



THOMAS MORE UNIVERSITY

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Provost Garriga and the Faculty Relations Committee,

This letter is in support of Dr. Joe Christensen's application for promotion to Professor at Thomas More University. Dr. Christensen joined Thomas More only a year prior to my appointment in the Department of Mathematics and Physics and was part of the search committee that was responsible for my hire. However, due to his previous experience as a faculty mentor at McMurry University, he was well-prepared to assist me upon my arrival. More so than any other individual at Thomas More, Dr. Christensen has served as my mentor and role model, both in terms of his presence in the classroom and his devotion to the institution. Our relationship has developed well beyond simple colleagues, and I consider him to be a true friend and certainly a key reason for my ability to maintain my sanity over my early career at Thomas More. Dr. Christensen is a rare example of a self-less faculty member that has been willing to take on increasingly taxing administrative responsibilities simply because he believes in making the institution a better place. In no way have these additional responsibilities diminished his ability to engage in the classroom and his scholarly devotion toward faculty development through efforts like the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) are unmatched. I wholly support Dr. Christensen's application for the rank of Professor and will provide evidence for his qualifications in this letter.

Educational and Professional Background

Dr. Christensen earned a B.S. in Physics and Mathematics at Bradley University in Peoria, IL in 1990, followed by a Ph.D. in Physics from the University of Kentucky in Lexington, KY in 1998. His time at UK, followed by a visiting position at Centre College in Danville, KY are partly responsible for his desire to move back to the region later in his career. From 1999-2007, Dr. Christensen worked as a faculty member in the physics department at McMurry University in Abilene, TX, earning promotion to Associate Professor while also serving as department chair and chair of the faculty. This wealth of experience made him an ideal candidate for a position in the Department of Mathematics and Physics starting in 2007 at Thomas More. Upon arrival at Thomas More, Dr. Christensen was immediately willing to take on roles well beyond the expectations of a new faculty member and has continued this tradition throughout his entire career at the institution.

Effective Teaching

In the area of teaching, Dr. Christensen has been my sounding board from my very first day. I was hired immediately out of graduate school, with relatively little teaching experience before my first semester at Thomas More. As such, I needed a lot of assistance in preparation and planning for my first set of courses, as well as advice on how to handle issues as the semester progressed. Dr. Christensen's office is next door to mine and I felt most comfortable asking him for advice in those early days, though I imagine I likely popped into his office far too frequently. Every time I needed help, he was more than willing to advise and most of the time, he would begin with "At my previous institution, we would...". It was his experience at McMurry which really helped to guide me (and many others) because, in addition to being good advice in general, it was advice from a perspective outside of Thomas More. In some cases, this would show commonality between our practices and those of other institutions, but in other cases, it could show how the way we were doing things at Thomas More were distinct, for better or

worse. This level of perspective also helped Dr. Christensen become instrumental in areas outside of instruction as well.

In the classroom, I have monitored and evaluated Dr. Christensen multiple times over the past ten years. Initially, I was observing him to learn as much as I could about effective teaching, particularly within the physics discipline. Later, I had come full circle and was evaluating him as part of my role as department chair. In either case, I always witnessed an instructor that was dynamic, humorous, and, most importantly, incredibly aware of the level of understanding of all students in the classroom. Every class period, Dr. Christensen rotates conceptual questions throughout the room, but he is doing so with a detailed level of strategy. He might ask high-performing student about a significantly complex concept in order to provide a challenge, while next asking a more basic question to a low-performing student in order to boost their confidence. More so than any other attribute, this is what I came to admire about Dr. Christensen's instruction. Within a few weeks from the start of the semester, he had a working knowledge of roughly where everyone in the classroom was in terms of their understanding of the material and their overall abilities. Based on this analysis, he adjusted his teaching, every moment of every class, by asking appropriately leveled questions to each individual student. If a student provided an incorrect response, they were never criticized, but given an opportunity to adjust their response or perhaps pass the question onto another student. Via these methods, every student in his classroom is engaged, regardless of their current level of performance. It is an ability that I am still trying to master in the classroom myself.

Also relevant to the physics discipline in particular, Dr. Christensen focuses on improving the student's conceptual understanding, going beyond simple problem solving skills. Many early physics majors feel that the key to the discipline is simply knowing what equations to use, plugging in some values, and solving for an unknown. The way Dr. Christensen presents the material puts a greater emphasis on understanding the context and meaning of the underlying equations, rather than just presenting the equations as a problem solving tool. This practice is also clearly evident on his exams, where students are often required to provide written explanations of the conceptual physics as opposed to straight-forward number crunching. While this makes the instruction (and the grading) more difficult, it is by far more effective toward student learning.

