


Memorandum

To: Bruce Mattingly, Dean, School of Arts and Sciences
From: Jenn McNamara, Chair, Fine Arts and Humanities Sub-school Personnel Committee 
Date: March 31, 2026
Re: Promotion of Samuel Avery

The Fine Arts and Humanities Sub-school Personnel Committee does not recommend Samuel Avery for promotion to Professor in the Communication and Media Studies Department. This unanimous decision is based on Professor Avery's dossier, which details his performance in teaching, scholarship, and service, and does not support the positive recommendations of the Department Personnel Committee or Chair. After carefully reviewing his materials, the FAHSSPC concluded that Avery has not met the minimum expectations for the rank of full professor at this time.

This was a difficult decision for the FAHSSPC because all members noted that Avery had assembled a very attractive, professional-looking portfolio, although it was unfortunately incomplete. Several deficiencies were identified regarding evidence. Most importantly, there was no timely, academically focused External Review letter that meets the requirements outlined in the College Handbook 220.07 (A.5) and the policies of the Board of Trustees. The six letters provided on 3/28/26 praised Avery's skills as a Film Festival organizer; however, they did not address his contributions to the university. While external reviews are not the only factor in the evaluation, it is essential for the candidate to submit review letters that fulfill the purpose of this specific requirement for all full professor candidates at SUNY Cortland—to provide external scholarly and intellectual assessment. The committee notes that Avery did not effectively respond promptly to the requirement to submit an External Review. ("External Review" refers to the solicitation of an evaluation of scholarly, intellectual, and creative achievement as outlined in Section 220.07.E by qualified professionals outside SUNY Cortland.) Additionally, the committee was surprised that the CMSDPC and the CMS Chair did not note the absence of this requirement in their assessment of Avery's promotion application.

Aside from the lack of an appropriate external review for this process, the FAHSSPC also noted other missing documents, such as CTEs, since his last promotion. Avery included his 2013 CTEs, which he collected during his first year at SUNY Cortland, and he acknowledges that he might not have saved hard copies or requested digital copies from the online bank before last year's deadline. Avery attributes much of the missing documents and details usually included in a dossier on the effects of COVID-19. He also points out the pandemic's negative impact on his teaching efforts, particularly his inability to lead with his best pedagogy as a teacher who creates opportunities for practice and doing. While it's commendable that Avery emphasizes this experiential approach to teaching, he may need more time to gather sufficient evidence of his commitment and its success, now several years after returning to campus teaching post-pandemic.

Teaching

This review area appears to be the most incomplete, as although Professor Avery teaches multiple classes beyond the usual three per semester, there is a lack of available evaluations. He attempts to address this challenge by demonstrating the value of his teaching through student feedback. He includes CTEs from Fall 2024 through Spring 2025 (the last academic year). However, he seems not to have collected CTEs during Fall 2025, nor from Spring 2018 to Spring 2024. In his portfolio, he has marked these as "Missing" in red ink but states he is "currently in the process of tracking them down." Avery's smaller class sizes, due to his team-based filmmaking format, likely contribute to only 2 or 3 responses from 12 students on many CTEs. Some students commented that Avery conducted a "good class" and is a

“great prof” because he allows time for creativity. This part of his teaching record could be stronger with more evidence, especially considering the numerous missing CTEs. Though he included observations from colleagues Tyler Bradway (Nov. 2018), Larissa True (Jan. 2019), and Paul van der Veur, chair of CMS (Oct. 2017), the most recent course evaluation was from Spring 2024 at Tompkins Community College, where Avery teaches regularly. To improve future reviews, more samples like syllabi, course outlines, and examples of best practices and assignments would be helpful. The limited data makes it hard to identify trends or assess consistency in record-keeping. In his brief, Avery acknowledges that the CTE process does not seem to be effective for his classes. The committee encourages him to develop and implement a new system for measuring and evaluating his teaching.

