

January 16, 2022

Tenure Committee Members
SUNY Potsdam
44 Pierrepoint Ave.
Potsdam, NY 13676

Personnel Committee of the Department of Politics:

It is my pleasure and honor to provide a letter of recommendation in support of Professor Michael Popović's application for tenure. I had the opportunity to work with Professor Popović in a wide range of contexts, and his professionalism, dedication, and assiduity are unparalleled. We served together as Co-Gender and Sexuality Coordinators at the State University of New York at Potsdam for several years, we engaged in volunteer efforts related to the LGBTQ+ community for a variety of organizations, and he introduced me to the world of facilitated dialogue and its capacity to address systemic inequity through his work with SOLIYA. Across all of these contexts, Professor Popović demonstrated exceptional qualities as an educator and advocate, and I have never worked with anyone more worthy of tenure.

I first crossed paths with Michael when we worked together as Co-Gender and Sexuality Coordinators at SUNY Potsdam. We were tasked with a number of objectives designed to create a more welcoming, inclusive, and supportive environment for LGBTQ+ students, staff, and faculty. Our first step in this process was the creation and implementation of a series of trainings designed to educate various audiences about the LGBTQ+ community and opportunities for allyship. From our first interaction, it was immediately apparent that Professor Popović cares deeply for his students and his colleagues, that he operates from a place of profound compassion, and that he is willing to put in immense time and effort to improve the experience of members of marginalized groups in our community and educational institutions. For example, as we worked to develop the training materials, I was consistently impressed with his wealth of knowledge related to the history of the LGBTQ+ rights movement, and his thoughtful consideration of intersectionality. One specific example of this was the assiduity he demonstrated in prefacing the story of the 1969 Stonewall Riots with the story of the Compton's Cafeteria riot in 1966. An oft-ignored piece of history, the Compton's Cafeteria riot was led by people of color and trans folks, and it paved the way for the Stonewall Riots several years later. Professor Popović refused to omit the contributions of people of color and trans individuals from the history of the movement, and in the many years I have been working in this field, he is the only educator to have made that thoughtful choice. We used the training materials we created in a wide range of presentations for various departments, staff groups, courses, campus groups, community groups, and local high schools. Professor Popović's attention to detail, his genuine consideration of intersectionality, and his brilliant understanding of history's impact on our lived experiences benefited every member of every audience. He poured his time, effort, and considerable intellect into this process, even while juggling many other important professional responsibilities, and working and presenting with him was a genuine joy.

Professor Popović was also instrumental in the design and development of a webpage for LGBTQ+ current and prospective students, staff, and faculty on the SUNY Potsdam website. Over the course of a year, Professor Popović worked tirelessly to build this incredible resource so that people could access information related to available trainings and workshops, opportunities to build an LGBTQ+ community on campus and in the wider North Country, upcoming events related to these topics, trans resources, social services, mental health resources, suicide prevention, LGBTQ+ organizations, legal resources, job market resources, and answers to frequently asked questions. The development of this webpage was a mammoth undertaking, but Professor Popović worked tirelessly to ensure that the content was of the highest caliber. The result was a beautifully designed and profoundly helpful resource for members of the campus and community. Several of my colleagues who work outside of SUNY Potsdam used the webpage in their own educational spheres and expressed deep gratitude that such a powerful tool was designed for our area to support this marginalized community. This webpage simply would not exist without Professor Popović's dedication and determination to bring it into reality.

Professor Popović's inspiring leadership within the Office of Gender and Sexuality also extended beyond the trainings and webpage we developed. Professor Popović and I worked together to craft and then pass an affirmative name and pronoun policy, we built a lending library of diverse and positive LGBTQ+ literature, we created digital and print resources for folks who wanted to become allies of the LGBTQ+ community, and we held SUNY Potsdam's inaugural Lavender Graduation in 2019, it's first in over 200 years. Professor Popović designed a brilliant run of show for Lavender Graduation, worked seamlessly with faculty and staff to bring the necessary pieces of the event together, and crafted a speech that brought tears to the audience. In each iteration of Lavender Graduation since 2019, Professor Popović has championed students, courted phenomenal guest speakers to honor their accomplishments, and designed awards to spotlight the twin merits of diversity and heart. For example, Professor Popović conceptualized a new award designed to honor a historical figure whose contributions to the LGBTQ+ community have been overlooked or forgotten. The inaugural recipient became the namesake: William Dorsey Swann, better known as The Queen. Swann was a formerly enslaved person who most likely became America's first activist to lead a queer resistance group. Swann was the first American on record who pursued legal and political action to defend the LGBTQ+ community's right to gather. Professor Popović's inception of the William Dorsey Swann Remembrance Award quite literally created a space in history to honor the ignored and the forgotten, a powerful lesson for students as they head off into their bright tomorrows.