Scholarly and Professional Development

Dr. Christensen's dissertation work was on theoretical particle physics, which can be a bit challenging to study when working at small, liberal arts institutions due to limitations in access to supercomputers and other similar facilities. Dr. Christensen's scholarly activities have therefore branched out from pure research into the realm of professional development for faculty, exemplified by his work as Director of the QEP from 2010-2016. Upon accepting this role early in his time at Thomas More, Dr. Christensen took on the monumental task of planning, implementing, and reporting the success of program that involved both faculty and staff across the institution. The theme of critical thinking was chosen as a key area of needed improvement campus wide, and Dr. Christensen went to work developing a program that involved training, mentoring, analyzing, and reflecting on what faculty do in their classrooms and what staff accomplish in their departments.

I was part of the initial cohort of faculty to join the QEP and during this time participated in regular group meetings, workshops, and occasional conferences in order to explore new techniques and methods to be implemented in the classroom. Of all the experiences related to the QEP, I found the group sessions, led by Dr. Christensen, to be the most meaningful. During these weekly meetings, the cohort of faculty would simply gather together and share their thoughts and reactions to anything new they had tried in the classroom. We would also seek advice for introducing new techniques or recommendations for improvement when something went wrong. In every session, Dr. Christensen was there to help guide the conversation, reference the relevant information from a variety of resources, and encourage us to keep exploring innovations in the classroom. Dr. Christensen also personally conducted numerous workshops for the entire faculty on topics related to critical thinking in the classroom and the Paul-Elder model. As a result of these efforts, there are many of us at Thomas More that have

altered our teaching methods for the better. Perhaps more importantly, Dr. Christensen helped to show us how we need to be continually thoughtful and reflective of our teaching practices in light of the current best practices.

In addition to the professional development opportunities fostered by Dr. Christensen via the QEP, he has also spent concentrated time and effort in the development of an on-line, interactive manual for our physics laboratories. One clear downside to using a simple booklet manual for laboratories is the inability of the student to dive deeper into a particular concept or seek help for a particularly difficult question. This is especially true when the student is asked to read through and complete pre-lab exercises in advance of the experiment, but also applies to when the student is actively conducting the experiment but the instructor may be assisting other students. As part of his sabbatical in the fall of 2017, Dr. Christensen explored the creation of an on-line physics textbook, where the use of interactive links can allow a student to easily explore the connections between different physical concepts and get a grasp of the bigger picture of the development of the science over time. As an extension of this project, Dr. Christensen chose to convert our current paper manual into this format. Our students are now able to utilize this on-line resource in order to better prepare for their upcoming labs, as well as seek out relevant help during the laboratory itself. Overall, the on-line, interactive manual has proven to be a valuable asset to the department in the short amount of time since its implementation.

Contribution to the University Community

While I saved the category of contribution to the institution as my final topic in this letter, I believe it to be the area where Dr. Christensen has stood out more than any other faculty member at Thomas More in the last decade. Simply put, Dr. Christensen has been willing to sacrifice his time and effort toward the betterment of the institution through a variety of administrative roles, including department chair, director of the QEP, chair of the Core Assessment Committee, reviewer of the faculty manual and constitution, assistant dean, and now associate provost for the university. In many cases, Dr. Christensen is willing to take on the work that we as a faculty have been trying to avoid. It is truly a self-less act and one of self-sacrifice, but Dr. Christensen is willing to make the effort because he honestly believes in the mission of the institution and in supporting his fellow colleagues.

In addition to the immense workload associated with the variety of administrative roles, it is more important for me to emphasize the manner in which Dr. Christensen conducts himself as he carries out his duties. Dr. Christensen has had unending and admirable patience in working with a faculty body that can be incredibly slow to act in a variety of situations. He believes completely in the shared governance of the institution and recognizes the importance of everyone's role, no matter how messy or time-consuming discussions and deliberations can get. He has been our guide through many complicated and contentious situations, whether it involves our book ordering service or faculty rights and voice in greater institutional matters. During a time when the relationship between faculty and administration was very strained, Dr. Christensen was always a diplomatic voice of reason that was willing to see both sides of an argument and find a compromise wherever it could be found. Without Dr. Christensen's help in a lot of these matters, I believe things could have become much worse for all involved.

In closing, the only criticism I have ever had for Dr. Christensen is his steadfast adherence to looking at every situation in a rational manner. The only reason for my frustration is simply because I know that he is right to approach most of life's dilemmas in this way. Many times over the past decade, myself and others have approached Dr. Christensen to discuss our emotional anger over some situation, only to find ourselves being calmed and enlightened by his rational explanation of the matter at hand. He has been a voice of reason for me and the institution as a whole and I will continue to be thankful for his insight.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Wesley Ryle".

Wesley Ryle