

Jonathan D. Mabee, Assistant Professor of Media, Journalism, & Film
Personal Statement for Tenure and Promotion

My name is Jon Mabee and I write to you today seeking your support of my application for tenure and promotion to Associate Professor in the Department of Media, Journalism, and Film at Missouri State University.

In all honesty, for me to be at this juncture at this point in my life is actually quite surreal. I was never even supposed to go to college, let alone teach at one! In fact, if you were to go back in time 24 years ago, you would meet a tall, scrawny, racially ambiguous 18 year-old who heard on a daily basis that he would be a “burger-flipping loser for the rest of his life.” And, given his educational shortcomings, to tell him that he might one day become a tenured professor – well, that would have been absurdly preposterous! Although he was able to turn his attitude and GPA around during his senior year, the continued lack of support from his teachers – and most other adults in his life – left him feeling as though there were few viable options available to him as he neared graduation. Given the situation, he chose to do what thousands of other recently-graduated “losers” did – join the United States Military. And in making that choice, his life would never be the same again.

Since taking the Oath of Enlistment over two decades ago, I: was present at the start of the wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11, and then upon my completion of service, was honorably discharged from the United States Navy; have traveled the world five times over, including earning my bachelor’s degree from the University of Sunderland in the U.K.; have worked on dozens of films and TV series both in the U.S. and abroad in various production roles; have earned a Master of Fine Art in Mass Communication and Media Arts; have won dozens of awards from around the world for both scripts that I have written and films that I have produced; and now teach my passion for storytelling to hundreds of students at the state’s second largest public institution for post-secondary education.

I share this brief “origin story” with you, not to brag or gain your sympathies – but rather, to contextualize who I am presently – an educator and filmmaker. In the paragraphs that follow, I reflect upon my life’s experiences, and how they have impacted every facet of my teaching, research, and service here at Missouri State. By directly correlating these facets with the Department of Media, Journalism, and Film’s tenure requirements, and the University’s public affairs mission of ethical leadership, cultural competency, and community engagement, I present my case for earning tenure and promotion at Missouri State University.

Teaching

The evaluation criteria for Media, Journalism and Film states: “A primary mission of the Media, Journalism and Film Department is to provide an excellent educational experience for its major and non-major undergraduate students.” Since my appointment to Assistant Professor in August of 2017, I have strived to meet and exceed this goal of our department and university. Each semester, I teach a 3/3 load of three unique classes, and each semester my student evaluations have been well above the department average. Across ten semesters of teaching undergraduate and graduate students, my overall average teaching evaluation score was a 4.5/5, while the department average was 4.2/5 (no evaluations were conducted in Spring 2020 due to COVID-19). Qualitative evidence from these evaluations suggest that my classes are well-organized, practical, have real-world application, and that I create an accessible and inviting learning environment for all of my students.

Evaluation criteria state that teaching evaluations “may count for no more than 50 percent of the evaluation of teaching effectiveness,” and that faculty should exhibit other markers of effective teaching. This includes “new course development...and online and distance learning.” In addition to my regular course load, I have developed and taught a multitude of classes during summers and intersessions that enable students to learn specific skills and/or find a structured environment for them to work on an independent project, both of which support the department’s offerings and aid in student recruitment and retention for the university. Because of my professional experience, I am able to offer courses such as Steadicam Operation (something that I am certified in), Client-Based Media Production, and Gaffing and Gripping for Film and TV. Each of these classes

are designed to supplement our current course offerings to ensure that students can learn advanced skills that will get them hired on film and TV sets around the world. When I offer a Practicum in Electronic Media or Independent Study at the undergraduate or graduate level, it gives me the chance to work with and mentor students who are capable of producing a self-driven project but are unable to find an existing course in which to do so. I also teach students from our Electronic Arts undergraduate program and Master of Fine Arts in Dramatic Writing program, and lead our Video Production Certificate program.

