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To Whom It May Concern,

I have written many letters in support of younger scholars or even esteemed colleagues. These include graduate students who have studied with me and friends within the Barnard or Columbia history departments. But I think that none of those letters is as important as what I write in support of Rebecca Stanton, whom I know solely in her professional capacity as a teacher and pedagogue.

This statement might readily be dismissed as the usual recommendation puffery, but what I say about Stanton in this letter I convey in my forthcoming book, *Mindgames: Revitalizing Higher Education through Deep Role-Playing*. I devote much of a chapter in that book, "Building Community," to Professor Stanton.

I describe a situation that occurred a few years ago. Barnard faculty who were teaching its first-year seminar gathered to decide whether the college should continue to provide each instructor with several hundred dollars for a dinner for their class. Seven or eight professors described their heroic attempts to make the dinners special: some invited students to their homes and cooked distinctive meals; others planned an excursion to a museum with dinner afterwards. Yet each story had the same result: only a handful of students showed up. The no-shows usually sent email apologies: they were swamped with work and other obligations. The faculty voted to eliminate the dinners--and the stipend.

While leaving the meeting I was approached by Professor Stanton, a professor of Russian literature. She mentioned that her class had held a dinner on their own a few weeks earlier, and that every student attended. I nodded and we continued walking. Then I remembered that Stanton had taught her seminar the previous semester. How, I asked, could there be a class dinner when the class was over. "This was a reunion dinner," she said.

She explained that three times during the semester students had decided to hold their own class dinners. But this made no sense to me. If students were "always" overwhelmed with work and other commitments, how did Stanton's students repeatedly manage to organize, fund, and attend their own dinners? I asked Stanton if I could explore this with her students; she agreed and invited her students to contact me online.

About a half dozen did so. What the students told me was that Stanton had challenged her students so powerfully that they had little choice but to pool their efforts to work together. The social bonds they

formed were strong--and they endured. By the time I finished my manuscript, Stanton's students had graduated: By then they had held their fourth anniversary reunion dinner.

I cite the story in my book because many college administrators are seeking to address issues of retention. Many studies have shown that students who have friends on campus are far more likely to graduate than students who don't. Administrators have accordingly sought to "build community" literally--by building state-of-the-art student centers--and by expanding the "student life" bureaucracies: College-funded pizza parties and counseling and advising. But these approaches have been around for some time with negligible impact on retention. I cite Stanton's record because she did not "create" community by schmoozing with her students and chatting them up. Rather, she gave them difficult intellectual problems, inspired them to work together to find solutions, and, when necessary, provided guidance and encouragement. I know this from what the students told me.

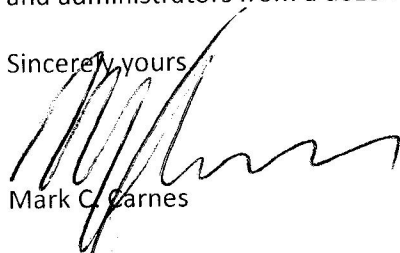
Professor Stanton has devised a new approach that promises to invigorate active-learning pedagogies, especially Reacting to the Past, which is now used by faculty at some 350 colleges and universities throughout the world. Professor Stanton has become a major figure within the Reacting community of scholars. She is routinely invited to hold faculty training workshops and to address practical issues concerning active-learning. When a higher education foundation proposed to make a promotional video about Reacting, Stanton was one of the ten faculty who were singled out to be included:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnpE2MQqNXo>.

Not everyone agrees with active-learning. Many of us (myself included) learned the "proper" professional practices of our disciplines over thirty years ago. For decades we have worked hard on our lectures and struggled to elicit discussion during seminars. Stanton, unfailingly collegial and genial, does not proselytize for her mode of active learning; rather, she inspires students and their extraordinary accomplishments create a buzz on campus. This generates plenty of chatter--and also sustained discussion--and brings student learning to the fore of campus debates. That in itself is a major achievement.

In short, Professor Stanton is a teacher who is truly exceptional. While many faculty and administrators assume that MOOCs will eventually bulldoze the profession, Stanton provides, by her own incandescent teaching, the perfect antidote. She makes the classroom vital.

If you have any questions, I'd be pleased to answer them. Or I would be happy to refer you to faculty and administrators from a dozen colleges that have profited from their interactions with her.

Sincerely yours,



Mark C. Barnes

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