

Faculty Conference
Thursday, Aug. 30, 2007

Good morning. My plan today is to tell you how amazing we are and celebrate all we've accomplished. And then I'll ask you to do more!

My first task in this, my second and last fall conference address, is to thank all of you. Last year I mentioned that I had a standing offer to go bash tennis balls to take out my frustrations—presumably frustrations generated by some of you. I have not had to do that—yet. Last year was very busy and stressful for me, but we accomplished a lot. All of the committees, led by outstanding chairs, did exemplary work. Some highlights include the Faculty Affairs Committee intense work on compensation, in addition to their regular duties such as organizing the faculty fall conference. We all owe a debt of thanks to this committee for their continuing work on compensation and we will hear more on this right after I am done. The Educational Policies Committee passed a record eleven pieces of legislation and eight policy matters, helping move PLU to a place where we have clear and consistent standards and procedures. The Admission and Retention Committee also continued the work of tightening up on standards and policies. For the PLU degree to remain competitive and meaningful ongoing attention to such matters is essential. The Rank and Tenure committee accomplished the labor-intensive work of reviewing eleven tenure and seven promotion cases. While much of this remains invisible in any given year, it is of course extremely important work—probably one of our most important professional rights and responsibilities is to judge the work of our peers. The Campus Life committee did very important work on issues concerning the interface of the curricular and co-curricular, and that will continue this year. Campus Life also accomplished a beneficial clarification and reorganization of its duties—a task being taken up by the Instructional Resources Committee as well. The time and expertise needed to keep up with the changes in teaching and research technologies is mind boggling and the IRC works hard to make sure we have the rooms, books, and equipment to carry on our work. Similarly the Global Education Committee began its task of getting policy and procedures in place to help our study away programs run smoothly. And as usual the Governance Committee helped us all do our work according to the parameters of the Faculty Handbook. They also had the pleasure of running more elections last year than ever before!

All of this committee work was the result of the superb leadership of the chairs of these committees, who gathered every month as the Faculty Executive Committee. The work done here to ask questions, vet issues, and coordinate tasks made the more public side of the committee work go very smoothly. A great deal of invisible work goes into bringing motions to the faculty assembly that are formed by wide-spread input, research, and careful thinking. I thank them all for an amazing first year as faculty chair and I look forward to this year with a new set of chairs and new issues to address.

Other work to acknowledge includes all the work being done on accreditation. Laura Polcyn and Dave Robbins lead the work along with the steering committee on accreditation and the hard work of all the department chairs and deans. There is more

work to be done here of course as we prepare for the site visit in April. You all may be called upon to help with this as the time approaches.

And then of course, and you knew this is what I would *have* to talk about, there is the Ad Hoc Steering Committee on General Education. I think it is fair to say that general education has become a kind of obsession for me. It comes up in most conversations I have—people run from me on campus, especially chairs and deans—because they know I’m going to ask a question or request something tied to general education. Even when I’m at a philosophy conference, trying to engage with my scholarly work, I can’t stay away from general education. As I told the Board of Regents last spring, while attending a panel on nonviolence at the Central meeting of the American Philosophical Association last spring I started thinking about the gen. ed. process and how it might be good for all the faculty to go through some non-violence training before the vote next spring!

This obsession bled into the summer as well. Having postponed sabbatical to fulfill the role as chair of the faculty I was desperate to get some time to work on my pragmatism and animals book. So I applied for an NEH summer seminar on American Pragmatism to be held in Albuquerque. I was accepted, so I loaded up books, clothes, 80 pounds of the special organic dog food my dogs eat, two dog crates and three dogs in my little Saturn and off we went. I was excited to spend five weeks reading, writing, and talking with others about pragmatism—specifically the work of Charles Pierce, William James, and John Dewey. But by the end of the first week I knew I had *strong* disagreements with most of the seminar leaders. Worse, it was clear to me that if their understanding of these thinkers is what is being endorsed by the majority of philosophers not only would I not want to be part of it, but that it would contribute to what I see as the increasing perception that philosophy is dead and irrelevant.

