Date: **March 27, 2018**

To: **Angelo Bonadonna, Ph.D.**
                  Chair, Department and Language and Literature

From: **N. Hathcock, Ph.D.**
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RE: **Classroom observation: Dr. Karen Kaiser-Lee**
                                  February 26, 2018

Angelo, I was happy to observe Dr. Karen Kaiser-Lee's work in the classroom back in February. The occasion was a Monday morning (10:00 am) meeting of her English 224—Business and Professional Communication. Since the class was one I'm currently teaching and have taught extensively over the last 30+ years, I anticipated seeing someone else with more current perspectives and more recent experience handle the course. Karen's classroom was the computer lab in ACC 104, a large space and one in which—as in so many of our classroom setups—the facility largely determines approach.

By the time the few stragglers arrived, the attendance numbered eighteen, a full house I'd assume. Students were situated all over the room, nestled behind their monitors (I sat at the back), and I would have thought the situation was ripe for distraction and an inconclusive discussion. That's not what I saw.

Karen had done her homework with an extensive (4-page) description of the project being introduced during this class period—the recommendation report project. The assignment requires that student groups of no more than four decide upon and formulate a strategy for dealing with a problem on the SXU campus. It asks that students use their unique perspectives on the university community to frame the situation needing attention and conceive of solutions. Having used the campus as organizational context in sections of this course before, I can attest that it engages students in ways that projecting them into as-yet-unknown precincts of their chosen careers does not. All the same, it is potentially a clichéd complaint collection (food in the cafeteria) or foray into sensitive institutional territory (sexual assault reporting and response). Karen saw this introductory session as a way of giving students the opportunity to air some ideas and concerns in a public forum and to head off the potential dead-end. By casting the project as group work with individual components, she has given herself some leeway in the assessment while emphasizing collaborative effort and buy-in. For all its detail, the description still leaves room for student creativity in their selection of focus and their strategies for presentation. The persistent factor is rhetorical—the audience of decision-makers determines the approach.

The discussion was a kind of push-back against the computer lab setting. Karen used the projector to keep the course CANVAS site materials prominently featured, but the exchange was all about students responding to a situation they'd obviously become accustomed to. We were about five weeks into the semester at that point, so that's probably to be expected (but we know it doesn't always happen). After some greetings and logistics—scheduling, re-situating the class progress—Karen opened the session to volunteered topics. Students evidently had read the description online, so she was more concerned with getting to their ideas, even though later in the session she would use the on-screen material to underscore some important parameters. She used the whiteboard to list their suggestions throughout the next thirty minutes. Over half the class offered not only ideas, but reasonable reservations about certain topics—the fairness of exam scheduling, the adequacy of advising in the Graham School—with Karen moderating a lively exchange. Then she moved them to consider the potential pitfalls of group projects—with which they all seemed to have considerable experience. All the same, as the final ten minutes of class came on, students moved to their designated groups quickly and purposefully to start a process that would focus the next four weeks of the semester.

Karen's approach—based on this tiny sample size—seems appropriate for a writing class that is technology-based and has daily access to an online environment. As mentioned, the setting almost dictates that the instructor will be de-centered, and while this day might have veered from <u>that</u> norm, her presence and attitude suggests someone who is at home in the supervisory role. The work of the course is there in front of them, and, while the technology itself offers manifold avenues of diversion, it's clear that she knows how to cede the stage when it's necessary and urge them to the task at hand.

Were my situation different, I'd be looking forward to learning more from Karen about how to function effectively in a setting like this one. The responses from the students I saw would imply that her way is working.