

ST. LAWRENCE
UNIVERSITY
Canton, New York 13617-1475

January 31, 2007

President Daniel F. Sullivan, Chair
Vice President of the University and Dean
of Academic Affairs Search Committee
Vilas Hall
St. Lawrence University
Canton, New York 13617

Dear President Sullivan and Members of the Committee:

I write in response to your e-mail of January 26th in which you requested a current vita and letter outlining the case for my candidacy as the next Vice President of the University and Dean of Academic Affairs. A hard copy of my vita is attached; I have also sent you one as an electronic attachment. Here follows my sense of the case for my candidacy, my response to your December 15th memo on the position, and an initial articulation of my thoughts on what agenda I would pursue were I to be appointed academic dean.

I am grateful that some colleagues on the Faculty view me as a viable candidate for this position, the most important one this Faculty has. Were I to become Dean, I would do the job with as much energy, thought, imagination, and zeal as I possess. I would also do so with considerable diplomacy, a quality I have in some supply but, for one reason or another, have not always been credited with.

It makes sense to begin with some highlights from my personal history here. I joined this Faculty in 1983 as an Assistant Professor, the second person appointed in Canadian Studies and, owing to the structure of that program, also a member of the English department. Early in my career I was among the pilot faculty in the First Year Program; the current Associate Dean of the First Year confirms that, among those holding ongoing faculty rank, I have taught in the FYP more than any other faculty member. During my second year here I became Director of the Canadian Studies program, something I have done on and off ever since, dealing directly with a succession of deans, serving on Faculty Chairs, working with faculty from other departments, planning the program, working with its donors. During my early years, too, when my wife was Director of the Canaras Conference Center (1985-89), I came to know St. Lawrence alumni and trustees in ways unusual for a young faculty member. Throughout that decade and the next, I moved through the ranks. I taught an exceptionally broad range of courses—in Canadian Studies, in English, and in the First Year Program. During that time too I pursued my scholarship as a literary critic and on various topics in Canadian studies, served as Editor of the national Canadian studies journal (1994-2002), as an officer in the national association of my primary subfield, Western American literature, and played functional roles in Willa Cather studies (International seminars, 1995-2007). During the 1990s and into the 2000s, I was elected to three terms on the PSC, serving as its chair (three years), vice-chair (one), and case minutes secretary (one). That work gave me what might only be called a deep understanding of this faculty and its ways. During the past two years I have moved into new administrative roles,

most recently Associate Dean for Academic Advising Programs, a job that has allowed me to see the University and its mission from yet another point of view and also to work closely with other staff not among the faculty (student life, athletics, student financial services).

This thumbnail summary encapsulates what might be seen as my greatest strength as a candidate for the position of Vice President of the University and Academic Dean: an unusually broad experience of St. Lawrence University. As a person appointed to an interdisciplinary program but also a member of a department, as a longtime teacher in the FYP, as a scholar-critic, editor, and academic organizer, as a university citizen, and as an academic administrator (over the years but recently primarily so), I have done everything that a faculty member here might do. While how well I have done each of things is ultimately for others to judge, my own sense of this work is one of confidence. This experience probably explains, at least in part, why I am willing to stand again for this position. As I said in a tag line at the first forum when I last stood for this job, "It's not easy being Dean." No. And nothing I've seen during Grant Cornwell's tenure in the office has made me think anything else. Still, I think I could do the job, and do it well.

What of the job itself? What would I do? Were I to become dean, my priorities would always be to know the workings of my office within the larger university and then to respond thoughtfully, carefully, and professionally — and as immediately as possible in these days of hundreds of e-mails--to the urgent issues that presented themselves to me for decision or other action. (I can well believe that Grant Cornwell received 80,000 e-mails and sent 12,000 in return. Any dean will have to do that.)

My goal in doing this would be to keep our primary mission always in sight: teaching our students, shaping in imaginative ways the education they achieve here. Teaching, mentoring, supporting them is our prime purpose, our first priority. After this, we need always to keep at our own scholarship--a requirement of faculty members about which there can be no question —and also to serve our community. Thus an effective dean needs to shape and succor the faculty by both priority and action, giving precise response--and sometimes explicit direction--to those persons and areas in need of it. Such interventions by a dean are sometimes at the individual level, sometimes at the department or program level, sometimes at the division level. My overarching goal would be to provide strong leadership to academic affairs by being an effective Dean of the Faculty —though that is not the exact title here, it is certainly the role—and by acknowledging leadership within the faculty. Overall, I would like to see each member be as autonomous as possible to do her or his work as a professional, and I would always work to effect this.

Responding specifically to your December 15th memo, a thoughtful and precise articulation of the dean's job as I've come to know it working with five deans as they've done it, I would highlight two lines in particular: "Figuring out how to stay happily in the same place is not where St. Lawrence is"; and, "the Dean must be able to imagine how liberal education, not just disciplinary education, can happen in a university like St. Lawrence" (4). Responding to these observations —which I take to be utterly true and axiomatic—will allow me to offer an initial sketch of the strategic imperatives I see now.

As it happened, your return here in 1996 as President coincided with the beginning our older daughter's college search, one made up wholly of liberal arts colleges. This fact is

worth mentioning because it contextualizes my own understanding of the myriad changes you have effected here since 1996. When you came back, St. Lawrence had already taken key steps in defining itself in innovative and appropriate ways—the First Year Program, interdisciplinary programs, international education—but the climate of change (especially through facilities expansion and upgrading) you brought was both necessary and overdue if St. Lawrence was to continue to compete and improve. As I visited the schools our daughter was interested in—mostly in the northeast, but some also in the midwest and the south—I saw just how necessary these changes were. Our facilities were not equal to our competitors', nor were we making the most of our strengths. As is readily evident now, the changes St. Lawrence has made since then are palpable—our students are much better than their predecessors overall, they are more focused, and they are more diverse.

