NOMINATION OF

WILLIAM F. MAYHAN

FOR THE

CHANCELLOR'S AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE

TO AN ACADMIC NON-REGULAR

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Committee for Chancellor's Award for Excellence to an Academic Non-Regular
Office of the Senate
University of Missouri-St. Louis

Dear Members of the Committee:

I am very pleased to nominate Associate Teaching Professor, William Mayhan for the Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching by a Non-Regular Faculty member. I was Associate Chair of the English Department when Bill was hired in 1993, and I can remember my astonishment when the Chair and I read through his first set of student evaluations. Dr. Mayhan, student after student asserted, was the best teacher they had had at UM-St. Louis. They remarked on his love of literature and his obvious passion for teaching as well as his determination to make them both better readers and writers. It can take years to develop the confidence, the sympathy, the self- discipline, the classroom manner to become a first rate teacher; Bill seemed to have it all from the start. Reports from students and faculty over the last fifteen years indicate that Bill has remained at the top of his game. As Professor Frank Grady notes in his supporting letter, average enrollment in Bill's literature courses are significantly higher than in comparable courses. 93% of his students call him "one of the best" or "above average" compared to the Departmental average of 74% in comparable courses. A different order of evidence attesting to Bill's popularity are the predictable complaints from faculty members who find themselves scheduled to teach a literature course at the same time as Bill. No one wants to compete with Bill for students.

Bill is as versatile as he is popular. Among the courses he teaches are the Junior Level Writing Course, both halves of the English Literature Survey, Early and Late Romantic Poetry, Nineteenth Century Novel, Victorian Prose and Poetry. Bill also regularly teaches Practical Criticism: Writing About Literature. A required course for all beginning English majors, Practical Criticism introduces students to the basic concepts and vocabulary of literary criticism while instructing them in the writing of good critical prose. Bill believes that a major goal in the course is convincing students that criticism is neither plot summary nor an arcane practice for professionals but rather an opportunity for them to draw on their own experiences and abilities to make sense of (and evaluate) what they are reading or seeing. Bill typically brings pictures, pieces of music, bits of sculpture to class to demonstrate the different stages in the process of interpretation and evaluation—a process that moves from simple description to analysis to discussion of the social and historical context of the work and eventually to larger philosophical reflections on the meaning and function of literature and art. By breaking down the critical process into discrete parts, Bill provides students with a method for sorting and ordering their various impressions (and questions) about a literary work that can provide the basis for an interpretive critical paper—the final stage in the critical process.

Writing their first critical papers can be an unsettling experience for beginning English majors. Bill understands this and is both encouraging and demanding. Having led students to trust their responses, he wants them to make their case as coherently and persuasively as possible. He takes pains to show how lively titles and introductory topic sentences, the choice and orderly use of evidence (often short quotations), varying sentence structure, and clear, emphatic conclusions can make papers stronger and more interesting. Bill sets high standards for papers, and students quickly come to respect them. If students "want an easy class," a former student writes, "Professor Mayhan is not for them." "He will push you," writes another. He wants you "to put forth your best work and effort." "I have learned more in the three classes I have taken with Dr. Mayhan than in all of my other classes combined." It is worth noting that Bill always returns student papers very quickly (typically the next class meeting); while this might not strike some an especially big deal, it signals Bill's students that he finds their work important and interesting enough to get his immediate attention and response.

That attention continues outside the classroom. Over the years, Bill has shown himself to be a patient, understanding advisor to students. "Dr Mayhan is always eager to help students with comprehension of material, paper questions, or anything else," writes a student. "He never seems too busy to help, even when he has stacks of papers on his desk. I leave his office feeling like he truly enjoyed helping me, and this makes me feel comfortable going to him for advice and information." In addition to looking after the needs of his own students, Bill has given freely of his time to advise English-Education majors and post-baccalaureate English students-- a demanding job that entails dealing with complex rules and special circumstances. Bill has always been happy to help out; and, students, learning of his patient, welcoming manner have flocked to his office. It is typical of Bill that he has never asked for a reduction in his (four course per semester) teaching load to take on this extra work – and typical that he has volunteered year after year to serve on and chair the English scholarship and essay-prize committee—an assignment that means reading even more papers than the hundreds that he reads from his classes.

