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To the CUES selection committee

March 9, 2019

I am writing to support Dr. Ryan Straight's nomination to become a CUES Fellow. I have worked with Ryan since he joined the program as an Adjunct in 2014, advancing to a Senior Lecturer in 2015, and to an Assistant Professor in 2017. This rapid progression demonstrates how much we value the contributions he has made to the program. So much so, that I asked him this year to be Co-Director of the program overseeing our undergraduate offerings.

I have always been impressed with Ryan's eagerness to embrace innovative teaching strategies. While we are an online program, much of what he does is also applicable in a face-to-face or blended environment. He has had a profound impact on us in three major areas.

First, is our delivery of content through D2L. Through his work, content is now delivered in the majority of our courses via Google Docs with links from within D2L. This allows us to easily share and edit content of D2L modules with each other, but it also allows us to share content with students. Since some of our students are military trainers, we often have students who work in a secure environment where they are not allowed to access D2L. By providing links to the various module pages in Docs, students can access course material when on a work break. This method also allows us to share course content with students who are "shopping" for a course and don't have access to D2L. Our switch to Docs has also allowed us to standardize the "look and feel" of the content pages. This provides consistency across courses and instructors, ensuring that key information (learning outcomes, module objectives, general content, etc.) appear in consistent locations for the students.

The second area of impact is in the use of Podcasting. Ryan has recently started his own podcast, "The New Professor," in which he posts his individual thoughts about education as well as interviewing guests who have "information I think my students want to hear." [From a presentation he gave recently at the OLC Innovate conference] He selects the people he interviews based on his work within the program and also as a Faculty Fellow and from his Honors courses.

Along the way, he has developed a number of techniques that allow other instructors to develop their own podcasts. In fact, I will be starting a new podcast myself based on working with Ryan. His work in this area has been recognized by the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) where he recently received a *Best in Track* award for a presentation on Podcasting. He will also be joining the International Society for Education's Learning Sciences Project as a Social Media Advisor based on his work in this area.

The third, and perhaps most impressive impact Ryan has had on the program is his introduction of Slack. Slack is a communication tool that combines text, audio, and video communication while integrating with a number of online applications (Google Docs, Trello, RSS feeds, etc.).

Ryan first introduced Slack into his own courses. But through his guidance, we now use Slack in all of our courses. He has also worked with half a dozen other programs at UA South and advised a handful of programs on main campus. While I started out using Slack as a way to facilitate general discussions among the students, under Ryan's guidance I have now replaced all my D2L discussion forums with Slack channels.

While Slack can be accessed through a website, there is an application for desktops, smart phones, and tablets. We encourage our students to download these as it keeps them in constant contact with us. While some instructors may not want that much contact, I have found it has let me address simple student questions on the fly rather than having to address them in email. This has cut my email communications to almost nothing as students prefer getting rapid responses through Slack versus waiting for an email conversation.

Also, through the classes' social channel, I have learned about my student's professional and personal lives, providing me with a much stronger bond with my students. I do an informal survey mid-course with my students and often get comments on what's going right that "Slack makes me feel much more engaged with the class." I have also received responses that Slack "let's me keep in touch with my classmates." In fact, we did a survey of students last year and two-thirds indicated that they use Slack to communicate with each other outside of class.

It is important to note that Ryan is in a career-track position. As such he is not required to do research or publish. However, through his podcasting and work with the Online Learning Consortium, he meets the requirements of Innovation and Scholarship under the University's Inclusive View of Scholarship. For example, he was part of a team who received the Effective Practice Award at OLC Accelerate in 2018 for his work on developing the Squad Goals Network PLN framework. A framework that was implemented at the recent OLC Innovate conference.

To say that Ryan has had a fundamental and profound impact on the program is an understatement. Through his work, we have not only improved our daily impact on students within the program, but throughout UA South and into main campus, as well. I highly recommend him as a CUES Fellow.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Johnson", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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