

# Promotion Application Letter

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From:

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To:

The Evaluators of this Academic Portfolio,

My name is Sam Avery, and I joined the Communication and Media Studies Department at SUNY Cortland in August 2013 after earning my terminal degree (MFA) in Media Arts Production from the University at Buffalo. In 2019, I received continuing appointment and was promoted to the rank of Associate Professor. From the start, my work at Cortland has been driven by a belief in the power of storytelling and visual media to connect people, document lived experience and give voice to ideas that might otherwise go unheard.

That belief has shaped every part of my career as a filmmaker, event director, and educator. In 2015, I founded the [Blackbird Film Festival](#), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to celebrating independent filmmaking and building a creative community in Central New York. I have served as Blackbird's Executive and Artistic Director since its inception and have organized ten annual festivals in Cortland. At present, I am coordinating the 2026 event scheduled for early Summer in Syracuse, New York. In 2018, I also launched the [ProLab](#), a collaborative production initiative at SUNY Cortland where media production students and I work side by side each semester to create original short films and share them with regional audiences outside of required classwork and assignments.

With this said, my scholarship exists primarily as **film productions, festival events, and student-driven creative projects**, which may look different from more traditional text-based research. However, the core of my work remains the same: sustained creative inquiry, mentorship, peer review, and community engagement with and for media arts. Therefore, I respectfully submit the following link to my digital portfolio as my application for promotion to the rank of **Professor**.

**PORTFOLIO LINK** ► [www.SamuelAvery.info](http://www.SamuelAvery.info)

According to **Chapter 220.07: Criteria for the Continuing Appointment and Promotion of Academic Faculty** of the SUNY Cortland Handbook, faculty seeking promotion to the rank of professor are expected to demonstrate:

- **Section A)** a record of success in promoting student learning through reflective inquiry into teaching practices;
- **Section B)** a record of sustained intellectual inquiry, research, or creative peer-reviewed work making a significant contribution to the field; and
- **Section C)** a record of sustained leadership across the department, school, university, SUNY, profession, and community.

What follows is a summary of how my work since 2019 fulfills these expectations:

## Section A – Teaching & Learning

### *Promoting Student Learning through Reflective Teaching*

Since starting as an Assistant Professor at SUNY Cortland in August 2013, I have taught 18 distinct classes within the Media Production, Cinema Studies, and Communication Studies majors – seven of which are courses I conceptualized and implemented as part of the new BS in Media Production Program that took effect in Fall 2020 – a transformative curriculum initiative led by myself, Dr. Paul van der Veur, and Dr. Caroline Kaltefleiter. Since 2019, I have continued to develop and revive courses including *Documentary Film Analysis*, *Cinematic Cyborgs*, *Introduction to Screenwriting*, *Festival Planning and Promotion*, and *Film Criticism* as part of the Media Production and Cinema Studies majors. These courses respond to student interests, emerging cultural conversations, and changes in how stories are told and shared in a digital world. However, it is within my media productions courses that the real ‘learning through reflection’ takes place...

In film and media education, learning is inseparable from doing. My teaching is built around the idea that students learn best when they are given meaningful creative responsibility, guided through professional processes, and supported as they reflect on their work. Since beginning my teaching journey in 2010 as an adjunct instructor at the University at Buffalo, I have designed my classes to be interactive and hands-on in their implementation, getting students out of their seats and engaged in the creative process alongside myself. To this end, much of my creative practice as a filmmaker and festival director **has included students as collaborators and peers**. I do not believe there to be an age in which a person becomes “creatively ripe” and therefore I attempt to create a classroom environment that functions more like a creative collective whereby a sophomore English major might share an idea for a short film that we, as a production team, can help adapt into a script, produce into a film, and screen publicly at a regional film festival. This exact scenario happened during the Spring 2023 when Michaela Thompson shared an idea for a short film she’d been thinking about with my CIN 329 – Community Filmmaking seminar. As a class, we worked with Michaela to adapt this idea into a single column screenplay and produce the film. The final film was titled [Prodigal \(2023\)](#) and it premiered at the 2023 Phoenixville Film Festival in Phoenixville, PA where I took a group of students, many of whom worked on this film, to the festival to represent the film.

