Dear Friends,

We write this letter to let you know about exciting changes in multilingual poetry education at The University of Arizona Poetry Center, and to share new ways we will support the corrido art form for Arizona youth. We also want to share with you our reasons for making the strategic decision to discontinue the corrido contest format and what new opportunities this decision makes possible for our programming.

As you well know, for the past fifteen years, the Poetry Center has hosted an annual corrido contest for high school youth. The contest was founded in 2000 by the Center's former Literary Director, Frances Sjoberg. The legendary Linda Ronstadt served as the first contest judge. Over the last fifteen years, the contest has produced a living, musical record of the history of the State of Arizona documenting the experiences, culture, and lives of our youth. From “Corrido de las Dos Grandes Amigas” to “El Corrido de Pat Tillman El Valiente,” teens in this state have shown us the deeply felt political, social, and familial forces that shape their lives.

The contest has existed for fifteen years because of the support from so many dedicated community members like you. Through our relationships with advisors, contest judges, and musicians we have compiled a who’s who of our border region that is impressive and vast. In particular, the contest has thrived because of the stewardship of Celestino Fernandez, Big Jim Griffith, and Maribel Alvarez, who have advised us on aspects ranging from curriculum development to fundraising; our translator Wendy Burk has participated every year in creating English/Spanish translations with great care and sensitivity; Guillermo Saenz, Ted Ramirez, Alberto Ranjel, and Janet Sturman from the College of Music have all provided guidance and musical talent in setting the lyrics of these young people to music. Former Dean of the College of Humanities Charles Tatum offered seed funding for the contest and was instrumental to the program’s inception.

Some highlights of the program include: poetry residencies at Cholla, Desert View and Tucson High Schools; curriculum created by Poet-in-Residence Theresa Sotto in collaboration with Kennedy Arts Edge; a series of “Field Days,” or mini-writing conferences, for high school youth; and the publication of “A Decade of Young Corridistas,” an anthology of music from the first decade of corrido contests. The contests’ long running history and these ancillary programs that enhanced the contest each year have created an archive of music and words that is valuable and unique. We have spotlighted traditional corridos sung by one voice, one guitar (Guillermo Saenz), corridos with a mariachi flair (Alberto Ranjel) and more recently corridos with a Ranchera or Norteño feel (Edgar Ricuad). Students themselves have experimented and paid homage to the form in myriad ways and continue to participate in the composition of the music, even performing musically on occasion. While the form is vast, we feel we have accomplished an extraordinary amount with our participants and supporters, and that we’ve reached the limit of what is possible within a contest structure.
As a result, we have made the strategic decision to retire the contest format after the 2014-15 year, and to support teachers and schools who continue to teach the corrido through an online archive of our historical and pedagogical materials. The archive will include all the lyrics and music from the fifteen years of the contest, and will be made available indefinitely. We will encourage classroom teachers and community organizers to use these resources freely, to create their own contests, concerts, and firesides that feature the form.

This decision creates important new opportunities for the Poetry Center to explore other multilingual modes of creative writing through the Center’s education programs. In particular, we are excited that this shift will allow us to create a platform for multilingual creative writing residencies in local schools. We continue our commitment to reach out to diverse range of youth and to provide culturally relevant texts through our matinee program.

As the final awards concert approaches, we will be offering more information about that archive and about plans for a special goodbye reception and special features to our final concert. We hope that you will join us to help celebrate the fifteen year history of the contest and this special final year as we transition toward these new opportunities.

Sincerely,

Renee Angle  
Education Programs Coordinator

Tyler Meier  
Executive Director