

Summary
ALUMNI DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR

August 25, 2020

The Alumni Distinguished Professorship (ADP) is a preeminent faculty appointment recognizing faculty members who demonstrate extraordinary accomplishments and academic citizenship through substantive scholarly contributions across all three of Virginia Tech's core mission areas of teaching, research or creative activity, and engagement. Each ADP is expected to make scholarly contributions in the three mission areas at the same high level evident at the time of appointment. An extensive nomination and vetting process involves department and college honorifics committees, a specially convened university committee, the executive vice president and provost, and the president. The Board of Visitors confers upon an individual appointment as Alumni Distinguished Professor for a period of 10 years, at which time the appointment may be renewed. Currently 10 ADPs may be appointed and there is no quota by college or department (Faculty Handbook, Section 3.2.2).

Two Alumni Distinguished Professor appointments (initial ten-year appointments) are to reach their completion this fall. In following with the established procedures, invitations were issued to Drs. Thomas Gardner and John Seiler to seek reappointment. Both submitted personal statements and updated curricula vitae detailing their contributions and accomplishments as ADPs. These materials were reviewed by a small selection of current ADPs, and recommendations forwarded to the executive vice president and provost, as well as the executive committee of the Alumni Association Board of Directors, for consideration.

Provost Cyril Clarke recommends the reappointment of Drs. Thomas Gardner and John Seiler. These Alumni Distinguished Professor reappointment recommendations have also received the endorsement of the vice president for Alumni Relations and the executive committee of the Alumni Association Board of Directors. The reappointments are effective for a period of ten years and carry with them a salary supplement provided by the endowment and an annual operating account for use by the professor.

ALUMNI DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR

Dr. Thomas Gardner, Alumni Distinguished Professor of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, is a truly gifted scholar, educator, speaker and mentor, recognized within and beyond the university for his writing accomplishments and course design.

Since his initial appointment as Alumni Distinguished Professor ten years ago, Dr. Gardner maintained a steady stream of critical books, journal articles on poetry, and has recently added created writing to his published accomplishments. He has published a critical scholarly work, *John in the Company of Poets: The Gospel in Literary Imagination*, and a creative work, *Poverty Creek Journal*, a return to creative writing for which he credits the freedom to explore to his appointment as ADP; his poetry has won broad recognition and critical praise from within and from outside of the academy. He has also published eight chapters or articles, five short pieces, five reviews or review articles, given fifteen talks and eight readings, has another book of creative essays, *Sundays* (scheduled for release in September 2020), and three new critical works, *Keeping Perception Nimble: Marilynne Robinson, Narrative Calvinist, Dickinson, Calvin, and the Drama of Perception*, and *Lyric Theology*.

Dr. Gardner has maintained an impressive teaching portfolio with 32 courses over the past ten years, all with very positive feedback from students in his course evaluations. He also designed several undergraduate and graduate level courses which are now required courses. He directed twelve independent studies at the graduate and undergraduate level, directed one PhD dissertation and eight MA theses as well as serving as a committee member for seven MA and eight MFA theses; four of his students won awards for their writing. Gary Downey, also an Alumni Distinguished Professor, said:

“Undergraduate students rightly flock to Tom's courses, wanting to understand and, perhaps, write poetry. The pedagogical challenges are considerable. Tom helps students learn to listen, including to themselves. Graduate students learn from Tom how to teach such learning.”

For his excellence in teaching, Dr. Gardner was nominated and a semi-finalist for Baylor University's \$250,000 Robert Foster Cherry Award for Great Teaching in 2011 and was invited to have his nomination reconsidered in 2012. He is a member of the Modern Language Association and the Virginia Tech Academy of Teaching Excellence.

A compelling and favored speaker, Dr. Gardner has served as a guest lecturer in departments in multiple colleges and centers across the university, as a guest lecturer in eleven different English classes, delivered the undergraduate commencement address in December 2014, conducted two six-week classes for Virginia Tech's Life-Long Learning Institute, spoken at a number of university-wide functions and served on multiple university-level and college-level committees.

Dr. Gardner continues to be recognized among peers and university scholars as excelling in his scholarship and making ongoing contributions of excellence in the key areas of teaching, mentoring, and outreach.

RECOMMENDATION

That Dr. Thomas Gardner be reappointed as Alumni Distinguished Professor effective September 10, 2020 for a period of ten years.

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ALUMNI DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR

Dr. John Seiler, Alumni Distinguished Professor of Forest Resources and Environmental Conservation in the College of Natural Resources and Environment (CNRE), is recognized for his research, outreach, teaching, and service within and well beyond the university due to his passion for sharing scientific insight enthusiastically with a broad and varied audience.

Dr. Seiler was the Primary Investigator (PI) for the five-year Pine Integrated Network: Education, Mitigation, and Adaptation Project (PINEMAP), one of three Coordinated Agricultural Projects funded in 2011 by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and a \$20M grant (of which Virginia Tech received \$3.4M). He was responsible for development and implementation of the PINEMAP Undergraduate Fellowship Program, which included an undergraduate internship and graduate student researcher mentorship; over four years, it paired 38 undergraduate fellows with graduate student mentors for summer research experiences after which undergraduates returned to their institutions and enrolled in an Effective Communication Skills class, developed by Dr. Seiler and delivered online with another PINEMAP faculty member at Virginia Tech.

In his time as Alumni Distinguished Professor, Dr. Seiler has advised nine masters and seven Ph.D. students. He developed a class to provide scientifically based information to a wide range of students, FREC 2115: "Ecology of Appalachian Forests," which was approved in the Virginia Tech Pathways learning outcome area "Reasoning in Natural Sciences." This class enrolls mostly students outside of the CNRE and has become a recruiting tool for the college. He proposed and obtained funding for a graduate student who wrote the management plan for the old-growth woodland known as Stadium Woods in Blacksburg, Virginia. He leads a team that has developed award-winning multimedia tutorials for tree identification, placing Virginia Tech as the number one internet site for tree identification. During his tenure as ADP, he has developed new products including two apps: *vTree*, a location-based tree identification app which allows users to contact him personally with questions, and *Ramblr* which is an app based on a series of personal walking tours covering tree identification.

PINEMAP, under Dr. Seiler's leadership, was awarded the Partnership Award for Mission Integration of Research, Education and Extension by USDA NIFA. In the spring of 2020, he was the recipient of the College of Natural Resources and Environment's Outstanding Undergraduate Student Mentor Award.

Since Dr. Seiler's ADP appointment, he has continued to serve on many university, college, and departmental committees as well as undergraduate affairs committees at all governance levels. He gives voluntary talks to the community and alumni chapters across the United States. He is sought for interviews each fall about recent weather impacts on fall leaf color changes, which have been regularly picked up by national news organizations. He chaired the University Arboretum Committee and became very involved in a controversial building siting proposal in Virginia Tech's Stadium Woods. He has

helped with numerous tree-related questions related to the route 460 interchange and has been a strong advocate of the university hiring a professional arborist (2019).

Dr. Seiler is a strong campaigner for diversity and inclusion: working closely with CNRE's director of recruitment, giving tours as part of recruitment efforts, and hosting visiting students in his classes. He advocates for training women and minorities in the forestry profession by recruiting talented female students for his research program. In summer months during the program's life, Dr. Seiler worked with Upward Bound students.

Dr. Seiler is recognized by his peers, profession, and university as excelling in his scholarship and making ongoing contributions to the university, the Virginia Tech community, and the forestry profession through his research work, teaching, outreach, and service.

RECOMMENDATION

That Dr. John Seiler be reappointed as Alumni Distinguished Professor effective September 10, 2020 for a period of ten years.

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