So, this was not something I could ignore or stay quiet about—I’m sure my department colleagues will be quiet shocked to hear this about me. Not only could I not keep quiet, but every ounce of diplomacy I may possess—which may not be much to start with—had been used up here on general education and other faculty matters. So, the fight began. It was conducted civilly, but bluntly. At a certain level I knew I was fighting for my professional identity. Had I not found a home in the work of the American Pragmatists and feminist philosophy I would not be a philosopher today. I do not expect all other philosophers to share my commitments here and I truly appreciate the kind of pluralistic department we have at PLU. In fact, a commitment to pluralism is one of the main tenants of pragmatism and feminism. I do not even mind “attacks” on my subfields—that is one way of doing philosophy and it can be a very healthy endeavor. However, I get more than *little* cranky when those in the more dominant areas of philosophy decide to willfully misread and co-opt the work of pragmatists or feminists. That’s what was happening in Albuquerque with pragmatism and so I had to fight.

One consequence was that my own work on animals was pushed to the side. Another was that my blood pressure spiked each day in the seminar. How to contain myself when people were trying to tell me that John Dewey had nothing to say about

freedom!—a major topic of my first book, by the way. So what did my thoughts turn to under these stressful circumstances? General education. I knew there had to be some lessons for me here. What I realized was that passion for my discipline had to be honored along with my commitment to general education.

I am clearly someone who is passionate about philosophy. I think scholarship in philosophy can and does make important contributions to real life problems. Peter Singer's talks on September 10th should serve as one possible example here and I hope you all can attend. I also think philosophy can and should do a better job of engaging in the public debate. Even more, I think the teaching of philosophy is *essential* to producing critical thinkers and democratic citizens. This is no idle task for me or my colleagues. Now it may come as a surprise to some of you that we in the philosophy department do not always agree with each other. I'm sure this is not true of any of your units! But, despite some deep differences in philosophical approach we do all agree on the importance of teaching philosophy, though we may emphasize different things and certainly have different pedagogical approaches. In my 15 years here we have had our share of differences, but we still function very effectively as a unit and prove to be an attractive department for prospective hires. This doesn't just happen, though. It takes a lot of energy and requires honest and respectful discussion of our common purposes and of our differences.

Now I suspect this goes on in most units here at PLU. We all have intentionally tried to hire people who are committed to undergraduate teaching, but who also have active scholarly agendas. We do this because we understand that there is an important connection between being an engaged scholar in one's discipline and being a passionate teacher in that subject. Here, however, there also comes a challenge. Given the nature of PLU most of us do not get to teach courses in our specialization all the time, and when we do teach them they are often not at the level we might want to be able to teach them. Worse yet, you might have to *share* the few upper division course in your most desired areas with other colleagues in your department—Brendan you can't keep the pragmatism class forever! So, for instance, with the course releases connected to this job I will have taught no upper division courses this year, I taught none last year, and I taught one (the senior seminar) the year before that. The year before that was one—pragmatism--and so it goes. This is not some evil plot by my chair—I was my chair for half of that time. It is just the reality we face trying to deliver strong majors and a strong general education program with small departments and limited resources. This is not a challenge we can remove any time soon. We can, however, approach it differently.

I think it is fair to say that without consciously having made what was until this year Core I into a program with ongoing oversight and assessment, contributions to that core were left to departments to organize. Right now some departments are very thoughtful about what courses count for General University Requirements (what we call GURs), have goals and objectives specifically for those courses, and schedule with attention to providing enough of the right courses for students seeking to meet a GUR. The other extreme would be departments who construct and staff their major first, and then point

to a few courses available for GUR students. They may or may not give any thought to whether there are differences in teaching a course for majors and teaching a course for students fulfilling a distributive requirement. There are of course many approaches in between these two extremes—all done, I should say, with a commitment to providing an excellent education for our students.

However, if we are to make a commitment to providing an excellent *program* of general education that is **coherent and purposeful** it cannot be done without more buy in, commitment, and planning than we have generally given it. An excellent example of this is our former Core II—Integrated Studies Program→International Core→ to International Honors Program (that's just in my time here). This has been a *program* of general education all along. It has oversight, assessment, and faculty development. This is why it has not stayed static, but grown and changed as PLU moved on with the goals of PLU 2000 and PLU 2010. Last year's International Core Committee (along with EPC) is another one of those mostly invisible groups who deserve our thanks for all the hard work they did last year to bring forward the proposal to convert the International Core into the International Honors Program. Whether you agree or disagree with the decision, this kind of work shows that a general education program never stands still. It is **always** a work in progress. A set of requirements, on the other hand, can become static and simply procedural rather quickly.

