



August 30, 2024

Dear Rank & Tenure Committee:

Imagine a classroom where creativity meets critical thinking, where the stage becomes a platform for transformative learning experiences, and where students are inspired not just to consume knowledge but to create and communicate it effectively. Through innovative teaching and assessment methods and a dedication to student success, this is the dynamic I have cultivated over the past six years as the Assistant Professor and Director of Theatre at Loras.¹

My mission is to captivate and inspire on the frontier of storytelling. This mission extends beyond my professional and creative work to my teaching as well. I believe that human beings communicate through stories and that learning to tell stories hones essential interpersonal skills and fosters self-discovery. Theatre, as a mode of inquiry, develops individuals who are empathetic, accountable, resilient, thoughtful, and capable. I hope to demonstrate this belief as I discuss my (1) teaching, (2) scholarship and creative work, and (3) service in this letter.

As I discuss these three areas, I hope that it will be apparent that I have actively engaged in the Scholarship of Discovery, Integration, Application, and Teaching, significantly contributing to the academic and creative environment. These areas of scholarship, as described by Ernest Boyer in *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate* (1990), are so integrated into all areas of my work, that I would like to acknowledge these categories first and address where they may be most readily observed throughout this letter and accompanying portfolio. In the **Scholarship of Discovery**, I will notably discuss my directing output and recognition by the Kennedy Center American Theater Festival (KCACTF), fellow faculty and chair/dean observations, as well as other institutions. My efforts in the **Scholarship of Integration** are evident through the development of the Summer Film Camp, Film & Theatre minor, and contribution to the Health & Medical Humanities minor, integrating my discipline into broader educational and community contexts. In the realm of the **Scholarship of Application**, I have demonstrated a commitment to community engagement and service through Loras partnerships and initiatives with the Dubuque Fine Arts Players and Julien Dubuque International Film Festival, as well as my various service to the City of Dubuque Arts & Cultural Affairs Commission. My dedication to the **Scholarship of Teaching** will be addressed first, reflected in my innovative teaching practices, such as experiential learning and kinesthetic techniques, and the continuous improvement of my teaching effectiveness based on student feedback and proactive professional development pursuits.

In my portfolio, I have attempted to curate a representative, yet limited number of artifacts to illustrate these connections. Artifacts are referenced throughout this letter via footnotes. As a renewable term professor without a third-year review or portfolio exemplars, it is a challenge to anticipate which materials are most helpful to the

¹ Decker - CV 2024

committee, but I am happy to elaborate in our forthcoming interview. These artifacts and activities collectively highlight my comprehensive engagement with all aspects of the Boyer Model, not just within scholarship and creative work, but across all areas of my professional work, underscoring my contributions to the college and the wider community.

From the outset of my career, I have been committed to fostering an inclusive and stimulating classroom atmosphere. My courses, particularly in Acting for Stage & Screen (COM 121), Oral Communication as Critical Inquiry (COM 110), and Theatre Arts (COM 105), are designed to encourage active participation and personal growth.² One student reflected, “The most important thing I learned in acting this semester was stepping out of my comfort zone and being content with looking like an idiot at times.” This statement underscores the transformative nature of my teaching, where students learn to embrace vulnerability and gain confidence.

My teaching practice and philosophy relies on three core beliefs: there is freedom within structure; learning is an experience, not a transmission; and learning is an individual and personal act.

There is freedom within structure. While this concept is a cornerstone of acting and directing, I believe it holds true for education as well. A well-designed roadmap at the beginning of an educational journey engages students in metacognition, expectation management, and goal setting. Providing a small amount of transmitted knowledge and clear outcome expectations pays off exponentially in the long run. Effective communication using a shared language and objective truths facilitates mastery in critical thinking and any specific skill set. Clear intentions and expectations are important and empower the freedom and flexibility to meet the student and the moment.

Learning is an experience, not a transmission. The classroom, studio, and stage are arenas where we must mindfully confront “big questions.” This might involve investigating theatrical theory, methodologies, or questions of belief, value, or policy. Teaching engages students in a dialogue and exploration where ideas and concepts are tested. I believe that words do not teach; experience does. Thus, I lecture only as much as is useful and universally embrace hands-on, experiential, and kinesthetic approaches in every course. When approached with openness and sincerity, discoveries about how we think and act, both as individuals and as a society, are inevitable. These insights empower us to invite changes in our thinking or actions. Recognizing the value of failure in this journey, I have begun experimenting with ungrading practices in combination with experiential learning and collaborative learning techniques (CoLTs) to great success.

