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To Whom It May Concern:

I write this letter to provide a teaching assessment of Dr. Paula Tallman. As Department Chair, I invited her on a colleague recommendation to teach Anthropology 105, "Introduction to Biological Anthropology," when we needed a temporary instructor in Fall 2020. This course not only serves our Anthropology majors, but also offers a "general education" requirement that draws students from all majors at the university. Our campus has a majority-minority student body, and we want our courses, especially in the Department of Anthropology, to be responsive to and respectful of this student diversity. At Dr. Tallman's request, I observed two of her classes so that she could include a peer/supervisor evaluation in her career dossier. Because we had an entirely remote teaching environment due to the ongoing complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic, these observations meant viewing a recording of her lectures, which she delivered live to students via Zoom including slides, live on-camera lecturing, and student interactions.

Let me begin by stating that Dr. Tallman is an absolutely wonderful instructor. Her lectures are well organized, carefully planned, easy to follow and understand, and full of thoughtful content. She has a dynamic, engaging personality that delivers information in a student-friendly, humorous, and nuanced way. She regularly begins her lectures with course "housekeeping" reminders and updates, and she effectively frames student engagement and success as a way to "lead" and take personal accountability. I found this inspired. In addition, she outlines where a particular presentation is going and how it relates to past and future lectures, and she refers frequently to assigned readings and films to keep students anchored in the course material. What struck me throughout her lectures is that Dr. Tallman is comfortable with herself and with students, and this creates a welcoming learning atmosphere that promotes community, empathy, and humanity in the classroom. She seems highly capable of securing student engagement during lecture (especially when illustrating the visceral impacts of stress with her "fake" pop quiz announcement!), and if she can do that in Zoom where other instructors struggle, she can easily and effectively do that in person.

In addition, Dr. Tallman displays strong mastery of course content and has already perfected ways to make content resonate with contemporary experiences of students, especially those coming from diverse backgrounds. In particular, she takes care to situate certain theories drawn from anthropology and evolutionary biology in their political contexts. For instance, she makes sure that students know that what we have learned from evolutionary biology about long-term human histories does not translate into simplistic applications to today's problems nor does it provide justification for "the way things are." These kinds of intellectual and political nuances are absolutely vital to avoid misunderstanding and misapplication, and it helps students see the relevance of the information to their world and also the accountability that professors, students, and disciplines need to have to be transformative.

In this particular course, Dr. Tallman tackles the complexities of human biology in the context of long evolutionary trajectories, specific ecological histories, cultural contexts, and systems of social discrimination (e.g., race, class). Her lecture on "Evolutionary Medicine, Obesity, and Birthing" perfectly conveyed how humans have evolved rather arduous births but how those are exacerbated by different social contexts and practices, especially those affected by racism. She also managed to add a personal touch to this lecture that helped students understand the themes and relate to her as an instructor. Notably, she did all of this on a Zoom lecture, and I can imagine this would be even more successful when face-to-face with students as she could draw them in with her animated style of lecturing and real human touch.

Dr. Tallman does not shy away from the complex topics in anthropology. Her lecture on “Race” does this with great care and subtlety. She traces students through the histories of racial classification, and she tackles the anthropological conundrum of race having no biological basis but yet having profound political and social consequence, especially related to health, diet, and other “body” contexts. I was particularly impressed with how she handled a student question about how one racially identifies themselves, as the original ask seemed, at first, like one that could derail the topic. She offered comments on her own personal situation and on systemic inequalities, and she listened carefully to that student’s circumstances, which revealed it was not a potentially derailing question at all, and used this to make insightful points about racialization and implicit bias. She seamlessly guided this right back into the planned lecture.

I truly have nothing but high praise for Dr. Tallman’s teaching effectiveness and overall performance. I was pleased to see that her teaching evaluations from this course reflected students seeing the same quality that I did. Her quantitative scores and qualitative comments indicated how much they appreciated and valued Dr. Tallman, and I am more than pleased to note that she secured the kind of positive teaching response in her one course with us that often takes more veteran instructors many years and multiple courses to achieve, if ever. My only regret is that we could not offer Dr. Tallman more courses or even a more permanent place on our faculty. Our students would love her and the freshness, care, attentiveness, and relatability she can bring. Someone will be fortunate to have her as an instructor.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Stephen Silliman". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and legible.

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