The story of *Prodigal (2023)* is just one example of the many films produced as part of the **ProLab** initiative, which has since become a semester-based creative production engine, connected yet beyond my assigned teaching responsibilities. Through the ProLab, students work closely with me outside of traditional class structures to write, direct, shoot, and edit original short films. This environment mirrors professional practice and encourages students to take creative risks while learning collaboration, problem-solving, and ethical storytelling. To date, the ProLab has collaboratively produced more than 25 short films, several of which have been accepted to regional festivals and have provided students, and myself, the full-circle experience of writing, producing, and exhibiting creative work. These projects demonstrate how classroom learning extends into authentic creative practice.

To this end, it’s important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic represented a profound disruption to my “hands-on” teaching practice. Shortly after my last promotion in 2019, I was required out of necessity and concern for student safety to move away from the hands-on, in-person production model that had long defined my approach to teaching. Like many educators, I found this shift both professionally and personally challenging, as it required rethinking nearly every aspect of my courses and teaching method in a very short period of time.

Rather than viewing this transition as a temporary workaround, I approached it as an opportunity for meaningful instructional redesign. During this period, I reimagined my courses for virtual delivery and developed [www.profavery.online](#), a comprehensive teaching platform that supports **asynchronous, modular, and self-directed learning**. The site allows students to engage with course material through clearly structured lessons, scaffolded

assignments, and flexible learning pathways that accommodate different learning styles, schedules, and levels of prior experience.

This work fundamentally reshaped my teaching. The instructional strategies and digital resources developed through [www.profavery.online](http://www.profavery.online) continue to support both my online and in-person courses, strengthening student engagement, accessibility, and learning outcomes. What began as a necessary response to crisis ultimately expanded my pedagogical toolkit and deepened my commitment to inclusive, flexible, and resilient approaches to media education.

As evidence of my teaching efforts and evolution, I have created a duplicate “sandbox” version of this course portal for evaluators to explore. A direct link to this website can be found under the **TEACHING** tab on my portfolio website. Through this Course Portal, evaluators will be able to access syllabi, lessons, assignments, and more.

## Section B – Sustained Creative Inquiry

### *Creative Work Making a Significant Contribution to the Field*

My creative work is grounded in storytelling as a form of inquiry into culture, community, and lived experience. Since my promotion to Associate Professor in 2019, this work has taken place across three interconnected scales: individual authorship, collaborative production, and the leadership of creative infrastructure. Together, these efforts reflect a sustained and evolving program of creative inquiry shaped by both disciplinary practice and broader historical circumstances.

#### 1. Individual Creative Practice: Filmmaking and Screenwriting

As an independent filmmaker and screenwriter, I continue to develop original narrative work. Since my last promotion in 2019, my short film [The Catch](#) (completed shortly after my 2019 promotion) represents the most prominent example of this practice during the review period. The film received 18 official selections at regional, national, and international festivals along with multiple awards, including Best NY Short at the Adirondack Film Festival, Outstanding Comedy at the Snowtown Film Festival, and the Audience Choice Award at the Syracuse International Film Festival. It was also featured on Mountain Lake PBS in a two-part “Film Spotlight” segment produced by Paul Larson. Additionally, I was able to produce two additional films titled *Cravings* and *Nutz & Bolts* shortly after *The Catch* but, unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic took hold just as these films were entering the festival circuit and never got the chance to screen...

As I’m sure most are aware, 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 (see item #2 below)

#### 2. Creative Leadership and Cultural Infrastructure: Blackbird Film Festival

The **Blackbird Film Festival**, which I founded in 2015, represents the **most significant and sustained component of my creative inquiry.** The festival is not only a venue for film exhibition, but a curatorial, organizational, and community-based creative practice that examines how stories are shared, contextualized, and experienced.

From 2020 through 2022, when the pandemic forced many arts organizations and festivals to suspend operations entirely, I chose to keep Blackbird active by radically reimagining its format each year:

- **2020:** a community drive-in film festival at Greek Peak in October 2020
- **2021:** an outdoor film, music, and arts festival at Greek Peak in June 2021

- **2022:** a creative-centered conference at SUNY Cortland in May 2022

Each iteration required extensive creative problem-solving, new partnerships, revised funding strategies, and entirely new programming models. **These years demanded sustained intellectual and creative labor at a scale comparable to producing a major piece of new work each season**, as the festival's survival depended on constant adaptation in an environment of uncertainty. I cannot stress enough how much mental, physical, and emotional labor went in to keeping this entity alive during these incredibly difficult years.