Perhaps the most encouraging feature of Bill's career at UMSL is the influence he has had on future teachers. Nearly half of our English majors go on to become high-school and junior high teachers. For many of them, Bill has served as an ideal role model-- an example of what an inspired, resourceful teacher can achieve in the classroom. "Dr Mayhan showed me the kind of teacher I can be," writes one student. "As a future English teacher, he has proven to be an amazing role model," writes another. "He is the kind of teacher I hope to be someday; he has not only taught me English, but how to be a better educator." And this from another future teacher on Bill's class – "the most amazing class I have ever participated in. If I could just begin to have this kind of impact and influence over my students, I will consider myself immeasurably fortunate." Professor Nancy Singer, the English-Education coordinator writes that her students hold "Dr. Mayhan up to be a professional example to which they aspire." "We know that students will, in part, teach as they are taught. I can think of no better role model." Henry Adams once wrote that "a teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops." Whether or not Bill's teaching will shape eternity, it is gratifying to think that his example will influence future generations of UMSL students and teachers.

For fifteen years Bill Mayhan has been teaching and advising UMSL students. Over that period he has introduced many hundreds of students to the pleasures and formal structures of literature while instructing them in the art of writing good critical prose. He has set a very high standard and has garnered an enviable reputation among students and faculty. His name has

become a by-word in the English Department (as well as in the Honors College) for teaching excellence. Bill is not a self-promoter; I had to persuade him to let me nominate him for this award. Nor is he a techie--though he uses My Gateway regularly. He is simply a very, very effective and respected teacher of English—perhaps the best that we have. It is for this reason that I am nominating William Mayhan for the Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching by a Non-Regular Faculty Member.

Respectfully submitted,
Richard M. Cook
Chair, English Department

MY PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING

I was not always a teacher. For many years after my B.A. degree I wrote commercially for publishing companies and advertising firms. I was miserable. The assignments concerned things I cared nothing about and the days seemed interminable and meaningless. But I always maintained an enthusiasm for literature, music, and art. So I decided to study again, pursuing my M.A. degree from UMSL while I continued working. Eventually I left the business world completely and earned my Ph.D. in English from Washington University.

As soon as I entered the classroom I knew I had made the right decision. Communicating the enthusiasm I felt for the poems, stories, and plays I assigned to my students enlivened me and gave me a sense of real vocation. So I suppose my philosophy of teaching is a rather selfish one: I teach because I love the literature and I especially love when that enthusiasm is communicated to others. Often I feel reinvigorated and refreshed when a student seems legitimately excited about the material and ideas I discuss. Almost like a parent whose children make him feel again the excitement of new experiences, I also gain from my time in the classroom. I reach new insights because of the questions my students ask or the opinions they offer. I try to make my students feel the excitement I feel about the material I teach. I have often been told over my 15 years of teaching here at UMSL that my enthusiasm in the classroom remains what students most remember and appreciate about my style. I introduce them to ideas they may not have reached on their own and they repay me with helping me remember my own excitement of discovery.

Communicating excitement for the material I teach also requires, I have found, a classroom style that must SEEM like it is immediate and improvised on the spot. Although I certainly have an outline I work from and key ideas I know I must communicate in each class meeting, I don't adhere to a strict protocol. I have learned to let discussions happen, to let ideas develop in an almost organic way. This at times requires some fancy foot work in getting the discussion to where I want it to go. But it also allows for that new insight that wouldn't have occurred if the diversion had not occurred and I had adhered to a strict presentation of facts.

