

“Letter to alumni”

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Greetings! It is a real honor to write this letter on behalf of the Department of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics and to welcome you to our website. I would like to begin by mentioning how delighted I am to serve in the position of Chair, which I have held since July, 2005, at the time when my colleague from our German section, Helga Madland, retired from OU. After four years of work with my colleagues and our students, I am pleased to report that we are making good progress in a number of areas, not the least of which has been to develop outreach efforts to our many alumni, and it is in the spirit of communication and keeping you informed that I write to you today. Working with my department this past fall has proven to be a satisfaction both intellectual and somehow, too, spiritual, as we have considered together many matters of academic import, questions both ethical and pragmatic, regarding the well being of our department and our institution, of our colleagues, of our students, and of the society that contains us all.

I would like to begin by providing you with some information about myself, for although I have had the pleasure of meeting—even of teaching—many of our alumni, there are also many more whom I have not yet had the opportunity to encounter. I have been at the University of Oklahoma since 1991, the year I received my Ph.D. in French from the University of Illinois, and indeed, this first job has proven to be a fortunate opportunity. In the 14 years that I’ve spent here, I have had the chance to work in the department, as Assistant, Associate and Full Professor, as well as now as Chair, and I have also had the rich experience of serving as an Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences for five and a half years. During that time (1999-2005), I continued to teach and to participate in departmental service activities, because it is important to me to remain in contact with our faculty and students, and I am very glad I did, as it has helped prepare me for the responsibilities associated with my current position. In our French section, I have taught a variety of courses, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and have had the pleasure of working closely with our best students in sections of Independent Study, Honors Reading and Research, and Master’s and Ph.D. direction. My specific research interests focus on the late nineteenth century and on twentieth-century French literature, specifically on such topics as Symbolism, Decadence, Surrealism, and the figure of the Dandy. I have published articles in journals such as *French Forum*, *Romanic Review*, *Dalhousie French Studies*, and *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*. I published my first book in 1995, entitled *André Gide dans le labyrinthe de la mythotextualité*, and my second book, entitled *Symbolist Journals: A Culture of Correspondence*, appeared with Ashgate press in 2002 and won the 2003 South Central Modern Language Association Book Award. In 2003, I published a collection of essays, *The Twayne Companion to Contemporary World Literature*. I am currently working on a project involving an interdisciplinary analysis of *Japonisme* in 19th-century French writing.

With regard to the projects currently underway in our department, I thought it might prove useful for me to provide you with the annual overview of accomplishments and goals that Chairs are required to submit to the Dean every winter. I hope that this information will help establish for you and for the general community some of the most fundamental priorities of our quickly growing department, as well as the general directions in which we hope to continue to advance.

The goals I had set forth for 2008 were the following:

- 1) Work with MLLL faculty in Italian and Japanese to complete work on the two new BA degree programs in these areas.
- 2) Work with Dean Bell and Provost Mergler with the aim of progressing with recommendations of the CDRP, included in our Strategic Plan, specifically to implement the 2:2 teaching load for tenured and tenure-track faculty and to hire a professional staff adviser for Spanish majors and minors.
- 3) Secure permanent space in Kaufman hall for offices for MLLL faculty and other instructional staff, as well as for our Language Learning Center.
- 4) Bolster tenure-track faculty membership with the hope to recruit in areas of continued need, such as Spanish.
- 5) Work with Graduate Liaison and graduate faculty to strengthen numbers in our graduate programs, particularly in French and German.
- 6) Continue to increase the national and international visibility of our department, by seeking expanded support for the research programs and teaching initiatives of our faculty and graduate students.

