

MEMORANDUM



TO: Mark Prus, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

FROM: R. Bruce Mattingly, Dean of Arts and Sciences 

DATE: April 15, 2019

RE: Reappointment Recommendation for Eric Edlund

I am pleased to recommend Eric Edlund for a two year reappointment. This recommendation is consistent with those of the department personnel committee, the department chair and the subschool personnel committee. Because of a resignation and a sabbatical leave, the DPC included only one member.

Dr. Edlund was first appointed at SUNY Cortland in fall 2017 but was granted a leave of absence in his first semester to allow him to complete an ongoing research project in Germany. His teaching responsibilities began in spring 2018 and have included lecture and laboratory courses in the principles sequence (PHY 201, 202 and 203) as well as a 400-level course in classical mechanics. He serves as the academic advisor for ten students. He has mentored two undergraduate research students, including Nathaniel Rose who worked with Dr. Edlund in Germany in summer 2018 and presented his results at a conference held at the Max Planck Institute for Plasma Physics.

Dr. Edlund's enthusiasm for teaching is readily apparent. He has invested a significant amount of time in preparing exercises and supplementary materials for all of his classes, including a calculus review and new inquiry-based laboratories. He is working with staff from the Academic Support and Achievement Program to introduce Peer Led Team Learning (PLTL) into PHY 201. This semester, he is working with a colleague in Art and Art History, integrating problem-based learning into both of their courses as part of the Common Problem Pedagogy project.

Despite his efforts, his first two semesters of teaching at Cortland have been challenging, as he has learned more about our campus culture and students' abilities, and they have adjusted to his standards and expectations. He provided a course-by-course analysis of his teaching, summarizing his perspectives on what worked well and what needed improvement. He has sought feedback from several colleagues. Dr. Doug Armstead observed a class, stating, "There was much that was good in this lecture" while also offering several suggestions for improvement. Dr. Frank Rossi praised Dr. Edlund's use of mathematics in explaining concepts in physics, but suggested that students could have benefitted from more context and scaffolding. He observed that students were comfortable asking questions, but that some of them may have become frustrated because they did not understand Dr. Edlund's responses. Rossi reported that he met with Edlund after class and found him to be open to constructive criticism. Dr. Edlund also sought feedback from Dr. Brice Smith, who is serving as interim chair this year. In his recommendation, he stated that some of Dr. Edlund's students have taken upper-division classes from him, and that he has found them to be very well prepared.

The relatively low scores on many of the items on Dr. Edlund's CTEs are a cause for concern. Nevertheless, in his detailed analysis of these results, Dr. Edlund was able to demonstrate measurable improvement from one semester to the next in several areas. There were also some positive remarks made by students on the CTEs. However, a majority of the written comments are negative. Students expressed a variety of concerns about the level of the material, the difficulty of the exams, and their perceptions that he did not explain

concepts well. He also had a very disheartening experience in his PHY 420 class, discovering that students had cheated on a take-home midterm exam by obtaining answers to questions from an online web site. His portfolio includes a very lengthy analysis and commentary about this situation, which resulted in his filing academic dishonesty charges against every student in the class.

I appreciate the amount of critical self-reflection that Dr. Edlund has demonstrated, but I am wondering if he has over-analyzed his first year of teaching at Cortland. For instance, many faculty have written statements indicating how they intend to respond to concerns raised by students in their CTEs. However, in some of his classes, Dr. Edlund provided a rebuttal to each individual student comment, which might give the appearance of defensiveness. In spring 2018, he investigated the study habits of his PHY 201 students, reporting that he had found some “disturbing implications.” In his nine-page “post-mortem” analysis of the cheating scandal in his PHY 420 class, he did explore several hypotheses about why things went wrong, and considered whether he was unapproachable, whether his course was too difficult, or whether his lectures were flawed. Ultimately, however, he concluded that the root causes were a lack of student effort and a campus culture that encourages cheating. I applaud his willingness to confront difficult questions directly and I do not question his intentions, but I hope that he does not form overly-negative opinions about all students’ work habits, commitment and ethical behavior based on the challenging situations he has had to address so far, I am heartened by the letter from Marinda Souva, who served as a third party witness when he brought academic dishonesty charges against his students. She noted that Dr. Edlund demonstrated a calm and patient demeanor, and was focused on having students learn from this experience. I encourage him to continue to seek guidance from more experienced colleagues. He may also wish to consult with the newly-appointed director of our Institute on College Teaching. He may be able to offer insights on the best strategies for promoting effective learning and student engagement.

Dr. Edlund indicates that he feels that his progress in research has been slow because of the time he has spent in adjusting to a heavier teaching load. From my perspective, he has made some good progress. Prior to his appointment at Cortland, he published 18 peer-reviewed articles, including five on which he was the first author. Since then he has one new peer-reviewed article and had another one accepted. He also published a new technical report. He collaborated with colleagues at MIT as co-PI on a major grant from the U.S. Department of Energy that will award \$900K over three years. He also helped to write an earlier grant when he was at MIT but their policies prevented him from having status as co-PI. He reports on two projects currently in progress, indicating strong promise that he will continue to be a productive scholar.

Dr. Edlund’s service activity at SUNY Cortland exceeds the norm for most new faculty members. He has served on two department committees (curriculum and personnel) since spring 2018 and was part of a search committee this year. He has advised students at summer orientation sessions and offered ten planetarium shows at various times. Beyond the Physics Department, he was a member of the Educational Policy Committee and was elected to serve on the search for the director of the Dowd Gallery. He helped to install one of the gallery exhibitions this year. In fall 2018, he was trained to serve as a student conduct advisor. He attended the Summer Ethics Institute, participated in a civic engagement round-table, and is active in the campus UUP chapter. He received an award for campus engagement from Men of Value and Excellence (MOVE). He has contributed professional service as a referee for four academic journals. It is gratifying to see a new faculty member become so quickly engaged with the campus.

In conclusion, Dr. Edlund has demonstrated that he is fully committed to becoming a more effective teacher. He has continued to make progress on an already productive research program, and has quickly become an active and visible member of the campus community. I look forward to his continued development.

Cc: Eric Edlund, Physics Department
Douglas Armstead, Chair, Physics Department Personnel Committee
Brice Smith, Chair, Physics Department
Theresa Curtis, Chair, Math and Science Subschool Personnel Committee