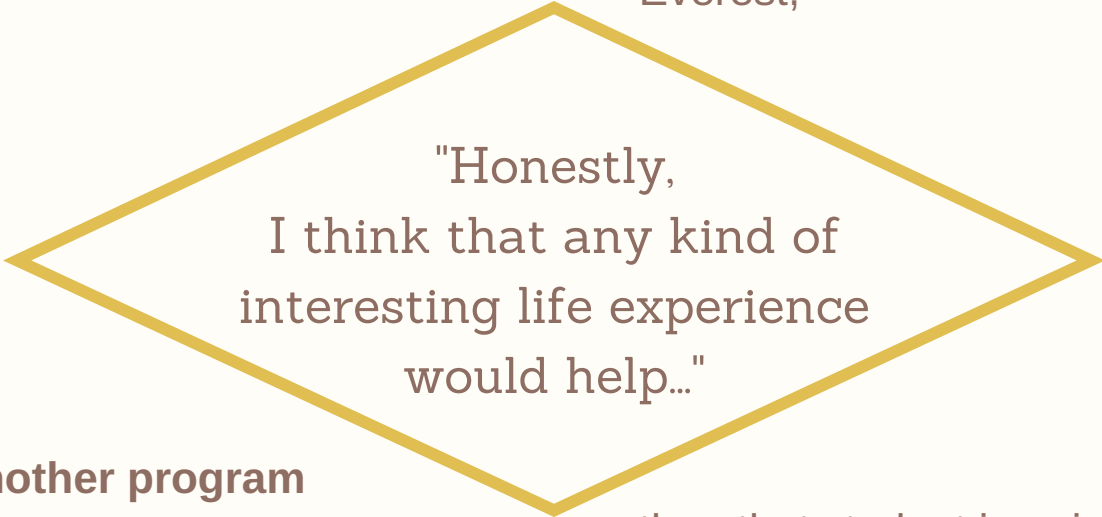
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What do most of the MFA students want to do once they graduate?

"I think first and foremost they want to be writers; that's their number one goal. They want to publish their work. They understand that, practically speaking, it's difficult to make a living as a writer, so I think a lot of them are thinking of teaching as a career. They may want to go into other fields such as editing or publishing. I think the first and foremost thing is that they think of themselves as writers."

Besides having an excellent writing portfolio, are there any extracurricular activities that make a student attractive to a graduate program?

If a student has written for a paper or they've worked for a magazine - those definitely don't hurt. Honestly, I think that any kind of interesting life experience would help. If you get an application from someone and they say, "I was in the peace corps" or "I hitchhiked across Europe" or "I climbed Mount Everest,"



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Is there another program you recommend for students who want to be teachers or professors?

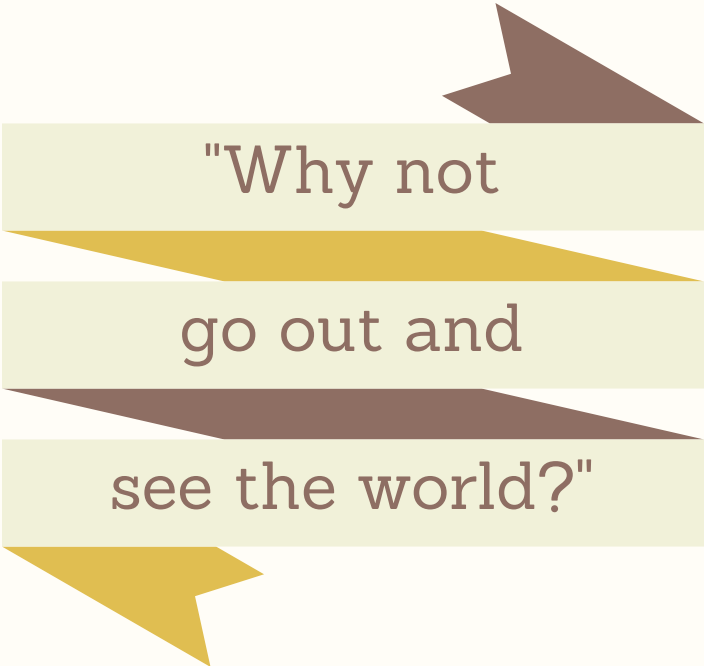
"You can get a job as a college professor with just an MFA, but you're probably more appealing on the job market if you have a PhD. It used to be - say 30 years ago - if you had an MFA that was more than enough to get a job. I think the job market has become more competitive so more people are getting PhD's."

then that student is going to appear more interesting. If you had to decide between, say two candidates were pretty even to get into a program, and one student had climbed Mount Everest and one had not, you might be more inclined to pick the student who had climbed Mount Everest because you may find them more interesting. I tell my students to take time off between undergraduate and graduate school.

Especially in creative writing, if you go out and have some life experience - travel a little bit or work a job - you're going to have more to write about. You'll probably be a little more mature and a little more appreciative of being in school. I think nothing makes someone appreciate school more than having to go work. I think when a student has that kind of life experience it makes them a more interesting candidate, as opposed to someone who says "I just graduated from college in May and I want to go back to graduate school in August." Why not go out and see the world? It will make you more appealing."

If a Western student applies and it may not be their best fit, is there a resource you would direct them to that might help them pick a University that would be better for them?

"There are lots of guides out there for an MFA in creative writing. For example, AWPwriter.org is the Association of Writing Programs website. If someone is going into creative writing they may want to make the choice based on who they want to study with.



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Say, for instance, they want to be a poet and their favorite poet teaches at the University of Kentucky or the University of Idaho they might want to go to school where that person is teaching. Or, if they write in a certain style - for example they write poems about golf - they may want to know that university of Idaho has a great program for students who write about golf and they may choose to go to the University of Idaho as opposed to somewhere else."

About the Author

Samantha Schroeder is an English for Secondary Teachers Major at WKU