Accomplishments of 2008

Much of the work of 2008 has focused on addressing the six areas identified as goals last year:

- 1) Work on the Italian B.A. degree program has now been completed at the departmental level and has been submitted to the administration. Japanese, along with Arabic, has shown increases in enrollment, and MLLL faculty strongly support the implementation of BA degree programs in both of these areas. Committee A, as well as the MLLL Course and Curriculum Committee, will work directly with faculty of the Japanese and Arabic programs to pursue the pragmatic work associated with developing the degree programs at this time.
- 2) MLLL has now successfully completed all three years of the Program Review process. We have also established our new Strategic Plan, and have implemented important elements from it, such as the introduction of a 2/2 teaching load for tenured and tenure-track faculty, and the hiring of an additional full-time front office staff person and a new full-time Academic Counselor. Our faculty participated directly in the enterprise throughout the process, and all documents were written and edited by MLLL faculty members themselves. We were very pleased with the process throughout, particularly in the sense that the two outside reviewers and the members of the Campus Departmental Review Panel agreed strongly with the areas of need, as well as the areas of strength, in MLLL. Our Strategic Plan has also now been submitted to the CAS Dean's office. In sum, the experience proved valuable to our faculty and students, especially in that it allowed us to rethink our current status and to clarify future goals.

- 3) Space needs in MLLL continue to be acute, for all our instructional and administrative staff. However, this year, there was important progress in this arena, as we were able to move most of our faculty from temporary office space to the seven new offices assigned to MLLL on the third floor of Kaufman Hall. We still have five faculty members housed in temporary space, however. It is our understanding that in the near future, much-needed MLLL space—both for faculty and staff offices and for our Language Learning Center—can be secured in Kaufman Hall, specifically via the move planned for the Classics department from the first floor of the building. We are also working closely with our Language Learning Center Director on a substantial grant application to allow us to begin updates to our lab facilities.
- 4) In spring 2008, we hired one new tenure-track Assistant Professor Italian, who began work in fall 2008. In the fall, we also brought in three new renewable-term faculty members (two in Spanish, one in German). Additionally, in summer 2008 we requested two tenure-track Assistant Professor positions of Spanish and one tenure-track Assistant Professor position of Japanese, as well as a renewable-term faculty position in Japanese. Unfortunately, all our requests are currently on hold, given the hiring freeze implemented in August 2008. However, because of the impact of a substantial external grant, we are very pleased to have the opportunity to search this year for a tenure-track Assistant Professor of Arabic (to be jointly appointed with the School of International and Area Studies). Yet with regard to tenure-track professors, our need remains acute, especially in Spanish, in which enrollment numbers and credit-hour production continue to soar. For fall 2008, we were also obliged to hire eight one-year faculty instructors and lecturers (two in Spanish, one in Italian, two in Japanese, two in Arabic, and one in Portuguese) to help us to cover the necessary instructional offerings required of our department.
- 5) The MLLL Graduate Studies Committee is conducting a thorough review of our graduate programs with a view to attracting more highly qualified students to the program. While recent efforts in this area—such as outreach to U.S. and international universities, direct mail campaigns, and the newly created Graduate Fellowship Program—have helped increase the numbers in all three of our graduate programs, the we are also exploring new ways of attracting qualified students. MLLL currently participates in the Graduate Enrollment Management Program sponsored by the Graduate College of the University of Oklahoma. Additionally, in the fall 2008 semester representatives from the graduate program participated in a seminar conducted by the Graduate and Professional School Enrollment Management Corporation. For the past three years, MLLL has taken part in a GRE name search program, a program that has enabled it to identify a number of potential students based on their areas of academic specialization. Also related to the recruitment and retention of qualified students, the individual graduate programs in MLLL will examine current course offerings. Graduate student professional activity represents a final area of focus. Through its association with *World Literature Today*, the Neustadt Prize, the Puterbaugh Conference, the South Central Modern Language Association, and by providing funding for conference participation, we have worked hard to assist students in their professional development. In addition, the students in the Spanish graduate program have shown great initiative in the past, establishing the journal *Pegaso* and organizing the Tierra Tinta conference (both of which celebrated their third anniversary in the fall 2008 semester). Finally, for the second successive year, we were thrilled to see our graduate students win university-wide awards; in 2008 one of our

graduate students in German was awarded a Graduate Teaching Assistant Award. (Currently, we are preparing the nomination dossier of another MLLL graduate student—this time in our Spanish doctoral program—for this prestigious teaching award.) In order to build on these past successes, MLLL will continue to encourage its students to participate in a variety of professional activities and will continue to seek additional outlets for these activities.

