

“Letter to alumni”
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(updated August 2007)

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 two 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 these past two years 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 for 2006 were the following:

- 1) Working to secure permanent space for our quickly growing instructional staff; office space on the third floor of Kaufman hall would be ideal.
- 2) Requesting tenure-track positions for MLLL sections in which the resources are most strained, such as in Spanish.
- 3) Continuing to support faculty development, particularly through securing research funding, encouraging tenure and promotion, and nominating faculty for awards.
- 4) Expanding sources of support for student-related activities, both at undergraduate and graduate levels, such as workshops and speaker series associated with our honor societies and language clubs.
- 5) Overseeing completion by Policy Committee of departmental policy handbook.
- 6) Working to develop fundraising opportunities with the CAS development officer, Von Allen, who is invited to our first 2006 faculty meeting.
- 7) Aiming to increase the national and international visibility of our department by fostering additional publication, presentation of research at conferences, and significant professional service among our faculty and graduate students.
- 8) Seeking creative means of support for the department generally; with 37 full-time faculty and nearly 100 TAs and instructors, the dramatic rise in instructional staff in recent years has strained our current resources.

Accomplishments of 2006

Much of the work of 2006 has focused on addressing the eight areas identified as goals last year:

- 1) Space needs in MLLL continue to be acute, for all our instructional and administrative staff. This year, we were able to assure our faculty currently housed temporarily in Copelin hall that they could remain in their present offices for the 2006-2007 academic year, in large part because of delays in construction planned in Kaufman hall. Additionally, we were able to secure three additional temporary offices for faculty in Sarkey's Energy Center. It is our hope that by the end of the current academic year, much-needed MLLL faculty office space will be identified on the third floor of Kaufman hall.
- 2) In spring 2006, we recruited one new tenure-track Assistant Professor of Linguistics, and one new renewable-term Assistant Professor of Russian, both of whom began work in fall 2006. Additionally, in summer 2006 we requested one replacement for a vacant line in

Spanish at the Assistant Professor tenure-track level (which was held by an Associate Professor), as well as four new tenure-track lines (two in Spanish, one in Arabic, and one in Italian). We were granted a replacement for the vacant line, as well as one new tenure-track line in Spanish. We are grateful to be able to carry out these two searches, but need remains acute, especially in Spanish, in which enrollment numbers and credit-hour production continue to soar. For fall 2006, we also hired five new one-year instructors and lecturers (two in Spanish, one in Japanese, and one in Portuguese) to help us to cover the necessary instructional offerings of our department.

- 3) Faculty development is an area of great emphasis in MLLL, and strong progress was made in this area over the past year. Five of the seven 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 (in spring 2006, all five MLLL proposals were funded; in fall 2006, five of six were funded; for the November, 2006 deadline, we have ten proposals pending), and through numerous other forms of support, such as a great number of 1/3 matching travel grants, support for departmental lecture series, visiting lecturers, conferences, and other academic development activities. All three MLLL proposals for President's International Travel Fellowships were funded, as were all six MLLL Junior Faculty Fellowship proposals. The one Presidential Dream Course proposal from MLLL was approved, as was the one Faculty Senate Faculty Development proposal.

We were also pleased to see that all four MLLL candidates for tenure and promotion were successful and all five renewals of five-year renewable-term contracts were approved. We also brought forward one new candidate for tenure and promotion, from our French section; after a unanimous positive faculty vote, his dossier is now at the college level. Two other faculty members are currently undergoing third-year review; in MLLL we do an extensive review at this point in the tenure-track process, and two outside reviewers for each candidate are now considering their research dossiers. Finally, we have four faculty who will undergo Post-Tenure Review in spring 2007, so we have begun preparations for that process.

- 4) We have been able to expand support for student activities, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, through a variety of initiatives. Particularly notable is the annual scholarly conference organized by the Spanish graduate student association, *Tierra Tinta*, as well as the founding of a new scholarly refereed journal, entitled *Pegaso*, also by our Spanish graduate students. We established a new MLLL Student Advisory Committee, as well, which has been very active and has worked hard to address a number of issues facing MLLL students and faculty, such as the proposed cut in library serials and the development of more study-abroad options.
- 5) Our MLLL Policy Committee, which originated this past year, has made great strides in reviewing longstanding policies, establishing new ones, and clarifying those currently in place. In the spirit of inclusiveness and equitable representation, all tenured, tenure-track, and term faculty members are eligible to run for election to this important committee.

