The 2014 student poet is Laura Ahking ’15, right, with Assistant Professor Ben Grossberg.

Opposite page, top to bottom: Amanda Schoen ’13 won for 2013; Tim Pettus ’11 was selected in 2011; John Dudek ’10 won a spot on the tour in 2010; and Matthew Gilbert ’09 was the first Uhart student to be chosen in 2009.
The University of Hartford is gaining a reputation as a perennial powerhouse in an annual competition among some of the most talented college students in Connecticut. This competition does not take place on a playing field, and it does not involve popular competitive pursuits like robotics or chess. This competition is all about verse.

For five of the last six years, a University student has been selected for the prestigious Connecticut Poetry Circuit Student Poets Tour. This annual tour, which the Connecticut Poetry Circuit has been sponsoring since 1970, sends five undergraduate student poets across the state to read their work at Connecticut colleges and universities. They also read their work in the summer at the renowned Sunken Garden Poetry Festival at the Hill-Stead Museum in Farmington, Conn.

Competition for the five spots on the Student Poets Tour is intense. All two- and four-year colleges and universities in Connecticut are invited to nominate one undergraduate each year to be considered for the Student Poets Tour. No University of Hartford student had been selected for the tour until 2008–09—the year that Assistant Professor Benjamin Grossberg joined the University's College of Arts and Sciences faculty.

Grossberg, who recently published his third book of poetry, is the first poet to serve on the English department faculty in many years. He has made it a goal to try to get a University of Hartford student on the poetry tour every year—and he has an almost perfect record of success.

"It seemed like an incredible opportunity. It is a great way to build up students' ability to think of themselves as writers in the world," Grossberg says.

Every fall, Grossberg invites all undergraduates at the University to submit five pages of poetry. After reviewing the submissions, he selects one student to be nominated for the tour. Grossberg then works closely with the student to help revise and edit the work before submitting it to the Connecticut Poetry Circuit for consideration. For the five University of Hartford students who have been selected for the Student Poets Tour, the experience has been profound.

"The tour was the highlight of my undergrad career. It let me experience the performance side of poetry," says John Dudek ’10, who won a spot on the Student Poets Tour in 2010. Dudek is working toward an MFA in poetry at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he recently won the Robert J. and Katharin Carr Graduate Poetry Prize.

Tim Pettus ’11, who was on the Student Poets Tour in 2011, says, "It was flat-out the coolest thing I did during college. I was meeting great poets, visiting Connecticut's best and brightest institutions, and sharing my voice with a much larger audience than I had imagined reaching at that early stage."

The students on the tour often develop a close bond, Grossberg says, allowing them to become part of a community of writers in a profession that can be very solitary.

"The most important thing for a writer is being part of a community, because it isn't a profession with an instruction manual that tells you how to be successful if you follow certain steps. You figure out what to do by experiencing other writers," says Matthew Gilbert ’09, who became the first University of Hartford student to win a spot on the tour when he was selected in 2009. Gilbert went on to earn an MFA in poetry from Columbia University.

All of the students who have represented the University of Hartford on the Student Poets Tour say that Grossberg's teaching and mentoring played a key role in their success. Grossberg expanded their ideas about what a poem can be, they say, teaching them poetic technique while encouraging them to experiment and branch out in new directions.

"It was his encouragement that led me to submit my poems to the Connecticut Poetry Circuit in the first place," says Amanda Schoen ’13, who was selected for the 2013 poets tour. "He always had time during office hours to discuss revisions, and I believe his suggestions made my pieces significantly stronger."

The newest University of Hartford student on the tour is Laura Ahking ’15, a former art student who is finding her voice as a poet. Being on the tour this year has helped significantly with that process.

"Not only did I get to meet other extremely talented student poets, I got to observe them grow throughout the eight readings. I grew as well; I became more confident and sure of myself as the readings went on," Ahking says. "It was a great learning experience."