Learning is an individual and personal act. While I am proud of this profession, I hesitate to say that I “teach.” Instead, I engage students as a professor, offering a variety of effective acting, directing, dramaturgical, and analytical practices. My responsibility is to present these practices as clearly, directly, efficiently, and viscerally as possible, so that students become seekers and generators of discovery. Not every approach is right for every student, but there is a right approach for everyone. My job is to facilitate the discovery of those approaches, meeting students where they are—technically, physically,

² Sample Syllabi: COM 105 Theatre Arts-EI; COM 110 Oral Comm/Critical Inquiry; and COM 121 Acting for Stage & Screen-EC.

vocally, emotionally, intellectually—and adapting my courses to their unique needs. Therefore, I see myself more as a creator, facilitator, and collaborator, fostering conditions and communities that yield transformational and lifelong learning.

In my first year of teaching public speaking and oral communication—a new discipline for me at the time—I encountered significant challenges. As a Master of Fine Arts, my expertise lay in the performing arts rather than in communication theory and academic practice. However, through independent online study (TEDx, Mindvalley, Charisma U, etc.) and practical experience, such as delivering invited talks for PechaKucha DBQ³, I gradually mastered communication theory and practice, improving my teaching methods.

IDEA teaching evaluation scores reflect this journey.⁴ Initially, my scores in Fall 2018 were below average. My Summary Average was 3.5 for both sections of Public Speaking-FS, placing me in the 38-43 range for “Progress on Relevant Objectives” and the 33-35 range for “Ratings of Summative Questions.” By Spring 2019, my scores had improved significantly. By Fall 2019, my second year, as I began teaching Oral Communication as Critical Inquiry, my scores consistently reached average and above-average levels. For example, my Summary Average for Oral Communication as Critical Inquiry was 4.1, placing me in the 50-51 range. This upward trend continued, and during the pandemic year (Spring 2020 to Spring 2021), I achieved even higher scores. Notably, in Fall 2020, my Summary Average for Oral Comm as Critical Inquiry was 4.7, with ratings of 4.6 for “Progress on Relevant Objectives” and 4.7 for “Ratings of Summative Questions.”

In the latest semester (Spring 2024), my scores have reached new heights. One section of Oral Communication as Critical Inquiry received a Summary Average of 4.8, with ratings of 4.7 for “Progress on Relevant Objectives” and 4.8 for “Ratings of Summative Questions,” placing me in the top 2% for teaching effectiveness in progress on objectives. This significant improvement underscores my growth and potential as an educator in this field.⁵

Several key changes have contributed to my improved teaching and the enhanced learning experience for my students:

- **Experiential Learning:** I stopped using a traditional textbook and adopted a more “studio” approach, similar to methods in fine arts courses, leveraging robust critique sessions with both instructor and peer feedback. I shortened lectures, eliminated the midterm exam, and incorporated kinesthetic activities like “Drawing Communication,” “FourBidden Words,” and “Brainstorm” to actively engage students in communication theory and skills practice.
- **Curriculum Redesign:** The transition from Public Speaking-FS to Oral Communication as Critical Inquiry, which I contributed to designing, opened the course to a broader investigation of students’ interests, making idea exploration a central component. This allowed for a balanced focus on both delivery and content.

³ “Intentional Happiness” (2019) and “Directing Theatre, Directing Life” (2024)

⁴ IDEA Evaluations to be provided by the Center for Learning & Teaching

⁵ IDEA Averages for Public Speaking & Oral Communication

- **Class Size & Community Building:** The curriculum shift resulted in smaller class sizes, enabling more personalized critique and feedback. The course became required for students' majors, increasing its perceived value. I also spend more time on introductory and teambuilding activities, which has led to students feeling comfortable to share and engage, speak, and be seen in class.

My self-directed journey to develop communication content mastery led me to encounter Dr. Patrick Winston's philosophy that "Your success in life will be determined largely by your ability to speak, your ability to write, and the quality of your ideas, in that order." This philosophy has become one I've adopted and frames my courses. Although my initial involvement in teaching communication arts was driven by necessity, I have grown to embrace and excel in this role. It is fair to say that I am now a competent "Communication Arts" professor and a strong advocate for oral communication courses on campus.

Regarding my role as a Performing Arts professor, my courses have consistently ranked at average and above average effectiveness from the outset. In the most recent academic year, my Fall 2023 Acting for Stage & Screen-EC course received a Summary Average of 4.4, while my May Term 2024 Theatre Arts-EI received a 4.5.⁶

Throughout my tenure at Loras College, I have aimed to create an engaging and effective learning environment. My course evaluations and qualitative feedback from students underscore my commitment to their academic success and personal growth. Students in my Oral Communication as Critical Inquiry course frequently express how my interactive teaching methods and constructive feedback have helped them improve their public speaking skills and gain confidence. This consistent positive feedback indicates that I am effectively meeting learning outcomes and fostering a supportive learning atmosphere.

