

April 18, 2014

Dear David,

With apologies for the pun, the University Lectures Committee had an eventful academic year. We hosted faculty colloquia on December 4, 2013 (Dr. Amorette Barber, Assistant Professor of Biology, “Maximizing Anti-Cancer Responses through the Activation of Immune Cells”), and on April 17, 2014 (Dr. Eric Moore, Associate Professor of Philosophy, “Why Lance Armstrong Didn’t Cheat: Sports Ethics and the Tour de France”); the Simkins Lecture on April 8 and 9, 2014 (composer Damon Ferrante gave a public talk and a performance); and, as you’ll recall, the Raft Debate on March 25, 2014.

All four special events were generally well received. We included a scale on our audience survey form asking attendees to rate their experience from one (“not satisfied”) to five (“very satisfied”), and the most frequent score was five, with four coming a distant second. People enjoyed the breadth of topics and ideas presented, with the only suggestions for improvement (aside from only a very few criticisms respecting the presenters’ ideas or public speaking skills) recommending adjusting the scheduling of the events in the evening or during the semester (more on that anon).

In fact, we were pleased to note some progress on several fronts. We aimed this year to increase the number of STEM-H submissions for the faculty colloquia (historically the humanities and fine arts dominated the proposals and choices, thus apparently discouraging submissions from the hard and social sciences) and we saw them double by reserving the fall colloquium for hard and social science faculty and the spring colloquium for those in the humanities and fine arts. The committee was also pleased at the growing popularity of the Raft Debate. We had ninety attendees, twice as many as last year, and the feedback highlighted not only the humor of the event, but also the provocativeness of the participants’ arguments. Finally, we were thrilled that we received a “bonus” event from our Simkins Lecturer. In addition to speaking in front of forty people on Tuesday night, Damon’s original compositions were performed for about fifty-five people, mostly members of the public, in the LCVA on Wednesday evening.

These successes were due not only to the talents and the originality of the speakers themselves, but also due to the diligence and cooperation of a wonderful committee. Professors Peggy Agee, Ayse Balas, Robert Marmorstein, Jennie Miskec, Wade Znosko, and Tom Wears, and student members Debra Shumaker, Andrew Garner, Jana Reynolds, and Gilbert Hall are superlative colleagues. There was never a dearth of volunteers to help organize, promote, and facilitate our events, and their enthusiasm and ideas made chairing this committee an easy, if not enjoyable, job.

In spite of our success this year, I do believe it critical to draw your attention to a troubling pattern that jeopardizes this committee’s events, particularly the faculty colloquia. Namely, participation with regard to faculty submitting proposals, and especially respecting audience

attendance. While we were pleased to see an increase in the science proposals, we still only received nine submissions from them, and had only five submission from the humanities and fine arts. This lackluster interest (often from the same faculty members with very niche interests) has been a pattern over several years that all types of solicitation strategies—student nominations, facebook announcements, departmental meeting announcements, recruiting submissions, and browbeating—have not changed. Clearly, even in spite of the \$1,000 honorarium and faculty members’ complaints about research not being encouraged or appreciated on campus, there is negligible interest in the faculty colloquia. The same applies for the Simkins. This year there was one applicant, and I believe the same applies for last year. In both instances, there was a pre-existing relationship between the speaker and his faculty host.

Moreover, given that thirty people attended the fall colloquium and forty people attended the spring colloquium, our audience numbers are not only underwhelming, they also bring into question whether spending about \$1,300 per colloquium (or \$37 per audience member) is prudent stewardship of the University’s funds.

Some of these problems may be resolvable, but I’m not sure to what degree. Some attendees did not like that the events started at 7 p.m., but that time was picked after previous audiences complained that the events started too early and they didn’t have time to eat dinner. Other attendees worried that the poor attendance was a consequence of the events being held late in the semester, but that decision was a product of faculty members complaining they didn’t have enough time to put together a competitive proposal early in the semester.

The more likely source of our poor attendance and lack of faculty interest in submitting proposals is the profusion of other special events that have emerged since the creation of the Simkins Lecture and the faculty colloquia. Every department has at least one, if not two, event series now, not to mention the abundance of student and sporting events, and the addition of new series like the President’s Leadership Forum. The kudzu-like growth of these events, many of which occur during the same week or even day, is cannibalizing all of our audiences, most of whom are already-overworked and -committed students, faculty, and staff. No matter how interesting a topic we can offer the campus (or general) community, if there is a “special event” every single night, people are unlikely to attend it out of mere exhaustion or event-fatigue. And this doesn’t even take into account promotion—doing due diligence in advertising an event reaps only marginal results among the clutter of posters and announcements.

I have a few ideas on how to solve this, some of which will take time and audacity, if at all implementable. I’ve spoken to Justin Pope about the president’s office trying to partner with existing event series to pool resources and ideas rather than instituting series that compete with the former. I believe the Provost’s office should contact the coordinators of major academic events and series before the start of the semester to establish a schedule that accommodates every one, and then decline adding new events on days surrounding those legacy events. At the extreme end of the scale, the faculty colloquia may have outlived the usefulness that in had in the

past, and perhaps they should be eliminated. The money could be allocated to the Blackwell Talks, which are very successful and well-attended fora for faculty research, and also to the Simkins Lecture, our oldest and most prestigious speaking event, in order to better incentivize faculty submissions.

More immediately, perhaps more practically, and definitely more within this committee's purview would be to give the faculty colloquia one more year to succeed as measured by outcomes defined in advance and assessed this time next year. (Note: I do not recommend any changes to the Raft Debate and I recommend leaving the Simkins unchanged pending the outcome of the following.) Yes, you read correctly: we voluntarily and earnestly desire to assess ourselves formally to determine what precisely the intent of the colloquia are, and coupled with the evidence of the past two or three years, determine next April whether or not we are or can meet those goals. If we cannot, then I recommend one or more of the options above, particularly the last one. As to what the colloquia's outcomes are, I leave them to my successor and his or her committee to decide, but I am gladly willing to assist in their brainstorming, especially if I am asked to remain on the committee as a member.

Thank you for your time and patience with this letter. At the risk of taxing the latter, I felt it was necessary to bring to your attention not only the challenges facing the faculty colloquia, but also their potential causes and potential solutions.

Sincerely,

John D. Miller
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Assistant Professor of English