The University of Kansas

Office of the Dean
February 28, 2006

Distinguished Teaching Award Committee
Office of the Provost
CAMPUS

RE: Silver Anniversary Distinguished Teaching Award:

Dear Committee Members:

I write to provide an evaluation of Professor teaching, in connection with her nomination for the Silver Anniversary Distinguished Teaching Award.

Below, I will provide a great deal of detail on Professor approach to teaching, and about the specific practices she uses. At the outset, I should summarize four key themes.

- Her standards are very high. She wants students to understand sophisticated concepts and arguments, and to think and write with analytical precision. When this becomes difficult, she thinks about how to change her methods, not her standards.
- She works incredibly hard at being an effective teacher. She is intellectually engaged in the endeavor, thinking hard about how to accomplish learning goals. She also puts in a great deal of time, partly in class preparation, but especially in time meeting with students and providing detailed feedback on writing assignments. She also spends a lot of time helping colleagues (like me) become better teachers.
- She is innovative. She continually modifies her methods, sometimes quite significantly. When things do not appear to be going well in a class, she never blames the students (even when she should). Instead, she focuses on what she can control, and tries to figure out how she can get more out of them.
- The results are clear. Anecdotally, her students rave about her classes. When gets one of her former students in class, it is clear, especially in the attention to detail and precision one sees in their writing. Statistically, she receives consistently very high quantitative ratings from students, even in large lecture courses, and even in courses where workloads are high and grading is tough.

In addition to the information that Professor provided me for the purpose of writing this letter, my evaluation is based on the two semesters in which we co-taught graduate seminars together (POLS 870, Theories and Methodologies of International Relations, Fall 2003; and POLS 973, International Political Economy, Spring 2004). I cannot overestimate how much that experience has reinvigorated my own approach to teaching.
Quality of Intellectual Content of Courses
Professor seeks to challenge both herself and her students in the development of reading and writing assignments, as well as in the planning of class time. The most striking thing about co-teaching with her was the amount of work she put in to ensure that the topics covered and readings chosen were just right. Long before the beginning of the semesters we co-taught, she was sending me syllabi she had collected from other universities and articles for us to consider using in the course. There was nothing wrong with the existing syllabus, but she insisted that we read widely and consider every assignment individually. With her in the lead, we developed a seminar that covered the cutting edge of research in the field.

The syllabi in her other courses demonstrate the same level of attention to the intellectual content of the courses. The syllabus for Political Science 981/International Studies 750 (Global Development) is a good example. For that course, Professor scoured the internet and journals for up-to-date policy relevant works, and then used Blackboard to make them easily accessible to students. The detail in the syllabus reflects the extent of planning that went into the course. She had long conversations with me and with other members of the faculty about the selection of topics and the order in which they are presented. At the graduate level, she expects students to read the latest material from serious academic and policy journals. At the undergraduate level, she supplements textbooks with readings from policy journals such as Foreign Affairs and World Politics, to give them an idea of how the theories they discuss in class are deployed in “real-world” policy debates. Moreover, she does not shy away from teaching the students the abstract theoretical debates that underlie international politics, even in the large introductory lecture course.

Quality of Teaching Practices
When I taught with Professor , I was astounded at the quality (and quantity) of preparation she put into each class session. First, she read meticulously and took notes, which she shared with me, which often amounted to 20 typewritten pages for a given class meeting. She uses these notes to plan in detail for class discussions. The goal is to keep class discussions moving along and focused on the critical issues. Even in a three hour seminar, digressions and lengthy explanations can mean that one gets to the end of the meeting with a feeling that not everything has been covered. By preparing so carefully, Professor minimizes this likelihood. She identifies clearly what she wants to get to, and makes sure the class stays focused.

Much of Professor best teaching, I think, goes on in her office rather than in the classroom. She not only welcomes student meetings, but requires them (to discuss papers). I often hear from my students about their meetings with Professor , and when I walk by her office, it seems there is always a student in there. Many of us are willing to spend a great deal of time with students. What is different about is that students perceive this, and believe it, and really do feel welcome in her office.
She also makes considerable use of events around campus to augment what students do in her class. She received funding to bring in a series of speakers directly linked to one class (Spring 2005), and her students are frequently to be seen at lectures and seminars on campus. She is able to do this in part because of the credibility she has with students, and in part because she is so adept at drawing connections between what students are working on in class and what is discussed in these outside events.