Creative Accomplishments

The most significant impact of COVID on Avery’s scholarly achievements seems to be in his creative work. Before his promotion to Associate Professor in 2019, he completed several films within his first six years. In his 2019 letter from the CMSDPC, they noted that he should be recognized and rewarded with a promotion for those films. Since 2019, when Avery was last reviewed and granted tenure and promotion, he has made two short films, *The Catch* and *Nutz and Bolts*. He shows no additional films or festival entries after 2021 on his Personnel Action Form. In 2019, he was very active, showcasing his films *The Catch* and *Nutz and Bolts*—both made that year—at several regional and state festivals. He appeared twice out of state and once in Canada for an international screening. However, the absence of details about the dates of showings, works completed, or documentation verifying attendance and participation suggests that the last year he produced new work was 2019, the year he applied for and received his promotion. Although Avery has collaborated with students on senior projects and in his Pro-Lab share collective, he has not provided clear evidence of other films produced and circulated for peer review. The FAHSSPC recommends that Avery include specific evidence of any films sent out for review to demonstrate his ongoing efforts as a film scholar and artist. Possible evidence includes festival programs, award certificates, acceptance or rejection letters. Additionally, he should clarify his role in film projects. Avery mentions spending more time writing screenplays since COVID, but sharing published pieces or drafts for review would better show his continued work as an experienced scholar.

Service

Professor Avery has actively engaged in departmental service since his last promotion. He mentioned work on curriculum, personnel, and search committees, which is commendable. However, it seems a disservice to himself that Avery does not clearly specify his committee appointments, including dates and titles, as a member or chair. Providing these details in a chronological curriculum vitae would be beneficial. It also appears that Avery may not have served on any school-level or university committees since 2019, though this is unclear from the provided information. It seems he has not yet met the specific expectation for those seeking promotion to Professor to demonstrate their commitment to service and senior leadership on campus by leading a committee. The College Handbook offers several suggestions for how a candidate can showcase leadership in service, such as participating in faculty governance, working on cross-campus initiatives, contributing to regional, national, or international associations related to the discipline, or engaging in conference work or with SUNY platforms.

The Committee commends Avery for founding the Blackbird Film Festival. As seen in his earlier portfolios before his tenure, he organized a successful film event that provided engaging entertainment for our local Cortland community. Many emerging filmmakers received a warm welcome into the independent film scene through Blackbird. The festival offered students opportunities to review incoming films and serve as event organizers onsite, giving them valuable experience. Many viewed it as a proud achievement for the CMS Department and a pivotal moment for students seeking creative outlets. However, some committee members voiced concerns that Avery seemed to present Blackbird as a leading example of his community service, innovative teaching, and creative scholarship. It is recommended that he be cautious about showcasing this significant work across multiple categories.

Considering the lack of vital evidence supporting his creative work and achievements, his service beyond department duties, and documents demonstrating his potential for effective teaching since his last promotion in 2019, the FAHSSPC cannot endorse Samuel Avery's promotion at this time. Avery explains his struggle to create and teach creatively since the pandemic, explaining it "disrupted traditional exhibition opportunities and shifted my creative focus toward sustaining cultural infrastructure, this individual practice remains central to my identity as a filmmaker and informs both my teaching and collaborative production work." All committee members understand that the challenges of COVID were discouraging barriers to our efforts as creators, scholars, teachers, and service providers, but we encourage Avery to find new pathways and keep detailed records of his successes as he moves forward.

cc: Samuel Avery
Moyi Jia
Paul van der Veur

Clarification of Materials Submitted for Promotion Review

Dear Dean Mattingly and future evaluators,

Thank you for your time and continued consideration of my application for promotion to the rank of Professor. I appreciate the opportunity to provide a brief clarification in response to several points raised in the Fine Arts and Humanities Sub-school Personnel Committee review, with the goal of ensuring that my materials are being understood as intended within the context of SUNY Cortland's promotion criteria.

