

August 17, 2012

Clayton Christian  
Commissioner of Higher Education  
Montana University System  
2500 Broadway  
Helena, MT 59620-3201

Dear Commissioner Christian:

We have the good fortune to have many excellent faculty at Montana State University. On occasion, an exceptional scholar who has earned national recognition, achieved distinction in his respective field, made unique and sustained contributions to the quality of the university in the areas of teaching, research/creative activity, and outreach, deserves special recognition. Michael Sexson is such a scholar and it is my pleasure to nominate him for consideration as a Regents Professor.

Over his 48-year career, Michael Sexson has without question made outstanding and distinctive contributions in all of these areas. What sets Professor Sexson apart, however, is the extraordinarily effective integration of his skills as a master teacher with his scholarship, creativity, and imagination.

Everyone who knows Michael Sexson knows that he is a master teacher. Perennially the highest-evaluated member of the MSU-Bozeman English Department for his teaching—so far above the others that he is in a category by himself—students have always clamored to get into his classes. Over the years, his courses have been among the first to fill, and by semester's end, students are effusive in their praise. Professor Sexson generates an excitement in the classroom that makes even non-English majors turn lyrical. One Introduction to Literary Study student comments in his evaluation that Dr. Sexson had been "captivating in his narrative, stimulating students to participate." One student wrote: "The instructor has taught us how to imagine." Students in his Shakespeare course say that their experience was not only thought-provoking but life-changing and that he "breathes life and magic into Shakespeare in a marvelous and charismatic way." Students in his Mythology courses regularly use words like "fascinating" or "exciting." Here are sample student responses from just one semester:

"He brings the course to a real, personal level for us all by incorporating events from our everyday lives into the mythic script."

"So often we take classes where we sit and stare and pretend to learn, but how often do we sit and listen intently to stories—and take the stories with us? This class...has taught me a new way of perceiving the world."

"Dr. Sexson made English 209 more than just a class with a handy call number and abbreviated title. He made it a genuine horizon-expanding, eye-opening experience."

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The English Department uses a narrative student evaluation form in addition to the Knapp form. Our questions are few, but we provide room for students to expand on their views. To “What has the instructor done especially well?” students begin with statements (every semester!) such as: “Everything. The classroom seemed to disappear when he began to speak and it wasn’t because I fell asleep.” or “Everything—he is the finest educator I’ve ever known.” To the question “Is there anything the instructor should change to improve the course or his/her teaching?” student after student answers “No, it’s great the way it is.” Or “No, he does a great job.” or “No, don’t change a thing.” Many add “Thank you!”

Professor Sexson’s primary field of study is mythology, which he has always made come alive through a variety of creative teaching techniques and student assignments, including one at the heart of the subject itself—storytelling—a gift for which he has achieved legendary status. Professor Sexson was a pioneer of experiential learning long before it became a fad, yet he has always preserved a critical balance (which he has theorized and written about as well) in the master-teacher/student relationship. Over the years, this had led to a seemingly endless stream of creative courses, in which Professor Sexson has shown an almost magical ability to get far more from students than they ever thought possible, even to the point of helping students see themselves as contributors to the public arts—which they have done over and over. It is not an uncommon experience to run into doctors, lawyers, and other professionals around the state who cite Michael Sexson’s classes, more than any others, as impacting their lives. And now, having been at MSU since 1966, Professor Sexson is finding that it isn’t just the children of his first students, but their grandchildren as well who are now appearing in his classes, with two previous generations of high expectations to live up to—which, of course, he does with aplomb.

Michael Sexson’s catalogue of teaching awards over the years is unsurpassed and includes the Fridley Distinguished Teacher Award, the Burlington Northern Outstanding Teacher Award (now the President’s Excellence in Teaching Award), the CLS Outstanding Teaching Award, and the Chamber of Commerce Award for Excellence in Teaching. As a teaching mentor, he has been selfless with his time, sharing his expertise and helping new faculty in the English Department and even across campus become acculturated to the quality of teaching that he models.

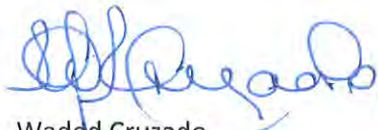
Professor Sexson’s extraordinary contributions have not only been in the classroom. He is a true scholar of “public humanities.” Representative are the interdisciplinary conferences he has organized. Especially notable was *Logon ’83*, an interdisciplinary gathering which drew thousands to MSU to engage the issue of “Literacy, Technology, and Mythology.” This event won the 1984 Schwartz Award for Outstanding Humanities Conferences in the United States. Other memorable conferences include *Eclipse ’79*, which drew scientists and humanists from around the country to celebrate the total solar eclipse visible in Bozeman that year; *Resiting, Resighting, Reciting the Future*, a conference on memory and imagination; and *Yesterday’s Tomorrows*, an exploration of the humanities/museum interface.

Professor Sexson has taken his interdisciplinary creativity into print through the humanities print journal *Corona*, which since the advent of the internet has evolved into a multimedia enterprise, Corona Productions, featuring conferences, seminars, and other activities in the public humanities. Most notable recently was the film *My Book and Heart Shall Never Part*, premiered here at the Emerson Center for Art and Culture in Bozeman, and last year the Reader's Theatre production of *The Book of Many Colours*, a celebration of the birthdays of the King James Bible and Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Dr. Sexson has also served as Chair of the Montana Committee for the Humanities (2003-04). From 1977-1988, he conducted *Views and Reviews*, a weekly radio show on humanities related issues.

Michael Sexson's work has, of course, appeared in print over the many years of his career. He published a book on Wallace Stevens and has written dozens of articles and reviews for academic journals, edited volumes, and popular periodicals. In addition, his written work on mythology has been widely used in the classroom by other scholars of mythology, most notably his "Myth: The Way We Were or the Way We Are?" in *Introduction to the Study of Religion*, edited by T. William Hall (Harper & Row, 1978), and "The Déjà vu Glitch in the Matrix Trilogy," in *Jacking in to the Matrix Franchise: Cultural Reception and Interpretation*, edited by Matthew Karella & William G. Doty (Continuum, 2005). Moreover, he maintains connections to a broad community of scholars in diverse fields who admire and respect his work. In addition to this outreach, Professor Sexson has served in many ways in professional organizations and scholarly societies. And no one who has been to an MSU commencement can forget the richness and warmth of his voice as he flawlessly read the names of our graduates.

Regents Professor is the most prestigious title that may be granted in recognition of accomplishments by a faculty member, I believe the singular career of Professor Michael Sexson makes him the ideal candidate for such an honor. We ask the Board of Regents to approve this nomination.

Sincerely,



Waded Cruzado  
President