

January 27, 2019

Dear Search Committee Members:

I am excited to apply for the Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities position at Central Washington University. In my fifteen years on the faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, since earning my Ph.D. in Linguistics at Michigan State University, I have assembled a strong record of achievement in teaching, scholarship, and service, and for the past four-and-a-half years, I have been privileged to serve as chair of the English Department. As a solution-oriented leader who values collaboration and teamwork, transparency and clear communication, positive and productive work environments, and data-informed, continuous improvement, I have dedicated myself to student success, faculty excellence, collaboration across campus, and campus-community partnerships.

My interest in this position is bolstered by Central Washington's focus on students and student success. I keep students at the heart of all decisions. As such, I place the highest value on excellent teaching in personnel reviews for instructors, and I promote outstanding courses with proven and novel pedagogical strategies and delivery modes as well as innovative programs and enhancement opportunities to engage students as lifelong learners, including internships, academic apprenticeships, domestic and international immersions, departmental honors, and others. As a leader, I have invested in student collaboration and student feedback to improve the student experience. For example, when I was the Director of Undergraduate Studies in English, I created the English Ambassadors program to advise the Director of Undergraduate Studies and the Department Chair on issues important to students, give students a voice on the English Curriculum Committee, and assist with recruitment and orientation activities. Student input has been critical to reviving the English Department Honors Program to not only include a broader array of student experiences but also keep the achievement bar high; the English Department Honors Program had fewer than three graduates over a ten-year period prior to the revision, and this year alone, we expect at least five graduates. Another example of student collaboration is making the English Department a more welcoming space for students by opening unused meeting rooms to students; adding a refrigerator and microwave for students to the department library; and displaying student writing and artwork in the hallways and meeting rooms. To allow students to make timely progress toward their degrees and engage with department opportunities to the fullest, I analyze enrollment data and investigate scheduling challenges and communicate course offerings, internship and other opportunities for students, department honors eligibility, and events information to students, faculty, and advisors.

In my time at UW-Eau Claire, I have developed organizational, management, budgetary, and interpersonal skills in various leadership experiences including Chair of the English Department (6/2014-present), Director of Undergraduate Studies in English (8/2011-5/2014), team leader on university-wide initiatives, faculty advisor to two active student organizations, and chair of various committees. My current department has 45 tenure-track/tenured faculty, instructional academic staff, and office staff with over 350 students in undergraduate programs in 5 emphasis areas—creative writing; critical studies in literatures, cultures, and film; linguistics; rhetorics of science, technology, and culture; and English teaching—and 20 students in two MA programs in literature/textual interpretation and writing, which has a creative writing and a rhetoric track. The English Department is also home to a nationally recognized first-year writing program that serves the entire university, and the department is a major contributor to the university's liberal education core. Both as a member of the Department Personnel Committee and as chair, I have conducted dozens of annual performance reviews for reappointment, promotion, tenure, and post-tenure review. As department chair, I have also gained experience with other personnel issues such as staffing plans, recruitment and hiring, and short-term and long-term coverage for planned and unplanned absences. In addition to personnel issues, I have extensive experience with scheduling and budgets. I not only oversee the timetable and room schedule for over 200 courses each year but

also analyze enrollment data to ensure the courses we offer are the right number and types and have enough but not too much capacity. My budgetary experience involves managing several different accounts in the English Department of over \$2.3 million with funding related to personnel, travel, services/supplies, events, internal grants, external grants, and others. To remain organized, I make copious use of spreadsheets for personnel reviews, staffing, scheduling, budgeting, event planning, and more.

I am a dedicated advocate for faculty/staff, promoting excellence in teaching, scholarship, and service and fostering a positive work environment (even in the midst of UW-Eau Claire's worst budget crisis). As noted above, I place a high value on excellent teaching in personnel reviews. I also encourage instructors to take advantage of development opportunities and support them in applying for grants that will allow them to expand their teaching in new directions, including hybrid and online courses. In collaboration with the Director of the Writing Program, I organize annual professional development sessions open to all faculty/staff teaching first-year writing. In addition, I understand the value that scholarly and creative activity and service bring to faculty and their teaching, and I likewise support faculty and staff in those endeavors, for example, by sending multiple reminders of deadlines for grants and writing strong letters of support for grant applications. Two small examples of attempts to create a positive work environment include adding a "shout out" section on department meeting agendas to highlight colleagues' achievements and reviving the English Department colloquium series to allow colleagues to share teaching strategies, scholarly and creative works, and service activities. Moreover, I have successfully nominated several colleagues for college and university-wide awards. I should add that I have had to deal with some difficult personnel situations, including letting people know that they will not be rehired and addressing issues such as bullying and unresponsiveness to student concerns. Particularly in personnel, staffing, scheduling, budgeting but also in other areas, I believe in establishing and following clear and transparent policies and procedures. As Dean, I will support departments and programs at Central Washington as they equitably apply transparent policies and procedures to all faculty and staff.