I ensure that my course materials are current and relevant by integrating updated supplemental materials and pedagogical strategies. In my Directing for Stage & Screen (COM 221) course—upon truly realizing I was not working with the upper-level art school students I had been accustomed to—I adapted the curriculum early into the semester to better suit the students' needs; I worked quickly and intensively to incorporate a class-set of scripts and switched focus to the practical final projects. For a generally under-literate student population enrolled in a General Education course, this strategically enhanced students' understanding of the directing tradition and its contemporary applications. In Acting for Stage & Screen (COM 121), I have created several worksheets, discussion/critique guides, collaborative learning activities, and other supplemental resources in addition to routinely updating our scripts and incorporating new texts—notably Diane Timmerman's *Spare Scenes* and Madeline L'engle's *Walking on Water*, reflections on art and life—to better serve students.⁷ In Oral Communication as Critical Inquiry (COM 110), I am consistently updating supplemental materials, videos, activities and assignment prompts to explore contemporary issues and affairs, such as COVID-19 and public health, media literacy and "fake news," and ethical applications of Artificial

⁶ IDEA Teaching Effectiveness Scores for All Courses

⁷ Sample Course Materials – COM 121

Intelligence.⁸ In theatre courses, generally, I provide my expertise in Practical Aesthetics, Meisner Technique, Semiotics, Narrative Analysis/Interpretation, Linklater Progression, Somatics, Qigong, Laban Efforts, and Chekov Work, in addition to acquiring and integrating my new areas of learning; Reiki, Rasa Boxes, RTT (rapid hypnotic induction), and fundamentals of Therapeutic Creative and Expressive Arts.

In the broader scope of curriculum development and design, the new Film & Theatre minor aims to bring contemporary relevance and stronger coalitions to the theatre program through the collaboration of Creative Media offerings and new Theatre courses which include film techniques.⁹

My courses are meticulously designed to promote diverse learning experiences. For instance, the Theatre Arts (COM 105) May-term course was reconfigured to combine elements of theatre history, appreciation, and practical performance from previous COM 250 and COM 251 courses in a highly experiential format. This approach allowed students, novice and experienced, to gain a comprehensive introductory understanding of theatre while actively participating in a theatrical production. My Theatre courses (excluding my advanced studio and practicum courses) fulfill a category of the FEV general education curriculum. Additionally, my involvement in various professional development workshops, such as the Collaborative Learning Techniques (CoLT) Bootcamp, further refined my instructional techniques and course design skills while engagement in the NetVUE Summer and Pathways to Participation programs keep me mission-oriented in my course development and communication.

Effective course management is crucial to student success, and I have implemented several strategies to ensure my courses run smoothly. This includes clear communication of expectations, reliable and fair grading practices, and timely feedback. In response to suggestions from my 2018-2019 annual review that I should “feel free to tell [students] exactly what the expectation should be,” in Oral Communication, I have implemented rubrics and redesigned assignment sheets that are more explicit in their expectations, while providing students the agency and autonomy to direct their learning. While I find that rubrics are an imperfect attempt to quantify feelings, they are a useful tool for assessment and organizing critique.

In addition to rubrics, with the “studio” approach I’ve come to employ in both my performance and communication courses, students receive immediate, targeted oral feedback from their peers and myself and reflect on their performance with the rest of the class in the same critique session. In cases where oral feedback cannot be provided, in all my classes, I now have hardcopy peer-critique forms or eLearn questionnaires that solicit feedback to specific concerns of our work at various points of the semester.

To keep the class on task and the course on track, I announce our daily agenda at the beginning of every class and put our day into the context of our semester calendar at the beginning of class often. Because my classes are participatory, when we do get rowdy or start to veer off track, I reel us back in with some quick guided breathing exercises from my acting background.

⁸ Sample Course Materials – COM 110, Sample Presentation – Brandon, and Sample Presentation – Brock

⁹ Film & Theatre Proposal

I regularly solicit student evaluations and use their input to refine my teaching methods and course content. For example, the adjustments made from Public Speaking to Oral Communication as Critical Inquiry were largely based on student feedback, which helped tailor the course to better meet their needs and improve their learning experience. I explicitly tell students that I want their feedback and let them know specifically how my classes have changed semester-to-semester because of feedback. I encourage feedback by rewarding the students collectively with final exam bonus points for >80% response rates on IDEA assessments. I make it routine and accessible through frequent and informal check-in discussions with the class. I make it relevant with metacognitive final exam questions.

My planned continuation of ungrading in Acting for Stage & Screen is driven by the insightful written feedback I have received from students. In our end-of-semester reflections, one student wrote this strategy put them at ease and helped them improve:

... [Ungrading] made me feel like I was allowed to make mistakes ... I felt more comfortable and safer to learn in this environment, because I knew I could focus on improving my work ... I was only here to practice, receive constructive criticism, and apply it to my future work.