Part of making our general education requirements into a program has been helped along by the decisions we made the last three years. The various general education committees have done a great deal of research, and gathered faculty and student input on a variety of issues. We sent a team to the general education conference put on by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. This work was used to move us forward in a careful and deliberative manner. We have passed the Principles of General Education and the Guidelines for a General Education Program at PLU. Both of these documents articulate shared commitments with regard to general education. We also now have one Core—or whatever we end up calling it—and an Honors Program. Change in language and presentation here can go a long way to meet the call from faculty to simplify PLU's approach to general education.

We have also, with the vote last May, expressed a desire for a general education program that respects the disciplines and uses them as the primary organizational structure. For some of you I know this seems like a failure of courage or imagination on our part—why don't we try something *radically* different from what we've done in the past and/or what other colleges and universities generally do? It is true that fear of change can make the results of a democratic process tend toward conserving the status quo—the least threatening plan gains the most support. This is not the only way to understand the pursuit of a discipline based general education program, though. I recounted my summer experience at the NEH seminar for a reason.

We are a faculty deeply and passionately engaged in our disciplines, as I was reminded this summer. While there are multiple ways to deliver a general education program, the only **effective** way to provide such an education is to build it off the expertise and

enthusiasm of the faculty. This was one of the main points of that AACU conference back in 2006. So a discipline based general education program makes good sense for PLU. And it doesn't mean nothing will change about how we understand, organize, and deliver general education at PLU. I take the spring vote of the faculty, charging the Ad Hoc Steering Committee on General Education to develop specific plans for a PLU general education program along the lines of a distributive model, and a model that is distributive but with embedded themes, to be an affirmation of our history, mission and commitment to excellent scholarship and teaching. Not all faculty were prepared to, or interested in, teaching in the ISP, International Core, and now the International Honors Program. But, our commitment to that program meant some units were very intentional in who they hired—hiring people who could and would contribute. Many units are also intentional about hiring people who are prepared to teach in the First Year Experience Program. I think most units have done the same for Core I, though maybe less intentionally, by hiring people committed to introducing undergraduates to their specific areas. **This is not enough, though.** (And in case you're sleeping by now, this is the place where I begin to call on us to do more and better.) We need a more pan-university understanding of what makes a general education course a general education course (the sessions yesterday afternoon have been helpful in this regard). We need faculty development and overt conversation around the various pedagogical approaches employed by various disciplines and courses. All sort of things are possible with **ongoing** attention to a general education program that includes oversight, assessment, faculty development, and ongoing modification. Rarely, however, does radical revolution work, as it tends to dismantle too many parts of a system at one time—including some of the strengths that should be retained.

We cannot forget or undermine one of our greatest strengths as a faculty—our commitment to and engagement in our disciplines. However, we also cannot let this stand in the way of considering reform or strengthening what we currently do. General education cannot be an afterthought or seen as an obstacle to the real work of the major. This is one of the challenges we must face head on this year. **Each unit needs to be able to articulate how their minor and major builds on, is supported by, and interacts with, general education at PLU.**

To get us started on the work for the year, the Ad Hoc Steering Committee has already had two retreats to discuss the feedback from the student focus groups held last spring, your responses to questions about specific elements of possible general education programs in the survey we conducted last spring, and the information provided by most units in their annual reports. This is all very helpful feedback that will continue to inform our work. The Committee also began the task of framing and developing specific plans of general education. We continue to ask units for ideas and feedback and plan to lead some discussions during the fall. We hope to have several versions of specific plans ready this fall for the Educational Policies Committee to examine and weigh in on, and for the newly formed cost committee to evaluate. This committee, which reports to the Provost, will first examine our current practices so they can provide information about what various changes may entail. This is not meant to decide anything in itself, but will

be just one more piece of information for us to consider as we continue to deliberate as a full faculty.

