



College of Education and Human Development

Nov 3, 2021

Dear Committee Members:

It is with great pleasure that I support my colleague, Dr. Theresa Wills, who is a nominee for the Stearns Center Teaching Award. In addition to her national reputation in math teaching, Dr. Wills is a true leader in online instruction. In addition to receiving notable awards for excellence in online teaching from various foundations, Dr. Wills holds a strong interest in online education as part of her research agenda.

Last year, I taught online for the first time in my career and was looking for great models. In response to my question of who could serve as an effective role model for online education, a number of my colleagues referred me to Dr. Wills. After sending her an email requesting to visit her class, she graciously agreed to let me shadow her. I had the privilege of shadowing Dr. Wills' Math Methods class in Spring 2021.

The methods classes taught by Dr. Wills were engaging; she utilized technology effectively, and incorporated various online teaching strategies into her classes. Dr. Wills was undoubtedly an excellent math teacher educator who implemented and modeled many pedagogical strategies throughout her classes and students thoroughly enjoyed the lessons. My questions to Dr. Wills about her methods of online teaching always elicited an open exchange in which she explained how she worked with the students and how she applied her methods. In the midst of the pandemic, Dr. Wills' virtual synchronous online course strategies made a huge difference to me. In my courses, I've incorporated many of the strategies I learned from Dr. Wills. I believe all Mason colleagues would benefit from her expertise in online teaching.

In addition to the online teaching strategies and math pedagogy, she introduced socially and culturally relevant math activities to her students. The data and problems she introduced were always related to real-world issues instead of synthetic materials. Her teaching centered on social justice issues and she made equity and inclusion her top priority. She has received much praise from her students, including pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, and graduate students, for the materials they learn.

Besides teaching online, she is the author of the book "Teaching Math at a Distance". This book provides best practices for how to teach online math based on research evidence. This book also provides strategies for teachers in implementing rich tasks. In addition to her book, she offers free teaching resources for math teachers on her website. Dr. Wills also hosts a weekly professional development series called *MATHurdays* for teachers and covers topics such as building community and relationships, math routines, math tasks, and rich mathematical discussions on her YouTube channel.



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She also collaborates with many professional math education institutions, works to expand professional development opportunities for math teachers, and provides coaching. In the Northern Virginia community, she is an avid volunteer in many professional organizations including Virginia Council for Teachers of Mathematics and Virginia Mathematics Specialist Leaders. Additionally, Dr. Wills is playing a leadership role in National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. In addition to her numerous keynote speeches, she has won various honors and recognitions nationally and internationally due to her excellence in online teaching. Her exceptional teaching skills, passion for online teaching, and commitment to the welfare of students and colleagues, make her an outstanding leader in math teaching and learning.

The best way to determine her effectiveness as an instructor is to listen to her students. If I had the ability to attach all the excerpts from her current and former students, I would. A few examples include:

A former graduate student: “I wanted to take a moment and thank you for being such an incredible model for online teaching. Back in spring [2020], I felt so well equipped with tools and experience that, while overwhelmed, I never felt anxious. Words cannot express how deeply fortunate I feel for the example you set for me. I still continue to use your website (and share it with my co-workers) because there are just so many valuable resources there. I truly cannot say this enough – THANK YOU! Your positivity and expertise have helped me so much to be the teacher that my students deserve.” -Emily Anderson via mailed personal note.

A current in-service elementary teacher: “Thank you for making graduate classes so engaging and fun. I felt so lucky to know you and have you as a professor. I strive to be as knowledgeable as you one day. I thoroughly looked forward to class every week. Thank you again.” -Hannah Kim via Stearns Thank-a-Teacher Message

You can see from her evaluations that she is an excellent teacher and mentor. Many of her students, including pre-service and in-service teachers, regard her as one of their favorites. The development and design of her online courses have led to many more teachers being able to teach math more effectively. In each academic year, she is a highly sought-after professor because of her reputation from previous years. To put it simply, she is an excellent instructor!

Since I have known Dr. Wills, I have witnessed how she treats everyone with the same respect she has shown me. In addition to her outstanding impact on her students, Dr. Wills’ scholarship in online teaching and math education make her a perfect candidate for this award. I highly recommend Dr. Theresa Wills for the **Stearns Center Teaching Award**. I thank you for your time and consideration.



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Erdogan Kaya, Ph.D.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Erdogan Kaya".

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