

Statement on Professor Ruel W. Tyson Jr.

Co-Winner of the Thomas Jefferson Award for 2002

The faculty, students, administrators, staff, and alumni who have known Professor Ruel W. Tyson Jr. over the course of his distinguished 35-year career at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill understand his deep affinity with the "ideals and objectives" of Thomas Jefferson. Professor Tyson's extraordinary achievements as an inspiring teacher in the Department of Religious Studies and as the visionary, founding Director of the Institute for the Arts and Humanities exemplify the intellectual and institutional leadership that we recognize in Thomas Jefferson and in the exceptional faculty colleagues whom we honor with a Jefferson Award.

The faculty who nominated Professor Tyson for this award referred to a wide range of personal attributes and public actions that show his commitment to Jeffersonian ideals. To summarize a long history of achievements in a single sentence, we would say simply that Professor Tyson is a brilliant cross-cultural translator and an innovative master builder. He translates high ideals into a language that other people understand and want to act upon in their own lives, and he knows how to build new institutions that embody those ideals and ensure their future development. Jefferson is best known, of course, as the early national leader who summarized the emerging American political

creed in the Declaration of Independence, but he was also a "builder." He was forever building his famous home at Monticello, but he was even more influential as the visionary builder of the University of Virginia. He believed that education and a well-informed public were the foundation for an enlightened, democratic society.

Professor Tyson has long expressed these same values in his teaching, in his writing, and in his remarkable service to the university and the state. He believes deeply in the value of a humanistic education that raises the provocative, enduring questions of philosophy, religion, literature, and history. His former students refer to the ways in which he changed their lives by provoking them to think critically about their own beliefs and by helping them to develop a vision for their future. Professor Tyson's teaching—as former students describe it—inspires people to think for themselves and to imagine new approaches to old problems. He insists on the importance of understanding humanistic traditions, but he also insists on the constant need to rethink and revise these traditions amid the rapid changes of the contemporary world.

Professor Tyson extends his teaching skills far beyond the university because he is a master at explaining to non-academic people why it is important for scholars to study seemingly arcane philosophical or cultural issues. He shows how careful research and creative scholarship lead to inspired teaching, but he also listens carefully to people outside the university and brings their insights back to his colleagues at UNC. Alumni often say that Professor Tyson helps them comprehend what professors do and why they do it. He describes the search for knowledge in a language that never condescends to non-academic audiences, and his engaging personal conversations convey his deep curiosity about the distinctive insights of each person he meets. He assumes that every

human being has a great capacity for learning and for understanding what is at stake in the great questions of philosophy, political theory, and literature (a democratic conception of education that also expresses a key Jeffersonian ideal).

He regularly takes "Faculty Fellows" of the Institute for the Arts and Humanities to conversations with alumni groups and external "Friends" of the Institute. These discussions always focus on specific themes—including, for example, the nature of civic culture in America, the complexity of race relations, or the meaning of friendship. Professor Tyson thus carries the spirit of the university into countless meetings in places such as Charlotte, Greensboro, Washington, New York, Boston, and Atlanta, but he also carries this wider public back into the University. This is the work of a brilliant, cross-cultural translator.

At the same time, however, Professor Tyson is a brilliant builder. He has built the Institute for the Arts and Humanities into one of the most vital centers of faculty conversation and interdisciplinary exchanges at UNC. His long, generous service to this Institute has created a unique meeting place where faculty have the space and the time to talk about their ideas, their teaching, and their visions for the University. He works tirelessly to attract valuable gifts that have endowed faculty fellowships, supported special programs and lectureships, and led to the construction of a beautiful new building. Professor Tyson is an exceptional builder who knows how to build intellectual programs as well as impressive structures in bricks and mortar. He has raised millions of dollars for his various "building" projects, and he has managed this money well (in this respect, he builds more successfully than the debt-ridden Jefferson built at Monticello!). Equally important, Professor Tyson shows how fundraising in a university must always serve a

higher vision. He builds toward an ideal, and few professors have ever been more successful in transforming their ideals into reality.

Like all great builders, Professor Tyson has created a strong foundation for the future use of the structures he has established. Approximately 200 UNC faculty members have benefited from semester fellowships at the Institute for the Arts and Humanities, where they have met colleagues from other departments and presented their research ideas, their art, their music, and their ideas about good teaching. Future generations of UNC professors will continue this well-established program, and they will meet in a building that will become a dynamic center for the creative exchanges that characterize a great university. The programs and facilities of the IAH will help shape the future education of UNC students, but they will also continue to provide all-important links between the university, the alumni, and the citizens of both North Carolina and the wider world.

Professor Tyson has thus expressed the "ideals and objectives" of Thomas Jefferson by translating ideals into action and by building for the future without forgetting that solid structures always stand upon a legacy from the past. I therefore speak on behalf of his faculty colleagues, his students, and his many friends outside the University in thanking Professor Ruel Tyson for the extraordinary work and imaginative leadership that we recognize as he receives Jefferson Award for 2002.

Lloyd Kramer
Professor of History
Associate Director, Institute for the Arts and Humanities

With the Assistance of other faculty who nominated Professor Tyson for this award:

Jane D. Brown
James L. Knight Professor
School of Journalism and Mass Communication

Bart Ehrman
Professor and Chair
Department of Religious Studies

Peter Filene
Professor of History

Bobbi Owen
Professor of Dramatic Art

James Peacock
Professor of Anthropology
Director of the University Center for International Studies