Regional film festivals play a critical role in sustaining local creative communities, particularly for independent filmmakers whose work often exists outside commercial distribution channels. Festivals like Blackbird provide one of the few remaining public spaces where stories can be shared, discussed, and experienced collectively. **During the most uncertain years of the pandemic, I made the deliberate choice to devote my creative energy to preserving this space, often at the expense of my own individual film production, so that students, emerging filmmakers, and regional artists would continue to have a visible and meaningful platform for their work.** I am beyond proud to say that Blackbird has now operated continuously for over a decade and remains a regional hub for filmmakers, students, and audiences. **The festival's longevity and evolution demonstrate creative inquiry not only in content, but in the design and stewardship of cultural space.** It is my sincerest hope that the evaluators of this portfolio will see the Blackbird Film Festival for what it and the value it brings to central New York arts community.

I encourage evaluators to visit [www.blackbirdfilmfest.com](http://www.blackbirdfilmfest.com) to see the scope of the festival's programming, community partnerships, and ongoing impact, which together represent a sustained and deeply committed form of creative inquiry.

### 3. Collaborative Creative Production: ProLab

Alongside my individual filmmaking and the creative leadership work of Blackbird, I have sustained a collaborative production practice through the **ProLab**, an initiative I launched in 2018 that functions as an ongoing, semester-to-semester creative engine at SUNY Cortland. Importantly, ProLab is **not a course requirement or a class assignment**. It is an optional, co-curricular production environment for students who want to go beyond coursework and engage in a more professional, learning-by-doing process of writing, casting, directing, shooting, editing, and preparing projects for public exhibition and festival submission.

Because participation is voluntary, ProLab attracts students who are motivated to practice at a higher intensity and assume real responsibility on set. The resulting work represents sustained creative inquiry into genre, narrative structure, performance, and visual storytelling. Recent ProLab films include *The Good Spirit* (2025), *Smash & Grab* (2025), *JAAQ* (2024), *Call Back* (2024), *Cherub* (2024), *Brian's Special Pencil* (2024), *Kid Killer* (2023), *Prodigal* (2023), *Managed* (2023), *The Proposal* (2022), *The Spymaster* (2020), *Special Skills* (2019), *The Mayor* (2019), just to name a few. Since 2019, I have submitted ProLab films to a variety of festivals and received Official Selection status from the Syracuse International Film Festival, the Buffalo International Film Festival, the Adirondack Film Festival, the Snowtown Film Festival, the Albany Film Festival, the Phoenixville Film Festival, as well as the Fort Myers Beach Film Festival. When a concentration of ProLab films are selected to screen at a regional film festival, I typically organize a weekend 'Festival Tour' with 10-12 students affiliated with the productions so that we can represent the films and SUNY Cortland at the various festivals. Since 2019, I have arranged seven of these weekend festival tours.

What makes ProLab especially meaningful in the context of promotion is that it demonstrates creative work that is simultaneously **peer-facing and student-centered**: students are not only learning production skills, they are participating in an active creative practice with real stakes, real audiences, and a real pipeline from concept to completed film.

A collection of these films has been made available for evaluators to browse on [www.Samuelavery.info](http://www.Samuelavery.info). Films of note include *JAAQ* (2024), *Cherub* (2024), *Brian's Special Pencil* (2024), *Kid Killer* (2023), and *Prodigal* (2023).

## Section C – Sustained Leadership and Service

### *Leadership Across the Department, University, Community, and Profession*

My service record since promotion to Associate Professor reflects sustained leadership that operates simultaneously at the departmental, institutional, professional, and community levels. Much of this work is ongoing, labor-intensive, and foundational to the success of Media Production at SUNY Cortland.

