



12 April 2012

U.S. Professor of the Year Program / CASE

Dear Selection Committee Members:

I am thrilled to write to you to support the nomination of John Boyer for the Professor of the Year award. I am sure you will get many wonderful nominations and I am equally sure that this one will stand out in the crowd. I have known John for a decade, since I took my job in the Geography department at Virginia Tech as a new assistant professor. I quickly learned about John's extraordinary talent in education and frankly, I thought "oh no, why did I get an office right next to this guy?" as I was anxious about my own status as a novice teacher. But as it turns out, rather than feeling overshadowed by John Boyer's accomplishments, I found that my own energy, confidence, and inspiration for undergraduate education quickly increased by orders of magnitude in large part due to my interactions with John. Outstanding in his field, Boyer reaches out to any and all educators in an effort to spread his enthusiasm for undergraduate learning far and wide. I have benefited greatly from having the office next door to the most innovative and passionate educator I have ever known.

Boyer's approach to teaching is to make the ideas relevant and accessible to engaged learners. Who says large classes have to be boring, impersonal, and burdened by reduced learning? I actually believed that myth for many years from my own experience as a student, but the myth was shattered when I first sat in Boyer's World Regions class of ~600 students some eight years ago. My own lecture ended 15 minutes prior to his course, so I decided to venture across the hall and relax in the back of his. The experience was anything but relaxing! Every single class was filled with innovative teaching that was beyond my own imagination. Boyer's teaching employed numerous media such as music, imagery, international films, and many amazing skits performed by student actors—I remember machetes hacking up dolls to illustrate average numbers of children in families of various countries, fishing (with real fish) showing primary productivity, produce hurled into the audience as rewards for knowing its origins, and troops of ninjas attacking the stage. If it sounds audacious, believe me, it was. But even today, I remember many of the important themes and lessons from his class about world politics, economics, and history and how it all fits into the geography of our planet and its occupants. I was addicted, as were the students who filled the seats and brought their friends until fire codes capped the classroom population. If anyone says that entertainment and education cannot be mixed, I would challenge them to experience Boyer's class to see how it can promote student learning. However, students weren't just entertained by this course, they were engaged and thus learning occurred...simple.

The creativity and passion for education exhibited by Boyer in those large classes was nothing short of amazing, but those were old days. Now Boyer crowds the largest auditorium on campus (almost 3000) and uses social media to connect to the massive audiences. In addition he has developed courses that are mixed online and in-person class meetings to accommodate large numbers, yet keep personal attention. John took on this gargantuan teaching task out of his dedication to student learning and to meet student needs. His classes were maxed out and over-requested by thousands of students. He believes, as I do (though I am a physical geographer), that every U.S. student needs to be informed about about the world in this age of globalization. John's teaching centers on promotion of global citizenship and excitement about the world. His major goal is to make the study of world regions relevant and accessible to every student and create life-long learners. He has an on-line community of thousands of current and former students that continue to follow his "Plaidcasts" (podcasts to the class and public about current world events) because they were inspired and engaged by his courses.

*Invent the Future*

I still am drawn to the excitement that is World Regions as John Boyer's teaching has evolved with the times to continue to reach into the world of college students in order to share the broader world with them. He is expanding into the use of comic books and an alter ego to educate, textbook writing (not your typical textbook!), and of course every type of classroom technology. His cutting edge use of social media uses web and mobile-based technology to turn communication into interactive dialogue between students and communities, organizations, and even famous political figures and entertainment stars. Last fall (2011), the course created a number of landmark events. The whole World Regions class was recorded asking Aung San Suu Kyi to please have a Skype meeting with them. The YouTube video went "viral" and the leader of democracy in Burma (recently released from house arrest) said "yes." An event of major significance in the lives of students, the public, and the university community was born, simply because John Boyer was able to imagine it. I watched the event unfold via "Plaidcast" (Boyer's chief means of communicating with students outside the classroom). Undergraduate students had the once in a lifetime opportunity to ask questions directly to the newly released democracy leader who was larger than life on the largest screen on campus. No one who attended, or watched via online streaming, will ever be the same. That semester also brought screenings of important films like Bouncing Cats (Uganda), Invisible Children, and The Way, along with some of the associated experts and stars (including Emilio Estevez and Martin Sheen, who came to VT because of another "shout out" on YouTube). Above all, these projects demonstrated to students that they have power and abilities to reach for dreams and attain them...even in a geography class.

John is not only an outstanding classroom educator, he is also a community builder. He practices this at every level—the classroom, the department, and in the larger college and university, along with the community at large. He serves on committees of every variety and speaks for any and every group who asks, both on campus (ours and other universities), including in classes and to international and other interest groups, and in the greater community. He was even Blacksburg High School commencement speaker recently. He has traveled the country to speak to Virginia Tech alumni; he participates in professional conferences often serving on panels; he has advised the VT studio radio station group; he basically never says no! John's office door and on-line door is open about 12 hrs/day (or more) reflecting his policy of availability to students and faculty—a rather mind-boggling feat given his class sizes. He has informally advised hundreds if not thousands of undergraduates and graduate students. Somehow with all of this service work, on top of teaching some 25,000 students in the past 10 years or so, Boyer finds time for scholarship including grants, publications, and presentations.

John Boyer has won every award possible as a senior lecturer at Virginia Tech and his plaques and trophies fill our glass case in the department, yet he is humble and sees himself as just a guy carrying out his life's mission. He does this with a passion and tireless work ethic that holds us all to a higher standard. I hope you will look carefully at the application you receive and that you find that John Boyer is highly deserving of this award. It would be great to spread more of John Boyer's enthusiasm and special talents and knowledge in undergraduate education around the country somehow.

Most Sincerely,

Lisa M. Kennedy, Associate Professor and Graduate Program Director