CLAS Faculty and Staff Meeting, August 24, 2017

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Good morning and happy new year.

There’s a picture from the Hubble Telescope that you’ve probably all seen called “the Pillars of Creation.” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pillars_of_Creation#/media/File:Eagle_nebula_pillars.jpg> It’s a picture of what’s colloquially called a “star garden.” The pillars, one as tall as four light years, are composed of cool [molecular hydrogen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Molecular_hydrogen) and dust and are being eroded by [photoevaporation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photoevaporation) from the [ultraviolet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ultraviolet) light of relatively close and hot [stars](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stars). Under the radiance of nearby stars already doing their thing, new stars are emerging.

The CLAS College Office has cultivated its own administrative stars. In July it was my duty to announce that Shaily Menon has left the University to become Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at St. Joseph’s University. We are very proud of her. She joins a distinguished group; we’re proud of Jann Joseph, Provost at IUSB, proud of Mary Schutten who’s Dean at San Jose State, proud of Neal Rogness who left the office to build our terrific Statistics Consulting Center, proud of Paul Stephenson and Karen Gibson who after their interim service have gone on to serve the University in a whole variety of positions, as have more recent members of our office, Janel Pettes Guikema, Brad Ambrose who’ll be chairing Physics this fall, Merritt Delano-Taylor, and, serving in more permanent deanly slots, Donovan Anderson and Kevin Tutt. We are proud of Associate Provost Ed Aboufadel. And we are very proud of Maria Cimitile.

This fall, Merritt Delano-Taylor has generously consented to reprise for one last semester his prior role as interim, but we will be searching this fall for a new Assistant Dean for Research, Grants and High Impact Practices. Members of the Search Committee are

**Shannon Biros, Chemistry;**

**Ben Holder, Physics;**

**Diane Laughlin, AP in Biology and the Inclusion Advocate;**

**Len O’Kelly, School of Communications;**

**Sango Otieno, Statistics;**

**Yin-Fen Pao, AP in Art and Design;**

**Charlyn Partridge, AWRI;**

**Chuck Pazdernik, Classics;**

and the search committee Chair, **Mark Williams of Music, Theatre, and Dance.**

Talk about a star garden! I’ve asked them to set up the public interviews before Thanksgiving. You’ll be hearing from them.

This is a good time to remind you that one of the “pillars” of whatever success we’ve had in the CLAS College Office is that everyone keeps their roots in our core commitment, teaching. Yet, the naked arithmetic is that the CLAS Office fulfills its traditional duties, and fulfills all the new duties we’ve acquired in this age of accountability, with slightly fewer decanal FTE overall than when we started; Gretchen and Kevin are ¾ time, Donovan and the new AD slightly less than half-time. It might have been hard to keep up at moments of turnover, but always, you need only call the main office and we'll fix you up with the right person. It’s not just a matter of capturing efficiencies, though; it’s remaining dedicated in a personal and immediate way to our shared mission. And now about that mission.

A.I., Sweaty Palms, and Liberal Education

Most of the people here today have heard me say this—and it’s something I’m liable to keep repeating. But really, how lucky we are to do what we do, and do together! I want to meditate this morning on how that’s so, from two very different points of view: what I’ve been reading about the distant future that our students will graduate to confront, and what I’ve been feeling about the immediate future as I return to the freshman classroom myself.

What I’ve been reading about the future of work that our students will face is sobering. Just as the industrial revolution changed the landscape of work, we may already be seeing profound changes in its nature, driven in part by Artificial Intelligence. As the Los Angeles Times noted,

A White House report released in December says 83% of U.S. jobs in which people make less than $20 per hour are now, or soon will be, subject to automation.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Andrew Yang, CEO of Venture for America, is quoting Stephen Hawking and others who agree that we are on the cusp of changes that could result in 60% unemployment. As he put it, “Literally the smartest people in the world think an unprecedented wave of job destruction is coming with the development of artificial intelligence, robotics, software and automation.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

A particularly pithy version of the sentiments shared in many of these articles appeared in June in a piece entitled “How Do You See the Future?” by the head of an entity that strives to use emerging technology to improve people’s lives, Shelly Palmer.[[3]](#footnote-3) Here are a few of Palmer’s predictions that seemed of particular interest to us:

* [Artificial Intelligence] will start taking more white-collar jobs, more quickly than experts predict, and new technology will not replace all of the jobs that new technology displaces.
* The auto industry will contract by 20 percent.
* The scarce resource of fresh water will diminish quickly over the next 30 years.
* The tools used to access the free and open Internet will have enabled users to filter out anything that makes them uncomfortable, exacerbating the negative effects of confirmation bias.
* Data is more powerful in the presence of other data.
* Anything that can be connected will be connected.
* Anything that can be hacked will be hacked.
* The convergence of on-demand, machine learning, and machine autonomy will change the world in ways that cannot be predicted.