Her dedication to intellectual quality is evident also in the strategy she takes toward writing assignments. These are carefully constructed to achieve clearly identified learning goals for the students. She focuses particularly on using staged writing assignments to help students, through the course of a semester, build up to the quality of analysis she expects by the end of the semester. Rather than putting all the weight a typical research paper, or using three or four disconnected assignments she begins with very short writing assignments, each intended to focus on specific analytical tasks. This strategy has several advantages. First, because each of these assignments is short, she can provide detailed feedback in a timely fashion. She doesn’t just grade these short works; she picks them apart, then meets with the students to discuss them, and then reads revisions. Second, because the assignments are short, they can be revised without taking too much time away from course reading or research. The process of rewriting the same essay, crucial to good writing, becomes much more manageable. Third, because each focuses on a narrow analytical task (e.g., identify a single author’s argument; identify the major differences among a group of authors; propose a hypothesis based on a reading of the debate), she is taking the student step-by-step through the process necessary to attain the high standard she will expect by the end of the semester. This works with first year students as well as with graduate students. Student achievement of learning goals is an iterative process in Professor model. Few of the students get where they need to be on the first try, but most do by the second or third. She is a very tough grader, but students perceive this as fair because of the time she spends with them and because of the clarity with which she shows them how to improve. Students generally do not mind being pushed to achieve higher standards, as long as they are clearly shown how to attain them. This is the heart of Professor approach to writing.

In the classroom itself, Professor is an innovative teacher, and the most important thing I learned from her is to be more adaptive in the classroom. We always prepared a plan for what we wanted to cover in each seminar and where we wanted the discussion to go. Sometimes it became frustrating when students would not or could not go in the direction we anticipated; or when they wanted to focus on an issue we thought was of lesser importance. In contrast to my style, which was to exert a degree of authority she was more content to let the students lead the way. Where I was inclined to stop a line of discussion I found unpromising, she would encourage it to go forward, and would then work to bring it back around to a more productive tack. She was very good at this. When the seminar seemed to be running out of energy, she suggested one week that instead of our normal readings-focused approach, we begin the meeting by splitting the group up into three much smaller discussions. This is not exactly revolutionary, but she had a great sense of timing about when to shake things up and when to let them go. Her tactics, I learned, were quite effective in allowing the students to become “owners” of the seminar. Over time, they became increasingly willing to participate, and discussions improved as the semester went on. This lesson has had a substantial impact on how I have taught since.
Quality of Student Understanding

Much of what I have already written addresses Professor’s approach to student understanding: she is almost obsessive about it. This means that she works with students—often one-on-one—until they achieve learning goals. It also means that she employs innovative learning strategies (such as staged writing assignments, and peer editing).

An additional innovation was the use of an oral exam in one of the courses we co-taught. Typically, graduate students face their first oral exam in a rather high-stress situation, and we as faculty are sometimes disappointed in their performance. Providing a chance for students to complete an oral exam as part of a class would help prepare them for later, more consequential efforts. The instructors would have an opportunity to provide substantial feedback. Moreover, it would give us an opportunity to assess students in a way that might allow some to show more than they had previously. Therefore, the final exam in that course was modeled on a PhD preliminary exam (with both written and oral components). Professor and I met with each student individually for the oral exam. I cannot claim that this did not cause students some anxiety, but I think they found the experience useful, both in thinking about how to present their arguments orally, and in better understanding the strengths and weaknesses of what they had written.

In addition to extensive written feedback on writing assignments, Professor spends extensive times meeting with students in her office discussing their work sentence by sentence. I know this because, when we co-taught, the same students would come to my office with their drafts already thoroughly marked up in discussions with Professor. She also provides, as part of her syllabi, a lengthy statement of the characteristics of “exceptional,” “good,” “fair,” and “poor” essays. Accompanying this list is a scale of how these characteristics fit into the grades that she gives. By elaborating standards in such detail, and providing relevant examples, Professor minimizes student anxiety and helps them achieve learning goals.

Evidence of Reflective Consideration and Development

As a colleague of Professor, this is the quality that stands out most about her teaching. I related above the length of the process that goes into the preparation of her syllabi. Revising and rethinking her methods and approaches is a foundation of her approach to teaching. Even we are not co-teaching, she peppers me and other colleagues about their experiences, including what has worked and what has not. We have had long conversations in particular about how to keep the Introduction to International Politics class, which we both teach, intellectually rigorous and writing-intensive in a lecture/discussion format with over 200 students. She is continually innovating in the means she employs, because she is so unwilling to lower her expectations for student learning.
I benefited personally from this commitment to innovation last fall, when I was preparing for my course this semester, Russian Foreign Policy. I have not taught the course in several years, and sought her input on how to rethink the course from scratch. She had an amazing number of ideas, many of them garnered over several years of working with CTE. These included creating a “planning poster” to clarify the goals of the course, and forcing myself to be clear about exactly what I wanted students to get out of writing assignments. Many of us have a pretty clear notion of how to teach a college course, and once we develop a course, we then are content to tweak the readings and lectures incrementally each time we teach it. Professor rejects this approach. Her notion of how to teach a college course is not fixed. For her, it is an area for constant questioning and discovery, not fundamentally different from a research endeavor.

**Summary:**
There are a lot of talented teachers at KU; people who seem to have a natural gift for communicating complex ideas in simple terms, and for conveying their passion in way that lights a fire in their students. is one of them. Within this group, she is distinguished by the level of effort she puts into the enterprise, both in terms of intellectual energy and of time. When one encounters her former students, it is clear that the effort is paying off.

If I can provide any more information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,