Another student noted this strategy made them more reflective and discerning:

When it comes to my creative work, I always critique myself harshly because I am always my worst critic. However, putting a letter grade to things helped, because I would look back on a performance, and instead of being like: 'Oh, that was terrible', I can look at it critically and decide what letter grade it deserves. ... I really appreciated the 'un-grading' that you implemented for this class."

Ultimately, I believe that I have become a professor skilled at integrating kinesthetic techniques and high-impact practices to engage students in self-reflection and an exacting, transformative learning process. I offer the creative and expressive arts as a resource for students to reveal vocation and "fulfill the original selfhood."

I believe my teaching at Loras improved tremendously when I let go of my conceptions of what a professor *should* be, and instead embraced the professor I am, with my unique communication style and personality. All my work hinges on interpersonally connecting and authentically resonating with individuals and audiences (typically in a storytelling medium). I bring shrewd discernment with a nurturing, collaborative spirit and attempt to do all things with vulnerability and honesty, humor and excitement! This is true of my teaching, as well as my scholarship and creative work.

While formal classroom teaching and related tasks constitute about 70% of my role on paper, in practice it accounts for closer to 15% of my workload. The majority of my efforts are dedicated to production and, by and large, ephemeral forms of "troubleshooting." This context is crucial for promotion consideration, as much of the work I engage in goes unseen and undocumented. I am very proud of the accomplishments of the Loras Players over these last six years: our artistic excellence, successes with the Kennedy Center American Theater Festival, survival and rebound from a global pandemic, and the growth of the program I inherited. I have maintained a clear, yet adaptable vision for the program and remain optimistic about the future of theatre at Loras.

Since beginning at Loras, I have been an actor and/or director of 25 productions, or an average of one every three months (not including Loras acting class showcases, improv shows, or One-Day Plays). Most of those productions have been as a director for Loras.¹⁰

I cannot overstate how aggressive that production schedule is.

In 2022, while undergoing program review, Dr. Dennis Barnett, The William R. and Winifred Shuttleworth Endowed Chair and Professor of Theatre at Coe College, reached out to me to use Loras as an example of a comparable program in their self-study. While Coe grants undergraduate degrees in theatre, they deemed the Loras College theatre program similar for the number of productions and courses delivered annually. Our major dissimilarity is that Coe Theatre was a faculty/staff of 4.5 people at that time.

While the output of the Loras Players looks similar to that of other small, private college theatre departments, it is not typical of an individual.¹¹ Over time, I have created more opportunities for students to take on practicum and leadership roles with greater agency and creative influence.¹² I still, of course, am responsible for, and safeguard, the overall artistic quality of our productions. I have also found creative ways to deliver public performances as extensions of coursework, by way of the Theatre Arts May-term production¹³ and the Acting Class Showcases. I intend to add a similar Directing Class Showcase in the coming year. But for the sake of considering my field's scholarship in context, I do not want the committee to register my output as typical, nor to see the Loras Players as a particularly "efficient" organization. While some aspects of the organization and production process can be systematized, by-and-large it cannot. Every production is truly a behemoth unto itself, with unique creative, organizational, logistical and resource challenges. That said, as Dr. Jay Edelnant, Emeritus Professor & Director of Theatre at University of Northern Iowa, past National Chair of the Kennedy Center ACT Festival, and founding editor of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education's *Theatre Topics* endorsed to past Loras provost, Dr. Cheryl Jacobsen, I have a unique ability that serves Loras extremely well: "making theatre out of dust."

The Association for Theatre in Higher Education's (ATHE) 2021 Revised Guidelines for Tenure & Promotion recommends that committee members' consideration of a Director candidate be based on their ability to teach and use their practice to explore: (1) Production Expertise, (2) Historical Contexts, and (3) Collaborative Skills. ATHE also recognizes that a Director's work must be realized within the constraints of budget and available labor for the producing organization. "The work of the stage director must also be evaluated within a perspective of such constraints as acting pool, artistic and technical support, and facilities/production resources. Such expertise is demonstrated by participation in realized productions, both on and off campus." I believe that witnesses of my work (process) and typical product (productions) would consider ATHE's criteria satisfied, especially within our resources. Ultimately, ATHE advocates that photography,

¹⁰ Loras Players History Webpage, Production Photography 2018-2024

¹¹ Theatre Load Distribution Practices at Peer Institutions

¹² Sample Syllabi: COM 193 Theatre Practicum

¹³ "10 Ways to Survive" Program

recordings, paperwork and documentation¹⁴, although appropriate, are insufficient artifacts for a promotion portfolio: “The Director is best evaluated by *attending a live performance* of a production for which the director is responsible.” Other support material “does little to evaluate true ability.” I encourage committee members familiar with my work to share their experiences with each other and thereby allow the work to speak for itself.

