

## *The Faculty*

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### HOT TYPE

# U. of Iowa Writing Students Quash Planned Open Access

By ANDREA L. FOSTER

The **University of Iowa** has abruptly reversed course on a plan to make some students' theses freely available online, after vigorous protests this month from students in the university's prestigious writing programs. The students said the plan could have threatened the potential commercial value of their novels, plays, and other creative works.

**Lola L. Lopes**, interim provost of the university, has announced that Iowa will not publish theses from students in the writing programs as open-access documents. Her decision affects students who will earn master-of-fine-arts degrees in Iowa's wide-ranging graduate writing concentrations in poetry, fiction, nonfiction, playwriting, and translation.

"It was only a germ of a thought to begin with," said Ms. Lopes. "And we have squelched it."

The controversy began in late winter, when graduating students in the writing programs noticed new language in a form required for all students depositing their theses with the Graduate College. The document informed students that the University of Iowa Library would scan the hard-copy theses as part of the degree requirement and then "make them open-access documents," which the form defined as freely available over the Internet and retrievable "via search engines such as Google."

That form has since been removed from the Web, and it has been revised to remove the open-access language.

It is unclear who authorized the new language. **Nancy L. Baker**, university librarian, said the form, which was drafted by the Graduate College, had misrepresented the library's position.

After meeting with students, professors, and librarians, Ms. Lopes said a consensus emerged that the thesis-deposit form for students in graduate writing programs will include a statement saying that the theses cannot be scanned or distributed without the authors' consent. Students are also being advised to attach pages to their theses that reaffirm their copyrights to their works.

Students and professors in the writing program said they were pleased by the provost's quick response.

"The provost has been far-seeing and greatly supportive, and everything is moving in the right direction," said **Lan Samantha Chang**, director of the Writers' Workshop, who attended the meeting with the provost.

Ms. Lopes said a separate thesis-deposit form will probably be drafted for graduate students in research programs. She acknowledged that the university had not thought through the implications of distributing students' creative-writing projects electronically. Graduate students in sciences and other scholarly fields

often prefer to have their theses and dissertations widely disseminated online because that can lead to more citations of their research, which in turn can lead to professional advancement.

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A nonfiction-writing student, **Nicholas A. Kowalczyk**, who had helped organize the protest, said the open-access plan bothered him because theses may contain sensitive personal information that students have yet to verify for accuracy. His own thesis is about his family's history in Lorain, Ohio — a town west of Cleveland — and how the small city has become, he said, "a busted-out factory town."

"I haven't fact-checked the details," he said, explaining why he didn't want his thesis circulated on the Web. "I want to get feedback on it."

Iowa's now-abandoned policy also brought protests from the university's alumni and its history professors. The latter group objected to the open-access publishing of the work of history students. **James Hynes**, a novelist who graduated from a writing program at Iowa, said the open-access plan had alarmed him.

"For those who are writing or have written scholarly dissertations, this may not be a bad thing," he wrote on his blog, "but for those of us who graduated from the Writers' Workshop or one of the other creative-writing programs at Iowa, it's pretty infuriating." He said his thesis from the university was an early version of his first novel, *The Wild Colonial Boy*.

Other colleges, too, are facing opposition from creative-writing students over open-access publishing of theses, said **David Fenza**, executive director of the **Association of Writers and Writing Programs**, which is based at George Mason University.

He said the issue had come to a head within the past 18 months. Universities are pushing open access to free up space — including space reserved for theses — for computers and multimedia equipment, Mr. Fenza said, and to tout a university's research output.

"College administrators don't always do what's in the best interest of students," he said.

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