

January 11, 2019

Dear Clarke Theatre Alumni and Friends,

If you value the high quality, foundational liberal arts education you received at Clarke, and believe the Arts, particularly Theatre, are critical to that foundation and to the health of civilization, and that a career in the Arts is necessary and valuable in *every* era—then now is a critical time to make your voice heard.

On December 12, the first day of final exams, Clarke's outgoing president, Sr. Joanne Burrows, communicated the decision to **end** five majors: Art History, **Drama and Musical Theatre**, Environmental Studies, Religious Studies, and Spanish. Approved by the Board of Trustees, these changes were communicated internally with no intent to announce them publicly. However, someone among the affected ranks contacted area media which then sought comment from Clarke administration.

Here is a [link](#) to a responsive interview President Burrows gave that day to KCRG, the ABC affiliate out of Cedar Rapids, IA. Two days later, a [letter to alumni](#) under her signature was posted on Clarke's web and social media sites. (If you are receiving this letter in hard copy only, please go to www.kcrg.com, search Clarke University, to find the article, "Students, Alumni upset with Clarke University's plan to cut arts majors"—and for the Burrows letter, go to www.clarke.edu/news/a-letter-from-sister-joanne/.)

Over recent years, and certainly since this announcement, information has come to our attention, either through direct experience or from sources we believe are knowledgeable and credible, that raises concerning questions about Clarke. Those questions, which await satisfactory answers, involve leadership and governance practices, fiscal accountability, and transparency regarding the kind of institution Clarke has become. For purposes of this letter, we focus only on issues related to the decision to end the Theatre majors, which we believe is extremely unfortunate and misguided. Again, while some of the following information is necessarily anecdotal, we believe it credible and worth sharing.

Assertion of Value

In her letter to alumni referenced above, President Burrows asserts, "*Declining student demand regionally, and nationally, coupled with our location far from larger cities with thriving theatre sectors, has interfered with our ability to attract sufficient enrollment to maintain the two drama majors.*" A cursory on-line search suggests otherwise. "In the past 10 years, college musical theatre programs have reported huge surges in applications, with some schools reporting an increase of 300 percent or more.... Viterbo has seen an annual 10 to 15 percent increase in student applications in the past five years." ([Dramatics](#), October 2018). Schools in the region comparable to Clarke would support this. Just this academic year, Cornell College, one hour south of Dubuque, *added* a BFA Musical Theatre to their offerings. Viterbo University (LaCrosse, WI), with twice the undergraduate enrollment of Clarke, supports 10 faculty members in its Musical Theatre program while also offering competitive sports teams (8 sports for men, 8 for women, 1 coed) yet not football. St. Mary's

University (Winona, MN) brands Arts and Athletics next to each other on their web home page, supports 8 faculty in their Theatre major, and encourages involvement by any interested student. With undergraduate enrollment of 1,171, they offer competitive sports (9 sports for men, 10 for women) but not football. As for proximity to theatre-rich cities having any correlation to the ability to attract enrollment, this is at best a specious assertion. Incoming students come from many locales and backgrounds. Those traditionally considering a theatre degree at Clarke would do so based on the prospect of accessing a deep education and direct experience in the various aspects of theatre—backstage, onstage, or front of house—with plentiful opportunities to be involved as part of obtaining their liberal arts degree. Referencing “*larger cities with thriving theatre sectors*” overlooks the thriving local theatre and fine arts scene in Dubuque. Not all schools of Clarke’s size have the good fortune to be situated in such an arts-rich, art-supportive community.

Deprivation of Support

Based on information conveyed to us, we believe the following actions by Administration, undertaken over years, reflect a deprivation of institutional support and are what led to President Burrows’ justification for cutting the Theatre majors.

- Recruitment – While common that recruiting is a part of the job for academic Arts faculty, so is an expectation of support from the Admissions office. It’s been suggested that Recruiting staff was told to focus on interacting with student athletes. Recruiters did not attend theatre-rich recruitment opportunities, such as the American College Theatre Festival or the International Thespian Festival. Clarke theatre graduates, who went on to teach theatre in area high schools with very robust programs, report never hearing from Clarke recruiting staff. A Clarke theatre alumna teaching at an intensive, industry-prep institution reports directing prospective students to Clarke Admissions staff. Those students reported never receiving follow-up.
- Technical and Physical Space Needs – The Theatre Department’s production budget has not increased in eight years, and TDH capital improvements are sorely needed. Technical production equipment is grossly outdated. Dimming units, as part of a generous donation of the existing lighting/dimming system in the 1990’s, are now over 25 years old and irreparable. The fly system hasn’t been inspected in over 10 years, with nearly half of the 16 lines having deteriorated, frozen head blocks, rendering them unusable. Terence Donaghoe Hall is in considerable disrepair. Regular flooding in the lower level extends through the scene shop to dressing rooms. (One dressing room sustains additional leakage from above, purportedly from a restroom). Sustained water damage has caused broken tiles and asbestos exposure. In the lobby, patrons vie for two one-stall bathrooms, both in poor shape. Administration *did* recently undertake cosmetic improvements (paint and new carpet in the theater) thanks to generous alumni donors—but without faculty input.

On a positive note, Administration submitted and was recently awarded a six-figure grant from the Gallagher Foundation for the stated purpose of physical plant and technical upgrades to TDH. Unfortunately, again, theatre faculty was not consulted regarding needs and budgets. Given the planned cutting of the theatre majors, one might ask, “What is the intention for TDH?” Many possibilities have been swirling, based on comments from Administration and staff—from razing

the building entirely, to renting out the theater space and turning the lower level into a work-out room for the football team which makes its debut in the Fall of 2019.

