

February 1, 2013

Dear Colleagues:

I am pleased to recommend Kevin Cassell for a faculty position at your institution. He and I both arrived at Michigan Tech in the fall of 2008, I as an associate professor and he as a Ph.D. student. Although he didn't take a class from me, he worked directly with me as the composition program graduate student coordinator for two years, during which time the program benefited from his impressive record of classroom teaching, scholarly performance, and administrative experience. This letter elaborates upon my impressions of Mr. Cassell in each of these three areas.

Exemplary teacher. His teaching experience spans 25 years and includes graduate assistantships and lectureships at six American colleges. His extensive international experience includes his Peace Corps work as a teacher and teacher trainer in Fiji; teaching English and theatre arts in Costa Rica; and periods spent in Japan and Venezuela. He has taught both multimodal composition, our sophomore-level general-education writing course, and technical communication, a junior-level course that is an elective for a number of our science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) majors. His student evaluations are well above the university and department averages. On the summative question, "Taking everything into consideration, I consider this instructor to be an excellent teacher," his average rating is 4.51 out of 5. In other words, about 90% of the students in his classes agree or strongly agree with this statement.

Mr. Cassell's innovative assignments and engaging classroom presence evidence his commitment to student learning. I visited a section of HU 3120, the junior-level technical communication elective, in Spring 2010. The topic was visual rhetoric, so they had been reading about and analyzing visual arguments. The first general thing I noticed was his casual rapport with the students. Our STEM majors are accustomed to large classes where they can remain anonymous and learn via the lecture/examination method. They usually do not relish the thought of writing, and are slow to engage in discussion. Mr. Cassell called on them by name to elicit their responses, drew them out with requests for elaboration, engaged in theatrics when warranted (building on his prior experience as an actor), and generally kept the discussion moving. Part of the lesson that day entailed the students' reviewing a presentation that he had prepared for a national conference. He asked for—and received—feedback on his slides, content, and delivery, and the students benefited from his modeling protocols for a professional presentation.

In addition, during his two-year appointment as graduate assistant/associate to the composition program, he taught numerous workshops for new graduate student teachers, and worked with several of them one-on-one. His enthusiasm for teaching is an effective motivator and confidence-builder.

Productive scholar. He has delivered more than a dozen conference presentations at regional conferences as well as at national, competitive venues such as the National Communication Association and the Council of Writing Program Administrators. He practices and edits and revises his presentations, so that by the time he is in front of his audience, he appears to be speaking extemporaneously.

Effective administrator. He has twice worked formally as a writing program administrator—as Director of Lower Division English at the University of New Mexico at Taos from 2002-2005 and, as I noted before, as the graduate coordinator for the composition program at Michigan Tech from 2010-2012. *"Official" or not, he is always active in supporting and promoting the program's initiatives.*

For the graduate coordinators at Michigan Tech, the day-to-day work of the composition program involves planning and implementing a 10-day summer orientation for new graduate teaching assistants; mentoring composition teachers in course/syllabus design, lesson planning, grading, and classroom management; and coordinating the program assessment process. Each Composition Program Coordinator also undertakes a special project that benefits the program while advancing their own scholarly or pedagogical goals. For his program project, Mr. Cassell reached out to other departments on campus, both to help composition teachers better understand our colleagues' expectations for written and oral communication and to help our colleagues, especially in STEM disciplines, understand the composition program's goals, objectives, and pedagogical practices. This research resulted in a report that has been widely circulated within and outside the department, a program overview booklet that is in its third edition, and communications/collaborations with several technical departments. Ultimately, his work has come to inform an emerging Writing in the Disciplines initiative.

As if helping to shape a university-wide initiative were not enough, Mr. Cassell was also instrumental in implementing a revised portfolio system for the composition program. When he began his term, the legacy portfolio system was fraught with problems. We transitioned to e-portfolios first. Next, Mr. Cassell rewrote the guidelines to separate student learning assessment from assessment of teaching, substantially reduce the volume of documents students were required to submit, wrote a new rubric, and proposed an assessment protocol in which two assessors review the same portfolios then meet to discuss and refine their ratings. All of these innovations have allowed us to increase the number of randomly selected portfolios we assess, spread the work out among all composition teachers instead of those who self-select to be involved, and utilize portfolio assessment as a professional development opportunity for our all-graduate-student teaching staff. Assessment is a work in progress for our program, as it is for most others. This system brings us closer to our goals; after several recent refinements, we are poised to accommodate a planned curriculum change that takes effect in Fall 2013.

This year, he was elected president of Graduate Student Government, a role that affords him the opportunity to learn even more about higher education administration. In this position, he represents the graduate students on bodies such as the University Senate and the Board of Control. He gives regular (high-stakes) presentations, represents the grad students' interests on numerous committees, collaborates with the undergraduate student leaders, and communicates with his constituents on matters of importance to them. It's a very visible position, for which he is extraordinarily well qualified.

In short, Kevin Cassell's mix of effective teaching, research productivity, and administrative experience lead me to give him my highest recommendation. The department that hires him will be hiring a productive, exceptionally capable and congenial colleague. Please don't hesitate to contact me should you have questions or require additional information. I can be reached at 906-487-3254 (office), 906-523-5191 (home), or via e-mail at kitalong@mtu.edu.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Karla Saari Kitalong". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Karla Saari Kitalong, Ph.D.

Associate Professor and Director of Composition and the Michigan Tech Multiliteracies Center