Candidate’s Statement for Chair Search
Department of English, OSU
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ADMINISTRATIVE PRIORITIES

I hope that my work as Interim Chair over the past three months has given my colleagues a sense of what I am like as an administrator. During these three months, I have had individual meetings with 51 faculty and staff colleagues from all ranks who answered my invitation to tell me their sense of the department and their feelings about how the department could better support their work. I have listened to about two dozen graduate students, singly and in small groups, on the same themes. My guiding administrative principles are (1) “Take everyone seriously on his or her own terms” and (2) “The answer is Yes” or--at least--“Yes, I will find out whether it is possible to do that.” I was pleasantly surprised at how many wishes were not hard to fulfill, given our resources. Can we have per diems for business travel? Yes. Can someone get ergonomic office furniture to alleviate physical discomfort? Yes. Can graduate students use their travel/research money to buy business cards? Yes. Can a faculty member shift her teaching schedule to summer so that she has more time to keep working on her book right after a research leave? Yes. I try never to refuse a request unless there is a very compelling reason to say “no” (and “No, we have never done it that way” is not a compelling reason). Shortfalls for Associated Faculty salaries notwithstanding, our department has a substantial budget for making good things happen, and I believe we should use it to enrich our intellectual and physical environment in every way we can.

An axiom I have been living by is “No person can make a good decision if she makes it by herself. Always ask for input and advice, then decide.” The chair of our department is blessed with an administrative support system of faculty directors, staff professionals and colleagues in key service positions whose collective wisdom is a marvel. I don’t have space here to name everyone whose knowledge, good humor, and patience have made it possible for me to function in this job so far. Running things by them doesn’t guarantee I won’t make a mistake, but my corollary axiom is “When you are wrong, admit it right away and apologize.” Then I do my best to make it right and to be transparent about addressing any problem that resulted.

Transparency is hard, especially in a place as large and complex as this. A department chair has to walk a thin line between full disclosure and the need not to incite panic prematurely. I’m not sure what it means when an institution like OSU declares, “We are committed to transparency.” I found out on Monday what I mean when I say that. When Pablo pressed me for details on the sequence of events preceding the EDC meeting, I hesitated because I was weighing the conflicting imperatives to disclose and not to disclose. In the moment of truth, as it were, my commitment to transparency prevailed. The truth can be uncomfortable--destabilizing, even. I am sorry that my report to the Associated Faculty of the true situation on Sunday had to cause so much distress, but I am proud to have colleagues who are as brave and as resourceful as they showed themselves to be.
CONDITION OF THE DEPARTMENT

When I asked colleagues and students to tell me about their sense of the department, its current condition and the direction it is taking, I expected to hear at least some gloom and doom. To be sure, not everyone weighed in, and some people voiced legitimate concerns which have informed my sense of what we need to do. But I was impressed by how many people declared that they love the department, they are proud of its accomplishments and its potential, and they are happy to be part of the work we are doing here. I feel the same way.

Our department’s greatest strength is the number and diversity of subfields we cover. To me it is thrilling to be in a department that offers not just all fields and periods of Anglophone literature as well as creative writing, but the whole range of what an English department could contain, including not just rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies (which at many institutions are in a separate unit), but also disability studies, linguistics, folklore, digital media studies, comics, film & TV studies, critical race studies, ethnic studies, gender & sexuality studies, human rights, postcolonial studies, medical humanities, critical theory, professional & technical writing, environmental humanities, and narrative theory. The list of our fields looks like an outline for a 21st-century MLA convention program. Discussions and votes in EDC meetings show that we have healthy dissent, but I see no polarized schisms or factions among the different fields. Even more impressive is the consistently high quality of the research and creative activity emerging from all of them.

