

Dear Colleagues,

I am pleased to write in support of Dr. Karen Mitchell's nomination for Professor Emeritus. I have known Karen as a colleague, mentor, teacher, and friend and believe that I am in a strong position to comment on the indelible mark she has left during her remarkable career as a teacher, researcher, and performance practitioner at University of Northern Iowa (UNI). In this letter I articulate how Karen meets and excels at teaching, performances, publications, and service to the field and university, thus earning her status as Emeritus Faculty at UNI.

## Teaching

Throughout Karen's career at the University of Northern Iowa she has prioritized--in almost every conceivable way--the teaching and appreciation of the artistic, cultural, and justice-driven principles of performance studies. Her excellence in the classroom has been recognized by local school boards, UNI's College of Humanities and Fine Arts, and the Iowa Board of Regents. After winning UNI's College of Humanities and Fine Arts award for faculty excellence in 2009, Dr. Mitchell delivered the keynote address for the College titled "Why *Just* Teaching Matters" wherein she shared her twin commitments of "just teaching and teaching justly." In it, she shares,

As Paulo Friere's philosophy of critical pedagogy reminds us, both teachers and students have valuable experiences to contribute to the classroom; in such a space, teachers learn and students teach through an on-going dialogue among people who share different experiences and positions. In such classrooms, teaching and learning extend far beyond the end of the term, and in some bases, learning never ends.

It is up to teachers, Karen believes, to create a better, more just world and this ethic is practiced in her classrooms.

Karen has taught nearly two dozen different courses in performance studies and critical pedagogy while at UNI which speaks to not only her commitment to performance studies as a field but also to the ideals of education. Whether she is teaching Performance of Social Protest; Communication, Community, and Change; Performance and Culture; Performance and Identity; or Critical Pedagogy, Karen promotes performance and education as emancipatory, self-defining, and an act of love. Over her career, she has embodied this ethic of care and love by being generous with her time

and talent in the classroom, theatre, directed studies, master theses, and student-led shows.

Her commitment to performance studies is evinced through her continued justice-driven ethic in the classroom. She regularly couples performance studies theory with praxis-based texts such as Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* and adapts her syllabi to keep up with justice-driven movements happening today. For example, in 2015 she taught Performance for Social Change and focused the readings, assignments, and performances around the recent police murder of Trayvon Martin and the Black Lives Matter movement. From the class came a traveling ensemble show titled *Facing Our Truth* about racial injustice in the United States.

Teaching is and has been Karen's activism and it matters to her, to UNI, and to the discipline. In all, her identity as a critical pedagogue of performance studies greatly benefits the myriad other ways in which she contributes to UNI as a whole.

## **Performances & Publications**

Karen's commitment to performance and critical pedagogy as a way to create dialogue around issues of oppression and social justice extends beyond the classroom to her live performance work and publications.

I first met Karen as an undergraduate student in SAVE (Students Against a Violent Environment) Forum Actors. This remarkable program, of which Karen was the founding director, used Boalian techniques to initiate dialogue on issues surrounding gender-based violence and provided audience members a safe place to rehearse for change. The SAVE Forum Actors performed for thousands of UNI students and the program was so successful that Karen was asked to help build similar programs at the University of Iowa and Iowa State University. .

The staged performances Karen has directed throughout her career also reveal her dedication to social activism and transformative pedagogy. In the 90s, Karen played a key role in advocating for, designing, and establishing what is now the UNI Interpreters Theatre. Karen has directed 21 mainstage productions on issues spanning the topics of racial inequity, ability, the working poor, immigration, prisoner rights, and sexism. As a director, Karen engages her cast and crew in learning about the topics the performances engage. She makes what happens *in* the theatre meaningful to the lives of students *outside* the theatre.

Karen's publication work tells a similar story of her dedication to social justice and transformative pedagogy. Karen has published in *Text and Performance Quarterly (TPQ)*, *Theatre Topics*, and *The Speech Communication Teacher*. She has edited a special issue of *TPQ* on citizenship. She has written book chapters and book reviews. She has offered keynotes, delivered workshops and short courses, and has presented at many, many conferences. All of this work collectively contributes to the field of performance studies by enhancing the field's understanding of how performance makes and breaks culture, identity, and resistance.

## **Service**

As the two previous sections of this letter indicate, Karen Mitchell's record of service permeates all aspects of her career. For some professors, service is an adjunct to the "more significant" work they do as a teacher and a scholar. To be truly impactful, however, the character of a professor's service to the field and the discipline cannot be dissociated from their teaching and research; rather, it must be consistent with their pedagogy and be reflected theoretically in their published and creative scholarship.

Social issues are at the heart of the work she has done throughout her time at UNI, from her early explorations of the gendered nature of reading and how reading can be used to create community to her more recent work related to issues of race, class, and sexual violence. Moreover, in doing these social justice projects, she has performed a feat that only a handful of other performance studies scholars have been able to achieve—she attracted external funding from national agencies to support performance work that mattered. The testimony of the performers who worked with her demonstrate the life-changing nature of the creative work in which they participated. Further, the work that they produced as a group under Karen's leadership brought about revolutions in thought and action in the lives of the people who audienced those performances. Her work actively demonstrates performance as power as well as the power of performance.

Given her grounding in both the traditions of the field and its recent evolutions, Karen was a natural choice to serve as the third editor of the National Review Board. The Board, with its mandate to provide peer-reviews of creative scholarship by performance studies scholar/artists, has increased the cache of creative scholarship at colleges and universities across the nation. It has done so by helping department heads, promotion and tenure committees, and administrators understand the significant

theoretical grounding characteristic of creative scholarship that places it on par with more traditional scholarship. In her tenure as editor, Karen expanded the scope and diversity of the board in order to meet the changing demands of evaluating new types of performance work.

Perhaps Karen's greatest service is the extent to which she has seeded the discipline with scholar/artists who, after completing work with her at UNI as undergraduate or masters students, were sent on to graduate programs and/or subsequently became prominent members of the broader performance studies and critical performance pedagogy communities. Her former students hold university faculty positions in New York (Waychoff, Powell), Ohio (Freitag, Williams), Florida (Huber), Pennsylvania (Schaes), and at several colleges and universities in Iowa (McGeough, University of Northern Iowa; Smith, Drake University; Nolte, Wartburg College; Supple-Bartels, University of Dubuque).

In 2009, Karen and her co-editors concluded the essay introducing the special issue of *Text and Performance Quarterly* on Performance and Citizenship with the following quote from Augusto Boal: "To be a citizen is not to live in a society. A citizen is one who transforms society." In assessing Karen's service, we might paraphrase Boal to acknowledge that Karen was not content to be a citizen of UNI, she actively worked throughout her career to transform the university . . . and we have all been enriched through her distinguished service.

Karen has left a legacy - a legacy of transformative pedagogy, activism, scholarship, service, love, and compassion. And for these reasons, I wholeheartedly recommend Karen S. Mitchell for status as Emeritus Faculty at UNI.

Sincerely,  
Danielle Dick McGeough  
Associate Professor of Communication and Media  
Artistic Director of the Interpreters Theatre  
University of Northern Iowa