As a nominee for the Board of Governors' Award for Excellence in Teaching, I think of the four-year-old me, declaring to my mother—who was a history and English high school teacher—that I would grow up to be a teacher. You could say that my determination has never wavered. Teaching has been essential to my life story, and it is such an honor to be able to write this teaching philosophy statement in my 30th year of teaching at the university level. When I think about why I teach, I can only answer: “It is who I am.” I am always a teacher, inside and outside the classroom, in my role as a professor, in my role as Associate Chair as I work with new faculty members, visiting scholars, and MA Fellows, but also as a middle school youth advisor, as a tutor for a second grader and for a high school junior, I am a teacher when I talk to my children and their friends, when I see former students who are now successful in their careers, in my daily life wherever I go, and whatever I do—I teach.

To me teaching is about relating to people, about getting them to realize their potential. What I love the most about my profession is the ability to reach people, to engage in intellectual exchange with them, to prod them to expand their horizons, and to see how the seeds of whatever class they took take root and make them bloom as individuals. Each student is a person with many talents and skills, each one is unique and marvelous, and it is a privilege to be able to touch so many lives, to engage with so many students intensely, and to see what they make out of the encounter, be it in a classroom or outside.

My teaching embraces a student-centered approach, and I mean this in a way that goes far beyond being the correct buzzword for our profession—it is my passion. The students are what interest me. I am fascinated to see what happens when they learn a language, in this case German, and more importantly, how they grow and change when they come in contact with another culture.

Thirty years in this profession have taught me that teaching is not done in isolation. It is intertwined with research and service. My teaching, research and service at UNC Charlotte have focused on the relationship and intercultural exchange between Germany and the United States. I come by this interest honestly as a native German, whose father hails from Spain. A born comparatist, my university studies led me from the University of Göttingen, Germany to UNC Chapel Hill and a PhD in Comparative Literature. While I was hired as an assistant professor of Comparative Literature and taught classes in Russian Literature, French Translation, Spanish Elementary language and German language and translation in my first year, I enthusiastically accepted the invitation to become assistant professor of German and Comparative literature in my second year at UNC Charlotte. From then on, my teaching, research and service have focused on the relationship between Germany and the United States, which is reflected in my classes, my curriculum building, the student opportunities such as excursions and spring break trips I have created, the cultural events and internships I have organized and the scholarships I have made possible.

My goal in teaching is to prepare students for a global environment that prizes knowledge of the German language and culture as invaluable. To that end, I strive to bring my research to the classroom and my students to research. My proudest moments in my teaching career have been when I was able to involve students in research that is the real world. For example, in one of my upper-level translation classes, we were following the syllabus of translating texts from a broad range of genres, when I received a request for translating a brochure for a new midwife practice in Basel, Switzerland. I offered my students that we could work on this project as a team in class, and that consequently their names would appear on the published brochure. We spent about four weeks meticulously preparing the translation of the brochure, which was published with the students’ names. A similar situation occurred when another translation class worked on translating subtitles of YouTube videos from German to English for an entire semester. The translations were created directly in YouTube and were subsequently submitted to the owner of the video before publication. Three of our translations were published. Students experienced the value of what they were learning and participated in an area of my research. I have published translations of two novels and was asked to translate another novel by one of the authors. This semester, my students are working on passages from that novel, with the understanding that if their work makes it into the publication, they will receive official credit.

My work with graduate students is similarly exciting. I am currently advising a student who is working on his Master’s Thesis for which he is creating a museum exhibit about xenophobia, islamophobia, homophobia and anti-Semitism in Germany today. I connected my student with one of my UNC Charlotte visiting scholars, Mr. Mario Röllig, a former prisoner of the East German dictatorship, who currently works as a museum guide and historical witness in Berlin. His input will allow us to guide my student’s project, a proposal of which he is submitting to the Deutsches Historisches Museum (German History Museum) in Berlin.

Another one of my more unconventional techniques of teaching can be observed in my class on the Holocaust. At the end of the class, students can choose to prepare a creative project which represents an issue we have discussed. Often, I ask them to think of a manner in which one can memorialize the Holocaust with respect for the victims. Some students have built models of monuments to the victims, others designed teaching materials for high schools, and yet others delivered paintings, poetry and even musical performances. Seeing the students’ efforts and engagement is my greatest pride when it comes to teaching.
I strongly believe that part of my teaching mission is to offer an appropriate curriculum. I have responded to the changed demographics of our students with a complete overhaul and revision of our Major and Minor curriculum, which I adjusted to students’ expectations of a language degree in the 21st century. I spearheaded the effort of curriculum revision, by streamlining the program, professionalizing the experience by eliminating surveys of literature, re-invigorating the Certificate in Business German, and Certificate of Translation and creating a new Certificate of German for Engineering. I am very proud of our curriculum that offers language, culture and professional preparation for our students. The fact that students with a German major land in executive administrative positions, in inside and outside sales jobs, as well as in graduate school shows that my approach works. In addition, I designed the Minor in Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights, which is now housed in the Department of Global Studies and supervised by the director of the Center for Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights. Finally, I also worked on the graduate curriculum and added a graduate Certificate in Translation in German which is well enrolled. Translation at the undergraduate level has also been a huge part of my teaching mission. When I was hired, there were exactly two students signed up to take the one translation class offered in the Fall of 2002. Since that would have been an overload, I was asked to combine the German and French translation classes for a total of four students. Since then, I have worked tirelessly to build up the translation program in German. Until the pandemic, we were at the point of offering three translation classes of the three-course sequence in German each semester. Students welcome the opportunity to enhance their marketability with a Certificate in Translation, of which I am the director. Such events as the Symposium in Translation at UNC Charlotte, for which I did the local arrangements, and the annual International Translation Day encourage students to work in translation. For each of these events, I encourage my students to volunteer and participate, drawing them into a professional world and showing them what it would mean to enter that world. In a similar way, I have encouraged my students to present their work, undertaken in one of my classes, at the Philological Association of the Carolinas and now the Southeastern Association of Cultural Studies, organizations in which I have served in executive capacities for many years.

