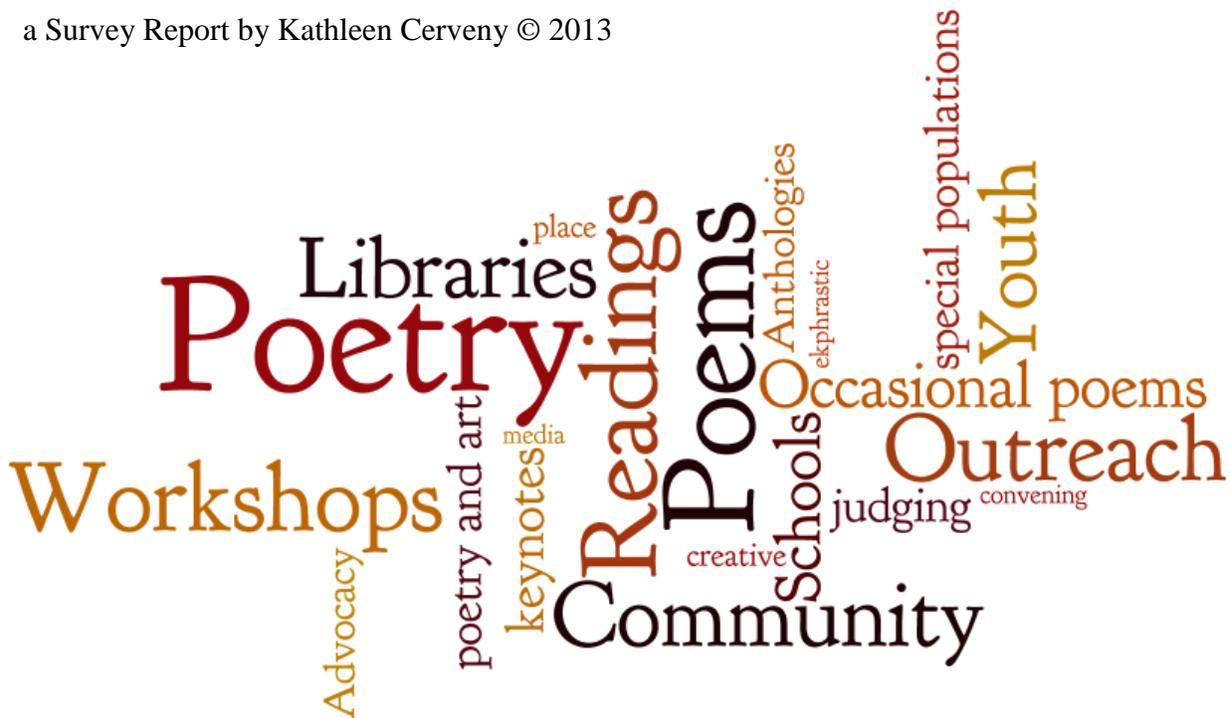


# The Roles and Experiences of Poets Laureate in the United States

a Survey Report by Kathleen Cervený © 2013



## Overview

This is a synopsis of a report that was the culmination of a research project, undertaken in partial fulfillment of the MFA degree requirements in poetry at the University of Southern Maine: Stonecoast Creative Writing Program. It presents data gathered over a two-month period in 2013 from 99 local, state and U.S. poets laureate through an electronic survey instrument. The purpose of the survey was to learn how this venerable office operates in contemporary American society and what if any best practices might be distilled from the experiences of those who have held the office.

The full report includes a brief history of the office of poet laureate, describes the design and implementation of the research project, and includes qualitative and quantitative data from the survey along with anecdotal information pulled from the survey's essay questions and from telephone conversations and email exchanges with several participants.

Finally, the report draws some conclusions and offers thoughts on further steps that might be taken to generate a stronger support system for the largely volunteer work of the artists who agree to serve their communities in this role.

This document is a preview of the full, 51 page report which, at present, is not available for public circulation. Seriously interested parties may contact me to discuss use and availability of the information in the complete report. [kcervený46@gmail.com](mailto:kcervený46@gmail.com) or [kcervený@clevelandn.org](mailto:kcervený@clevelandn.org)

## The Roles and Experiences of Poets Laureate in the United States

### Preface

*As artists we have a creative as well as a political role to play in our communities. Because we have this title, this position conferred by a public official or institution, it gives us the chance and the responsibility to empower the voices of others for the benefit of the community – to help the individual voice be heard through our work. The individual voice matters.* - Sarah Busse, 2013 co-Laureate, Madison, WI (interview)

My interest in this topic comes from being asked to serve my home community as laureate by a local nonprofit which has been sponsoring a poet laureate in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, for more than ten years. I was appointed in April, 2013 and will serve through March, 2015. In undertaking this project, I was interested in exploring questions that would help me learn from the experiences of others so my service as laureate would be productive and effective. I also hoped to add something to the body of knowledge about this unique office which might serve the field.

The primary questions for the survey were framed to uncover differences, if any, in how laureates were selected, and the specifics of their terms of service, including length, whether or not an honorarium was provided, and the range and types of duties performed. I also was interested in gathering advice and capturing learning from the experience of laureates to begin documenting what might, for future laureates and their hosts, be considered a set of guidelines or best practices for successful laureateships.

The methods I employed through this project included the use of Survey Monkey, a commercially available electronic survey tool that has the capacity to anonymously gather both quantitative and qualitative data, and follow-up telephone interviews with a number of laureates. The interviews provided an opportunity to delve more deeply and personally into the experiences of those who serve in this role at the state and local levels. To encourage participation and not be seen as too burdensome, the Survey Monkey was kept to a total of 15 questions, fewer than half of which required a narrative response. This placed some limits on the depth and range of information that could be gathered.