- 6) In large part, the goal of heightening the visibility of our faculty and students is related to the other goals set forth in this document, and as we make progress in a variety of areas, we have been pleased to see our visibility rise, as well. Several of our faculty hold positions on regional, national, and international executive committees in scholarly associations and on advisory boards for academic presses across the world. MLLL faculty have been invited to give lectures at many institutions, both here and abroad, and our graduate students are increasingly more active in presenting conference papers and publishing scholarly work. Faculty development is an area of great emphasis in MLLL, and strong progress was made in this area over the past year. Two of the four MLLL faculty nominations for university- and college-wide awards were successful and this year, we have four new nominations pending. A great deal of support for research came directly from the College of Arts and Sciences, especially through the CAS faculty enrichment program for awards of \$1200 (in spring 2008, all 12 MLLL proposals were funded; in September 2008, 12 of 13 were funded; for the November, 2008 deadline, 8 of 10 applications were funded). All six MLLL proposals for President's International Travel Fellowships were funded (including one for a doctoral student), as were all five MLLL Junior Faculty Fellowship proposals. We also received numerous other forms of support, such as a great number of 1/3 matching travel grants, support for departmental lecture series, visiting lecturers, conferences, funding for a new departmental brochure, and other academic development activities (particularly notable were two substantial FOCAS grants from the College of Arts and Sciences). Finally, we were honored to see one of our own majors chosen as the Outstanding Senior in the Humanities at OU. In the end, I am extremely pleased to see such strong professional development among my colleagues and students.

Other accomplishments of 2008:

- 1) Worked with faculty in our Arabic section, and with colleagues in the International Programs Center, to submit a substantial grant proposal to the National Security Education Program. The initiative was successful and we have now been awarded from the federal government \$1.3 million for development of the Arabic language program.
- 2) Worked with faculty reappointment, tenure, promotion, and post-tenure review cases. Last year, three faculty were awarded tenure and were promoted to Associate Professor. In spring 2008, one faculty member underwent, and was successful at, post-tenure review. This academic year, we have one Associate Professor under consideration for promotion to Professor and one Assistant Professor undergoing our extensive process of third-year review. Three faculty members will undergo post-tenure-review next spring.

- 3) Worked with several MLLL language sections to develop new on-line courses, especially with regard to the third-semester language requirement. In spring 2009, we will offer more on-line courses than ever before, in Chinese, French, Spanish, German, Italian, Russian, and under our "MLLL" rubric.
- 4) Updated the MLLL committee structure to include two new committees: the Space and Planning Committee and the Task Force on Enrollment Issues. Met with both committees in fall 2008 to give them their specific charges.
- 5) Advised our hoc Committee on World Literature Minor in the exploration of possibilities of developing a new minor program in the field of Comparative Literature. Worked with several sections of MLLL in the approval process of many new courses and changes in current degree program curricula.
- 6) With the help of various MLLL faculty, completed review of International Baccalaureate credit in our degree programs.
- 7) Continued, with the Chair of Modern Languages at Oklahoma State University, the organization of our OU/OSU faculty exchange lecture series (established in 2005).
- 8) Worked closely with faculty leadership in all 11 areas of specialization in our department on the increasingly important processes involved in Enrollment Management. Aimed to ensure that we review course offerings carefully, implement logical course rotation systems, and balance student needs with available staffing and resources.
- 9) Nominated our front office staff person, Mr. Brandon Smith, for a university-wide staff award, which he won in spring 2008. In fall 2008, prepared four new faculty award dossiers, and one graduate student award dossier. Plans are in place to nominate two additional MLLL staff for awards in spring 2009.
- 10) Continued my own work as a professor and taught a new senior-level literature course (MLLL/ENGL 4003, "European Literature and Beyond,") as well as a section of graduate-level Independent Study. Also continued to serve as director of a doctoral dissertation in French, and served as a member on three Master's committees and one doctoral committee.
- 11) Continued my own service work, through a variety of activities, such as serving on the Provost's Advisory Committee on General Education Oversight, the Provost's Panel on Administrative Leadership, the Provost's Dissertation Award Committee, and on various other university committees. I served as external reviewer in three tenure and promotion cases for American institutions, as well as in the capacity of reviewer of scholarly articles for *Modern Language Studies* and *Studies in 20th-Century Literature*. I was also named an honorary member of Phi Beta Kappa, and was invited to speak at the Founders' Day events in late 2008. Further, I participated in the annual grant proposal review process of the National Endowment for the Humanities.
- 12) In my research, I had one new refereed article and one book chapter accepted for publication, and I presented my research at four conferences, those sponsored by the