I make it part of my job as a leader to support others in discovering and realizing their own strengths, including leadership potential. This strategy has contributed to the success of faculty in earning tenure and promotion; instructional academic staff securing long-term positions; robust, active student organizations; faculty/staff earning awards and grants; and faculty/staff serving in leadership positions across campus. I work at being a good listener. I actively mentor new faculty members. I welcome faculty and staff ideas and concerns, and I enjoy contemplating the issues and implications of those ideas. I also strive to work with others to develop a plan for moving forward and to make that plan a reality.

Through my work with faculty, staff, students, and alums, I have identified opportunities and undertaken creative initiatives to bring about positive change. I describe three examples here (and would be happy provide more) that address enrollment and recruitment, faculty workload and productivity, and equity, diversity and inclusion. First, to increase enrollment in the graduate program in English at UW-Eau Claire and create a unique opportunity for our majors and department, I collaborated with colleagues in English, Graduate Studies, the Registrar, and Admissions to create a dual bachelors-masters degree program in which advanced undergraduate English majors can earn their BA/BS and MA degrees in five years. Second, I worked with colleagues in English to reform an unsustainable department committee structure that required faculty members to have a minimum of four standing department service commitments each year, addressing a long-standing workload issue that was negatively affecting morale and contributing to burnout. Third, I worked as part of a multidisciplinary faculty-student research team investigating sexist and gendered language on campus; our team developed an inclusive language policy (avoiding unnecessarily gendered and sexist language) that was endorsed by the Student Senate, approved by the University Senate, and signed into policy by the Chancellor.

In my leadership, service, teaching, and research I strive to uphold a commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. For example, as chair, I have collaborated with colleagues and students to bring speakers to address EDI issues and scholars from underrepresented populations to campus as part of our department events

programming; I have worked to diversify candidate pools, resulting in more diverse hires; I supported the Department Personnel Committee in developing EDI performance review standards (a year before it was mandated by the University Senate), and I have sought to bring more diverse representations of faculty, staff, and students to our website and promotional materials. The English Department has a greater variety of culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse faculty and staff than at any time in its history. As a research collaborator, I have worked with and mentored non-traditional, first-generation, LGBTQ students and students of color. In my linguistics courses, we confront the widely held language myth that some dialects are not as good, elegant, or correct as other dialects (here *dialect* is a neutral term for a form/variety of a language); dialects that suffer this degradation are often associated with minorities and socially disadvantaged groups. Students explore the sources of such commonly assumed beliefs, examine their consequences, and label them for what they are: a proxy for prejudice against speakers of those dialects. This is not “a unit” in any course that I teach; it is infused throughout every course, and it is the one thing that I want students to leave with.

My collaborations with colleagues, students, and community members span a variety of areas including fundraising, scholarships, EDI, curricular revision, recruitment, retention, research, career readiness, and while I’ve given some examples already, I’d like to highlight a few additional cross-disciplinary collaborations. The College of Arts and Sciences holds a weekly chairs council at which twenty-four chairs and program directors collaborate on issues like enrollment management, recruitment and retention, strategic planning, and others. In 2017-18, I co-led a career readiness initiative involving representatives from nearly every department and program in the College of Arts and Sciences and Career Services. In addition, English’s interdisciplinary programs have provided opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and students across the College; for example, the Multimedia Communication minor is an ongoing collaboration among the departments of Art and Design, Communication and Journalism, Computer Science, and English; the Interdisciplinary Linguistics minor and certificate as well as the Teaching English as a Foreign Language certificate involve collaborations with Geography and Anthropology, Languages, and English. My student research collaborators, student apprentices, and interns have come from a variety of majors including English, Education, Geography, German, Math, Psychology, and Spanish.

As I hope is evident from this letter and my cv, I have strong oral and written communication skills in a variety of situations, audiences, and media. I have presented on academic and non-academic topics at conferences, libraries, and community centers; given interviews on radio and television; designed material for the English Department website; consulted with committees and constituencies of faculty, staff, and students within the English Department and across the university; met with individuals in crisis; applauded achievements in emails, letters, and cards; communicated appreciation in letters and cards. I place a high value on clear, audience-centered communication. First and foremost, I listen; I listen to concerns, challenges, criticisms, suggestions, joys, achievements. Then, I place myself in my intended audience’s position to consider what they need to know, and I consider how best to communicate the necessary information.

My experience at UW-Eau Claire intersects with many of the responsibilities of the Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities and with many of the departments and programs in the College. I would be honored to be considered for the position and to explore ways that I can serve the students, faculty, staff, alums, and community members at Central Washington University.

Most sincerely,



Erica J. Benson