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Dear Search Committee Members:

I am extremely delighted to also apply for the {{position_name}} position recently posted on HigherEdJobs.com. I hold a Ph.D. in English from the University of Illinois at Chicago (2010) and have been an Associate Professor and Department Chair of the English and Foreign Languages Department at the University of St. Francis in Joliet, IL for the past five years (with a one-year hiatus as Chair this past academic year). My original doctoral work strikes me now as quite eclectic: graduate school training was in post-Kantian Continental Philosophy—with a heavy emphasis on Heidegger, Lacan, Levinas, Blanchot, and Derrida—combined with Medieval and Renaissance Literature—largely Chaucer and Shakespeare; I was also fortunate enough to be in a Department that was perfectly fine with me taking courses with physicists who were working on the foundations of quantum mechanics and offered interdisciplinary summer seminars combining physics, architecture, and philosophy together—an English Ph.D. student that got to learn about quantum/non-classical logics was a strange thing. My mentors and teachers in graduate school gave me a high bar when it came to truly interdisciplinary work—tracing out potential connections between the rigors of analytic philosophy and the wandering peregrinations of an essay by Derrida was hard work (and so often did not ultimately pan out in the ways we wanted). That said, those same mentors instilled in me a sense and awareness of how incredibly difficult and tough truly interdisciplinary work is at the end of the day. (Even if I have yet to chart out a career that has succeeded in hitting that high bar, they did wonders in creating a desire for such work.) Surface-level connections between things, between disciplines, are easy. As Donald Davidson wrote, speaking about similes, everything in the universe is like everything else, and in many more ways than one—which so often makes life tough. Deeper connections, analogies, between things—are much harder to come by. Whatever one might want to call it—similarities that are somehow "structural," likenesses that arise only when one can think about things often solely in terms of "form" (a career or set of courses where one does little more than read the likes of Freud and Lacan can help immensely with cultivating this capacity to think about "form"), correspondences that a well-constructed metaphor can bring out into the open—all of these kinds of skills and capacities are what one gets when they chase real interdisciplinary work and thought.

As I look back over the years of my tenure at the University of St. Francis, devoting myself to its Franciscan tradition and to its status as a small liberal arts school, an ability to work in this interdisciplinary way has treated me very well. I needed to be as flexible and adaptable as possible—upon finishing graduate school I would not have included things like expertise in Young Adult Literature, ecocriticism and environmental philosophy, and, most recently, an ever-increasing knowledge of work in the Digital Humanities (this last has even grown quite a bit over the past year as I worked my way through full paths devoted to data analytics and data science through Codecademy, which I have found to be incredibly enjoyable—it's been years since I took courses in linear algebra as an undergraduate, but some of it comes back to me little by little—and all of the ways in which learning to code and to include a more computational way of thinking has greatly enlarged my intellectual repertoire). Of course, I feel as if I have always pursued this "well-roundedness"—although, if I am completely honest, it no doubt had much more to do with my inability to ultimately decide what I wanted to study and thus tried to learn as much as I could in multiple different areas while postponing the ultimate decision of what to devote my thinking life to up until the very last moment). It certainly did not start simply when I was hired at USF; I should mention (given the role that the liberal arts tradition plays at the {{school_name_shortened}}) that I still have a receipt from 1969 when my father purchased an entire set of the *Great Books of the Western World*. This treasure he gave to me when I was thirteen—and, in so many ways, has been a partner to me on every single step of my intellectual journey so far. I shudder to think where I might be today without those books—and, although I certainly did not know it at the time, I would end up teaching so many of these texts—everything from Homer, Plato, Virgil, and Freud to Shakespeare, Hobbes, Darwin, and Marx. I have spent most of my life reading and teaching these texts and books.

Working at an institution like USF that puts teaching forward as the most significant aspect of our profession, I have spent my time here crafting and honing my vocation as a teacher. These efforts have certainly been rewarding in and of themselves, but it was even more so a couple of years ago when I received the University's "Excellence in Teaching Award," an honor that came my way almost as soon as I was eligible for it. (I am always flattered, too, when I have been nominated for this award multiple times since winning—students do not often read the Policy Manual which states that one cannot win multiple times within a certain time frame—many of them have nominated me for it every year anyways). Students tell me on a daily basis how I have earned a reputation at our small university for being an excellent teacher and ally and supporter of students—word of mouth does a great deal of work at small institutions and my course sections—whether they are in Gen Ed, the Duns Scotus Honors Program at USF, English major courses, or even under the Philosophy and Political Science course listings—are always full and students rarely miss an opportunity to tell their friends to come my way.