Now, it is the way of predictions that some of these won’t prove accurate. But still, what if at least some of them are—or are underestimations? These would be dislocations so fundamental as to force us to inquire radically into the ways we do things, including practices that correlated with times of growth and success, in order to adapt to new and rapidly evolving circumstances. This is the context for which we must prepare ourselves, and our students. And we’ve started to. When a few years ago our philosopher-Provost Maria Cimitile invited us to think about Big Data and how it could be made to serve our various fields, we were smart to take her up on that visionary invitation rather than assuming that was just for “computer people”. Now several CLAS disciplines are finding ways in which our digital adoptions have advanced our pedagogy. It seems the “text people” in the humanities are finding unexpectedly comfortable new homes.

And as I read about the 6 people who gathered to discuss climate and rapid environmental change for our annual report—from Geography & Sustainable Planning, Art & Design, Classics, Biology, English, and Writing—it was clear to me that in our college we advance the science AND the narrative; we know that both parts are crucial. We know, while much of our work is done within our fields, that we must open our perspective, and our attention, to the fields of others—which is, when you think about it, a model for our students, an enactment of liberal education. We are lucky to be able to serve our students in these ways. And lucky to be able to face such a challenge together.

The playwright and essayist David Mamet claimed that our movies are a kind of collective cultural dreaming—for example, literary and film critics pointed to Cold War metaphors in the narratives we created during that period. Lately, our nightmares seem to be about runaway AI, sleek, untroubled and cool; no wasted motion, no fireworks, no joy, no sweat—robots reducing us to dull, faintly amusing pets, and reducing matters of human significance to things of no matter at all.

Well--gee. In our work together, we’re wise in following Rahm Emanuel’s advice to let no good crisis go to waste. Crises may come anywhere—including from artificially intelligent entities that are predicted to be smarter than we in 20 years, or that will take all current technical, science and math-based jobs. Fair enough; we are lucky to be able, in collaboration, to offer our students a liberal education—an education that will emphasize the creativity necessary for hypothesis formation, revealing experimentation and discovery to keep pushing the boundaries, making new room for us. The world of work may continue to transform radically, but we are lucky to be able, together, to give our students a liberal education that fosters the mind and the heart—the empathy, imagination, compassion, the capacities to understand and communicate with those who are different from us, so that we all can have a place in that new world. Those are human attributes and skills that robots can only simulate, no matter how much they are made to resemble Michael Sheen in *Passengers* or Tricia Helfer in *Battlestar Galactica*. Liberal education will enable our students to inquire radically enough to sustain their resilience and adaptability.

But we must be ready—and I suggest this is the most productive way to see the demands related to University accreditation—to inquire radically about what it would look like for us to stay ready for the unimaginably cascading challenges that so many are predicting. So, how can we think about adapting what we do? For three examples:

* How would you conduct research and involve your students in it if your usual granting agencies disappeared?
* What would you do if you suddenly had 5% more or fewer students in your majors, or 5% less resources to cover the same number?
* How much of what we are doing is because we always have done it that way, albeit in recedingly distant, different circumstances? Where in our own education can we tap the courage and disinterestedness for continuous re-examination?

These are questions that we plan to pursue with CLAS units this year. Faced with the idea of being displaced by a “robot,” it’s hard for us to imagine what adjustments would be demanded.  But when asked to question why we do what we do, or how to respond creatively to, say, tightness in funding or dwindling numbers of high school grads, that we can do. The rewards of these conversations will come back to all of us the proverbial ten-fold—and they better, because we will need at least that kind of margin if we’re to help our students stay ahead of the robots.

