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Tribute to John Grandin

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Letter to the Editor

Winifred Brownell

*Dean of Arts & Sciences
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Raymond Wright

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Dear Editor:

John Grandin, a groundbreaking entrepreneurial leader in higher education, believes in partnerships. Rather than bemoan the fact that student enrollment in German language and literature courses was declining in the United States during the 1980's, he began to build an international program that would attract outstanding students and eventually rocket the URI language programs to some of the largest and most successful in the nation. Forming a partnership over 25 years ago with then URI Dean of Engineering Hermann Viets, John, a Professor of German and Interim Dean of Arts and Sciences, along with Hermann became the first odd couple—a liberal arts dean who worked collaboratively with an engineering dean to create an excellent educational preparation and develop career opportunities for students planning to enter the global economy. As Deans of Arts and Sciences and Engineering and the current URI odd couple, we wish to pay tribute to John Grandin who answered skeptics voicing “You can’t do that!” with a resounding “Yes we can!”

From the beginning, the naysayers predicted that John’s vision would not succeed. After building the first partnerships with language and engineering educators, John quickly discovered the power of partnerships with government agencies, both in the United States and Germany, to provide external funding that opened doors and allowed for effective and more rapid program development without awaiting reallocated funds from within the University. Funds from FIPSE and DAAD as well as generous contributions from private organizations such as Max Kade Foundation and private donors such as Heidi Kirk Duffy and others provided critical support for the International Engineering Program as well as the faculty and students. As we prepared to add the Chinese language, John secured funds from both the United States and Chinese governments as well as from corporations like ZF, Hasbro and Sensata to launch the language more rapidly and effectively.

In addition to government grants and foundation support, John established strong partnerships with global firms that appreciated the value of placing URI interns and hiring URI graduates with a first-rate education in both the technical areas of engineering and in German language and culture. As the IEP added the languages of French, Spanish and Chinese to German, the same companies maintained an interest in graduates of all of the IEP languages as they expanded their businesses throughout the globe. Now the same business partners eagerly suggest languages to add next.

John forged closer partnerships with K-12 education, building and strengthening language pipelines to higher education so that students could enter the university at higher levels of language preparation. His efforts to enhance Chinese and prepare our students to reach the high levels of fluency required by the Chinese Language Flagship Program were enhanced by bringing together stakeholders who shared a common appreciation for the value of language learning and the urgency to help our students gain a better mastery of global languages to ensure their navigation and success as global citizens.

Prior to his retirement, John strengthened partnerships with faculty and deans in Arts and Sciences and Engineering as we conducted an international search for the next Executive Director of the IEP. The search resulted in the hire of Dr. Sigrid Berka, an outstanding leader and educator who has already demonstrated her ability to sustain the excellence of the program established by John and enhance various aspects of programming.

John was able to build and sustain so many partnerships because everyone gained from them. We were able to prepare outstanding graduates for the workplace of the 21st Century who were in high demand for the global workforce. Global companies and organizations were able to recruit this talented workforce. John succeeded more than anyone envisioned in part because he established the partnerships based on his integrity, talent, intelligence, persistent dedication, and gracious style that is welcomed by all cultures, communities and workplaces. John Grandin is a visionary, inspiring leader, and charming friend whose greatest legacy is the IEP.

Cordially,

The Odd Couple