

## **PERSONAL STATEMENT**

2017 Alex G. and Faye Spanos Distinguished Teaching Award

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Department of History/Honors College (UNLV)

Dear Selection Committee:

I was surprised and honored to receive an invitation to apply for the 2017 Spanos Distinguished Teaching Award. In truth, anything I have accomplished in my five and a half years here at UNLV is due in large part to the support and mentorship I have received from my colleagues in the History Department, the Honors College, and the College of Liberal Arts at large.

My teaching philosophy pivots on one simple but deeply important idea: that *learning works best when it relates to real life*. Our success as educators rests on the degree to which we enable our students to discover connections between the course material and their own lives. In other words, my classroom (which virtually extends beyond the box of concrete and paint where my students and I meet) is designed not as a venue for me to impart wisdom but rather as a workshop where students can hone the skills and concepts they will use in their personal and professional lives for years to come. This approach flips the model of responsibility back to where it belongs: onto the shoulders of the students themselves. I challenge them to see our semester together not as an obstacle course they will pass or fail but rather as an opportunity for them to grow and develop as individuals.

Having students analyze primary documents and communicate an argument based on what they found, is critical to this process. As my syllabi reflect, I prefer to have the

students design small but potent research projects of their own because I feel that when allowed to “follow their noses,” they end up working on issues and problems of importance to them. For example, in my HIST 375 “Sports” course, a student of Pacific-Islander origin chose to study Hawaiian surfer culture because she felt it was part of her heritage. In the HON 430 “Pirates and Outlaws” course, another student focused on Jewish Prohibition-era gangsters to understand the ways in which his co-religionists had justified illegal activity. In HIST 732, a student of Italian American background focused on the historiography of Italian migration to deepen and complicate the truisms that had been passed down by family members around the dinner table.

While students are encouraged to study topics of personal interest, I balance this by insisting that they communicate what they have found in carefully crafted essays. Elucidating big ideas in crisp, clear prose prepares them to write the cover letters, grant applications, and executive reports upon which their success as twenty-first-century professionals will rest.

In sum, by allowing the students to make their *own connections* in their *own ways*, our learning relates to real life.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cian T. McMahon', with a stylized, cursive script.

Cian T. McMahon