

November 21-22, 2013

ITEM 161-2001-R1113

**Authorization to Confer the Title of Regents Professor Emeritus of English on Dr. Michael Sexson,
Montana State University**

THAT

Upon the occasion of the retirement of Regents Professor Michael Sexson from the faculty of Montana State University Bozeman, the Board of Regents wishes to extend its appreciation for his years of dedicated and valued service to the University, the College of Letters and Science, and the State of Montana.

EXPLANATION

Michael Sexson came to the Montana State University Department of English, fresh from an MA program in the Speech Department at Penn State, in the Fall of 1966 as an Instructor in Speech and English—at a full-time salary of \$6600 a year. Leon Johnson was president of the University at the time. His first assignment was teaching freshman courses in Communication and Speech. A prescient letter of recommendation, however, spoke of his strengths and potential in literature: “In the event that the position in question should entail the teaching of literature at an undergraduate level, I must indicate that Mr. Sexson is uniquely qualified, in my opinion, primarily due to his extraordinary breadth of acquaintances with literature of all kinds and to the particular sensitivity and capacity for understanding which he brings to this—for him, very primary—interest.” In pursuit of that interest, Sexson took a sabbatical and two year-long leaves of absence from MSU to study for a doctorate in the Department of Religion at Syracuse University, receiving his PhD in religion and literature in 1976. It was at Syracuse that he explored in depth his fascination with philosophy, religion, myth, poetry, and literature—in the latter focusing his attention on Wallace Stevens. Sexson returned to MSU in 1976 and began his lengthy career as a teacher and scholar of literature.

It is nearly impossible to convey the impact that Prof. Sexson has had on his students—as well as the university, the community, the state, and the profession. Of course, his scholarly contributions have been many—from his insightful book on the “quest of self” in the poetry of Wallace Stevens and scores of book chapters, articles, and reviews, to his editorship of *Corona*, a journal of artistic and literary expression and his production of a documentary film on literacy and children’s primers, *My Book and Heart Shall Never Part*. Sexson has been a compelling voice for the humanities his entire career.

But it is Michael Sexson’s teaching that perhaps constitutes his greatest legacy. To call him a master teacher does not begin to do justice to his impact in and out of the classroom. It has been a long-standing tradition in the department to hear from his students how Prof. Sexson has opened their eyes, minds, and hearts to the meaning and applications of literary texts from a host of traditions. They speak of the inspiration that comes from his lectures, the excitement of discovery that he evokes, and the engagement with texts and with one another that naturally emerges from his thoughtful guidance. In a day when the value and relevance of the humanities are being questioned, Michael Sexson unswervingly bears the standard of looking to literature, myth, and history for a deep understanding of the human condition and a rich application of learning to the issues and possibilities in our lives.

It is difficult to imagine life in the English Department—and at MSU—without Prof. Sexson. But the deposit he has left will accrue interest for a very long time. Michael Sexson is the quintessential Professor Emeritus.