Much has been accomplished, but there remains a great deal to do. The new dean will immediately face the completion and results of the Middle States Report, one which promises much data about the changes the institution has undergone over the past decade and, as well, will tell us a great deal about what yet remains to be done. My own sense of things is that the next several years may well be best approached as a time of curricular adaptation, perhaps even consolidation, rather than by pursuing further expansion of programs. The directions Grant Cornwell has effected during his deanship are clear, visionary, and well-articulated—they certainly do not need further definition.

We have built and we have renovated. We continue to renovate. We need to adapt to those new spaces, seeing to it that the teaching fits its new environments. This will be especially so in the sciences and the arts, of course, where the departments in each division will be sharing a space in ways they have not previously. A dean's job in working with each of these divisions will be to ensure as much as possible that the teaching resources—in both equipment and faculty—are there and that they fit the new space. Although some have suggested that ongoing Momentum capital campaign recognizes the science and arts facilities as priorities at the expense of the needs of the humanities and social sciences, I am not moved by this view. Another priority of the campaign is the Rhetoric and Communication Initiative (RCI). By transforming the Writing Center into the WORD Studio—with peer support for students with oral, research, and design projects in addition to writing projects—students and faculty in the humanities and social sciences disciplines will be especially well served. There is, of course, the question of the physical state of the building in which people work, but that is always an issue. Buildings, like people, get old. Their time will come.

Two recent white papers—on academic advising and rhetoric and communication—are especially important to me as I envision my specific priorities as dean because they view a St. Lawrence education as taking place over a four-year span of time. Improving the advising in the First Year Program and moving toward mentoring throughout the remaining years will be a particular concern of mine (whether I am selected dean or not). Taking up where Liz Regosin left off, I have been working in this direction since becoming Associate Dean—though it is early days yet, we have begun a coordinated initiative aimed at sophomores, called "Ya Gotta Declare Yourself," one that encourages them to think about that year as a time of planning the goals of their education here—both scholastically and in connection with an eventual career. We have just received encouraging news from the Teagle Foundation regarding a consortium grant—with Colorado College, Connecticut College, and Skidmore College—to share and support work on the sophomore year. As defined, it would

support plans to recruit and train a cadre of designated sophomore mentors. These would be faculty whose purpose would be to connect with like-minded and ambitious students emerging from the First Year program and help them shape the balance of their liberal education here in considered ways — requirements, study abroad, major, interdisciplinary concentration — toward a personal career goal. This type of mentoring has been called for by Thelmo and formally endorsed by them. Our advising system needs to be restructured to respond to this need. Similarly, the recent white paper on rhetoric, communication, and twenty-first century literacies has offered a complementary vision in which courses are revised to encourage "information fluency" (whereby students would combine skills in critical thinking, computer literacy, and literacy in a particular field to get what they need to know and want to be able to do). As you said in your memo, "the Dean must be able to imagine how liberal education, not just disciplinary education, can happen in a university like St. Lawrence." As dean I would encourage and facilitate both of these initiatives toward transforming the liberal arts education we offer over four years to all of our students.

Your second statement points directly toward what needs to be done in the years immediately ahead. For me, a St. Lawrence education is not fundamentally about a major in a discipline. Majors are still central, and necessary, but the most interesting challenges I see now are contextual to the major — sharpening the First Year program as the gateway course to the education we offer, further developing our courses which take the community-based learning model as their approach, raising questions of civic engagement and personal responsibility, transforming a somewhat haphazard advising system into mentoring, working on requisite skills over four years, adapting to our new teaching environments, and continuing to recruit and retain the best and most diverse faculty we can, people drawn to the undergraduate liberal arts as both a passion and a way of being.

Before I close, I would like to touch on a few more things. They may appear a bit random, but in my mind they are connected to the whole of our enterprise.

I was struck to learn sometime last year that over half of the present faculty came to St. Lawrence during the last ten years. I've been sitting toward the front at commencement for the last little while, but even so this fact gave me pause. One of the goals of my deanship would be to attend especially to younger faculty. I want them to see St. Lawrence as a place where they can flourish as teachers, scholars, and persons--just as I and so many others have. A particular point: I have been concerned for some time about anxiety among younger colleagues over our tenure and promotion procedures; as dean, I would draw upon my experience on the PSC to encourage faculty to see those procedures (which I view as quite humane, given what they do) with as much transparency as possible

There can be no slacking on diversity, certainly, but as we continue to pursue a more diverse faculty and staff, we should continue to recognize that there different sorts of diversities--racial, gender, age, sexual orientation, cultural and geographical background—that might inform a faculty. On the question of diversity within the student body —where we have achieved made considerable successes, since almost 20% of the student body identifies with one or more definable minority group—there are hard questions of institutional support for these students that need to be addressed.

And while I understand that it might be seen as something of a hobby horse, as dean I would work to put interdisciplinary programs on a secure resource footing. Our list of such programs looks good in the *Catalog*, but we still fall short on delivery. Many of these programs remain beholden to departments. I would work to change this.

That final point is worth reiterating: were I to be appointed the next Dean, I would work as hard as I am able to get others to see that this *is* the way we should go. As you say in your memo, those others will be students, faculty, trustees, and staff—most particularly other senior staff, including you yourself. It would be a privilege to have this chance.

Thank you for your consideration, and good luck with your deliberations. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bob" with a horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Robert Thacker
Professor of Canadian Studies and English
Associate Dean for Academic Advising