Though my enthusiasm for the material and my excitement in communicating that enthusiasm might be the foundation of my teaching philosophy, I have learned that enthusiasm alone is not enough to get the job done in the classroom. Through my years of teaching I have developed strategies and techniques that I feel work in better communicating to students the ideas I feel they need to know. I have learned that every student is not alike and that what works for some may not work for others. I have also learned that there are real differences in approaching the two main teaching areas I am involved in: the teaching of literature and the teaching of writing. I will briefly discuss both.

## Teaching Literature

Teaching literature is more than looking at specific poems, stories, and plays. In a very real way it involves introducing students to the culture that has informed their lives and continues to affect their thinking today. I believe that a teacher should touch the individual students directly, making them question what they have never questioned before and understand things they never felt needed explanation. Consequently, I often take time in class to introduce art and music to help establish cultural contexts and broaden the scope of the material. I want my literature students to see that the texts we cover have issued from real people in real situations, people not unlike themselves struggling to express feelings and ideas that are universal. In my class on Victorian literature, for example, I try to make students realize how many social and cultural problems that still plague us today had their origins in the 19th century. In addition, relating the manner in which the exchange of ideas took place in a basically combative culture dominated by journals and periodicals to the way our present cultural wars take place on cable television allows students to connect to something they may at first have seen as foreign and intimidating. I also try to get students to see that literature is not unlike the other arts, that its inspiration (like that of painting or music) stems from the human spirit trying to make sense of an often complex and incomprehensible world. I have also learned not to be afraid to talk about myself and my own personal and sometimes idiosyncratic reactions to the literature we read. When I discuss Wordsworth, for example, and his exaltation of a child's experience of nature, I allow myself to talk about my own experiences with my niece when she was a child. Or perhaps I share how the experience of my mother's death changed my reaction to a specific poem. I feel being open and honest about my own reactions to literature allows students to see that these texts are not simply historical artifacts but real utterances by real human beings in real life situations. It also allows them the same freedom to interact with the text in their own way.

## Teaching Writing

The writing course I teach—Practical Criticism: Writing About Literature—demands a slightly different focus because its goal is more complex. This class attempts to teach English majors not only how to react sensitively to texts but, more precisely, how to express their reactions in well-organized, thoroughly developed essays. The skills here are more specific—thinking logically, developing ideas clearly, writing sophisticated sentences, organizing paragraphs. Consequently, the class involves more "hands-on" practice: students write journals for almost every class period, they interact with one another in peer editing situations, they brainstorm in class about ideas for essays, they write drafts of essays and then revise them. The key to this course is not to present my own ideas or readings of individual texts but to guide students into their own ways of reading. Teaching students to interpret literature first entails letting them know that the scope of any interpretation is wide-ranging. There is not only one way to look at any particular text. So standing and lecturing, perhaps, while sometimes

necessary, can only be the first step. In my writing classes, then, I often request students to come up with their own particular interpretation of a story or poem and then in small groups share their insights with others. In small group settings many students often feel freer to express their own opinions than in front of the entire class.

Often in this class my teaching style needs to be more open-ended. After one student indicates a certain interpretation I might decide to guide the class through a brainstorming session to find textual evidence to support that particular argument. Then perhaps another student will offer a different interpretation and we will discuss that. This can be the most challenging (and exciting) part of the teaching process. I often don't quite know where the discussion will lead. Not being afraid to brainstorm and even perhaps admit when we've hit an interpretive "dead end" and acknowledge the need to start over was one of the most difficult things I had to learn in this class setting. But doing this shows students what their own writing process will be like, illustrates the pitfalls they may encounter, and lets them know that writing is process.

Once basic ideas about the text have been established, the students must work on fashioning an essay. This entails a draft of the essay, a peer review session, and revision. I try to balance each class period with discussions of writing (setting up topic sentences, varying sentence structure, organizing material, etc.) and the often more appealing challenges of reading and interpretation. Much of learning comes from receiving their essays back with my comments and suggestions. I always try to gauge my comments toward making improvements, not just pointing out errors (although this is, of course, necessary as well). I hope that at the end of the course my students realize the basic requirements of a coherent, well-organized essay and understand as well that such an essay is a product of time, thought, and effort.