The most recent innovation of the curriculum I have introduced relates to the field of Holocaust studies. It is a field I rather stumbled into than chose deliberately. As a German born in the late sixties, my generation was the first post-war generation to learn about the Holocaust. We were taught that as Germans we were to bear the burden of that collective guilt. I was never able to see how I could do something productive with that guilt. Upon my arrival in the US, I had a Holocaust survivor professor who to my surprise was willing to be my dissertation advisor. Upon coming to UNC Charlotte, I met Dr. Susan Cernyak-Spatz, German Professor Emerita, Auschwitz-Birkenau survivor who was teaching one course each Spring: The Holocaust in German Literature and Film. It is my connection to her that has inspired me to take up the Holocaust in my teaching, research and service. Initially, I sat in Dr. Cernyak-Spatz’s class, just to observe how a survivor would approach teaching this difficult subject that has featured so prominently in my own growing up and education. When Dr. Cernyak-Spatz began to have vision problems, I assisted her while she was teaching for several semesters. Finally, when she was not able to sustain the effort of teaching for a semester, I took over the teaching of her course, with two lectures per semester by her. At this point, we were still offering the course only once a year. However, the interest in this topic has never waned and we have been offering two sections every semester for a few years now. That is: we have quadrupled the students we reach each year. Upon Dr. Susan Cernyak-Spatz’s death in 2019, I have begun working on making sure that her legacy remains alive. We have made her course, The Holocaust in German Literature and Film one of the core requirements of the German major, which will be in effect beginning in the 2021-22 academic year.

My teaching goes well beyond the classroom both in the United States and abroad. In keeping with a focus on Germans in America and my research interests, I have designed three student Johnson Excursions funded by a private donor. I have taken students to New York to study German immigration at Ellis Island and to analyze their work, undertaken in one of my classes, at the Philological Association of the Carolinas and now the Southeastern Association of Cultural Studies, organizations in which I have served in executive capacities for many years.

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Even more important for students to understand the interconnectedness of Germany and the US, are the Spring Break trips I have organized. I created the concept of Spring Break trips at UNC Charlotte to be able to take a group of our students and study German history and culture and its relationship to the US on site in Berlin. Upon the success of the inaugural Spring Break trip to Berlin in 2007, I decided to expand their understanding to include other German speaking countries, and offered a Spring Break trip to Vienna, Austria. I also co-lead a Spring Break trip focusing on the Holocaust and how it is memorialized in Germany and Poland today. I took a group of 15 students to Berlin where we visited all the sites related to the Holocaust and Nazi Germany and then traveled on to Krakow Poland, where we visited Auschwitz-Birkenau, the extermination camp where Dr. Cernyak-Spatz had been held prisoner for three years. It is not possible to put into words the impact of that visit on myself, let alone on my students. In order to share the powerful experiences of the students, they created as part of their academic expectations a photo exhibit and a movie for each trip to present to students, faculty, staff and community members. The word spread among UNC Charlotte faculty and students, and to date there are sixteen Spring Break programs from a wide variety of departments at UNC Charlotte. The movie and poster exhibit that resulted from the trip which focused on the Holocaust, was very powerful and reached a large audience. The trip was so successful that the program of International Studies asked me whether they could offer a Spring Break trip to Auschwitz and eventually also a Poland/Auschwitz summer program.

Another initiative that grew out of my interest in issues of Human Rights was the inaugural Eyewitness Witness in Residence at UNC Charlotte, Mr. Roellig was invited to come to the Berlin International Film Festival since the documentary would have its first screening there. I accompanied Mr. Roellig to Berlin for one week and served as his interpreter during the discussions with the audience and director after the screenings. In recognition of the work we did with Mr. Roellig, two donors gave funds to create the Aliaga-Buchenau Witness in Residence Initiative for five years. It provides us with the means to host a three-day series of events each year with a focus on an issue of human rights or social justice. In 2017, the inaugural witness in residence event comprised a salon, public lecture, radio interview, and presentations at UNC Charlotte, Queens and Winthrop by two Syrian refugees. In 2018, we hosted a witness of the Death Penalty and in 2019 we had conversation around gender with three witnesses. In 2021, we have had conversation around gender with three witnesses.