In the full report I have included information on how the project was conceived, designed, and launched as well as the assistance I received from friends, acquaintances and my Stonecoast mentors. The research efforts leading to the survey launch and the strategy developed to encourage participation are also documented in the report.

The final section of the report draws some conclusions and makes a number of recommendations. My purpose in offering the recommendations is to advance both understanding and respect for the role of poet laureate – particularly at the local level where little

if any focused attention has been paid, and where there seem to be many poets doing exceptional, often unrecognized and frequently under-supported work in their communities.

I must express my appreciation to all 99 poets who took the time to participate in the survey. They represent an 82.5% response rate from a field of 120, whose contact information I was able to secure. I also want to thank the Stonecoast faculty who helped me plan and structure the project, especially my third semester mentor, Jeanne Marie Beaumont, and three former laureates who held this position in Cleveland Heights; Meredith Holmes, Gail Bellamy and Cavanaugh Faithwalker, for their help in previewing the survey.

## Methodology

The research was undertaken via Survey Monkey, a commercially available electronic survey instrument. The tool updates and tabulates the quantitative data continuously, each time new information is uploaded by a participant. Results for the quantitative data – about half the questions, were thus complete as soon as the survey closed October 31, 2013. Charts from the Survey Monkey are included in the full report.

But the questions requiring a narrative response required analysis by a different method, one which would offer a credible report of highly subjective responses. This qualitative information was reviewed through inductive analysis, whereby a representative sample of responses is closely reviewed to identify repeated words, phrases, and ideas across the sample, thus surfacing common and high-order themes that can be assumed to be representative of the whole. For this report, however, the entire 99 responses were used as the analytical sample.

## Quantitative Results: Questions 1 through 7

A summary of the survey's first seven questions provides the quantitative data that frame the more subjective information that follows. In brief, just under half the respondents are currently in their posts, with the remainder having served in the past. The largest number of respondents report serving either a small city or a state, followed by those serving a county or region. The largest percentage of respondents (65%) serve or have served a two-year term, and 12 percent report being re-appointed to a second term.

Nearly half report being selected through a nomination and committee process, and about one quarter indicate an open application process led to their appointment. Sponsors of the position cross a range of entities, but most include both a nonprofit organization and a government appointing authority.

Seventy eight percent of respondents report their duties as self-directed rather than mandated, and more than half report receiving no compensation for their services.

## Qualitative Results: Questions 8 through 15

These questions endeavored to capture specifics which could identify current practices, seek advice culled from experience and possibly generate a set of guidelines for future laureateships. These questions required narrative responses and as noted in the Methodology section, inductive analysis was employed to identify key themes and consistent messages that form the basis for the results presented.

NOTE: the full report provides detail and examples not presented here.

### Duties

Poets reported a wide range of duties as part of their service during their terms. Some examples include:

- 85% - Community outreach of various kinds
- 45% - Advocacy efforts
- 40% - Publishing
- 25% - Commissioning of occasional poems

### Satisfaction

90% of the 97 poets responding to this question expressed satisfaction with the experience, and close to the remaining 10% were somewhat satisfied. It is worth keeping this in mind when, in response to later questions, poets express some dissatisfaction in individual and some shared aspects of their experiences. Among things that limited satisfaction were; lack of monetary support, lack of other supports such as making connections, marketing, recognition for the poet's work. Politics were a challenge in some instances, and lack of adequate guidelines or planning for expectations of services to be delivered were frequently reported challenges.

### Impact on the poet's own work

Some poets felt their personal writing time was limited by their laureateship duties. Others, including the majority of respondents, found the work helpful to them in a variety of ways, including: a greater focus on craft, inspiration from topics not likely to be otherwise chosen, greater comfort in public speaking, rewarding contact with other poets and within their communities.

### Use of Social Media

Responses ran the gamut one would expect from any random population - from enthusiasm to complete lack of interest. Some data points:

- 70% of the respondents report having a website
- 46% reported having a professional Facebook page
- 20% reported not using social media at all

### Advice to New Laureates

Respondents provided many thoughtful comments. A few examples:

- Plan ahead; create a support system

- Ask about expectations for your duties and the support your host will provide
- Support other poets - it's not all about you

### **Advice for Sponsoring Organizations**

Here, the poets had much to say, again from their experiences.

- Create a credible selection process
- Provide at least a small honorarium; at least pay for gas if extensive travel is required
- Open doors, make introductions, provide visibility

## **Conclusions, Key Lessons and Recommendations for Action**

These last sections of the report draw conclusions from the survey data, from scholarly writing on the historic lack of appropriate compensation for the work and skills of individual artists compared to similarly educated professionals, and from my own experience as a working artist, arts advocate and long-time arts grantmaker. It suggests the need for setting standards for the role of Poet Laureate whereby impact and community benefit can be documented and the services of laureates more comprehensively valued and supported.

Finally, the report offers recommendations for steps that might be taken by laureates themselves, and by entities in a position to bring the value of the laureates' services to greater awareness and to effect positive change. These include recommendations for state arts agencies, national arts advocacy organizations such as Americans for the Arts and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) and the Association of Writers' Programs (AWP).

### **Final Comments**

This survey and this report merely scratch the surface. It is an admittedly one-sided report. Only the laureates were surveyed. I am certain that host and sponsoring organizations would also have useful comments and insights which could improve the design and impact of the office. Still, this information begins to frame the broad issues in the field. It offers practical ideas and guidance to laureates and their hosts as new poets take on this role. I hope, ultimately, that this work spurs others to take a deeper dive into the evaluation and study of this venerable field of cultural service.

The report also clearly illuminates the deep commitment of poets to their communities and to sharing their art form in order to enrich the lives of others. I also believe this report takes a step toward demonstrating the value of poets as important community assets, and the public benefit of empowering them to share their passion and creativity.