No less impressive was his commitment to upholding these values in our wider community through his volunteer efforts. I worked with Michael to craft presentations and materials for other local universities, high schools, and senior citizen educational programs with the aim of improving the experience of LGBTQ+ members of our campus within the wider Potsdam community. In working with these different groups, I observed Professor Popović's capacity to tailor his teaching to each distinct audience with incredible attention to detail. In so doing, Professor Popović never failed to inspire genuine change and growth in each audience. One particularly impressive example was his work with senior citizens through SOAR, a member-directed learning group of senior citizens in the North Country who requested his services in

providing a course called “LGBTQ+ 101.” Professor Popović beautifully crafted his materials and his presentation style to suit the audience, and by the end of the course, every single participant submitted a glowing review of his work. In turn, these participants have now become members of the wider Potsdam community who are sensitive and responsive to the needs of LGBTQ+ individuals, which has a profoundly positive ripple effect for marginalized students learning to make their way in the wider community during their time at SUNY Potsdam.

Professor Popović also worked tirelessly to support the holistic experience of LGBTQ+ students through the creation of an LGBTQ+ support group. It became clear in the pandemic that a significant percentage of students were struggling with mental health, and that the need for additional support was particularly acute for LGBTQ+ students. Professor Popović and I collaborated with the Counseling Center at SUNY Potsdam to provide students with a weekly support group to ensure their mental health needs were met. Professor Popović demonstrated an incredible combination of professionalism, respect, compassion, reliability, and warmth that allowed those students to feel safe and seen in these challenging times. Professor Popović’s efforts in this arena were far and away above expectations, and his extraordinary commitment to ensuring that these marginalized students were receiving the support necessary for them to succeed at SUNY Potsdam was simply awe-inspiring.

Equally remarkable were his efforts to bring to bear the power of SOLIYA’s facilitated dialogue program to address concerns about racism on campus. Professor Popović invited me to participate in SUNY Potsdam’s pilot facilitated dialogue program by offering me an opportunity to earn Advanced Dialogue Facilitation Certification through SOLIYA with a race and racism-specific training that he led himself. Working with Professor Popović remains one of the greatest privileges of my career, and learning from him remains one of the greatest honors of my life. Over the entire course of my own education and my own work as an educator, I never learned as much about race and racism as I did when I learned to dialogue around these issues thanks to his incredible instruction. It quite literally changed lives. He took a passionate and caring group of educators and taught them how to examine racism within themselves and our larger society, he gave them the tools to begin to dismantle it, and he gave them an opportunity to apply what they learned to their experiences with their students through facilitated dialogue. He held us accountable, even when it was hard. Especially when it was hard. He believed in our capacity and gave us the support we needed to reach the bar he set. Because I had an opportunity to learn from him through this process, I have a window into the experiences of his students. It is no wonder that he has won so many awards from his students and his colleagues. He is one of most exceptional and caring educators I have ever known.

It has been a genuine privilege to work with Professor Popović, and he has made me a better educator and person through his shining example of true dedication, thoughtful compassion, powerful advocacy, and unrelenting commitment to honoring intersectionality and uplifting marginalized voices. I strongly and unreservedly recommend Professor Popović based on his superb academic record, as well as his content of character. I hope that you will consider Professor Michael Popović’s application for tenure, and I would welcome the opportunity to discuss his capabilities and contributions further, as he has earned the highest praise I can offer. I

can be reached at ms.underhill.212@gmail.com, or at 720-341-1110, with any further questions.
Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,



Ms. Cailey Underhill

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