I have said this before, and I still think it is true. This *process*, whatever the outcome, has been a huge step for us. Even if nothing, or very little, changed about our specific requirements I believe we are at a very different place with regard to general education. 1) We now have a general education program for PLU and a separate Honors programs. This simplifies things for students and advisors. In its first year, with no lead time for marketing, we had over 200 applicants, over 100 students accepted, and 82 currently enrolled in the Honors Program. 2) I am confident we will have framing language that explains why general education is important at PLU, and specific rationales that explain the various requirements. 3) We will have some sense of costs and revenues associated with delivering the general education program. 4) We will have someone in the Provost's office who has the job of overseeing the program and helping with faculty development and *ongoing* modifications of the program (it will not be static). And 5)—and this might be the most important change—many of us are now talking about general education and the courses we teach. Attendance at the forums was strong last year, as was participation in the on-line survey. Seventy-five faculty signed up for the sessions yesterday afternoon, and despite the sunshine about 50 people showed up and engaged in lively and productive conversations about this very thing! My first look at the feedback sheets from those sessions shows we do share important conceptions about general education.

Given all of this, I hope we can see that the four-year process has already been quite successful. It is not all coming down to one vote next March. We have already accomplished a great deal. So, I hope we can set our anxieties aside, and our sometimes more narrow focus on our individual disciplines, and truly engage in an invigorating conversation about our common purpose of general education—a conversation that will continue to evolve as PLU changes and grows.

And what will I do once the general education process is on to the next step? I will happily participate in assessment and improvement of anything I might teach in such a program, and I will get on with my work on pragmatism, feminism, and animals. Despite everything else that was going on last year, philosophy major Lindsey Webb and I did a lot of work on ethical and political issues related to chimpanzees—work supported by a Kelmer-Roe grant for student-faculty research in the Humanities. We co-authored and presented several papers, as well as pursuing individual work based on joint research. Lindsey, having spent the summer as an apprentice at the Chimpanzee and Human Communication Institute at Central Washington University is now in Tanzania for the fall—hoping to visit Jane Goodall's research site. My big experience, though, takes us back to the summer in New Mexico.

I was able to take a weekend during the summer and drive down to Alamogordo, New Mexico to visit a chimpanzee sanctuary that is located at a former biomedical facility. This facility was repeatedly cited for USDA violations, including several horrific chimpanzee deaths. But the facility was still found to be a suitable home for retiring air

force chimpanzees and plans were made to move more chimpanzees in. Public outrage about this move resulted in a very generous grant to a chimpanzee sanctuary in Florida. This money allowed them to simply buy the entire New Mexico facility and all the animals. Work is proceeding to relocate all the animals to real sanctuaries. In the meantime, the living conditions of the chimpanzees remaining in New Mexico—over 200 of them—has been vastly improved. Most are now living in social groups rather than in isolation, they have more access to outdoor space, and they are provided enrichment items and food forages. Each building is cleaned and disinfected every day, rather than once every two weeks. It is, nonetheless, still a profoundly depressing and filthy place. They sit in concrete cells day after day. At least they now wait for popsicles, rather than a syringe or worse.

Looking these chimpanzees in the eye I am moved to do anything I can to improve their lives and to make sure this kind of treatment is not repeated. More generally, however, I am pushed to help as many people as I can to think critically about their sense of place and purpose in the world and their relationships with, and obligations to, others. It is this kind of thinking that makes lasting change and reform possible. And what does that sound like? Educating for lives of thoughtful inquiry, service, leadership and care—for other persons, their communities, and the earth. That is what keeps me here at PLU, and keeps me passionate about my teaching. It is not that I will produce countless future philosophers, though we do that too. It is the opportunity to push people to become critical inquirers who can think about the world and work to make it better. This is why I call on all of us to work hard this year as we move through accreditation and work on general education. Our mission is important and makes a difference in the world. And so we must be willing to improve. Our mission calls on *all of us* to contribute to the making of the PLU student and alum—people who live thoughtful and purposeful lives. Our mission makes this is an exciting place to work. And this is an exciting time for PLU—with the promise of so many new people to help shape the future. Given this promise, I am again honored to work on your behalf this year to help facilitate our **common** project. I thank you again for all your help and advice last year and look for more of the same as this year unfolds. It should be another busy and exciting year.

Thank you.

Erin McKenna
Faculty Chair
Professor of Philosophy