In lieu of recapping every Loras Players production of the last six years, I will direct committee members to the “Scholarship and Creative Work” areas of my Annual Review Part B Self-Reflections where I have already extensively shared the stories, struggles and successes behind each.¹⁵ The productions are wide in their range: from contemporary to classical and early modern, musical to original and devised. The Chair Feedback of annual reviews can also serve as evidence of their favorable reception. (Media previews, but not reviews, are available.¹⁶)

While industry/professional criticism is limited in our market, the Loras Players have had the opportunity to occasionally engage in our region’s Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival (KCACTF) at the Associate Production level. Both of our entries, *Silent Sky* (Fall 2019) and *Eurydice* (Fall 2022), garnered multiple student commendations. I also received a special award for “Excellence in Directing” for *Silent Sky*.¹⁷ Dr. Roman Ciapalo, retired professor of philosophy at Loras, made a rousing endorsement of the production via email:

I had the privilege of attending Thursday’s presentation of Silent Sky, and without exaggeration or hyperbole, I must say that it was perhaps the finest performance I have ever witnessed in my time at Loras. In fact, it was on a par with what I have seen in Spring Green (American Players Theatre) and other professional venues over the years.

The presentation of the story was poignant and inspiring, with mature, sensitive, and touching character portrayals. And, the realization that the play [is] based on a true story, only served to lend further substance and weight to the performances.

Sincere congratulations to all of you on a job very well done!

While the Loras Players have accomplished some incredible feats during my tenure, weathering the COVID-19 pandemic is perhaps the most understated. Through illnesses, isolation, and social distancing, the Players were able to pivot to online audio productions (*War of the Worlds*, *Miracle on 34th Street*, *Gremlins*), later socially-distanced productions (DBQ One Acts Festival and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), and ultimately made a strong, in-person return to productions in Spring 2022 (*No Exit*). We not only survived but have emerged as a stronger program.

¹⁴ Sample Design & Paperwork – Loras Players

¹⁵ Annual Faculty Reviews: AY18-19; 19-20; 20-21; 21-22; 22-23; and 23-24 Faculty Review-Decker

¹⁶ “Ride the Cyclone” TH Article, “Romeo & Juliet” TH Article, and “10 Ways to Survive” TH Article

¹⁷ Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival Excellence in Directing Award

The academic year 2023-24 was a banner season for the Loras Players and will hopefully result in continued momentum for program growth. Following our fall musical production, one Loras student emailed me:

I would be very interested in auditioning for the musical next year—if we have one! Ride the Cyclone was amazing, and I hope Loras will continue to run musicals in the future!! If you are looking for a student's point of view, I know myself and a lot of my friends thoroughly enjoyed the production.

Administrators shared similar enthusiasm and appreciation:

I really enjoyed the play on Saturday evening and congratulate you and the students on an excellent performance. It was great to see we have such talented students. I also thought there was a very good turnout of audience members who were also very entertained by the performance. Thanks for your work in directing and making the experience possible for students!

Another:

I also thought the play was phenomenal. I am really impressed with what you are able to do with the physical resources you have (not referring to students). The students themselves were wonderful.

Our spring production, too, received high praise from administration:

Congratulations on a very successful performance of Romeo and Juliet. I really enjoyed the play and commend you on the excellent work you've done to prepare a fairly large cast for what I think is [a] challenging play. The actors performed their roles well, including the combat scenes. I also enjoyed the humorous adaptations that incorporated modern-day elements (contemporary dance instead of the ball and the use of the phone—hilarious). It was also wonderful to see so many students involved. Thank you for all your work to make this possible!

While it's always great to hear that a production is being received well by an audience, I view my responsibility as the Director of Theatre ultimately to be creating an experience for the performers and production crew I lead. At Loras, these individuals are typically students, but with frequency they are also faculty, staff, and guest artists. Following a recent technical rehearsal for our Faculty/Staff Production, *Twisted River of Temptation*, playwright and Loras alum Kyle Klapatauskas shared his appreciation for my work and process:

Excellent work with the show! Steph and I really enjoyed it and I think the crowd is going to love it as well. You're very gifted and I really appreciate the creativity and energy you've brought to this script—and ultimately the production. Perhaps more importantly (perhaps), I really appreciate how great/easy it is to work with you. Others have said the same thing—and with building community/morale as one of the main goals, you're a gem to have as director!

In addition to my role directing productions, you'll notice that my creative work at Loras also features my scenic design, lighting design, sound design, and technical direction on a routine basis. As I am not trained in any of these fields nor do I have an M.F.A. in any of the design, production or technical fields, I have independently spent a lot of time learning these skills, as well as the operation and maintenance of the

antiquated and discontinued stagecraft technologies that outfit St. Joseph Auditorium. I have become particularly skilled at sound and infrasound design and repurposing our software for other systems and devices. In more performance-oriented realms, I have also taken on additional roles as a music director, choreographer¹⁸, and fight and intimacy choreographer/director.¹⁹

Routinely, I have been responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of Loras theatre facilities. Examples include mold removal from the scene shop, limestone foundation clean-up in the basement, electrical repair in the makeup studio, demo and structural reinforcement in the stock room, water mitigation in wardrobe storage, cleanup of a collapsed ceiling backstage-left, and pest removal, to name a few.

