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Diversity Statement

I believe that diversity is the bedrock of everything we do in the arts. While it may take intentional initiatives to achieve the diverse, equitable, inclusive communities we deserve, my commitment to diversity extends beyond any one initiative and would inform every decision and policy in my role as dean for the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television.

To give you a sense of how I come to this conviction, let me share how my commitment to diversity literally transformed the very concrete of a building.

I've had the good fortune of being engaged in diverse, vibrant artistic dialogues since the start of my professional career as Associate Producer for New Play Development at Center Theatre Group (CTG) in 1997. At that time, CTG had already established the Taper Playwright Labs, which included the Latino Theatre Initiative, Blacksmys, Asian Theatre Workshop, Writers Workshop, and Other Voices - a lab focused on playwrights and artists with disabilities. Our collective *raison d'être* was to champion those voices that had been historically excluded from the theater.

While I was deeply impacted by all the remarkable artists with whom I worked, I want to share how playwright John Belluso influenced me and how his presence ultimately helped shape the architecture of the Kirk Douglas Theatre and Mark Taper Forum.

John used a wheelchair. He had a degenerative bone disease that ultimately took his life. He was a fierce advocate for the disabled community, and his political plays were imbued with themes of access, equity, anger, and appreciation.

John didn't have a car, and in Los Angeles, that meant we all became acutely aware of the barriers he faced as we travelled together to countless second-story theaters and rehearsal rooms without ramps. This challenge came to a breaking point when John received the Sherwood Award at the Taper. Traditionally, the award ceremony took place on the opening night of a production, with the honoree joining CTG Artistic Director Gordon Davidson on stage. While the Taper had wheelchair-accessible seating in the theater, it lacked a ramp either backstage or to the stage and all the dressing rooms were located upstairs. There was no accessible route for a wheelchair to move from the audience to the stage. The architecture of the building failed to consider that someone using a wheelchair might be an artist onstage.

It was a painful realization.

At this same time, I was involved in the development of the new Kirk Douglas Theater for CTG and was working closely with the architects and theater consultants. The initial design required all audience members to ascend a flight of stairs to enter the theater. While it was a lovely design, other than an elevator to the very back row of the theater, it was totally inaccessible.

John's presence made this design wholly unacceptable. I couldn't support plans that excluded him as an artist and advocate of universal design.

Collaborating with our production department, we developed a new design strategy in which entire theater — from the backstage dressing rooms to the front entrance — was on a single level. This meant both artists and audience, regardless of mobility, could gain access to the theater without encountering stairs.

I proudly shared the plans with John, but sheepishly apologized that there were still some stairs in the building, along with an elevator. John wasn't finished teaching me when he said, "It's not about removing all challenges. It's about ensuring that everyone has a choice which challenges they want to tackle."

The resulting building embraced universal design delivering a theater that could, with removable seats and an elevator, accommodate up to 30% of its audience in wheelchairs — far exceeding ADA requirements. The theater we built wasn't just more accessible for wheelchairs; it was a more welcoming theater for the entire audience and everyone who worked there. Universal design was good design.

This experience formed the basis for how I have approached inclusive excellence, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Accessibility, and Belonging (EDIAB) and antiracism work ever since. It encapsulates the key lessons I have learned: first, the importance of acknowledging of my own place and privilege. Second, an intentional commitment to listen *to* and to learn *from* those whose life experience differ from my own. With that sensitivity, I strive to create spaces — both metaphorically and, as with the case of the theater literally — that are not only accessible but also safe, welcoming, and foster a genuine sense of belonging.

My work as an advocate and ally has continued as I have taken on leadership roles at CSULB.

I assumed the role Chair of the Theatre Arts Department at CSULB during the summer of George Floyd's murder. The national reckoning that followed prompted our student body to share deeply personal stories of the pain, trauma, and exclusion that they had experienced within our department. In response, I initiated an ongoing process to transform the department's culture by partnering with the California Center for Equality and Justice to engage students, faculty, and staff in a restorative justice process that would help us understand how the culture of our department was unwelcoming and exclusive. With an all-white tenured faculty, myself included, the process was not easy — but it marked a critical step toward meaningful change.

Building upon this engagement, we then undertook a comprehensive re-examination of the department's curriculum, policies, and procedures. Our intent was to enhance student engagement and enfranchisement while improving transparency and accountability across the department. This process, which involved broad student participation, led to the development and implementation of new, transparent policies and procedures, the involvement of students in season selection, removal of gatekeeping policies and practices, a commitment to the centering of student work, and the establishment of a framework and methodology for the ongoing evaluation of our pedagogical strategies and materials. These efforts align with CSULB's broader commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, as outlined in the university's Equity Action Report.

Within the department, I was able as chair to ensure that: all adjunct faculty we hired during this time were faculty of color; changes were made to ensure greater student access to rehearsal, auditions; students were included as 50% of our season selection process; our production season focused on historically excluded playwrights; guest artists of color were invited to hold workshops with all of our students.

While I am quite proud of the progress we have made, there is still much more work still to do.

Now, as interim associate dean of Student Success and Outreach, I am continuing this work at the college level. As part of my role, I co-chair the Strategic Planning Committee for the college alongside Associate Dean Chiara Ferrari. Together, we have made EDIAB a central pillar of our strategic plan, embedding these principles not only in specific initiatives, but also as core to our mission and vision for

a 'College of the Arts for All.' We are intentionally designing and evaluating priorities through an equity lens.

Additionally, I have convened a team of lead advisors from each department/unit to participate in CSULB's funded Data Fellows program with the intent of identifying and addressing persistent equity gaps for our students. I am partnering with department chairs to develop Recruitment and Retention plans that ensure access and support for applicants and identify retention issues and interventions for current students.

Every day, I am reminded of how profound and unwavering our commitment to this ongoing work must be. Each semester reveals the depth of the structural barriers we face and how much work remains to be done. But there is no other choice. If we are to equitably serve our students and fulfill our mission as educators for our communities, this process must be continuous and ever-present.

I am confident that, like the theater John Belluso helped make better, our schools and communities will become more welcoming spaces for all.