But that’s the far future. As a number of forbearing and generous faculty in Writing can attest, I’ve been obsessing about a nearer prospect: my teaching a randomly selected section of WRT 150 this fall. You know that I keep coming back to the classroom—and that’s not just because, as my boss at Iowa put it, a dean always needs a credible exit strategy. I can’t fulfill my responsibilities for the College, I can’t keep my commitment to you, without knowing our students, and without teaching through the everyday challenges—from last time, I remember leaking classroom ceilings; the charms of the software we use, from Blackboard to Banner; the drum line improvising an extra rehearsal right outside the classroom. But this is different; these are first year students. This is when they have everything in front of them, when retention and a great deal more is at stake. CLAS is serious about the first year experience—that’s a discussion that Dean Tutt intends to accelerate starting this year. But for 28 of my students who will be your students, it all starts here.

I should be cool and untroubled about teaching freshmen. I’ve taught countless sections of the basic course, and something close to 220 graduate students how to teach it, in my 17 years in the Iowa Rhetoric Department. This is the beginning of my 39th year as a college teacher. It’s an odd time for sweaty palms.

As a teacher, I’ve always spent the last month of summer tearing apart precursor syllabi, despairing about my limitations, and rebuilding my materials until virtually the last day before walking in the classroom—and, like many of you, I keep tinkering after that. There is something about going among students that inspires me—and this is the overheated mess that human inspiration can feel like. It’s definitely not sleek, untroubled and cool, there’s no sterile elevator music wafting while a pristine calm settles over what will be a clean and ordered space. Inspiration is geeked-out excitement, far enough out on the limb not to be too sure what will work. You as lifelong teachers know what this is—to stay awake at night wired up with frustrations, to be flung out of bed on a Monday morning with teaching ideas, totally engaged in thinking about how to do better than what you thought your best could be. There’s nothing artificial about the intelligence we apply to this process, nothing simulated about the worlds we open for our students; Siri, though useful instrumentally, is not much as a Muse. It can be awkward, it’s full of missteps, and sometimes it’s going to be embarrassing. It’s going to take the willingness to rethink what always worked in my recedingly distant and different past, and to redeploy—my syllabus is now on revision 8, which makes me empathetic for the revisions I’ll ask from my students. I’m realizing again, with you, that though it’s not comfortable, that’s what inspiration feels like sometimes.

And I’ll need it—for though I’ve been teaching regularly since I’ve been here, this is the first time I’ve taught 18 year olds for exactly 18 years. Will I be able to heave myself out of the comforts of my assumptions and meet them where they are? Will I be able to forgive them their grammatical trespasses, as they forgive my inadvertent trespasses against them? Will I be able to hear them? Will I have the faintest idea about their cultural referents? Will they get my humor?--and if they learn to, will that damage be permanent?

I’ve reconciled myself that in the end, it will be messy. I won’t hear every note they strike, and I won’t be able to start every conversation that could matter.

But after punctilious revisions of the syllabus, patient lessons on how to appease and petition the gods of arcane electronic resources, and picking a really great book, I’m ready, at least to begin their liberal education. I suspect my palms will stay sweaty, but I also understand how I am lucky. Lucky to have the chance again to be energized this way; and lucky to imagine myself asynchronously collaborating with those of you who will teach them at other junctures of their studies, and will accelerate them on their way to a meaningful life. We are lucky to do something so worthwhile and heartfelt as to make us ache at missed opportunities, be fully focused with all our talents and best efforts, engaged from the soles of our feet to the very top of our minds in the calling we have chosen--and in the work that, sweaty palms or no, we do best.

But what I’m feeling is that my luck is never only in teaching my students. It’s in this imagined, asynchronous, joyful collaboration with you, as you teach them up now and in the future. Let me say, while I think of you as good and kind and funny, what I really envy in my students’ future experience is the intellectual pyrotechnics you will send shooting across their minds’ skies. So let us collaborate: this semester, I’ll try to remove every obstacle to learning that gets in their way—if you resolve to really bring the fireworks.

1. <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/topoftheticket/la-na-tt-robots-jobs-20170330-story.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://thinkgrowth.org/silicon-valley-is-right-our-jobs-are-already-disappearing-c1634350b3d8> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. How Do You See the Future?

 <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-do-you-see-future-shelly-palmer?trk=eml-email_feed_ecosystem_digest_01-hero-0-null&midToken=AQFmDqgyTSwW8Q&fromEmail=fromEmail&ut=0KvmT6681ENDM1> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)