It should be noted, to the credit of faculty and students, that despite these significant barriers, Clarke was invited three years in a row (2012-14) to showcase their productions at the American College Theatre Festival regional competition where Clarke's program is held up as a quality model of theatre arts in the four-state region. This is unprecedented--a rare honor and accomplishment--and a costly undertaking, especially without institutional support.

Arts v. Sports

In her December 14 letter, President Burrows writes, *"... the assertions that these decisions were made to support expansions in athletic programming are inaccurate. We cannot keep setting academics and athletics up as rivals. Both are essential elements of the robust holistic experience Clarke provides to students today."* However, Clarke that has done just that—created an unhealthy chasm between academic and non-academic pursuits. It's Administrative leadership, Board of Trustees, and perhaps significant donors ultimately set Clarke's priorities and how funds will be allocated. Choosing to invest in 13 competitive sports teams (per Clarke's web site) while Administration has proactively worked to cut the Theatre Department (which, as President Burrows notes, has had a *"long history of excellence,"*) would understandably create a severe imbalance. While investment in *some* competitive athletic experience at Clarke may be understandable, 12 teams, combined with the costly addition of football, seems inordinate for a school of Clarke's size—and doing so at the expense of Clarke's cornerstone, Catholic-based liberal arts education is concerning. As well, with all that is known about the damaging, life-shortening effects of concussion and CTE (chronic, traumatic encephalopathy--a common football injury), a competitive football program seems antithetical to putting students and not money first. Allowing a non-academic, ancillary experience to dominate campus as well as classroom culture risks the overall quality of a Clarke education, including attracting and retaining high quality faculty and students.

President Burrows states that Clarke *"remains committed to a comprehensive educational experience that integrates the breadth of the arts and sciences and the depth of a specialized field of study in an array of programs with the acquisition of essential academic and professional skills."* It's offensive to many of us who achieved a theatre degree at Clarke to know that the institution no longer recognizes our degrees as having accorded us *"the acquisition of essential academic and professional skills."* (Indeed, both Drama and Musical Theatre are now referenced on Clarke's website as extracurricular "clubs"). We should also note that her use of the term *"breadth"* to describe a Clarke liberal arts education will soon have even more concerning relevance. Last year, Administration directed a review of General Education offerings with the goal of reducing the number of liberal arts courses required for a degree. During the Spring semester, faculty will submit revised course descriptions that continue to minimally meet required *"learning outcomes,"* and determine how to implement these changes.

Sadly, from our understanding, a number of faculty across the institution are disheartened, and morale is low. The Faculty Senate called an impromptu meeting several years ago, calling for a vote of "no confidence" in President Burrows who directed several of her senior Administrators to attend the meeting and successfully quash a vote. This seems an unprecedented step unless dissatisfaction is

considerable. We hope an incoming president will be chosen who can, among other things, proactively repair faculty relations.

This seems a particularly critical time in Clarke’s evolution. Its identity and direction are set by Administration, the Board of Trustees, and Faculty. As alumni--and especially alumni donors--we can influence their choices and have a responsibility to do so. Alumni financial support and prospective student referrals contribute to the ongoing health of the institution, but the institution must be steered with care and attention to its foundations and traditions, keeping a focus on education, contemporary methods, and not forsaking lasting values. The ancient, interdependent aspects of Good, Beauty and Truth are foundational to Catholic values. Drama, along with Music, Art, Literature, and Ritual, are deeply rooted in that foundation, and should be inviolate in guiding, providing, and experiencing a Catholic-based education. By cutting the Drama and Musical Theatre majors, Clarke appears to be moving away from its Catholic roots. Has Clarke decided to become a trend-following institution, primarily touting STEM-focused degrees with minimized liberal arts education, overly reliant on student athletes for its enrollment? Our degrees are only as valuable as Clarke’s continuing good reputation—and all of us, whether we went on to work in the theatre industry/academia or not, know how central our theatre education has been to our success in life.

Change is inevitable and should be embraced, but not at the sacrifice of what constitutes Clarke. If Trustees and Administration continue pursuing a course for Clarke that supporters think is misguided, we can—and should--let them know. We encourage you to do just that, and share this letter with other alumni and friends.

As we were unable to obtain a preferred contact list for all Trustees, we advise you to **send any communication to the current Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Board, listed below, with a copy to saveclarketheatre@gmail.com.**

Robert C. Wahlert (Chairman) rcwahlert@hormel.com Director of Corporate Development Hormel Foods 1 Hormel Place Austin, MN 55912	Mary Rose Corrigan (Vice Chair) mcorriga@cityofdubuque.org Public Health Specialist City of Dubuque 50 W. 13 th Street Dubuque, IA 52001
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If you have questions, comments, or suggestions, please email saveclarketheatre@gmail.com. Our sincere thanks for taking the time to read this, for considering action, and for your commitment to the value of the Theatre Arts.

Dave Bunting '01
Drama

Sarah Jo Burke '83
Spanish/Music

Ellen Goodmann Miller '03
Drama/English

Pam Knourek '88
Drama

Jamie Richardson '82
Drama

Karen (Huber) Ryker '68
Drama
Faculty Member '73-'84

Charlie Sturm '86
History/Secondary Education