

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Ann McClellan, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

**FROM:** R. Bruce Mattingly, Dean of Arts and Sciences

**DATE:** April 15, 2026

**RE:** **Promotion Recommendation for Samuel Avery**

After a careful review of his application, I regret that I am unable to recommend Samuel Avery for promotion to the rank of professor. This recommendation is consistent with that of the subschool personnel committee. The department personnel committee and the department chair both recommended in favor of promotion.

In his teaching philosophy statement, Avery highlights his emphasis on providing students with experiential, production-based learning opportunities, and the limited evidence that he provided suggests that he has been successful in doing so. He reports that he was unable to locate any of his CTE results from fall 2018 through spring 2024. This is unfortunate, since this review focuses primarily on his accomplishments since his last promotion in 2019. He did include CTE results from fall 2024, spring 2025 and fall 2025, all of which included mean scores ranging from 4.1 to a perfect 5.0. A few students provided written comments, and most of those were positive. One student wrote, "This is genuinely my favorite class I have taken in the entire three years I've been in college. There needs to be more classes like this that stretch my abilities in filmmaking and there needs to be more "hands on" classes where we actually go out and MAKE movies. I can't express how much I have learned from this class experience, and I'm sad that there aren't more classes like this available to take. Out of all the classes I have taken, this is one of the few classes where it actually feels like I learned something valuable for my specific career path. PLEASE MORE CLASSES LIKE THIS." Avery notes that he has experienced much lower response rates since CTEs were moved to online administration, and reports that he has begun relying more on informal feedback that he solicits from students during the semester through class discussions, informal check-ins, and project reviews. He writes, "I have found this process of continuous reflection and adjustment to be far more effective for supporting current students than relying on anonymous evaluations submitted after a course has concluded." Kerry Curran, a professor of English at TC3 observed an online class that Avery taught in spring 2024, declaring that "I would like to use Sam's online asynchronous course set up as the gold standard for other courses in this modality. So logical, inviting, accessible, varied, and interesting. Well done!" In addition to his classroom teaching, Dr. Avery carries an advisement load of about 30 students per year, and has mentored several senior thesis projects. In 2018, he founded the ProLab, that he describes as "a voluntary, co-curricular production initiative that allows students to engage in professional-style filmmaking outside of required coursework ... it is an opportunity for students who want to go further to collaborate with me on writing, producing, and exhibiting original films." Over the years, this has resulted in 23 projects. While he lists this work under the heading of research and creative activity, I believe that this work is more properly classified as teaching, particularly since several of these projects were specifically described as collaborations with classes that he was teaching. One of the projects was a 3-minute "welcome back" video for SUNY Cortland that might fall more into the service category.

Avery's service contributions to the Communication & Media Studies Department have included membership on the department personnel committee since 2019, curriculum development work for the Media Production and Cinema Studies programs, chairing faculty search committees, and serving as the faculty advisor for a student organization. Beyond the campus, he served as an external reviewer at SUNY Brockport in 2023. He has contributed professional and community service to the Cortland County Convention and Visitors Bureau, the CNY Arts grant program, and the Academy at Syracuse Studios. By far, his most substantial service activity has been his ongoing leadership of the Blackbird Film Festival, an annual event that has showcased the work of independent filmmakers, provided numerous internship opportunities for our own students, and brought regional, if not national, attention and visibility to SUNY Cortland. The festival received external support from the CNY Arts council, ranging from \$4,000 to \$8,500 each year from 2019 to 2025. His portfolio includes several letters of support from professionals in the film industry, all of whom praised his leadership, vision, and organizational skills. For instance, Carl Hansen, Vice President of Production for Original Programming at Fox Sports, wrote, "Sam's work with Blackbird reflects a forward-thinking approach that not only supports individual artists, but also contributes to broader conversations about equity and access within the film community." Debra Markowitz, founder/director of the Long Island International Film Festival (LIIFE) stated that under Avery's direction, "Blackbird has grown into a vibrant, thoughtfully curated, and artist-centered festival that fosters genuine community and meaningful dialogue."