Insofar as the “online and distance learning” components of that criteria, I can proudly report that even before the pandemic, I was actively engaged in learning how to become a more accessible and diverse educator. I completed the University’s Blackboard training program (now possessing a “Blackboard Blackbelt” and holding the title of a “Blackboard Grand Master”), attended multiple conference panels on nontraditional teaching methods, and earned a Certified Distance Educator Award for Exemplary Faculty Development in 2019 in recognition of my efforts. During COVID, when the university moved our classes to the virtual space, many students stated that the effectiveness and accessibility of my courses (that were usually held in person) were outstanding in the way the materials were set up in this new learning environment – something I attribute to seeking out these extracurricular professional development trainings. In addition to these accomplishments, I have also completed the Diversity Scholar program to better understand, relate, and teach people from different backgrounds, and completed the RESPOND mental health training to better support our students and their mental health needs. And because of my technical expertise with our production equipment, I often volunteer to teach workshops to my colleagues and students outside of the classroom.

One of the most truly beautiful aspects of teaching in this particular field is being able to watch my students’ work make its way into the world and to see them succeed in their dreams and ambitions. I have found that one of the things they often lack when seeking to make their mark in the world is a reassuring voice telling them that they can do it. In this particular industry, if you do not get your work out into festivals and in front of a set of eyes that can take you to the next step (e.g., optioning their work, signing them to direct something, etc.), then it is very hard to “break into it” unless you start your way from the bottom and move up. And while many students will take the long-road in accomplishing their occupational goals, some are exceptional storytellers and producers - and I continuously encourage them to submit their work to be recognized for it. Many of the projects that I have “executively produced” through an independent study or capstone course, have gone on to be successful conference and film festival selections. And I am proud to report that several of my students have gone on to win awards from national and international organizations. In fact, when it comes to the criteria of “evidence of effective indirect instruction resulting in superior student work,” Missouri State University ranks **first place** in scriptwriting and **fourth place** in film submission wins among the over 275 member institutions of the Broadcast Education Association’s Festival of Media Arts Conference – one of the largest academic organizations and conferences for the media industry – and an achievement that I have had a direct influence in helping accomplish. Not only am I honored to work with our amazing faculty, I am also humbled in my opportunity to help guide our incredibly talented students in bringing this kind of international recognition to our department, college, and university.

Research

Because of the varied nature of what constitutes research in our department, the Department of Media, Journalism and Film does not have a set number of publications or projects required for tenure and promotion. Instead, criteria state that, “A publication or production count alone will not guide performance evaluation; the quality, complexity, and the degree of collaboration involved in combinations of the following shall also serve as indicators of effective scholarship or creative activity.” From Fall of 2017 to Spring of 2022, I have: written and produced two short films, written two TV pilots and a feature-length script, wrote and produced a radio drama (narrative podcast), and have presented my work yearly at both the University Film and Video Association’s Conference and the Broadcast Education Association’s Festival of Media Arts Conference – the two largest academic organizations for media in the country.

My creative scholarship focuses on two main genres and diverge in topics depending on the medium in which I am creating. In my writing, I lean into my eternal love for science-fiction and fantasy: stories that allow us to

escape into worlds far off and unknown, yet still familiar, as the characters face the same kinds of trials and tribulations that are the “human condition.” One of the central narrative themes I focus on is that of identity – particularly how one identifies oneself, opposed to how others identify or project an identity onto them. Being a racially ambiguous brown person, I am often asked: “what are you?” Without getting to far into the weeds on how dehumanizing that question is, it actually inspired me to take that thought into outer space – where that question’s answer is... human. I’m a human being. In taking the audience away from the petty tribalism of Earth, and uniting them behind the idea of how they would react, behave, and survive in space as a *human being* – rather than a “brown” human being, or a “Catholic” human being, or a “straight” human being – I attempt to examine and explore all of the characteristics that we share. And how, if taken in a larger cosmic context, we have *more* in common than we currently wish to believe.