We still have pressing needs in Native American Literature, folklore, drama, and various subfields within literature and RCL, but I take the College’s approval of three new hires in English (two of them at the senior level) to be a sign of support for our research and teaching missions. Especially encouraging is their authorizing us to hire three faculty who will teach small writing courses, despite the scramble to raise enrollments throughout the College. I am working to meet the benchmarks the College has set for demonstrating that we need more tenure lines: the 85% faculty “yield” rate which we have only just achieved for 2016-17, and the 100 students per 1 tenure-line faculty member ratio which I believe we can attain by offering two or three large lecture courses on popular topics each semester. We are still the largest English Department in the world (counting by tenure lines and including our regional faculty members). There’s no other place like this, and we will keep building on Debra Moddelmog’s efforts toward making the institution and the undergrads sit up and take notice.

THE BUDGET

The budget is perplexing. Our Present Budget Allocation is enormous—about $13.5 million—and in addition to operating expenses plus salaries for TT faculty, staff, and GTAs, it includes hundreds of thousands of dollars to use for generous travel allowances and programming for our 300+ department members and our majors. Compared to the impoverished state flagship where I used to be Chair of English, we have a lot to work with, especially when you include the donors’ money in the Chair’s Discretionary Fund that pays for special projects, ad hoc student awards, and entertaining. The problem, of course, is that we still have a $480,000 hole where the funds for supporting first-year writing used to be. I believe Dean Hahn’s promise to work with me before the Spring budget meetings to determine how much extra money can go into our PBA for English 1110. I have told him I will not request one-time “cash” for 1110 as my predecessors had been doing; my position is that we can only offer
as many sections of this university-wide requirement as the university actually pays for. Given what the deans call “the financial health of the College” (which is not strong because of ASC’s big debt to OAA), we may not get all we need for 2017-18. Eventually the College will be in the black. Having already invested a lot of time seeking advice and coming up with proposals, I am prepared to keep arguing for the whole amount needed to keep our splendid faculty intact.

VISION FOR THE DEPARTMENT’S FUTURE

To build our undergraduate program, we will keep developing courses in all our subfields that give students the critical thinking skills a responsible electorate has got to have, while fostering the joy they take in reading, viewing, and creating all kinds of texts. We can work with our new Communications Professional to reach OSU undergrads who would love our classes but don’t think to look for them. We can form counterintuitive collaborations to make creative programs like the proposed Math and English major, showing that the STEM fields are actually compatible with the humanistic leaves, flowers, fruit, and seeds without which stems are pointless. Above all that, we will protect our core mission: our major, minors, and graduate programs.

To make our M.F.A. and Ph.D. programs even stronger than they already are, we can collaborate with departments across the College to get graduate fellowships out of the Graduate School and into the hands of departments, freeing us to act more swiftly and persuasively in our recruitment of outstanding new graduate students. We can talk about how best to teach Ph.D. students in smaller fields that are able to offer only limited numbers of seminars. We will keep strengthening the breadth and depth of specialties in the department, taking advantage of the many ways in which our different areas of expertise can intersect to benefit individual graduate students, whether they seek a career on or off the tenure track.

To support faculty research, we will pull as many English colleagues and grad students together under the final three Discovery Themes as possible, stretching those themes beyond the narrow presentism of the 11 that made the first cut. We will open more channels for discussion of faculty work in progress, and we will celebrate together when research and creative projects come to fruition. I will actively seek external funding to buy out time for faculty research, encouraging both individual and collaborative work.

To establish a firmer foundation for our first- and second-year writing programs, we will raise their profile inside and outside the university to the level warranted by our national prominence in RCL. We will benefit from the enthusiasm of our Alumni Advisory Committee for the teaching and study of writing, and will look with them for a major donor to “name” the CSTW. We will figure out a way to deliver our first-rate courses in professional and technical writing and digital composing to the persons and industries outside OSU who need them. We will continue to support our highly qualified Associated Faculty in appreciation for all that they bring to the teaching of writing at OSU.

And maybe we might someday find a donor who wants to “gut” Denney Hall and redo the inside of our classic example of midcentury modern architecture. In my seven years at OSU I have gotten kind of fond of the exterior of our building, but that HVAC system has got to go.

I thank you all (with a special shout out to the staff) for your help and support during my Interim Chair-ship. I look forward to serving you in the permanent role.