It was an email of just a few lines, but it spoke volumes of good news to Doug Unger. One of the founders of UNLV’s master of fine arts in creative writing program, Unger was serving as interim English department chair last summer when he received an unexpected email from a fact checker at The Atlantic Monthly. The email asked him to confirm information for an upcoming Atlantic Monthly article recognizing UNLV’s graduate-level creative writing programs as among the best in the nation.

“It was wonderful news,” says Unger. “To have this publication—one of the most sophisticated magazines in the literary world—acknowledge our creative writing programs was truly confirmation of our success.”

The article, titled “Where Great Writers Are Made,” appeared in August and named UNLV’s master of fine arts (MFA) program in creative writing as one of the five most innovative in the country and the doctoral program as one of the overall best of its kind.

The article praised the UNLV master of fine arts program for its emphasis on global literature and its unique partnership with the Peace Corps, which encourages students to spend two years abroad with the Corps as part of their programs. They...
also must translate a major work of literature.

The Peace Corps partnership has created a lot of buzz in the literary world, according to the article’s author, Edward Delaney. Though he hadn’t heard much about the UNLV program before he began his research, Delaney says the program was mentioned “again and again” as he interviewed some 350 authors such as John Irving, Tobias Wolf, George Saunders, Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka has participated, as has novelist John Irifeld. “These faculty members formed a foundation of strength in this area, which contributed to our decision to propose an MFA in creative writing,” Hudgins says. “Several of our master’s students had written creative theses for their final projects, and several others completed collections of short stories under these founding faculty.”

Hudgins says the faculty department realized that the first step toward establishing an exceptional MFA program was to build the faculty with well-respected authors. In 1990, they hired novelist Richard Wiley, who had won the prestigious PEN Faulkner Award for his novel Soldiers in Hiding and was a graduate of the prestigious MFA program at the University of Iowa.

In 1991, the department hired Unger, another Iowa MFA graduate and a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in literature, who says that he left a tenured position with the department of English at Syracuse University to come to UNLV because of the opportunity to develop a new and innovative MFA program.

Both Wiley, who now serves as the assistant director of UNLV’s respected Black Mountain Institute, and Unger, who continues to chair the UNLV English department, have received the Board of Regents Award for Creative Activities. “These faculty members formed a foundation of strength in this area, which contributed to our decision to propose an MFA in creative writing,” Hudgins says. “Several of our master’s students had written creative theses for their final projects, and several others completed collections of short stories under these founding faculty.”

With the support of then-UNLV President Carol C. Harter, the Board of Regents approved the program in April 1997, and the first three students enrolled in the fall of that year. The Peace Corps partnership was implemented a year later.

“Since then, the international emphasis has distinguished our program,” says Unger, adding that it produces a kind of writing that “looks out from America to the world,” offering a more expansive perspective. “A few programs out there are now doing that, and they felt strongly that living abroad could invaluable enrich a writer’s work. Thus, the idea for the partnership with the Peace Corps was born, and the development of the program was under way.”

With the launch of the UNLV’s master of fine arts program in creative writing one of the five most innovative in the country and the doctoral program in creative writing one of the overall best of its kind.