English majors write that my pedagogy and classrooms have facilitated their acquisition of all kinds of things and ideas about texts that they did not even know they could have; still more have noted that I made them aware of the fact that putting Foucault in dialogue with *Measure for Measure* is something they could just love learning about. Those who have gone on to do graduate work in the Renaissance will say they never knew how important the difference between a pair of parentheses and a pair of commas could be in Shakespeare's Sonnet 27. More have said that what I do is make them aware of thoughts, ideas, and work inside themselves that just "have to be shared"; remarks to the effect that they come to be passionate about their own knowledge and work because they have seen me model such passion first are also a frequent refrain. One of the best was a short write-up from one of my former students who described my Shakespeare seminar in 2016 as follows (for a more recent version of my teaching, please see the interview done by one of our Writing concentration interns here): "… I learned to be a little bit 'crazy' when I read. Obsessing over words, repeating words, contradictory words, and single letters. Every little thing serves a purpose, maybe even a huge purpose. No idea is too 'out there,' just be prepared to argue, and no idea is too weird." The most recent incarnation of this Shakespeare seminar shaped up quite similarly. One of our alums—who came to USF as a transfer student earlier and had yet to have a course with me—mentioned that what he "always enjoyed [was] how [Dr.] Spicer developed such a keen intuition for what lines of inquiry had the potential to ruffle feathers and how he unflinchingly ruffled those feathers—often mine, but always in the spirit of fostering engagement." Prior to doing the Shakespeare seminar with me, he noted that "[p]eople would talk about [Dr.] Spicer in other classes, but no words gave due justice to the histrionic fury I would encounter on the first day of class. Some might not have the taste to appreciate this intellectual berserkery, but I also found it as vitalizing as a shotgun blast of coffee grounds straight to the mouth." No doubt every student is singular and unique—their responses to my teaching seem to bear that out in so many different ways—and the multiplicity of responses seems like a wonderful thing to me.

Always putting students first: I should note that this has been legible even to newer additions to the USF community. When our new Provost, Dr. Beth Roth, had been on the job for only a couple of weeks, walked by my office one day, she stopped and said she noticed how I "always had students in [my] office, talking, arguing about things" and that she wanted me to know how wonderful that was to see each time she walked by my office. It is true, back in the halcyon days pre-COVID, I did always have students in my office (frankly, this is perhaps even more true today as I have still students in the office all the time, properly socially distanced, to be sure, but still always in the office). Thus, my student-focused pedagogy would seem to be clear and well-received by students and administrators alike. In a recently funded NetVUE grant, the Provost composed a cover letter for it, listing me as one of the participants on the project and describing me as a faculty member who was "revered by students." Although that word choice butts up against my humility somewhat, I think it has some degree of truth to it: of course, it's not rocket science, putting students first strikes me as not only good pedagogy, but good philosophy in terms of the liberal arts tradition more generally.

As already mentioned, my time in the university has largely been devoted to the crafting and polishing of the art of my teaching; the humanities thrive on increasing complexity at all levels—complexity of conversations, complexity of responses, readings, interpretations, angles on texts and thoughts and everything else. This is also totally applicable to one's teaching as well: I am interested in cultivating all the different singular and unique responses students can have not solely to the texts we read and I teach, but also to how I teach. This priority on my time in the classroom has changed over the last couple of years as I took over the administrative duties of the English Department Chair position. Although this was quite a transition for someone who originally felt he would live in the classroom if he could, the switch has been rather smooth (admittedly much smoother than it was during my very first year as chair). Much of my time since being promoted to Associate Professor has been taken up with the

construction of a number of different initiatives, improvements to our program, and also a slew of brand-new things as well at both the departmental and university levels. A couple of years ago I helped design and implement a brand new First-Year Experience sequence for all of our students; long before that I was coordinator for the older "Core" program, which itself had a Great Books feel, of a sort; I put in a great deal of time with one of my colleagues getting a "Writing" concentration added to the English Major, opening up space for interdisciplinary connections between a number of different disciplines in the Humanities. Over the past year or so I and a colleague also created an eighteen-hour course sequence in Rhetoric and Composition to be offered to high school teachers with MA degrees interested in teaching dual-credit composition courses in high school (Illinois Board of Higher Education guidelines require teachers to have either an MA degree in English or an MA in a different field along with eighteen credit hours in the discipline in order to qualify for dual-credit teaching). Even more recently than that, over the past year another colleague of mine and I put through our university's governance a brand new "Digital Humanities" undergraduate major, which will essentially be one of the very first of its kind at the undergraduate level. Also, after assuming the Chair position in my department, we have seen a sizeable uptick in majors—along with our securing two grants totaling close to $100,000 to help fund a Writing Program Administrator position and also to aid with a couple publishing endeavors connected to USF's centennial year (which was this past year, in fact). Last but by no means least, a dear friend, departmental colleague, and junior faculty member was her nominated for and won the "Excellence in Teaching Award" this past April—an honor that is quite significant, given how much focus our university puts on being an absolutely stellar teacher. This last accomplishment is by far my, our, greatest one—fertile and nurturing soil helps brilliant teachers grow and I am proudest of her winning this award, an enormous honor and one that the three full-time faculty members in my department deserve a good deal of credit for. They say it takes a village to raise a child—the same can so often be said of good departments caring for the growth of teachers: stellar teachers are a departmental/group effort, every single step of the way.

