

## Personal advising guides adult students to literary lives

*By Halley Sutton, Assistant Editor*

Finding a way to stand out in a sea of graduate writing programs, offered both online and in-person, creates a unique positioning challenge for a small private arts college, particularly on a campus known for visual arts. When Peter Gadol became the department chair of the graduate writing program at the Otis College of Art and Design, a private art school located near the Los Angeles airport, he embraced the small student body on campus, which is home to approximately 1,200 undergraduate students and fewer than 100 graduate students, as one of the strengths of the program.

Otis' intimate MFA program, which currently boasts a total of 13 full- and part-time students, offers the opportunity to provide guidance on a personal level, which is one of the aspects Gadol emphasizes to prospective students and which is reflected in his current overseeing of a curricular overhaul designed to provide a model for creating and sustaining a writing life post-degree.

Currently, the MFA program at Otis runs on two tracks: prose and poetry. Starting fall 2016, the tracks will be merged to provide a more cohesive writing education. "I don't think a writer today is restricting himself to a single genre," Gadol said. "People just think of themselves as writers. In order to foster that, we need to model a kind of conversation where people can move back and forth across forms." The new program will also provide a better opportunity for practical guided instruction for students based on personal goals and ambitions. That guidance will include directed readings based on projects; advice about what types of submissions and publications are most pertinent to the individual writer; and strategies to create a life focused on writing, even after graduation.

### Build and contribute to a literary community on campus to draw students

An MFA is an often expensive path to a graduate degree. A master's in fine arts might lead to a teaching position, but making the case to prospective students that the return on investment of two years and the tuition for an MFA will pay off can be an uphill battle for prospective students. In addition, Otis faces competition from more recognizably named local colleges, such as the University of California, Los Angeles; Loyola Marymount University; and California Institute of the Arts. Although Otis offers unique features on campus, getting

prospective students to recognize those opportunities among other options provides an uphill recruiting challenge. Gadol has had success with the following strategies to recruit students to campus:

➤ **Participate in community events to gain name recognition.** Each year, students and professors from Otis attend the Association of Writers and Writing Programs Annual Conference, which will be held in Los Angeles in 2016. Gadol made the case for Otis to be a large sponsor of the conference as part of the college's recruiting budget and to sponsor activities, such as author signings and readings, to create a visible presence at the conference as an opportunity for Otis to make itself more known to prospective students.

➤ **Foster relationships with other institutions to recruit.** Gadol also mentioned the possibility of creating a community mentorship program in Los Angeles, building relationships with undergraduate students and professors at other noncompeting programs within the city to search for potential future graduate students. Several of the local colleges and universities offer creative writing undergraduate majors but not graduate programs. Bringing current Otis students or faculty into the undergraduate programs to introduce students to Otis could help create a local pipeline of qualified, interested potential graduate students.

➤ **Offer professional experience along with financial aid.** Recognizing that financing a graduate education can often be a powerful stumbling block to attaining a master's degree, Otis offers financial assistance to all students accepted into the program. Furthermore, Otis offers both graduate teaching assistantships and graduate research assistantships to provide students with opportunities to develop their résumés while earning their degree. Teaching assistants teach undergraduates on campus, and research assistants work for a campus press with professors to publish titles of poetry and translation every year.

➤ **Bring networking opportunities to students.** Otis offers a Visiting Writers series of readings each semester, which allows students to interact with published poets, novelists and memoirists. Graduate students can speak with visiting writers before and after an on-campus reading, allowing them access to a world of writers and professional contacts while earning a degree.

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