### **Institutional and Community Leadership: Blackbird Film Festival**

Again, I would argue that one of my most significant leadership roles is as founder and Executive/Artistic Director of the **Blackbird Film Festival**, which I established in 2015 and have led continuously since that time. Blackbird is not a single annual event, but a year-round institutional commitment that includes grant writing, fundraising, community partnerships, artist outreach, student training, programming, and public engagement.

Through Blackbird, I have created sustained opportunities for SUNY Cortland students to serve as the primary festival staff, gaining hands-on experience in arts administration, programming, marketing, and event management. The festival also serves the broader central New York community by providing a consistent platform for independent filmmakers, artists, and audiences to gather, share work, and build creative networks.

At the professional level, Blackbird contributes directly to the field of independent filmmaking by offering exhibition, dialogue, and visibility to artists whose work often exists outside commercial distribution channels. Leading the festival, particularly during the COVID-19 years when arts organizations nationwide were forced to suspend operations, required sustained leadership, creative problem-solving, and institutional resilience. This work represents a significant service to both the profession and the community, as well as a meaningful extension of SUNY Cortland's public mission.

### **Departmental and Programmatic Leadership**

Within the Communication and Media Studies Department, I have played a central role in the development and sustainability of the **BS in Media Production** program. While the program benefits from contributions across the department, I serve as the primary production faculty member responsible for guiding students through hands-on filmmaking coursework, mentoring creative projects, and ensuring continuity within the production curriculum. This role requires consistent leadership in advising, curriculum planning, and student support.

I have also chaired multiple departmental committees, including **personnel**, **curriculum**, and the ongoing **search committee for a Media Production Assistant Professor**. In these roles, I have worked collaboratively with colleagues to support faculty governance, curricular integrity, and long-term program growth.

### **Student Advising and Mentorship as Service**

Since 2022, I have served as the primary advisor for **Senior Thesis students** in both the Media Production and Cinema Studies majors. Each semester, this work typically involves supervising **six to eight students** enrolled in COM 499 or CIN 499. The scope of this responsibility, which includes regular meetings, project development, production oversight, and evaluation, has functioned in practice as the **equivalent of an additional course** every semester, since 2022. This Senior Thesis (specifically COM 499 and CIN 499) advising work is uncompensated and not formally recognized as part of my teaching assignment, yet it represents a significant service commitment to students, the department, and the core required courses with both the Media Production and Cinema Studies majors. I continue to

undertake this work because it is essential to student success and program quality, particularly in a production-focused curriculum where individualized mentorship is critical.

In addition to the above, I serve as the **Faculty Advisor for the Film Club**, supporting student-led creative and extracurricular activity.

### **Community and Professional Service**

Beyond SUNY Cortland, I have contributed to regional arts, cultural development, and professional service through sustained leadership and advisory roles. These efforts include service on the Cortland County Convention and Visitor Bureau Board (January–November 2021), where I supported initiatives related to tourism, community engagement, and cultural programming, as well as ongoing professional service as a CNY Arts grant application reviewer for Onondaga County, providing peer review and evaluative feedback for arts organizations and creative professionals across the region. In addition, from August 2019 through May 2020, I served as the inaugural Director of the Academy at Syracuse Studios, where I designed and led an in-person, industry-connected internship program in partnership with American High. Although the program was later disrupted by the onset of COVID-19 and the subsequent withdrawal of its executive sponsor HULU, its early implementation demonstrated a viable model for experiential learning and industry partnership aligned with my teaching and professional practice.

### **Closing Statement**

Since my promotion to Associate Professor in 2019, my work has been defined by sustained growth, adaptation, and leadership across teaching, creative inquiry, and service. Whether through the development of innovative and accessible teaching practices, the production and dissemination of creative work, or the stewardship of cultural infrastructure that supports students, artists, and communities, I have remained deeply committed to SUNY Cortland's educational mission. Taken together, the work outlined in this portfolio reflects not isolated accomplishments, but a cohesive and sustained professional trajectory grounded in mentorship, creative scholarship, and institutional leadership.

I believe this record demonstrates the level of impact, responsibility, and sustained excellence outlined in **Chapter 220.07 of the SUNY Cortland Handbook** for promotion to the rank of Professor. I am grateful for the opportunity to continue contributing to SUNY Cortland as an educator, artist, and leader, and I appreciate your thoughtful consideration of this application.

Respectfully,



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