This teacher is a consummate perfectionist who appreciates the enchanting allure of the ideal – never lets it go – and yet recognizes that the best teaching must eschew a dogged pedantry, that inspiration is born of imperfection, and that growth is impossible without error, and sometimes pain.

Students who come with a sincere desire to educate themselves know they are this professor's priority. As one puts it, this teacher will drop everything to “spend an hour or more at a sitting with anyone who [wants] to talk, and learn.” With a boundless generosity this professor serves as both model and mirror, showing students what the pursuit of perfection looks like while at the same time helping them recognize the talent and potential they all too often fail to see in themselves.

These are not feel-good sessions, but preparation for the hard work of mining and interpreting evidence to construct responsibly a more perfect understanding of humanity. Her bottomless faith in her students’ abilities demands nothing short of their best. As one student recalls, “she has inspired me to work harder than I’ve ever worked before...[and] to enjoy that hard work all the while.” Another, a self-described “paper-reluctant” student who contemplated quitting more than once, recalls that this teacher “wouldn’t let me, and thus I wouldn’t let me.”

Those who write a thesis with her find a true collaborator in their quest for knowledge and fresh ideas. And they, like any who work closely with a benevolent perfectionist, feel a mixture of surprise, gratitude, and guilt. Some have wondered in amazement whether she spent more time reading their thesis drafts than they did in writing them. She has treated her students to food and film, and at crunch time she has even visited the deepest corners of the library to check on their projects, and their sanity. One thesis student, painfully afflicted by the paralyzing self-doubt that a noble perfectionism can instill, remembers a tearful visit to this professor’s office: “But instead of just telling me it would be alright, [she] did something that was infinitely more helpful. She calmly pulled out a notebook and pen... We would be, she said, a team.”

Whether teaching courses in History or in the Humanities Program, she holds herself to the very highest standard of all, making her lectures true works of art. Meticulous yet passionate creations delivered with a storyteller's diction, these live on in the minds of her students as fixtures of inspiration. Whether the topic be labor radicals or an essay on manure, reports one student, this professor’s “oratorical prowess...brings the past to life in all of its exciting...even odiferous, complexity.”

Above all, students will tell you that her work with them epitomizes the liberal arts education. As one puts it, “the best teachers have the humility, courage, and curiosity to join with a class in a mutual journey of discovery.” Throughout this journey, she relentlessly challenges students to think for themselves, to question their sources, and to apply what they have learned to the broader world. And truly, as they enter that world, they go forth with greater confidence and discernment, to
live futures that are all the more rich and nuanced – all the more ideal – for their study of the past.

Because you so inspire others upon such a fascinating and eternal quest for more perfect understanding, along roads opened only by questions yet to be asked, and because you cultivate in them the self-confidence and drive to make this a journey for life, we thank you and recognize you, Vivien Dietz, as a 2013 winner of the Hunter-Hamilton Award.