South Central Modern Language Association, Nineteenth-Century French Studies, Twentieth-Century French Studies, and the Modern Language Association. I also continued progress on my manuscript, entitled *Aesthetic Translation: Reading 'Japonisme' in Nineteenth-Century French Prose*; I have now sent out a book prospectus and other preliminary materials to publishing houses.

Goals for 2009

- 1) Work with MLLL faculty in Arabic and Japanese to complete work on the two new BA degree programs in these areas.
- 2) Secure permanent space in Kaufman hall for offices for MLLL faculty and other instructional staff, as well as for our Language Learning Center.
- 3) Bolster tenure-track faculty membership with the hope to recruit in areas of continued need, such as Spanish.
- 4) Work with small sections to bolster enrollment and numbers of majors, and with large sections to manage most effectively the dramatic increases in numbers of students.
- 5) Work with Graduate Liaison and graduate faculty to strengthen numbers in our graduate programs, particularly in French and German.
- 6) Continue to increase the national and international visibility of our department, by seeking expanded support for the research programs and teaching initiatives of our faculty and graduate students.

I would also like to offer at this time a few of the ideas I've been considering regarding the place of our department in the university as a whole, as well as the place of the study of foreign literature and language in a more global context. To this end, I share with you here a version of some of the remarks I presented in my Presidential Address at the annual convention of the South Central Modern Language Association, in Houston, TX in October 2005. I begin with a nugget of time-honored wisdom; doubtless you've heard it before but this time, I suggest, it is especially true: ours is a time of possibility, an era of opportunities offered and decisions to be made as to whether we wish to accept them. Ours is also a time of frustration, of budget constraints and understaffing and the seemingly timeless challenge of the artist in society, of the thinker in a world of mergers and acquisitions, of the bi- or tri- or multi-lingual speaker in the hothouse climate of monocultural insecurities, closing borders, and suspicion of nations and peoples different from the most familiar models. Obstacles embodied in the irritations of conventional society, in the misreadings of family and friends, in the hesitations of our students, and in our own moments of doubt are constant, in a way, for those like us, who hold fast to our intellectual curiosity, to our desire to open ourselves more—not less—to the people of other lands, to our belief that the study of languages and literatures and cultures and the very narratives of the world can only better us and those around us.

As I'm sure many of you know, 2005 was designated nationally as the Year of the Languages, presented as an opportunity to focus our attention on the academic, social, and economic benefits of studying languages, literatures, and cultures different from our own. In this spirit, I was

recently asked to address a group of fifty businessmen from throughout our region, recruiters on the OU campus there to participate in a university-wide career fair. My charge was to present an argument for why businessmen and captains of industry should be interested in liberal arts majors, why they should focus their recruiting, not on Colleges of Business or Engineering, but on graduates with degrees in English and Foreign Languages, in History and Classics. Given my own interests in foreign cultures, my specific task was to address the ways in which an awareness of things international enhances the education of our graduates, how study abroad and second-language learning and a general grasp of the Humanities provides our students with both intellectual qualities and practical skills that could grace any career choice.