Work completed by the committee this past year includes reviewing and updating the MLLL Policy on Departmental Travel Support and the MLLL Policy Governing Committee A. Other policy issues have been addressed in other venues; for example, the MLLL Course and Curriculum Committee has established a clear and organized document focusing on the process to follow to propose a new course, to propose General Education credit for existing courses, and to propose changes in degree requirements. Additionally, I have worked with other faculty members in the department to establish a document with suggested Recommendations for Recruiting Search Committees, a document detailing Travel Reimbursement Procedures, and an updated MLLL Policy on Photocopying. Faculty and staff have shown strong appreciation for the clarification and streamlining of these policies, as well as for the transparency of having such documents easily available for review by all departmental members.

- 6) Several of us in the department have been in contact with Von Allen, who attended an MLLL faculty meeting in spring 2006, with the hope to expand funding for student scholarships for our majors and minors. We have been very pleased to see three new scholarship gifts bestowed by current or former MLLL faculty and staff over the past year. I also worked with the MLLL Scholarship Committee and the OU Foundation to update and streamline guidelines governing several of the current MLLL scholarships. Additionally, we have provided Von Allen with a list of scholarship winners from the past five years, with the hope of establishing stronger contact with these alumni. Further, we have fine-tuned our departmental newsletter and are making aggressive efforts to expand our mailing list.
- 7) 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.
- 8) MLLL has continued to grow, both in terms of enrollment and in terms of instructional staff, and in fall 2006 we have 24 tenured and tenure-track faculty, six ranked term faculty, six unranked term faculty, and six full-time one-year instructors. With three retired faculty members currently teaching for us, we have thus a total of 45 faculty members, along with nearly 100 GTAs and instructors. As detailed in our recent self-study document, resources continue to represent a serious challenge for our department. We identified four areas of acute need: tenure-track lines, M&O budget, staff, and space. This past year we have worked to make progress in all four areas but are still facing significant shortages in these realms. Support from the CAS, particularly with regard to helping us bolster research funds for faculty and graduate students, has been greatly appreciated.

Other accomplishments of 2006:

- 1) Led our Program Review Committee in completing data collection and in writing the MLLL self-study document for the Campus Departmental Review Panel; the document was submitted in September 2006.
- 2) Reviewed and updated all MLLL Advanced Standing exams through the College of Continuing Education. Worked with MLLL faculty to begin review of International Baccalaureate credit in our degree programs.
- 3) 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.
- 4) Worked with our Foreign Language Task Force, in collaboration with Honorary Consul Barbara Thompson, in the exploration of ways to advance the teaching of foreign languages in the K-12 schools across the state.
- 5) Worked with colleagues in the Chinese section and with the Dean of the CAS in the successful bid to establish a Confucius Institute here at OU, as well as with colleagues in Pedagogy in the exploration of a possible new degree program of Master's of Teaching.
- 6) Continued, with the Chair of Modern Languages at Oklahoma State University, the organization of our OU/OSU faculty exchange lecture series (established in 2005). I was the invited lecturer at OSU in spring 2006, and we hosted two OSU faculty members here in our department.
- 7) Worked with Graduate Liaison and other French MLLL faculty to recruit a highly qualified doctoral student in French, to whom we were able to offer an attractive fellowship.
- 8) Worked with several MLLL language sections to develop new on-line courses, especially with regard to the third-semester language requirement. In spring 2007, we will offer more on-line courses than ever before, in French, Spanish, German, Italian, Russian, and under our "MLLL" rubric.
- 9) Nominated a graduate of our Spanish MA and doctoral program for a College of Arts and Sciences Distinguished Alumni award.

Goals for 2007

- 1) Work with MLLL faculty in Italian and Japanese in the exploration of establishing majors in these two areas, both of which have shown strong increases in enrollment in recent semesters.
- 2) Complete the third year of the Program Review process with the Campus Departmental Review Panel.
- 3) Secure permanent space in Kaufman hall for MLLL faculty and other instructional staff.
- 4) Bolster tenure-track faculty membership with the hope to recruit in areas of continued need, such as Spanish and Italian.
- 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-bites 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.