To briefly note my off-campus creative work, I have taken on a few acting gigs. While I haven't had the occasion to play my Shakespearian villains or dark-comedy contemporary roles in recent history, I still tend to impress as physically comic characters, including the jester Hugh for one season with the Brew HaHa Players in the scripted improv show *Murder in King Ferdinand's Court*, and dance instructor Rudolpho in the Grand Opera House's musical *Matilda*. Standout performances of the last six years were the contrasting roles of bombastic Admiral Boom and earnest Northbrook in *Mary Poppins*, and the nebbish photographer Lawrence in *Calendar Girls*, both at the Grand Opera House. My most recent off-campus directing project, also at the Grand, was the incredibly well received, outstanding production of *Rock of Ages*. Past Faculty Chair Dr. Matt Garrett made his endorsement known in a faculty-wide email:

And I promise the pattern is coincidental but another plug for Ryan, who is directing Rock of Ages. My wife and I went to opening night on Friday at the Grand Opera and it was a great show. If you like 80's rock and roll and can enjoy some adult humor, this is a show for you. Running this weekend yet and next.

Former Executive Director of the Grand Opera House, Frank McClain, too celebrated the show as "lighting in a bottle," better than the professional production he had witnessed. "It was a great cast and community. They rocked hard and had heart." A Grand Opera House board member said, "I've been a fan of your work for a while, but this might be the best yet."

Currently, I am an Associate Member of the Stage Directors & Choreographer's Society (SDC), the United States' theatrical labor union. I do hope to eventually engage in an active role in our region's Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival (KCACTF). Unfortunately, due to the demands of my time, I do not foresee the opportunity, but appreciate the value KCACTF participation would afford in bringing innovative ideas and practices back to Loras College.

My dedication to service in various capacities has been both extensive and impactful. Much of this portion of my letter will reflect my most recent annual review, AY24-25, as my contributions this past year represent, in my opinion, an impressive culmination of my tenure thus far and demonstrates great promise for the future.

¹⁸ "Space Age Bachelor Man" Choreography

¹⁹ "Ride the Cyclone" Program and "Romeo & Juliet" Program

While academic advising is not a part of my specific role, advising and assisting students has been a part of my work at Loras College. Informally, I support students in academic planning, campus resource access, and career planning—particularly for students interested in film, theatre and music education and industries. I routinely write students recommendation letters for internships and scholarships and make myself an available reference for job applications. Outside of school, I have assisted students over summertime to develop screenplays and learn advanced storytelling techniques to bring back to their senior Media Studies projects (Nate Kaiser and Jake Heelein). Beyond helping students achieve their professional goals and improve their technical skills and understanding, a great deal of my mentorship is in informal conversations in classroom and co-curricular settings around vocation; how skills and intelligences transfer across professions and areas of life, what kinds of people these students want to be, and the quality of lives they want to lead.

My active participation in recruitment and retention efforts—at Loras Player events, student life events, admission events, School of Humanities & Education meetings, and my theatre classes—have been instrumental in attracting and maintaining a diverse and talented Loras Players collective, as well as building a beginning cohort of Film & Theatre students. Serving as a faculty advisor for student organizations such as The Guild and Duprov has allowed me to foster community engagement and leadership among students. My committee-level guidance on Honors student research projects not only facilitates academic growth and critical thinking, but through coaching also prepares students to communicate their research effectively in oral and poster presentations.

As a member of the Civic Action Fellowship, among other responsibilities, I had the privilege of designing and co-facilitating the “Do It Different” Series alongside Dr. Kenny Loui for the Center for Experiential Learning. Based on our previous professional development session, “Arts Across the Curriculum,” this series aimed to explore innovative pedagogical approaches and encourage experiential learning. Through sessions such as “Making and Doing,” “Your Creative Toolbox,” and “Getting Hip with HIPs,” I facilitated discussions and workshops on kinesthetic learning techniques, creativity and innovation strategies, and high-impact practices. Additionally, the “Collaborative Wrangling Rodeo” focused on group facilitation, community of learning teams, and ungrading, fostering collaborative and inclusive learning environments.²⁰

