Mark Twain put it this way: “Education consists mainly of what we have unlearned.”

This is especially true for writers who rush into the craft with too many words and not enough scarred-up wisdom. Some are born great, but even they could benefit from spending a few years in a kindred community talking about how to be better.

“A lot of what makes it successful is not statistically quantifiable. It’s more about the experience, a process of osmosis,” says Martin Corless-Smith, a poetry professor and director of Boise State’s Master of Fine Arts program in creative writing. “As an MFA student, being a writer becomes your real life.”

The real lives of talented MFA students, faculty and alumni continue to draw the national spotlight. Ranked by The Huffington Post among the top 25 underrated programs in the country along with others at Cornell, Johns Hopkins and Purdue, Boise State’s MFA program was praised last year for its small size, envious setting, robust support for students and “extremely strong” faculty in both fiction and poetry.

“Everyone here is a productive writer, and seeing that life as a possibility often is quite a revelation for students,” says Corless-Smith.

Boise State’s MFA faculty is far from being merely productive. Recent accolades include high praise for books by fiction professors Brady Udall, Mitch Wieland and Anthony Doerr, ranging from rankings on national top 10 lists by Publishers Weekly, Entertainment Weekly and Amazon.com to distinctions such as the national Story Prize, Idaho Book of the Year Award, and New York Times Notable Book.

Corless-Smith and fellow poetry professor Janet Holmes are equally distinguished by commendations from esteemed peers, critics, literary magazines and blogs. Corless-Smith recently was designated one of six favorite contemporary poets by the Boston Review’s venerable poetry editor, while Holmes’ latest collection was a small press bestseller and “best of” honoree in the premier poetry magazine Coldfront.

Holmes’ leadership of the university’s Ahsahta Press has established it as one of the best publishers of contemporary poetry in the country. Thanks to her shrewd author selections over the years, the press recently received a nod from The Atlantic as one of 10 favorites.

Boise State’s literary journal, The Idaho Review, has comparably prospered under Wieland’s guidance as founding editor. Featured stories have been reprinted in prestigious anthologies such as “The Best American Short Stories,” “Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards,” “The Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses,” “New Stories from the South” and “Best of the West.”

Some of these anthologies have featured the work of Boise State MFA graduates. The quality of the program is reflected in their achievements, from JR Walsh...
Boise State’s MFA community is expanding the literary map in Idaho’s capital city and beyond. Here is a sampling of recent faculty achievements:

- Brady Udall’s novel, “The Lonely Polygamist,” made several national top 10 fiction lists in 2010, including Publishers Weekly (No. 9) and Amazon.com (No. 10), as well as being named No. 1 by Entertainment Weekly.
- “THE MS OF M Y KIN,” the latest collection by Janet Holmes, was a 2009 bestseller for international publisher Shearsman and for Small Press Distribution.
- Mitch Wieland’s 2009 novel, “God’s Dogs,” was Idaho Book of the Year, a John Gardner Fiction Book Award finalist and a selectee for the “Best of the West” prize anthology.
- Visiting professor Anthony Doerr’s latest book, “Memory Wall,” was named one of the best of 2010 by Amazon.com (No. 9), The Boston Globe (No. 3) and The Oregonian (No. 6), as well as being a New York Times Notable Book and winner of the $20,000 Story Prize.
- Brady Udall became Idaho’s writer-in-residence in 2010, an honor awarded every three years by the Idaho Commission on the Arts. Udall is the fifth with Boise State ties since 1990.

Learn more about the MFA program at http://www.boisestate.edu/english/mfa/.