In terms of leadership when it comes to interdisciplinary work—the previous paragraph paints a rosy picture. In all honesty, fashioning open channels of communication between departments and disciplines has not always been smooth. On many occasions I have come across colleagues who said they would love to have me teach a course on Kierkegaard and Christian Existentialism, but that if I lacked a Ph.D. in Philosophy or Theology or Divinity, then such cross-disciplinary connections would be nice in theory, but not really anything they would ultimately want to put into practice. Academia does seem to possess—as I'm sure we all know—a problematic tendency towards silos. What is the solution? Is the solution to tear the silos down, reduce their number, pretend they are not there, build the silos even bigger such that they consume one another and just get lumped into one gigantic silo? Or is it useless to fight against them in the first place? A few years ago, Stéphanie Walsh Matthews of Ryerson University gave a TED talk about the need for interdisciplinary work. Matthews herself has a Ph.D. in French, but works with computer engineers and experts in robotics to design robots that they hope can help children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. As she put it in her talk, if the world actually worked in a way where we could easily carve it up into nice and neat and tidy boxes, then the silo model would be ideal—however, as we all know, "we don't really have" such a world. Matthews argues that "the more you can embrace and allow yourself to step just outside of the particular rules of a discipline you end up engaging and a lot." Matthews's talk is one of the greatest I have ever come across in terms of arguing for the kind of collaborative and interdisciplinary work that I like to continue to strive for each and every day. What I like best about her argument is not how she herself is an example of the kind of interdisciplinary work I want all of us to do more of: take a dash of a Ph.D. in languages, combine it with some folks that know how to program computers and robots, and you get a fascinating and wonderful recipe—a project that helps us learn to better care for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder while adding to our knowledge about Autism. That is all fantastic, but what I really love is her central claim that what interdisciplinary work really helps you do is cultivate humility. When you are in a room with all kinds of people that have content expertise in all kinds of areas that you do not, humility needs to be central to how one works in such a space. I have worked under far too many leaders, sad to say, who step into a room already absolutely certain they know what the proper course of action is—very little humility is on display. Good interdisciplinary work is hard—it does not come easily, but this cultivation of humility is an enormously necessary quality.

Matthews's vision of interdisciplinary collaboration suggests that we should want to work with people who live and move between different silos, who can speak multiple languages and utilize multiple logics simultaneously; I want individuals who can bridge the distances between silos. I do not need colleagues that each have Ph.Ds. in twelve different areas, but I do want to work with people who know how to partner with and leverage the expertise of twelve different people with different areas of focus and expertise—and what that requires of the one who leverages all this is a profound sense of humility. As Matthews's notes, if the world is as complex and multifaceted as we all

know it is, then it is foolhardy to get everyone in their neat and tidy little boxes—the problems one needs to solve are significant and complex—people in silos probably will not be able to cut it. Even a cursory glance at the {{school_name_shortened}} makes it exceedingly clear that it has all these characteristics in spades—and as one would expect from an institution of its reputation and caliber.

I would like to conclude by saying that—in all honesty—coming to the {{school_name_shortened}} would be an enormous step up the academic ladder for me. Would I be punching way too high above my weight class, as it were? Perhaps—it is true that I have honed my talents at a small liberal arts school, not an R1 institution. That said, I recently graduated a pair of students—I have forthcoming co-authored papers with both of these very, very young undergraduates—who are incredibly brilliant, talented, and individuals with a profound desire to give back to the world in strong ways—one of them is far and away the greatest student I have ever had in all my years of teaching (and the other comes a very, very close second). I would say that she is one of those students who come around only once in a lifetime, but that would not quite capture it; at USF students like her do not simply come around rarely—I do not think they ever come around. However, she is the kind of student that I imagine the {{school_name_shortened}} attracts in sizeable numbers. I think about this current student of mine and know that if I am lucky, when all is said and done, I will have figured out some way to have contributed in just the tiniest way to all the wonderful things that she will ultimately go on to do in law school or graduate school or wherever else we decide she can use her talents for the betterment of the world best. I think about the kinds of people the {{school_name_shortened}} students are and the thought of all the good I could help them to continue to do is nothing short of exhilarating. I imagine an entire program of students that I have no doubt are very much like my current brilliant student—and I am absolutely elated at the thought of what I could help bring to a program that trains and educates students to become leaders in all kinds of different fields. It is a truly thrilling thought.

With this letter, please find included my CV and list of references. I thank you so much for your attention to and consideration of my application.

Sincerely,

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