

**Fearless Curiosity:  
Forging a Stronger Tomorrow, Together  
Fall Faculty Forum  
Monday, September 17, 3:30 to 5:00 pm  
Lang Hall Auditorium**

At the end of my time as an undergraduate English and Philosophy major at the University of Tennessee, I took a class on Shakespeare that required me to write an extensive research essay. I did enormous research and came up with what I thought was an interesting and innovative reading of one of Shakespeare's plays--Othello, I think. I knew I was on the cutting edge, ready to make my mark in the world. It was a stellar paper.

I believe I received a C+. I remember distinctly Dr. Carroll's comment at the end of my essay. "Jim--learn the rules, become an expert--and then go out on a limb and break the rules, intentionally, thoughtfully."

That comment has stuck with me my entire life. I am not, by nature, a rule follower. When I have a new home project, Sasha always wants me to read and follow the instructions. I generally don't bother. Things turn out just fine. (She would disagree.)

In the episode "Rebel with a Cause" on the podcast Hidden Brain, Francesca Gino, author of [Rebel Talent: Why it Pays to Break the Rules at Work and in Life](#), explains the balance that is needed between expertise and experimentation, and the danger that happens if we dwell on only one side of this equation.

When we become an expert in something, we learn to fall back on what is familiar. Patterns of thinking develop. We become comfortable. And the world becomes known.

But we also, then, become less innovative, less creative, and less engaged with the world around us. We are less curious. Less present. We miss things.

When we blend our expertise with experimentation, Gino asserts, magic happens. To nurture experimentation within our routines and patterns disrupts how we see the world, allowing us to be more mindful and present, more engaged with the creative unfolding of the world around us.

To live in a space that welcomes experimentation into our expertise depends upon embracing the capacity of intellectual humility where we focus not on what we know, but on what is left to be learned. Our rule-breaking then becomes constructive and leads to positive change.

How do we embrace this fearless curiosity?

I would argue that we are doing just that here at the University of Northern Iowa with the many collaborative projects that we have going on.

In the face of changes to Chapter 20, United Faculty including Joe Gorton and Becky Hawbaker worked closely with other faculty leaders and the administration to shift what was in the Master Agreement into a Handbook. That Handbook continues to be refined as a committee of faculty and administrators have come together to welcome experimentation into their expertise.

I want to single out the Faculty Evaluation Committee for the work they have done creating an evaluation process that celebrates and rewards faculty excellence and offers opportunities for continued professional development across the arc of a faculty members career. The committee includes Brenda Bass, Carissa Froyum, Chris Martin, Amy Petersen, Paul Shand, and John Vallentine—please stand. Forums have been held this fall on the evaluation criteria to get your feedback, expanding the collaboration across campus.

We have also developed a thoughtful and inclusive process for reconsidering our General Education Program. The 21 member committee which includes faculty from all colleges, staff, administrators, and students has researched best practices and has developed draft mission statements that celebrate the liberal arts and define how the general education curriculum

provides a foundation for student learning at UNI. They have also held forums to gather feedback from the university community.

Through the Office of Undergraduate Studies and the Assessment Council, we have advanced our work in student learning outcomes assessment, an essential element in our Higher Learning Commission accreditation. Beyond responding to the HLC, this work will provide faculty a deep understanding of what students are learning in our academic programs and of how we might continuously improve that learning.

We have also established a Program Vitality Committee to begin transparently sharing and using data to inform our decisions regarding resource allocation and strategic investment.

And we continue to elevate Community Engagement through our Quality Initiative, also part of our HLC work, and diversity -- in our curriculum, programming, recruitment and hiring.

As you know Recruitment will be a primary focus in the coming year.

I want to recognize Megan Holbach, Sunni Kegebein, and Carah Mabry from UNI-CUE, as well as Juana Hollingsworth from Admissions who have worked together to develop an initiative to recruit students through a new “coaching” model which will certainly impact our diversity.

In order to increase enrollment, we will also be focusing on Community College Relations, with some new efforts led by Kristin Woods in Student Affairs and Patrick Pease. And on top of that, we will begin conversations about branding and we will increase strategic marketing efforts.

A word about our budget. Over the last three years, we have worked diligently to more carefully manage our resources in Academic Affairs. We were prepared for a decline in enrollment, but because of our careful management and because we have more full time students than in the past, we have been able to balance our budget without going into crisis.

Indeed, we hired about 30 new faculty this year and are on target to hire 40 new faculty next year.

We do need to increase our enrollment, though, which is why it is a major focus. Increasing our enrollment back to 13,200 would generate an additional \$15M – and allow us to address salary issues, and to honor the commitment to allocate new dollars to reward faculty (merit, post-tenure review, distinguished full professor).

With many exciting initiatives going on, we do have other initiatives that we need to take up when the time is right. As part of the effort to position ourselves for the future, we must take a look at our Academic Organizational structure.

This would give us the opportunity to streamline our administrative overhead and strengthen program alignment and responsiveness to community needs, including both workforce needs and civic agency. Such an effort will also include a focus on our advising structure and how we mentor and guide our students.

To embrace fearless curiosity, to blend experimentation with expertise, requires us not only to be humble but also to be vulnerable, for we may fail.

As part of the Hidden Brain podcast, Gino describes a well known event that occurred in 2003: when 13 year old Natalie Gilbert sang the national anthem during the NBA finals game between the Portland Trailblazers and the Oklahoma City Thunder.

Shortly after she began, she forgot the words and fell silent. The audience gasped and prodded, aware that this little girl was about to embarrass herself.

What happened in that moment is remarkable. Maurice Cheeks, assistant coach for the Thunder, who was most certainly consumed with strategy for the game, walked over next to her. He put his arm around her and coached her on. "You can do this," he said. And he began to sing with her.

And her voice returned. And she remembered the words. And the entire crowd joined in the singing of the anthem.

Cheeks' voice was awful. He didn't even know all the words. But he stepped out of what he knew, what he was good at, and he became vulnerable in that moment.

And the crowd came alive.

I want to thank all of you, all of the faculty who work so tirelessly to offer our students opportunities not only to develop their intellectual capacities, their habits of mind, but also their emotional, psychology, and social capacities, their habits of heart and habits of spirit.

Students who journey with us have the opportunity to become whole human beings, prepared for professional careers, prepared to be active citizens, prepared to flourish and thrive as a result of the curiosity and engagement, the confidence and humility, the care and compassion, the resilience and persistence that you model for and nurture in them.