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Another way, I have brought our students into the real world is by offering them internships. One of our star opportunities is a one-year paid internship at an international boarding school in Kirchberg, Germany. I have sent eighteen students over the last ten years to work for a year as language assistants, teaching English in a fifth-grade classroom and working with high school students in the boarding school. In addition, I became a member of the AMCHAM Internship program sponsored by Bridgehouse Law LLC, Atlanta and the Frankfurt German-American Chamber of Commerce. Each summer our students have the opportunity to be chosen for a three-month
paid internship as a company such as Porsche, McDonalds, FedEx and Deutsche Bank in Germany. I have been very successful at placing approximately three students each summer. Based on the strong interest in internships, I have worked to create an internship cooperation between our department and Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools, which resulted in an MOU allowing our students to serve as language interns in local schools. While many of our students do not intend to become teachers, they can learn so much by working in a language classroom. They serve as language models, conversation partners and tutors for small group and individual work.

My most significant contribution in terms of student opportunities is fundraising to support them with study abroad scholarships. In 2010, I was approached by Kurt Waldthausen, the president of the German Language and Culture Foundation, who was interested in linguistically and culturally literate graduates for the workforce in the Charlotte region’s 233 German-American companies. In response to his request, I designed a study abroad program in Germany where students study intensive language for one month at the most prestigious language institute, the Goethe Institut. The German Language and Culture Foundation provided $2000 (now $2500) for each student. We began with eight students and received $16,000 and since then have sent approximately 30 students with $60,000 to study in Germany each summer (until the pandemic). In total, I have received more than $600,000 over the last eleven years. The program has proven to be a huge success and has revitalized our German program. While other German programs in the country were dying, we were recognized in 2018 by the Chronicle of Higher Education as the number two German program in terms of numbers of graduating majors in the United States. At our height, before the pandemic, we had gone from approximately 30 majors in 2010 to 139 majors.

To showcase my teaching, I would like to introduce you to several of my students. Their successes are my greatest pride. First, Mr. Adam Cloer, UNC graduate of 2011 with a double major in German and History, is in many ways a product of my interest in the interconnectedness between Germany and the Americas. Mr. Cloer took advantage of everything the German program could offer: he received the German Language and Culture Foundation scholarship to study at a Goethe Institut, he worked as an intern teaching English language for one year at the international boarding school SchlossSchule Kirchberg and participated in many cultural events and excursions through UNC Charlotte. Upon graduation, Mr. Cloer pursued graduate studies at the University of Mannheim, then worked as the International Relations Officer at Heilbronn University in Heilbronn, Germany. He is now permanently employed as Director of International Affairs at SchlossSchule Kirchberg in Kirchberg an der Jagst, Germany. Mr. Cloer lives the connection between Germany and the US.

Secondly, two of my students were particularly influenced by the course on the Holocaust. Ms. Jillian Wegner was a German and International Studies Major. She took my Holocaust through German Literature and Film class, participated in the portrait exhibit with Dr. Susan Cernyak-Spatz, and traveled with me during the Spring Break trip to Auschwitz. Ms. Wegner went on to pursue an MA at the Peace University in Costa Rica, where I served as a reader on her thesis committee. Upon graduation with her MA, Ms. Wegner began teaching in the LBST curriculum at UNC Charlotte. She continues to teach LBST 2102: Global Connections in which she focuses on Media, Peace and International Conflict.

Mr. Kyle McLain was a German and International Studies Major also. As an undergraduate he took my Holocaust through German Literature and Film class, participated in the excursion to Washington D.C. to visit the Holocaust Memorial Museum and was able to accompany me on a research trip to Vienna, Austria to conduct his own research funded by the German Language and Culture Foundation. I worked with Mr. McLain for a week in the archive of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Vienna which allowed us access to approximately 8000 documents related to Nazi perpetrators and their crimes. Since he was planning to go into a graduate program of German history, I encouraged him to present a paper incorporating his research at the annual meeting of the Philological Association of the Carolinas. Mr. McLain attended graduate school at UNC Charlotte and completed an MA in German History with a thesis about Nazi war criminals. During his graduate studies, he received one of the very prestigious summer internships at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. After graduation, Mr. McLain began working for a lawfirm in Charlotte.

To demonstrate my commitment to translation, I would like to introduce you to my former student Dr. Ryan Spring. Dr. Spring was a German Major with minors in Japanese and Film Studies. He was in my translation classes and completed the Certificate in Translation in German. After graduation, he worked as a professional translator for four years. He worked for a Japanese company transferring his translation skills in German to Japanese. He translated automotive instruction manuals. He then pursued an MA and PhD in Linguistics from Tohoku University, in Japan. Currently, he is Senior Assistant Professor at the Institute for Excellence in Higher Education at Tohoku University. He has connected UNC Charlotte and Tohoku University by creating study abroad exchange programs. On a faculty led program, Dr. Spring brings Japanese students annually to UNC Charlotte for a two-week immersion experience. And with his engagement, we are coming full circle: my own student is now a professor bringing opportunities of global engagement to the current students in our department.