Dear Hansford,

May I get the sappy part out of the way first? You once told me that everyone is dispensable – but I find it hard to imagine this place without you. I’ve been here for almost 19 years, and my Davidson experience seems inextricably linked to your presence on campus. No one signifies Davidson to me like you do.

And, thus, I will miss you. And there are many here who will miss you. You have been a wonderful colleague over the years; a leader of the faculty, an amazing teacher and mentor, and an exceptional administrator. We will miss your advice, your wisdom and common sense, your ability to see what is important. We’ll miss your sharp tongue, too, but also your empathy and your compassion.

When I came to Davidson, I had more to learn than I cared to admit. You helped me grow without making me feel childish. You taught me how to speak with students, with colleagues, with deans and presidents. And you taught me English – that “quote” is a verb and that “model” is a noun. I remember well my first Humanities lecture, when afterwards you gently, with a light pencil, corrected the word “tenant” in my manuscript. I was talking about the tenets of Machiavellian philosophy, as I recall. I knew that it was supposed to be “tenet.” It was a careless mistake. I was tired, I had typed all night. But I was glad that you corrected it because that’s what good editors do, and it was just an oversight that could have happened to anyone (except to you). And you had such a nice, gracious way of pointing it out without making me feel stupid. I appreciated the help then as I appreciated it many times thereafter – just as countless generations of students have appreciated your guidance over the years, among them the very best and brightest that Davidson has produced … and is producing still.

When I came to Davidson, I was asked, in my first semester, to teach two language courses and a seminar. All three were going well, I thought, especially German 201. It was a small group, seven students, and I had a good rapport with all of them. Maybe that’s why they felt they could taunt me on occasion with the plea, “We want Hansford!” “We want Hansford!” It was pitiful. And it developed into a somewhat regular chant. It was pretty funny, of course, but it was also telling. I don’t know what you did with those students in German 102, but they were well prepared for the next level and they clearly had enjoyed learning from you.

When I came to Davidson, you had already been teaching here for almost 30 years. You were no longer chairing the German department, but you were the grey eminence in the background. We all turned to you for advice. And that advice was needed because the department underwent a
series of transformations in the last twenty years alone. We were the Department of German and Russian for a long time. Then we were the Department of German, Russian, and Japanese. Remember that? We were known as the Department of Really Difficult Languages. The Department of Unromantic Languages. The Department of Unholy Military Alliances. But then we went back to being the Department of German and Russian – until Russian seceded with all its oil and gas money and we became the Department of German. And now we are the Department of German Studies, and you won’t have to deal with any of that silliness anymore.

As many of you know, before the department partnered with Duke to send our students to Berlin, we maintained our own program in Würzburg. And before that we were in Marburg. YOU, Hansford, long before you served as Davidson’s study abroad coordinator, you served as resident director in Marburg. That was way back in 1967-68. I believe you took a group of 14 students with you. What an extraordinary tribute that today, 45 years after their junior year abroad with you, 12 of those former students are with us today to help celebrate your retirement. Could I ask them, as well as their spouses and significant others, to please stand and be recognized? […] Thank you for coming, and welcome back to Davidson. I know that your time abroad was a transformative experience for all of you, and that many of you developed life-long friendships with Hansford as a result. That is very special indeed.

Hansford, let me close by saying that, like those former students of yours, I look back on my time working with you with great fondness and gratitude. You have been an inspiration to me, a mentor, and a friend. May the vita emerita be good to you. May you enjoy continued good health. May you travel, read, and write, and do all those things that you could not do while you were giving your heart and soul to this place. And then, only then, may you look forward to coming back and rejoin the Humanities staff in your 49th year of teaching. Ich freue mich darauf, und ich wünsche dir alles, alles Gute. Thank you.

Burkhard Henke
E. Craig Wall, Jr. Professor of Humanities
Professor of German and Chair
Department of German Studies
Davidson College
Davidson, NC 28035-6956