As the co-director of the Summer Film Camp team, in collaboration with the Julien Dubuque International Film Festival (JDIFF), I played a pivotal role in organizing a transformative experience for high school students interested in the cinematic arts and, hopefully, recruitment to the Loras Creative Media major or Film & Theatre minor. Our inaugural camp debuted in July and not only provided valuable hands-on experience, but fostered connections with industry professionals and Loras College for the campers.²¹ This was achieved with no additional resources from the College beyond donated space and my donated time; sponsorships and camp tuition covered meals, dorms, equipment rentals and stipends. In addition to teaching and managing workshops and breakout sessions, I coordinated all aspects of the camp with JDIFF as well as Loras College Facilities, Dining Services, Resident Life, and the Business Office to provide all necessary

²⁰ “Do It Different” Flier and “Do It Different” Faculty Feedback

²¹ Film Camp TH Article

accommodations for a weeklong overnight camp with appropriate liability mitigation. By spearheading initiatives that bridge the gap between academia and the broader community, much like I had with the Dubuque Fine Arts Players and DBQ One-Acts Festival, I've sought to create opportunities for meaningful collaboration, community, and experiences for students.²²

My involvement in college committees has been both significant and constructive. Serving on major committees such as the Faculty/Staff Production Committee, Honors Program Committee, and Loras Legacy Symposium Committee, I have contributed to key decision-making processes and strategic initiatives. I have taken on leadership roles in these committees, driving projects that enhance the academic and cultural environment at Loras College. Regular preparation for, and participation in, committee meetings reflect my commitment to collaborative governance and the betterment of our institution.

Through facilitating moderator recruitment and preparation, advocating and introducing a dedicated performing arts session, and serving as a liaison for the Legacy Film Festival, I have been dedicated to enhancing the academic experience for students and faculty alike in my Loras Legacy Symposium Committee role.²³ Legacy Symposium is truly my favorite day of the academic year, and my participation on the committee has been appreciated with an invitation to co-chair with Dr. Bryce Taylor for 2024-25.

I am currently in the middle of my second three-year term on Honors Committee. Having been asked to return to the committee to assist with last year's Upper Midwest Regional Honors Conference (UMHC) on campus, I am particularly proud of proposing the adopted theme "Passion Meets Purpose." Taking inspiration from Dr. Erin VanLaningham's work with the NetVUE Summer Program, the intention of introducing Loras to the larger Honors community with a distinctive institutional identity around vocational exploration was realized with a slate of diverse and outstanding plenary speakers and panelists. My additional contributions to this event were primarily in the area of Facilities and Event coordination with others of the committee, "boots-on-the-ground" errands, as well as some branding and graphic design work.²⁴ Presently, at the direction of administration and Academic Council, I am enthusiastically collaborating with the committee to reimagine, redefine, and restructure Honors as the "Premier Academic Program" of the college, taking into consideration the landscape of our other cohort offerings on campus, as well as our resources.

Within my former Communication & Fine Arts division, I was proactive in assisting programs and meeting division goals, attending all division meetings and serving as division secretary from 2019-20. As a one-man department, I have not had the chance to contribute to program review beyond the creation of the Film & Theatre minor. But as part of the new School of Humanities & Education, I did have the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Health & Medical Humanities (HMH) minor as a working group member. This interdisciplinary program, proposed and approved last year, underscores the importance of integrating humanities perspectives into health and medical education. With the team, I feel I made a significant impact in conceptualizing,

²² One-Act Festival TH Article

²³ Legacy Symposium Program 2024

²⁴ Upper Midwest Honors Conference Program 2024

organizing, and right-sizing an academic experience that delivers great value to the students we are aggressively pursuing as an institution while creating renewed relevance and opportunities for the School of Humanities & Education.²⁵ My major contribution was proposing the structure organizing available courses into three categories framed by an EI Cornerstone and VX Capstone, making the program deliverable and accessible in the FEV curriculum. In the future, I can foresee the value of similar academic programs in Arts & Wellness or Creative & Expressive Arts Therapies for prospective students and the college. My involvement in program development initiatives as well as position development proposals (Comm/Art Faculty & Theatre Tech Director and SOHE Social Media Intern) demonstrates my dedication to promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and fostering innovative approaches to education—especially when it comes to the advocacy of communication and fine arts disciplines, cornerstones of the liberal arts education.

Additionally, my participation in taskforces and committees related to workload transition, high-impact and transformative learning, scholarship awards (Loras Players, Stribling, and Rechenmacher), and leadership in the Faculty/Staff Productions exemplifies my commitment to supporting institutional initiatives and fostering a collaborative and inclusive community. In an effort to increase the number of Loras Players, and improve representation on stage, I have begun discussions with Dr. Sergio Pérez of Center for Inclusion & Advocacy and Loras LULAC to explore potential collaborations or new programs that could specifically engage students to tell Latinx stories and see Latinx classmates become theatre-makers.