Science-Fiction, Fantasy, & the Human Condition

Having grown up on a steady diet of science-fiction and fantasy, I learned how to examine complex human issues in ways that were not directly aimed at any particular group, but rather, in subtle ways that used analogy, metaphor, and representation in place of the actual actors (The Dominion from *Deep Space Nine* standing in for Nazis, for example). *Star Trek* (every rendition) was one of the first series I engaged with where I was able to see myself, in both those who portrayed the characters, but more importantly, in how I thought about and saw the world. In emulating these kinds of stories, my scripts were written with the intent of being both entertaining and thought-provoking in telling “diverse stories” about under-represented people. *Cornelius Adams* (TV pilot) is about a Navy Chief who is accidentally kidnapped by aliens when they attempt to steal his family’s cows in the middle of the night to sell on the “space black market,” and after a fate-altering event, finds himself setting off on a mission to bring some humanity to a universe that desperately seeks it. This script was Officially Selected at 14 national and international festivals, was nominated for two categories, and won eight awards, including “Best of Competition” for Faculty Screenwriting in 2020 at the Broadcast Education Association’s Festival of Media Arts – having a selection rate of the top 10%. *Sector: 2814* (Speculative TV pilot) is about one of DC Comics’ first Muslim Superheroes, Simon Baz, a *Green Lantern*. After reading the comic series and both relating to, and admiring the character of, Simon Baz (as a fellow racially ambiguous brown person), I decided to adapt his story into script to bring this two-dimensional character into the three-dimensional realm and demonstrate that a Muslim superhero character could “drive” a successful TV show. This script was Officially Selected at seven national and international festivals, was nominated for two categories, and won three awards, including an “Award of Merit” (First Place) at the University Film & Video Association Conference in 2021 – having a selection rate of the top 10%.

In contrast to that fantastical escapism, the films I produce focus on the moral and ethical quandaries that face our citizens while in and out of uniform, and are grounded in a lived experience that reflects how we treat our military and veterans. This is a subject minority of our population (less than 1% of Americans have served in the military post-9/11) who, for better or worse, chose to serve this nation and offer their lives to a country who openly celebrates them as valued “heroes” while in uniform but shows little empathy, support, or attention to them once that uniform is taken off. Issues such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), suicide, sexual harassment and assault, and veteran homelessness and unemployment plague our nation’s service members, but very little is *actually* done to address them. Having been directly impacted by the effects of being in war, having lost more than a dozen friends I served with to suicide, having known the depression and anxiety PTSD can induce – the films I produce invite the audience to understand these concepts in a way that other mediums cannot. By bringing them into the *real* worlds of those who serve, rather than the Hollywoodized (often a propagandized glorification) representation of military service (eg. *Top Gun II*).

Military Service & Veteran Issues

When having a conversation with a student about being one of the first Americans to invade Afghanistan after 9/11, they pointed out to me that they had been born just two months before that fateful day. And it dawned on me at that exact moment that this 18-year-old student was old enough to go fight in a war that I helped start almost two decades earlier. I was sickened when I realized that for the first time in American history, we had entered into a truly *generational* war – where the sons and daughters of those who started the war in Afghanistan could go fight and die on the very same soil of those a full generation before. *18 Years In* was

produced in response to this realization, where a fictionalized version of myself had a daughter at the age of 20 and as she nears her high school graduation, wants to follow in her father's footsteps and join the navy. A navy that was still at war in Afghanistan, where her dad had helped launch the first sorties of the "forever war" – and a place his daughter would inevitably go in her own service to the nation. I wrote, co-directed, and acted in this film due to the personal nature of the story and hired students to help as cast and crew. This short film was Officially Selected at 12 national and international festivals, was nominated for eight different categories, and won two awards, including a "Platinum Award" for Best Short Film at the Mindfield International Film Festival.

Unmanned was born through a conversation with one of my colleagues in my department who had been thinking about a similar subject – Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Warfare, more commonly known as drone warfare. With less than 25% of the population "fit to serve" on active duty, prolonged deployments, and the high cost of having boots on the ground, drones have become the weapon of choice in conquering the modern battlefield. What is often not addressed, however, are the personal experiences of the operators behind those drones and the effects of remote warfare, especially for women in those and other combat positions. This film was co-written, directed, produced, and edited with my colleagues in the department, and we hired both undergraduate and graduate students to fill in our cast and crew. The success of this film is an outstanding reflection of the collaborative nature within our department. This short film was financed in part by a Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning Grant of \$7,000 and has been Officially Selected at over 19 national and international festivals, nominated for six different categories, and has so far won eight awards – including the "Award of Excellence" at the Broadcast Education Association's Festival of Media Arts 2022, and "Best Director" at the Feedback Female Film Festival in Los Angeles, CA, both of which have a selection rate of the top 20%.

Although the Department of Media, Journalism and Film's evaluation criteria do not indicate that any number of projects must appear in ranked festivals or conferences, I believe the primary indicator of the quality of my work and evidence for how I have exceed research requirements is documented by the collaborative nature of my projects, community engagement through public screenings at events and festivals, and consistently presenting these projects at the University Film and Video Association and the Broadcast Education Association, where my institutional peers review, critique, and have recognized my work through awards and official selections. Supporting documentation can be found on my Tenure and Promotion Portfolio Website.