Now, we who work directly in the fields of literature, language, and global education know well that the practical value of these areas is not always clear at first glance—especially to a group of fifty businessmen. Personally, the part of me that can be defined as an academic researcher, as a student of French literature, deeply believes in the importance and necessity of art and philosophy and the history of ideas. But, to balance what might seem, from a conventional view, an idealistic side, the part of me that can be defined as an administrator, as the Chair of a large university department with three graduate programs and more than 300 majors and 900 minors, that part knows well our commitment as professionals to prepare those many students for the challenging realities of life after college. It is indeed an endeavor that requires a creative imagination, again, particularly when faced with an audience of individuals sometimes stereotyped as bean-counters and bottom-line fanatics, but it is in fact true that the education we offer can bring very concrete benefits in social, cultural, and workplace contexts, benefits that will serve students throughout their lives. Clearly, no matter our profession, we as Americans live and compete in a world of diverse cultures, where competence in more than one language, for example, can heighten our potential for understanding and for success. Our markets engage in exchange with many countries and we rely on their populations as consumers of our goods and services. By expanding our role as citizens of the international community, through the study of diverse languages, literatures, and cultures, it can be argued that we equip ourselves and our graduates with a keener sense, not only of the social dynamics of the rest of the world, but also of our own economic, intellectual, and cultural landscapes. Knowing another language and having direct experience with another culture does indeed make our students more sophisticated, deepening not only their appreciation for the traditions of world history, for the implications of cultural politics, and for a more profound philosophical sense of the human condition. It also strengthens the practical preparation for the future of our students, improving modes of communication, honing interview skills, opening the doors of various professions by reaching a larger job market, and developing analytical skills in critical thinking and problem-solving. From aesthetics to academics, from industry to public service, from technology to business management, from the Peace Corps to the Diplomatic Corps, it is irrefutably satisfying to be able to point to the diversity of areas of expertise and of professional development that our graduates navigate with notable success.

Now, this is all well and good, and I am proud to take part in what I believe is a critical aspect to the work we do, that is, to spread the word, to work towards communicating more clearly what it is that we actually do as professors and scholars of Spanish or French or Russian or Linguistics or Pedagogy. However, I believe too that there is nothing for which people like ourselves need to apologize, nothing for which we need to rush to explain by using expressions such as “honing interview skills.” I, as an academic, stand firm in my belief that the research areas that we study and teach, the ethical priorities that we foster and transmit to our students, the very way of life

that we have chosen and that we represent defies reduction, surpasses belittlement—even the most widespread and well-funded belittlement—it pertains, quite simply, it remains primary, no matter the contingencies of the contemporary context in which we may currently find ourselves. In our line of work, we teach how to think. We teach how to speak. And hopefully, we teach how to think before speaking. To the hasty critics, to the misled conformists, to the jaundiced defeatists, to the superficial frauds, and yes, to the captains of industry, to those who might question why we would bother to do what we do, I offer in response the words of the modernist French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who wrote, in a gem of crystal clear affirmation: I am not afraid of art. Others may fear it, businessmen may dismiss it, propaganda may smear it, advertising may pervert it, the general public may be blind to it, but I—and, I believe, you too—welcome it, embrace it, and embody by our very existence its profound and necessary significance, not just for today, but for all time.