First, with respect to teaching materials, I would like to clarify that **full access to my course content was provided through my instructional platform** which was included in my portfolio as a "sandbox" environment for evaluators to access via the provided link. **This site contains complete syllabi, lesson structures, assignments, and instructional materials across 14 total courses.** While these materials may not have been presented as static documents in a traditional dossier format, they were made fully accessible in a dynamic format designed to reflect the structure and delivery of my teaching practice. I hope this clarifies that comprehensive documentation of my teaching was, in fact, provided.

Second, regarding creative activity, I would like to clarify the nature of my work through the ProLab initiative. While my individually authored films (*The Catch*, *Nutz & Bolts*) represent one dimension of my creative practice, my work since 2019 has evolved toward a collaborative production model that reflects standard practice within the field of filmmaking. As a medium, film is inherently collaborative, and creative authorship is typically expressed through roles such as director, producer, and creative lead rather than through single-authored works.

Within this context, I serve as the primary creative lead on ProLab productions, guiding projects from concept through completion while working in collaboration with students. These films are developed under my creative direction and authorship, representing an extension of my scholarly and artistic practice. **Since 2018, this work has resulted in more than 25 short films (averaging approximately two productions per semester), twelve of which have received official selections at regional festivals,** including the Buffalo International Film Festival, Syracuse International Film Festival, and Phoenixville Film Festival, among others. As part of this cycle, I also coordinate field trips with students to represent our selected films at the various festivals where they have been selected to screen.

This model reflects a practice-based approach to scholarship in media production, where creative inquiry is expressed through sustained, collaborative production and public exhibition. Within the norms of the discipline, these works function as authored creative outputs and contribute to an ongoing program of scholarly and artistic activity. It is my sincere hope that evaluators of this portfolio do not think I *stopped* producing work in 2019 as that could not be further from the truth.

Finally, I would like to provide additional context for the [Blackbird Film Festival](#), which represents the **most significant and sustained component of my creative activity and leadership work.** Blackbird is not a one-time or isolated event, but a year-round, multi-faceted creative enterprise that I have directed continuously since founding it in 2015. Each annual festival requires extensive curatorial, organizational, and creative labor over the course of many months, including programming, artist outreach, partnership development, and the securing of approximately \$35,000+ in annual external funding through competitive grants and sponsorships. In this way, Blackbird functions similarly to an academic

conference or edited volume within the field of media arts: it is a site of peer review, dissemination, and scholarly exchange for independent filmmakers. Its sustained operation over more than a decade reflects an ongoing program of creative inquiry and institutional leadership rather than a singular past accomplishment.

In light of the Sub-school committee's concern regarding the presentation of Blackbird across multiple evaluative categories, I would like to clarify how this work aligns with the expectations of teaching, creative activity, and service as outlined in the SUNY Cortland Handbook. As a teaching endeavor, Blackbird is directly integrated into my curriculum through courses such as CIN 305 (Film Criticism) and CIN 429 (Festival Planning and Promotion), where students engage in film analysis, programming, and event production as part of their coursework. As creative activity, my role as Artistic Director involves the curation and development of the festival program, a process comparable to the editorial and scholarly decision-making involved in assembling an edited volume or conference program. As service, Blackbird operates as a public-facing cultural platform that serves SUNY Cortland students, the regional community, and the broader field of independent filmmaking by providing a space for exhibition, dialogue, and professional engagement.

Taken together, these dimensions reflect the integrated nature of practice-based scholarship in media production, where teaching, creative work, and service are not discrete activities but interconnected components of a sustained professional practice.

My intent in sharing this clarification is not to challenge the committee's review, but to ensure that the scope and structure of my work are clearly aligned with the expectations outlined in Chapter 220.07 of the SUNY Cortland Handbook, particularly as they relate to teaching effectiveness, sustained creative scholarship, and leadership. As noted in my application, my work is grounded in a practice-based model in which teaching, creative production, and service are intentionally interconnected. I understand that this model may differ from more traditional forms of scholarly output, and I appreciate the opportunity to further clarify how it fulfills the criteria for promotion.

Thank you again for your time, consideration, and guidance throughout this process. Please let me know if any additional information or documentation would be helpful.

Respectfully,

Sam Avery