Service

The Department of Media, Journalism and Film's evaluation criteria for faculty service state that "service activities of Department members may take many forms." One such example outlined in the departmental guidelines is: "Holding office or performing functions (editor, manuscript referee, prepublication reviewer, panel critic, etc.) on behalf of international, national, or regional associations and professional organizations." In May of 2022, I was appointed as Chair of the Writing Division for the Broadcast Education Association, and now oversee the entire division, supervise the Student and Faculty Scriptwriting Competitions for the Festival of Media Arts, and have become a part of the organization and conference's senior leadership. I was promoted to this position after serving first as co-chair of the Student Scriptwriting Competition for the 2018 and 2019 conferences; then the full chair of the Student Scriptwriting Competition for the 2020 conference, then promoted to the chair of the Faculty Scriptwriting Competition for the 2021 conference. After several successful years of helping the organization, the division held a vote in May 2022, and I was elected to become the new Division Chair. I will hold this position until 2025 and will then consider becoming a member of the executive board as I go up for full professor. I was also the Script Caucus Chair for the University Film & Video Association's conferences in 2017 and Co-Chair in 2018. I helped revise and strengthen the scriptwriting panels and competition submissions by suggesting we use the website *Film Freeway* to streamline the process. This also helped create a centralized "bank" where all submitted materials could be held for review and dissemination for judging and panel creation. I also added a requirement stipulating that individuals who intended to present on a scriptwriting panel, had to also complete a close-reading and written response to the other panelists' scripts, with an average of three people per panel. These peer-reviewed response letters are designed to help with the tenure and promotion process for scriptwriting professors and

academics in “proving” their creative endeavors – something that is hard to quantify beyond the festival realm in seeking documentation of successful creative work. I also judge screenplays and films for the Austin Film Festival, and several other film festivals on a regular and rotating basis. Each of these service commitments not only allows me the opportunity to give back to my discipline, but also keeps me up-to-date on current trends, narratives, and production techniques that are ever-evolving. This further allows me to bring updated material and information into my classrooms to better prepare and teach my students.

Another criterion for service is “chairing or actively serving on committees at the university, college, or department level.” At the University level, I am a mentor in the Bear Bridge Program – a program designed to connect junior and senior faculty and foster a better sense of community and collaboration on campus. I also serve as the faculty advisor for the student organizations of the Academic Media Production (AMP) Guild and the Queer Film Club. At the College level, I am a member of the Diversity, Inclusion, and Anti-Racism Council, Judicial Committee, and Academic Suspension Committee. Each of these is important to me given my own struggles with these issues in the past and has fueled a desire to ensure that *all* of our students have an ally advocating for them when issues arise that need to be adjudicated at the College and University levels. In the Department, I chair the Technology Committee, am a member of the Diversity and Inclusion committee, Promotion Committee, Recruitment and Retention Committee, and Production Committee. I served as Chair and/or Co-Chair for the Campus Film Series from 2017-2021. I am also a Master Advisor and a Proactive Advisor for the department, where I advise 40 students a year on average in both the Media, Journalism, and Film majors and Electronic Arts program. About 20% of my advisees are first generation and/or other “at-risk” students whom I work closely with as they navigate (or renavigate) college for the first time and support them as they figure out the confusing institutional bureaucracy of being at a university. These include the kinds of academic, health, and social resources the university has to offer, and just being a sympathetic ear as they find their way in this world. Again, these kinds of service are near and dear to me because I did not have a person who did these kinds of things in my own life’s journey and had to learn everything the hard way. I truly feel that if I can keep just *one* student in college, or inspire them to finish a class, or even advise them to take a break, stay in touch, and get them back into the classroom as soon as they are ready – then I am making a positive difference in our student’s lives.

In summary, this brief narrative overview of the last five years’ worth of teaching, research, and service accomplished in pursuit of tenure and promotion to Associate Professor provides a convincing argument in supporting my case for both. I believe in our students, department, college, and university, and what we do here in creating the next generation of ethical leaders who are culturally competent as they engage with their various communities around the world. Following with our university’s public affairs missions, I have strived to not only meet but exceed the expectations outlined in the tenure and promotion guidelines for the Department of Media, Journalism, and Film.