Throughout much of his career, Avery's creative activity has focused on screenwriting and filmmaking. His Personnel Action Form lists 12 independently produced films that he created between 2004 and 2019. Many of his films have received awards and other recognitions from film festivals, and some of those awards were received in 2020 or 2021 (after his promotion.) However, his focus shifted after the pandemic. As he explains, "the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally disrupted the global independent film exhibition ecosystem. Festivals were cancelled worldwide, and the primary venues through which independent films are reviewed and disseminated temporarily ceased to exist. In response, my creative focus shifted away from individual authorship and toward sustaining the creative spaces that make independent filmmaking possible. In short, I turned my full attention to the preservation of the Blackbird Film Festival." In fact, he argues that his work on the festival "represents a sustained creative activity involving film curation, programming, community engagement, and creative leadership." He goes on to say that Blackbird "serves as a platform for independent and student filmmakers and contributes to regional arts culture while maintaining professional standards consistent with peer-reviewed creative activity. Since its inception, Blackbird has grown in scale, reputation, and participation, requiring year-round creative planning and organizational effort. This ongoing work reflects a significant commitment to creative production, artistic evaluation, and public dissemination of film as a scholarly and creative practice." I do not question the amount of effort that Avery has put into this project over the years. Through the Blackbird Film Festival, he has unquestionably made a significant and sustained contribution to the independent film industry, but fundamentally, the work he is describing is service, not creative activity. This work may be analogous to serving as the editor of an academic journal, where the scholarly and creative work of others is vetted and disseminated. However, such editorial work falls into the category of service to the discipline.

As noted above, Avery provided external recommendation letters from six professionals who work in the film industry. However, none of them addressed the central question, which is whether his work with Blackbird should be considered as peer-reviewed creative work, and whether that body of work is sufficient to meet the academic standards expected at the university level for faculty seeking promotion to the rank of professor.

In conclusion, I believe that Avery has satisfied the criteria for promotion in the areas of teaching and service, particularly in the latter area, where he has excelled. However, he has not provided sufficient evidence that he has presented a “record of sustained intellectual inquiry, research, or creative peer-reviewed work since promotion to associate professor...” as required according to Chapter 220.07 of the SUNY Cortland Handbook. In his portfolio, Avery writes, “I have also continued to write original narrative work, including feature-length and short screenplays ... this individual practice remains central to my identity as a filmmaker and informs both my teaching and collaborative production work.” I encourage him to return to this work, and I would welcome the opportunity to consider his application for promotion in the future when he can provide clearer evidence that he has satisfied all of the criteria.

Cc: Samuel Avery, Associate Professor, Communication & Media Studies Department  
Moyi Jia, Associate Professor and Chair, Communication & Media Studies Department Personnel Committee  
Paul van der Veur, Professor and Chair, Communication & Media Studies Department  
Jenn McNamara, Professor and Chair, Fine Arts & Humanities Personnel Committee

# Response to Promotion Recommendation:

## Clarification and Reconsideration of Creative Activity Classification

Samuel Avery

4/15/2026

Dear Dean Mattingly, Provost McClellan, and President Bitterbaum,

Thank you for your time and consideration in reviewing my application for promotion. I appreciate the recognition of my contributions in teaching and service. I write to address a central issue in the evaluation of my record: the classification of my creative work.

I will be direct, as this point is fundamental to the outcome of my application: the conclusion that my work does not constitute sustained creative activity appears to rest not on a lack of output, but on a reclassification of that output. **I respectfully but firmly disagree with that reclassification.**

With regard to my film work, including projects developed through ProLab: the films included in my portfolio are original works that I have written, directed, and produced. The involvement of students reflects the collaborative nature of filmmaking and does not diminish authorship. These projects extend beyond formal course requirements and represent independent creative production.

