



Association of Writers
& Writing Programs

AWP's COVID-19 Program Director Survey: Results Summary and Statement on Upcoming Changes

We recently asked our program directors about their greatest concerns as writers during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Almost all directors who responded talked about trying to keep writing with new challenges cropping up daily, including writing while having increased family responsibilities and parenting more hours at home, writing while learning to homeschool their children, and writing while “freaking out” and trying not to be overwhelmed by the pandemic. A few expressed their frustration that they are just too busy or cannot find the energy to write in this new world.

Many directors were very worried about others in their community, expressing their concern for students who may not be able to stay in school if teaching assistantships and other sources of funding are cut. Others focused on the possible layoff of colleagues and how they will find other work if that happens. Some had more broad concerns about keeping creative writing vital and viable in higher education.

As some of their greatest concerns, many directors referred to some aspect of the economy and its effect on the literary world, including but not limited to:

- the survival of literary journals, small presses, publishers, and booksellers
- personal job loss and increased workload due to reduced staff
- creative writing programs and even schools closing down
- publishers taking fewer chances on new works and reducing their acquisition funds
- literary companies needing to lay off editors and agents
- creative writing funding being reduced or drying up
- readers' interest dropping off and more competition for that which remains
- new books, for themselves and their fellow writers, coming out in a vacuum
- fewer opportunities for promotion
- loss of money from readings and live book sales

Unsurprisingly, many directors stated that their primary concern right now was not about writing at all but related to staying well and keeping their families safe and healthy. Other non-writing-related responses included the collapse of the economy, the human suffering caused by and the inequalities in society highlighted by this crisis, the general health and safety of our society, the deadliness of this virus, and a lack of national leadership.

Program directors also identified a number of different virtual resources they would like AWP to provide, but the most popular responses were for guidelines and assistance in transitioning to online teaching, the creation of a best practices standard for online workshops, and a hub to communicate with other directors about these processes. Directors were also interested in AWP offering more virtual teaching resources and suggested webinars to share with faculty and students, short video elements to integrate into lessons, and new, creative online teaching pedagogy ideas. A few also asked for tools and best practices for holding virtual residencies and virtual conferences. Two related inspired suggestions were the creation of a list of guest authors who would be willing to video chat with students and the organization of a resource that allows for the exchange of guest writing speakers.

In these responses, program directors also shared requests related to writing program administration, including calls for more peer-reviewed scholarship, greater opportunities for program directors to communicate with one another, and facilitating communication between programs and directors. One responder offered a particularly compelling suggestion that AWP collect data about writing-program-specific consequences of the pandemic and the extent to which creative writing programs have suffered.

Our program directors are finding many ways to connect with their communities and suggested a number of ways those communications could be enhanced by AWP, including:

- more resources, literature, pedagogy, writing, mentoring, and performances available to teachers of creative writing to use with their students
- a tech hotline for how to host readings and book signings
- a tweet chat about how programs are responding to COVID-19
- posting more materials and information on virtual learning so that writers would have a single, well-developed source
- taking this time to think about the collective and how writers and writing might take part in what is to come differently than they have in the recent past

When asked about their concerns for the next six months and how AWP can help them, the major issue on program directors' minds seemed to be creating and managing new online versions of classes for the fall. An MFA program of study is so much about personal interaction with one another, and many directors worry about how this will be lost when everything is online. Other areas of concern highlighted in the responses were current issues of program enrollment, funding, and budgets. Program directors are also thinking about the personal finances of students and their mental health during this pandemic.

In our final survey question, AWP asked program directors to share their experiences over the last month and/or address any issues that weren't covered in the other questions. One major response to this question was frustration at our decision to hold the San Antonio conference, although some of the same respondents also noted it was a hard decision since there were no clear guidelines from the country's administration. Other directors expressed

dissatisfaction with the general running of AWP, including recent firings and the work of the board. Some program directors also reemphasized their desire that AWP play a bigger role during the pandemic by supporting programs and teachers with more resources on AWP's website.

Upcoming Changes—A Statement from the Professional Standards Committee

AWP is mobilizing to support our membership as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact writers, teachers, and writing programs and as we work to give more and better support to BIPOC communities. The most immediate changes we are launching are:

- The development of searchable catalogs of online resources--videos, podcasts, and articles--on our site that can be used as you plan for distance and online teaching and culturally responsive teaching. In the meantime, please explore our [Writer's Chronicle Features Archive](#), [The Writer's Notebook](#), and our [collection of videos](#) of our virtual events and select featured presentations from past conferences.
- The creation of a clearinghouse through which writers can list their creative writing expertise and offer to visit one another's classrooms virtually.
- A commitment to provide as much virtual programming as possible to our members during these times. We understand that budget cuts are limiting program resources, especially travel, and we are committed to offering the kind of programming that our members need most right now.

We also want our program directors to know that we hear your concerns, and we're working to change the culture of AWP to one of more transparency and accountability. We're deeply appreciative of the time you took to share your worries, ideas, and frustrations with us. AWP is supported by a small group of 18 staff and 15 volunteer board members, and in each decision we make we move forward not as a large corporation but as a small group of art lovers who simply want to be able to keep serving writers, as we know you do as well. Sometimes we succeed in our choices and sometimes we fail, but more often we fall somewhere in the middle. Like many other organizations, we are struggling to emerge from an old model and become something different, and with your input we get closer. We thank you for your own service to writers and the literary community and are proud to work alongside you to keep creative writing alive in this changing world.