October 26, 1998

Dr. XXX, Chair
Search Committee
Department of English
XXX University

Dear Dr. XXX:

I am writing in response to your advertisement in the Modern Language Association's Job Information List (advertisement number ##) of an assistant professorship in English.

I completed the Ph.D. at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, earning my degree in August of 1998. My dissertation, entitled "Interanimating Voices: Theorizing the Turn Toward Reflective Writing in the Academy," considers academic writing as a social practice, and examines in particular two increasingly popular writing practices within the academy -- autobiographical writing by contemporary scholars across the disciplines (such as Alice Kaplan, Patricia Williams, Marianna Torgovnick and Ruth Behar) and writing portfolios assembled by entering undergraduate students at the University of Michigan. My dissertation thus situates the educational practice of portfolio assessment within larger institutional dynamics marked by the growing trend toward writing scholarly memoir; and comprises an investigation of an often tacit ideology of literacy within the academy that is exemplified by constructions of genre and discourse. I also investigate ways in which such an ideology may be undergoing a shift in definition (a shift with economic, social and epistemological bases); and suggest the possible gains and losses incurred by both students and teachers of such a shifting ideology. For your convenience, I have enclosed a fuller description of my dissertation with this letter.

The larger research agenda of which this dissertation is a part aims to theorize the ways in which diverse writing practices within the academy constitute what I term examples of “reflective” practice—reflecting (either implicitly or explicitly) on the notion of audience, as well as on the building of complex relationships between writers and readers. I am currently turning my attention to practices of professional and technical writing as yet additional sites for investigating how academic writers conceive of audience; as well as for investigating the connections between writing done within the institution and that done beyond its walls.

Issues related to the teaching and assessment of academic writing thus are central to my research. For the past eight years I have taught a wide variety of writing courses and worked with diverse student populations at the University of Michigan and Wayne State University, as well as at numerous institutions on the east coast. My research also has helped shape the large-scale portfolio placement assessment which Michigan currently uses to place students into first-year writing courses. This teaching and research has generated numerous conference papers and forthcoming publications, all of which engage in the critical reading of a range of cultural texts; and has led me to think...
through the ways in which practices of assessment (both large-scale and classroom-based) are bound up with questions of curriculum development and the administration of writing programs generally.

My experience in program and curriculum development has taken place in the context of helping to develop several instantiations of the assessment criteria for Michigan’s annual summer-time portfolio reading, which is charged with placing more than 4,500 portfolios submitted by entering undergraduate students into appropriate first-year writing courses. We developed the criteria we currently employ in the context of a research group I convened which included both graduate student teachers and faculty.

This collaborative group had as its major goal the formulation of criteria which were not only practically useful for readers coming from a variety of backgrounds, but also solidly informed by a notion of rhetoric as social and epistemic. Aware that our criteria needed to take into account the demands for writing which the university would soon place on entering students, we were also acutely aware of the need to craft language which would encourage readers to recognize the value of diverse high school and home literacies —language which would help teach readers to recognize corollaries to the kind of analysis they value in certain traditional forms of academic writing (especially in the humanities), in a range of tasks or assignments. Further complicating our task in developing assessment criteria was our desire to give readers guidance in assessing writing from multiple disciplines, in a way that would also speak across different levels of the college’s writing program and encourage coherence between those levels. In order to thus make our assessment process as comprehensive, yet context specific, as possible, we consulted with faculty from various other units within the university.

I have paralleled this collaboration with diverse groups of university teachers with conversations outside the institution, most recently with high school teachers in the context of a National Writing Project, about what constitutes—in terms of both outcomes and practices—'good' student writing across the curriculum.

Such concerns as these, pertaining to how we, as teachers of college writing, value both the products and the writing practices in which our students engage, shape my teaching as well as my research. All of the courses I have taught not only have valued the complex and multiple literacies with which students enter their post-secondary experiences; they at the same time have helped students engage in the diverse practice of academic literacy in ways that encourage them to continue thinking about how their writing might speak to the audiences that are important to them both within and outside the institution.

Having taught for several years in computer classrooms has allowed me to consider the ways in which new technologies and hypertext resources also affect the practice of academic writing. I have used the opportunities which such technologies and resources afford to help students engage in intensive revising strategies; increase their awareness of the contingent nature of their own (and others’) writing practices; and to learn how to choose and critique the sources they draw upon in their writing. Along with exciting opportunities, these new resources also come with pedagogical challenges for teachers of writing who, for example, must negotiate the dynamic but often unstable environment of real-time computer conferencing; and who must help students balance their engagement with technology with an engagement with the peers who are using that technology.

My future research interests include continuing to examine the diversity of forms of academic writing and discourse, as well as investigating the complex relationships
between writing to diverse audiences within the academy and writing to audiences outside the academy. In exploring how, for example, forms such as memoir, electronic texts, and examples of professional writing inscribe audiences differently, I hope my work will help to enlighten our practices of scholarship and of the teaching and assessing of academic writing, in ways that make these practices both more intellectually rigorous and more accountable to the concerns and needs of diverse student populations. I am also interested in making further connections between my research in assessment, and the writing across the curriculum literature.

My future research therefore will continue to inform my pedagogical practice. I hope to teach courses in writing (at all levels) and in composition theory and research, for example. And I am particularly interested in collaborating with other faculty, with professional writers, and with high school teachers in developing context-specific approaches to the teaching of writing.

I believe that teaching and continuing my research at XXX University would present me with a rare professional opportunity, and that in turn my scholarship and experience would contribute substantially to XXX's mission of serving students. Please find enclosed a curriculum vitae which lists my references, as well as a statement of teaching philosophy. [I have also enclosed a few sample syllabi and assignments, evaluations from undergraduate and graduate students whom I have taught, and a copy of a portfolio composed by a 'basic' writing student with whom I've recently had the pleasure to work. I include these materials in order to help contextualize the statement of philosophy a bit more thoroughly.] Thank you for your kind consideration, and please do not hesitate to contact me at my home should you require a writing sample or dossier. In December I will be presenting a paper in San Francisco at the Modern Language Association Convention, should you wish to meet there to talk further.

Sincerely,

Margaret Willard-Traub

enclosure