New this year, I proposed and worked with Institutional Advancement to initiate a trio of programs to financially support the theatre program, including a “Support Circle” for individuals and families, sponsorships for businesses, and an ambitious “LIFT” (Legacy Initiatives for Theatre) program.²⁶ Although the program is still in its early growth, we have already secured our first sponsor of \$500 for the 2024-25 Loras Players season²⁷, while the Faculty/Staff Play received an anonymous donation to provide 100 free student admissions to the second performance evening. I am currently collaborating with Development colleagues to identify and pursue donors for larger contributions to theatre and LIFT goals.

While the Division of Communication & Fine Arts is no more, I am eager to represent my new School of Humanities & Education as a senator for the 2024-25 replacement term. Having been described as someone with compelling, unique, and balanced insights, I am eager to bring these qualities to the Faculty Senate. I believe in the importance of representing the diverse perspectives and needs of our faculty members while also remaining attuned to the overarching goals and priorities of our institution. These are qualities I also hope to bring to future leadership roles in the School of Humanities & Education and the College.

My engagement extends beyond the college into the broader community and professional spheres. As Managing Director (and Founding Artistic Director prior) of

²⁵ Health & Medical Humanities Proposal

²⁶ Theatre Support Flier

²⁷ Donor Reply Email

Trainwreck Productions, a found-space community theater company, I have overseen operations, managed finances, and led artistic planning initiatives. While I have been more hands-off artistically with Trainwreck since beginning at Loras, I was a creative consultant and story doctor on the initial episode of our COVID-initiated Sci-Fi podcast, *Dick Rogers: Space Detective*. With 34 episodes, a growing audience base and 1900 listens, this ongoing serial has been nominated for several 2024 Iowa Podcast Awards, including Best Comedy Podcast, Best Fiction Podcast, and Best Production - Editing, Sound Design & Writing, and will be performing at the awards' Live Show this September.

Serving as a Commissioner and Officer of Arts & Cultural Affairs for the City of Dubuque, in addition to routine business, I participated significantly in developing the City's initial public art policies and the Commission's new long-term strategic plan, significantly impacting the local arts scene.²⁸ My work facilitated new grant opportunities for individual artists and collectives operating outside of 501(c)3 institutions, as well as opportunities exclusive to BIPOC artists, among other metrics, increasing the financial viability of art-work in Dubuque. Additionally, I continue to serve as a member of the Art on the River subcommittee, where I am charged with curating the annual exhibit's theme and planning the opening reception. In developing the theme, call to artists, and programming, I am intentional in expanding community engagement, access, diversity, and representation without alienating existing patrons and stakeholders.²⁹ These roles have not only enhanced my leadership skills but also contribute to the cultural enrichment of the Dubuque community.

Perhaps it is my training as a director combined with my extensive previous experiences in marketing and public relations, but I do thrive on committees where public-facing event execution and messaging is essential. I am skilled at ideation, its transformation into vision, and maintaining a big picture focus while foreseeing and accommodating the needs and experience of participants at their various points of entry and intersection. I think this is clear to see in my work with Art on the River, Legacy Symposium, Upper Midwest Regional Honors Conference, DBQ One Acts Festival, Summer Film Camp, and Loras Players productions. My hallmark as a faculty member is a deep commitment to fostering innovation, creativity, and engagement in both academic and extracurricular realms. I am grateful for the support of colleagues and students alike and look forward to continuing to contribute to the vibrant academic community at Loras College and the broader community.

In conclusion, my journey at Loras College has been characterized by a steadfast commitment to fostering a transformative and engaging learning environment where creativity meets critical thinking. Through continuous self-improvement, innovative teaching methods, and a deep dedication to student success, I have significantly enhanced my own teaching practices and contributed to the academic and personal growth of my students. I strive to develop a community of active learners by integrating kinesthetic, collaborative, and community-based projects into my curriculum. I engage students in both theoretical and practical learning, while giving them autonomy that fosters reflective thinking. I place a strong emphasis on ethics in the classroom, aligning with the mission to nurture ethical decision-makers. Through theatre and coursework, I aim to prepare

²⁸ Arts & Cultural Affairs Commission Final Minutes

²⁹ Art on the River 2024 Opening Press Release and Art on the River 2024 Brochure

students to be responsible contributors in their professional, social, and religious roles. Beyond the classroom, my extensive creative work and scholarship have enriched the cultural fabric of our community on campus and beyond, while my dedication to institutional service has demonstrated my commitment to Loras College's mission and values. As I look forward to the future, I remain dedicated to upholding the highest standards of education, fostering creativity and critical thinking, and contributing via leadership roles to a vibrant academic community at Loras College. Thank you for considering my application for promotion to Associate Professor.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ryan M. Decker". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Ryan" and last name "Decker" clearly distinguishable.

Ryan M. Decker, M.F.A.
Assistant Professor, Communication & Fine Arts; Director of Theatre
School of Humanities & Education
Loras College