Not long ago, I heard someone whom I have grown to admire say in a public assembly that ours is an era that has lost its innocence. In many ways I understand that sentiment and I can agree. The overexposure to which we and our students are submitted daily in our personal and professional lives, to foolishness and contradiction, to bad faith and tyranny, to distraction and pollution of the mind, can lead quite naturally to a sense of hopelessness or scorn, or perhaps worst of all, to indifference. To keep our vision clear, to keep the focus of our work and of our pleasure uncontaminated can seem an impossible task, faced as we are with the unprecedented complexity of today's social, economic, intellectual, aesthetic, and ethical dilemmas. Yet innocence, with its overtones of untried youth, of chaste vulnerability, of genuine unknowing, seems in fact an essential part of every individual, the part that won't give in, the part that keeps us on track, the part that fuels our autonomy and drives the force of our will. In a sense, of course, no one is innocent. Yet paradoxically and perhaps to our surprise, we are all innocent in a markedly significant and profoundly moving way. That's why we want to learn. That's why we want to study. That's why we want to transmit our knowledge to others. To my way of thinking, there are few things more fundamental and more arresting than the innocence of a mind on the brink of discovery, on the margins of a new world. We as teachers know this innocence; we have lived it and we have seen it unfold before us in a classroom. But none of us is ever truly free from it; innocence taints our attempts at style or skill with a nuance of authenticity; innocence marks our traces with humanity and humbleness and the simple heartfelt desire to know and to connect and to make sense. In fact, to me, there is little at once more innocent and more sophisticated than the drive to know that which we are not, embodied in an active curiosity for the new, for the different, for the strange. And that's what we teach when we teach literature and language. And that's what our students gain through our teaching. And that, quite simply, merits, in my view, recognition and respect and encouragement, and perhaps even a job.

Again, ours is a world of possibility, one in which we can work to balance the move towards heightened security with one of heightened sensitivity, with a more acute awareness of the marvelous aura of the incongruous, of the necessity of that which the clichés condemn as frivolous or secondary, of the opening of borders both geographical and ideological, of the fostering of the fundamental human quality of curiosity towards the unknown. Our mission remains steadfast, founded on a commitment to study and to teach, to promote our areas of research specialization and to further the knowledge and appreciation of literary, linguistic, and cultural forms of the modalities of the human desire for self-expression. Now more than ever, the irrevocably crucial nature of that mission needs a voice, it needs our voice both in our region and far, far beyond. Now more than ever, every initiative we launch, every student we send abroad,

every German or Spanish or Linguistics major we “steal” from business or advertising, every lecture we give and every class we teach, now holds the seeds of communicating an urgent message of education, thoughtfulness, tolerance, and ultimately, freedom. Our impact can be manifold. Certainly we can persuasively argue to businessmen and politicians and market analysts that we prepare students for the new realities of the contemporary world, realities of a nature grounded in practical applications. The globalization of trade, the development of societies across the world, the expansion of new markets, and the active participation in ethical matters of international scope: such are the issues that our students both learn about and learn to take on in the educational programs that we sponsor. In a word, we teach our graduates to look beyond what they’ve always known and to look towards what they could hardly have imagined. Yet indeed, we study and teach much more than that. We teach our students to learn from past histories and to avoid the pitfalls of small minds and short-sighted views, both in temporal and topographical senses. We teach them to move beyond the sluggish spirit of complacency and the paralyzing acceptance of bland routine. We teach them to discover the fruitful distinction between selfishness and self-affirmation, between jealousy and healthy competition. We teach them that a complete and fulfilling life is one that welcomes paradox and irony. We aim to equip our students with as wide a view as possible of the world they will encounter, to provide them with alternate models of ways of life and modes of thinking, to furnish them with tools for self-expression and for the interpretation of the ideas they encounter, this is our aim, this is our responsibility. To counter the barrage of sound-bytes and slogans given voice by the likes of Dale Carnegie and Dr. Phil, the Terminator and Martha Stewart, let us strive to teach our students by example, to call forth our own pantheon of voices, a chorus of diverse and challenging views: Aristotle and Sartre, Sor Juana and Kafka, Calvino and Chomsky, Dostoevsky and Pinter. Let us respond too with our own voices, and with our work, clear and firm, innocent and sophisticated, full of possibility. Thank you.