It is easy to shine as a chair when you are surrounded by stars: Senior Faculty North Stars; Junior Faculty Rising Stars; and Student Emerging Stars. The 2017 University-wide Departmental Teaching Award represents the culmination of years of deliberate planning, hard work, and an omnipresent desire to express the best in the teacher-scholar tradition. My colleagues are superb and some of the most distinguished scholars not only on campus but also in the country. Our faculty members are routinely loaned out to institutions like Cambridge, Oxford, and Princeton. We are a Bancroft-winning (with Margaret Jacobs), Guggenheim-winning (with Will Thomas) faculty. As a Big Ten, Ph.D.-granting department, we are united in the belief that great teaching and great research go hand-in-hand. In fact, if I had to identify the most common theme of faculty meetings, it would be our determination to protect our teaching mission. As a chair of the Department of History at Nebraska’s Flagship, Public, Research Institution, I take great pride in this. The fact that UNL is the state’s land grant university makes our commitment to teaching more essential.

The life of a professional historian is a great life. We spend our days with queens, kings, presidents, revolutionaries, writers, painters, artists, sports icons, activists, assassins, heroes, victims, villains, and the oppressed and their tyrants from whatever historical time and place we choose. We have been trained to use our dialogical imaginations to converse with history’s great women and men, with known and marginalized leaders. We travel to archives, visit historic sites, collect material; we interview the famous and the forgotten and the unstudied out of a belief that our labors matter. We have no illusions, but we love what we do and we do what we love because we were once inspired by great teachers. This is our universal truth. Ours is a profession – a vocation – that underscores how teaching is about handing an intellectual torch to a new generation in search of its own future and understanding of the past. In this sense, our great undergraduate teachers and mentors travel on our shoulders with us each time we step into a classroom. We try to inspire through teaching because we remember the thrill of classroom inspiration. As a first-generation college student, I never forget the soaring lectures that eventually drew me like a moth to the historian’s flame. Whether writing in our campus or home offices, we do so at this level because we are full of passion and have a dogged determination to get to the bottom of things. Every one of us considers ourselves fortunate, and we do not take anything for granted. We understand that in the evolving landscape of the Big Ten and in higher education generally that we must stay in tune with our fields and with our students. We all understand that we owe it to our profession to make a commitment to teach with intention, with passion, and to inspire student excellence. Ours is a profession that not only teaches how to read and interpret material, data, and primary sources, but also how to build arguments, how to think critically about the past, and how to represent movements, individuals, systems, and ideas. Our faculty does all this with excitement and zeal.

Today, I stand before you first as a proud faculty member, and as a chair. I know that among our students sits a future Nobel Laureate, a Pulitzer Prize winner, a Poet Laureate, a CEO, a teacher, and eventually a friend. We teach not for ourselves but because teaching matters now more than ever. History matters now more than ever. Distinction matters now more than ever. And on that note, I would like to praise the serious work put into this award by my colleagues. I want to thank Carole Levin, our Undergraduate Chair who submitted the final version of our application, and Vanessa Gorman, our previous Undergraduate Chair who wrote previous versions. I want to thank Jeannette Jones, Patrick Jones, Sean Trundle, Gerald Steinacher, Margaret Jacobs, Ken Winkle, Will Thomas (our terrific previous chair), and Ann Tschetter – our fabulous undergraduate adviser – for working on our UDTA application.

In truth, I have a hard job made easier by our faculty and my extraordinary leadership team in my department (Parks Coble as Vice Chair, Gerald Steinacher as Graduate Chair, Carole Levin as Undergraduate Chair, and Dawne Curry as Chair of our all-important Research Committee). I want to thank my fellow chairs and directors for working so hard to build cross-campus relationships that keep my department dynamic, diverse, and strong. In specific, I want to thank our brilliant director of the Institute for Ethnic Studies, Joy Castro, for her leadership and devotion. I want to thank Patty Simpson for working with me in Modern Languages, Steve Lahey for working with me in Classics and Religious Studies, and Marco Abel, the fastest and sharpest mind west of the Mississippi, for working with me as Chair of the English Department. I would like to thank Kay Walter and Ken Price and the staff of the CRDH for helping build and sustain our digital initiatives; Margaret Jacobs in partnering with History as Director of Women’s and Gender Studies, and Carole Levin, who, for 10 years, has led our partnership with Medieval and Renaissance Studies as its Director. Closer to home, I want to also thank my indispensable assistants, Barb Bullington and Megan Brown. They are the real backbone of the department and keep me laughing and organized, no easy task for an absent-minded professor par excellence! The staff in the Dean’s office, especially Shelly Sorenson, Breana Garretson, Sara Mattson, and Michelle Rethwisch, deserve much praise for their unrelenting support. Lastly, I’d like to thank my dean, Joe Francisco, for his support, and Senior Vice Chancellors Donde Plowman and Steve Goddard, Chancellor Green, and President Bounds, and the Nebraska Board of Regents, for helping the Department of History at Nebraska continue to realize its Big Ten dreams. Would my colleagues in history please stand and take a bow?