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*Letter of Support for Ryan Furlong for Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award*

Ryan Furlong is most deserving of an “Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award.” I served as Ryan’s mentor during his first year of teaching in the General Education Literature Program, and I reviewed his course materials, observed a class session, and had several productive discussions with him about his classes. I sat in on his “Interpretation of Literature” class exactly one year ago. I still remember that when I arrived five minutes before class was to begin, Ryan was already there, sitting on his desk and chatting with the early-arriving students. It was clear from the start that he had an excellent, easy rapport with his students. It was also clear to me as I watched Ryan teach that he has had a lot of experience in the classroom: he moves easily around the class, listening intently to students who participate in the discussion, moving back and forth to the board to record insights, and communicating his own intensity of interest in the text under discussion—on this day, Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life*. Ryan generated discussion by asking a series of evocative questions centered on just who gets to narrate the events in Douglass’s life, and just how many narrators there are in the text, and why other narrators get to speak before Douglass does. He had students think about the engraving of Douglass on the frontispiece of the book and helped them figure out how to “read” an engraving—what the clothing signifies, what Douglass’s expression indicates, whether the engraving exudes weakness or strength, accommodation or firmness. About half of the 23 students present offered comments.

After a half hour or so of discussion, Ryan had the class divide into several small groups to work on defining the setting and atmosphere of the narrative. Ryan moved from group to group, listening to the discussion but not taking part, allowing the students to gain confidence in their own abilities to interpret a text. Ryan had given them a number of aspects of the text to think about, and he had explained that individual interpretations of any text depended on which aspects of the text you emphasized and on how each reader melded those aspects into an overall reading. After about ten minutes, Ryan brought the class back together and had each group report on what they had discovered. The discussion during the final ten minutes was particularly lively.

I observed an already experienced and talented teacher both informing and inspiring an initially reticent group. Ryan got the class to fully engage with a text they were unsure about at the beginning but were clearly warming up to by the end. I wanted to return for the next class to see how students’ enthusiasm and insight would develop, because there was no doubt Ryan had ignited both.

Ed Folsom  
Roy J. Carver Professor of English