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To: ACTFL Awards Committee

From: Dick Feldman, Director Language Resource Center, Cornell University; and
President, NorthEast Association for Language Learning and Technology

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I am very pleased and honored to support Mary Toulouse for the ACTFL/Cengage Learning Faculty Development Program Award for Excellence in Foreign Language Instruction Using Technology (postsecondary). I have long respected her work at LaFayette and I have seen its significance grow beyond her own campus to achieve national influence.

I have known Mary Toulouse for well over a decade through NEALLT and other conferences and meetings. Her work has always been consistent in its themes and breadth: while working closely with students and teachers, she integrates firmly with her well-informed understanding of national movements that enhance student effectiveness and motivation in learning foreign languages. The current issue—the use of portfolios and badges in assessment, is of special moment nationally, at a time when we are rethinking the role of teachers, students and the private sector in assessing learning and teaching.

Students learn languages and address culture in strikingly different ways. This has been the major finding from my own series of interviews with student learners about their learning histories. Applying a one-size fits all approach to assessment seems ill-suited to language learning and detrimental to student motivation. The portfolio approach celebrates diverse paths and encourages learners to pursue their own directions, modes and integration of their various interests.

A commercial high-stakes test seems like an endpoint of study. A portfolio, especially with can-do statements and goals, is a midpoint check. It sets the students on a trajectory, towards the true goal of any language program – lifelong learning. It encourages students to take control of their learning and to understand it, as they present it to the world.

Greater use of portfolios and badges would require teacher time for assessment as well as training of teachers. But currently we are putting resources into private testing companies where those resources do not benefit the teaching mission; they extract resources from it and tend to guide it in negative directions. Training in portfolio methods and assessment would have a beneficial effect on students and teachers. OPI training is a perfect example of how developing expertise in assessment can have strongly positive washback effects on teaching. A portfolio assessment system would benefit our entire teaching endeavor.

Another example of Mary's integration of national themes in her work is her use of established rubrics in assessment of portfolios. For evaluating the portfolio itself, she invokes the AAUSC rubrics. Within the LaFolio system, she uses the ACTFL 5 Cs and three modes. The portfolios ingeniously combine the comprehensive ACTFL constellation of skills with the portfolio concept of self-presentation and assessment.

Mary Toulouse has been a regular and prominent presenter at the NEALLT conference, where I am currently the president. This year she presented on a variety of mixed technologies used to "strengthen student connections" in her institution's study abroad program in Spain. She has presented descriptions of this current project multiple times – in 2016 she described the use of badges as well as participating in a panel about the innovative nature of language centers. In 2013, she presented a higher-level talk about formative assessments in departmental governance.

Mary is a leader at the student and class level as well as the national level. She has presented this important work multiple times and on her website. I can think of no better effort to implement technology for truly significant purposes than the Lafayette LaFolio system.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dick Feldman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and "F".

Dick Feldman
Cornell University