

Citation for William L. Andrews, Winner of the 2015 Thomas Jefferson Award

By Prof. Beverly Taylor (English and Comparative Literature)

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William L. Andrews, the E. Maynard Adams Professor of English & Comparative Literature, nobly incarnates the values represented by the Thomas Jefferson Award. In 1996 returning as a distinguished professor to the department where he had earned his PhD, he intended to devote himself to his scholarship after directing the Humanities Center at the University of Kansas. Always a remarkably productive scholar, he has nevertheless repeatedly subordinated his own work to leadership roles on our campus. He chaired the Department of English for four years, then served as Senior Associate Dean for the Fine Arts and Humanities for seven. In 2009-11 he co-chaired the massive endeavor to develop and write UNC's five-year academic plan.

It would be difficult to overstate the magnitude of his investment in the University and all its citizens—staff, students, and faculty—as a Senior Associate Dean for the College of Arts and Sciences, most especially during the worst of the budget crisis erupting seven years ago. Not merely keeping the ship afloat, he raised funds for new initiatives, including large interdisciplinary grants from the Mellon Foundation that have supported graduate fellowships, faculty research, and visionary collaborative opportunities such as the Medieval and Early Modern Studies program (MEMS) and the Carolina Digital Humanities Initiative.

Andrews's abundant, seminal scholarship in African American literature and culture deserves special recognition. He entered the developing field early, when it took notable courage and commitment to the field's importance for a white scholar to establish himself as an undisputed leader. He focused attention on slave narratives when few understood the cultural and literary importance of this unrecognized body of work. His archival research made an invaluable trove of previously unavailable slave narratives accessible to the world through UNC's Documenting the American South web archive. A recent national conference of the premier interdisciplinary organization for 19th-century American studies devoted a panel to the slave narrative in order to honor Bill Andrews's groundbreaking scholarship. With his customary modesty, he deflected the praise of six distinguished panelists who credited his work for making their own possible. Dismissing his many academic accolades, Bill described the one tribute he treasures as a testament that his work matters. A member of a small Southern church, a woman who owned the only computer in a congregation of about 100, thanked Bill Andrews for making available to her and the 25 children in the congregation a rich segment of their history.

His reach beyond academia, the role of his work in restoring a heritage of triumphs and meaning to a race too often reminded of bitter defeat and marginalization, reveal that Bill Andrews has extended the vision of Jeffersonian democracy to include people whom Jefferson himself was unable to include fully in the grace of America.

Bravo, Bill Andrews, inspirational leader and scholar!