

MEMORANDUM

To: Professor Sarah Barry, Chair, Department of Theatre and Dance
From: Barbara J. Brickman, Associate Professor in New College & Gender and Race Studies
Re: Teaching Observation of Professor Stacy Alley
Date: April 9, 2021

In my capacity as a College of Arts and Sciences Distinguished Teaching Fellow, I observed Professor Stacy Alley's DN 255: Beginning Tap Dance course on March 31, 2021. As a lower-level course introducing students (predominantly in the Musical Theatre concentration) to Tap Dance technique, Professor Alley's class trains students, many of whom have no experience with tap, in specific formal components comprising the language and style of the art form. Students are expected to learn beginning through intermediate techniques of tap dance and build not only an artistic but also professional foundation for performing tap. Professor Alley's syllabus and course schedule reveal a rigorous outline for student work and assessment with weekly effort, progress, and improvement expected of students in addition to a midterm exam evaluating "rhythm, style, technique, and retention" through performance of an assigned routine, and concluding with a final exam again evaluating technique and advancement over the course of the semester but also adding the element of performance quality. The course schedule outlines progress through introductory technique—from maxi fords to cramp rolls—leading to the learning of combinations that will make up the midterm exam and then be expanded upon and complexified as the semester progresses. Students are clearly expected to master basic techniques early on and then progressively build their skills, endurance, coordination, and style through combinations and routines as the semester proceeds.

In assessing the teaching of my peers, I focus on the following four fundamental areas: 1) presentation of material; 2) clarity/execution of the class plan; 3) student engagement; and 4) continuity of instruction (the connection between past learning in the course and expected learning in the present/ future). On all of these points, Professor Alley proved a masterful, engaging, and collaborative instructor of dance.

- 1) The material presented during this class session was work on the combinations and technique included in the final dance evaluation/performance, such as traveling time steps, bomberslays, and various combinations in the routine. Professor Alley and the students dove right into a piece of the final routine with Stacy leading at the front of the room able to view student progress in the mirrored wall in front of her, and they continued to work on different pieces and combinations through the remainder of the class. At each section of the class period, Professor Alley expertly managed the musical accompaniment, the level of sound, and the placement of students (required for correct social distancing) with ease and forethought. Students could all see Professor Alley's demonstration of technique, as well as their fellow classmate's performances and reviews, and she often repeated these demonstrations in smaller pieces, slowed down, or from different viewpoints for students who were being asked to learn and perform a complicated and detailed combination of steps. Professor Alley also records videos of her own performance of the techniques in order for students to review and practice outside the classroom, which they can find on their Blackboard course shell. Additionally, students are required to record themselves and evaluate their own performance and progress as a form of review and reinforcement.

- 2) Professor Alley is clearly a very experienced and organized instructor of dance at this point in her career. She has a meticulously structured and purposeful plan to build skills in students and challenge them progressively over the semester. Her communication with the students is incredibly detailed, thorough, and exact over the course of the class session, and she clearly expects the highest level of effort and dedication on their part. During this class session, they would all perform a section of the routine or a series of combinations together as a class, then in small groups of three so that Professor Alley could see more closely, and then finally as individuals with the highest level of attention from both the instructor and peers. Students asked for review of certain elements and Professor Alley always complied and attempted to offer context and various approaches to her advice—from very exact physical recommendations (about, for example, the exact position of one's knee) to more professional advice about how to perform or audition. The constant offering of notes and advice, both from Professor Alley and solicited by her from their peers, was clearly building on previous work in the semester, such as combinations already covered on the midterm exam, and also pushing students to build new skills.
- 3) Of the four areas I consider, Professor Alley is perhaps most exceptional for her ability to sustain and nurture student engagement. She has a wonderful rapport with students that engages them with humor, sincerity, and hard-won respect, and the collaborative and trusting atmosphere of her classroom is hard to miss. Students feel free to ask questions, interrupt a performance to double-check something, ask for review of the smallest details, and admit when they are struggling. Moreover, Professor Alley has clearly nurtured a safe collaborative space where students feel free to work closely with each other, find camaraderie in their struggles with certain difficult material, and help instruct each other. The students watch each other closely, and Professor Alley was incredibly attentive to places where groups of students were needing more advice or struggling with a certain particular technique so that no one person felt singled out and so that they could learn together and from each other. Professor Alley has a great deal of infectious energy and enthusiasm to which the students clearly respond, but she also expects a great deal of them, which infuses the classroom with a professional dedication and seriousness within the comfortable atmosphere.
- 4) Finally, as I've already indicated, the continuity of instruction for the course reveals a seasoned, deliberate, and organized expert at its helm. The students were clearly building from skills and combinations already acquired in order to complete the midterm exam and then being pushed from those earlier technical lessons into more difficult and challenging techniques, combinations, and even tempos. Throughout the class session, it was evident that Professor Alley was reviewing previous technique they should have mastered, even asking them to repeat and explain terms from earlier in the semester, and then building on that learning toward the final routine/performance with its added demands and complexities. Towards the end of the class session, Professor Alley also took time to discuss future and past assignments, such as pop quizzes, and students felt comfortable asking specific questions about what would be included in the evaluation of the final performance/exam.

In sum, I found Professor Alley's teaching wonderfully engaging, very well-organized, exhaustively detailed, and rigorous in evaluation and expectations. I especially appreciated the close attention she gave individual students, as well as small groups, and the warm but demanding, collaborative atmosphere she encouraged through her own instruction but also through peer solidarity and professionalized critique.