Importantly, the integration of student collaboration within my creative work has been consistently recognized in prior evaluations as a strength - not a basis for reclassification. In Dean Mattingly's 2019 evaluation, my work was described as follows: **"His creative activities are fully integrated with his teaching, as he involves students in many aspects of the production process."** This understanding is reinforced in my 2018 reappointment, where my films were recognized for regional, national, and international impact, alongside the observation that I **"actively engage students in the creative process."** At no point was this integration treated as disqualifying creative activity. On the contrary, the recommendations provided in my 2019 review cycle encouraged the continued integration of creative production, student collaboration, and public-facing work which is **precisely the model I have deliberately sustained since that time.**

Similarly, while I fully recognize that the Blackbird Film Festival represents a significant service contribution, **it has never been evaluated as service in isolation.** From its introduction in my 2016 reappointment, both as a creative initiative and as service to the community, through subsequent reviews, **Blackbird has consistently been evaluated as part of an integrated body of work that includes film production, student collaboration, and public-facing creative practice.**

Across my reappointments, promotion to Associate Professor, and continuing appointment, this integrated model was evaluated collectively and found to meet expectations for creative activity. At no point was this structure identified as insufficient or ineligible as **part of a sustained creative trajectory.**

Further, to ensure that the full scope of my creative activity is clearly represented, I would like to highlight the following independently developed work completed since my last promotion:

- *Romeo and the Rejects* — 138 page feature-length screenplay (2019; revised 2021)
- *MyGene* — short screenplay (2020), finalist for the CNY Arts Film Fund (\$40,000 grant)
- *The Catch, Nutz & Bolts*, and *Cravings* — short films (2019) with festival selections and awards spanning 2019–2021; made without student involvement.

- Films **independently written/directed** by me since my last promotion in collaboration with students engaged with my ProLab initiative: *The Mayor* (2019), *Managed* (2023), *The Proposal* (2023) *Brian's Special Pencil* (2024), *Call Back* (2024) *Cherub* (2024), *JAAQ* (2024)
- Interdisciplinary film collaboration (2023–2024) with faculty in Literacy Education to produce a three part Literacy Coaching Film Series ([LINK](#))
- Ongoing development of a feature-length screenplay, *Last Wish, LLC* (sabbatical approved for Spring 2028)

Taken together, this body of work reflects sustained, ongoing, and independently generated creative activity in screenwriting, film production, and interdisciplinary media work since my last promotion.

Given this record, **I find it difficult to reconcile how both this independent work and the integrated model of my creative practice (previously recognized across multiple levels of review) are now being interpreted in a way that excludes substantial portions of that work.**

The current evaluation acknowledges that this work has made “**a significant and sustained contribution to the independent film industry,**” yet concludes that it does not meet the standard of creative activity. This presents a clear and unresolved tension between disciplinary impact and evaluative classification.

I would also note that my application was recommended for promotion by both the department personnel committee and the department chair - colleagues working within the field of communication and media production. The divergence between those discipline-based evaluations and the current recommendation raises important questions about how creative work in collaborative, production-based disciplines is being interpreted at different levels of review.

If original films that I have written and directed are classified as teaching due to student involvement, and if curatorial and programming work is classified solely as service, **then a substantial portion of creative practice within film and media risks being systematically excluded from recognition as creative activity.**

Finally, I would like to clarify the issue of missing CTE data. I have consistently requested and reviewed course evaluations throughout my time at SUNY Cortland. The absence of earlier materials in my file is the result of a transition in the college's evaluation storage system, which rendered those records inaccessible. This was not an intentional omission, and I regret not recognizing the need to independently archive those materials prior to that transition. I am currently exploring options to retrieve this data, should it still be available.

**In light of the clarifications provided above, I respectfully ask that you reconsider your evaluation of my record, particularly as it relates to the classification of my creative activity.**

I fully respect the standards for promotion. At the same time, I believe it is important to clearly articulate when the application of these criteria may not fully align with the nature of creative work in a given discipline, particularly when prior evaluations have consistently recognized that work differently.

I remain committed to my work as a filmmaker, educator, and contributor to the field. Thank you again for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Sam Avery

Associate Professor

Communications and Media Studies, SUNY Cortland