2021 Awards of Distinction: Honoring groundbreaking research, adaptability and creativity

Several faculty members are being recognized for their excellence in teaching, mentoring and research as part of the University’s annual Awards of Distinction. This year’s honorees include a rare double winner – Robert Stephan, assistant professor of religious studies and classics, who won the Margaret M. Briehl and Dennis T. Ray Five Star Faculty Award and the Gerald G. Swanson Prize for Teaching Excellence.

The awards, presented by the Office of the Provost, the Honors College, the Graduate College, the Postdoctoral Affairs office and the GIFT Center at the University of Arizona Foundation, are scheduled to be celebrated during a ceremony this fall. Details will be shared once finalized.

Henry and Phyllis Koffler Prize in Research/Scholarship/Creative Activity
Vance Holliday | Professor, Anthropology

This award, made possible by donations from late President Emeritus Henry Koffler and his wife, Phyllis, recognizes outstanding accomplishments in three categories: teaching; research, scholarship and creative activity; and public service and outreach. The award recognizes a different category each year that it's given. This year's award is for the research, scholarship and creative activity category.

Holiday, who joined the faculty in 2002, "has been interdisciplinary since before the term became common," said one nominator. Another called him a leading figure in North American geoarchaeology, saying he "comes at the discipline equally grounded in both fields, which is truly a remarkable feat." Holliday is also executive director of the Argonaut Archaeological Research Fund, a privately endowed research program based in the School of Anthropology that focuses on understanding the earliest populations of the greater Southwest.

The award includes a $5,000 prize.

The Margaret M. Briehl and Dennis T. Ray Five Star Faculty Award
Robert Stephan | Assistant Professor, Religious Studies and Classics

The Five Star Faculty Award, established in 1983, is the only Universitywide teaching award whose honoree is chosen by undergraduates. Each year, a committee of students reviews nominations and interviews finalists before selecting a winner.

In nominating him, students remarked on his enthusiastic approach to remote teaching, which has included high-tech video lectures and virtual tours of ancient archaeological sites. Stephan, who was chosen from a record-setting pool of more than 360 nominees – 60 of which were for him. He joined the University in 2016 and teaches courses on classical history and civilization, the reception of classics in the modern world, ancient sport and spectacle, and the Greco-Roman economy.

The award includes a $1,000 prize.

Excellence in Postdoctoral Mentoring Award
George Gehrels | Distinguished Professor, Geosciences

This award recognizes a faculty member who provides exceptional mentoring to postdoctoral scholars.

A nomination letter from two postdoctoral scholars praised Gehrels’ "ability to balance being a top-tier scientist, mentor, and educator, while still valuing everyone's ideas, energy, and time." The letter went on to praise Gehrels’ commitment to diversity, noting that he has been a leader in hiring women and people of color in his lab.

The award includes a $1,000 prize and a plaque.

University of Arizona Foundation Leicester and Kathryn Sherrill Creative Teaching Award
Tori Hidalgo | Lecturer, Chemistry and Biochemistry

This award, presented by the University of Arizona Foundation, recognizes excellence in the art of teaching at all levels, with particular emphasis on the undergraduate level.

One nominator, a former student, shared a story about Hidalgo coming to class dressed as a whiteboard to illustrate the importance of using whiteboards in problem solving. The student said the story illustrates how helped change a "genuine
dislike” for chemistry to becoming “so inspired by her teaching techniques and creativity that I knew I wanted to be a part of her learning team.” Hidalgo, who joined the faculty in 2009, recently transitioned from teaching in a traditional lecture hall to teaching some classes of 600 or more students, and a nominator said her success in doing so demonstrates adaptability and open-mindedness in her ability to create a highly functioning learning environment.

The award includes a $2,500 prize and an individual plaque placed in the Donna Swaim Honors Lounge in the Student Union Memorial Center.

Outstanding Postdoctoral Scholar Award
Irene Shivaei | Postdoctoral Research Associate, Steward Observatory

This award recognizes a postdoctoral scholar who demonstrates excellence in research, communication and leadership. Shivaei joined the University in 2017 and is a NASA Hubble fellow. One nominator praised her research on star formation in young galaxies, saying her work has helped resolve complications that were inhibiting progress on the study of distant galaxies. The letter went on to praise Shivaei's creation of Mentorship and Education in SCience for Tucson, a math tutoring and mentorship program serving predominantly Tohono O'odham high school students.

The award includes a $1,000 prize and a plaque.

Distinguished Scholar Award
Lynn Carter | Associate Professor, Planetary Sciences
Allison Gabriel | Associate Professor, Management and Organizations
Elisa Tomat | Associate Professor, Chemistry and Biochemistry

The Distinguished Scholar Award recognizes outstanding midcareer faculty members for innovations in their disciplines and contributions to teaching, research and outreach at the University.

One of Carter's nominators called her a “clear leader” in the field of using radar to explore planetary surfaces, mentioning her involvement in six current spacecraft missions. A second called Carter a “brilliant scientist with creative ideas and terrific skill,” and praised her commitment to inclusive excellence, saying most of her advisees are from underrepresented populations. Carter joined the University in 2016.

Since coming to the University in 2015, Gabriel and has compiled “a truly outstanding research record,” according to one nominator. Her research focuses on employee experiences at work and how those experiences impact their emotions, motivation and well-being. A second nominator pointed to Gabriel's "remarkable level of service for someone at her career stage," citing her participation in premier conferences in her field and her work on the editorial boards of seven journals.

One nominator referred to Tomat, who joined the University in 2010, as "a formidable mentor of young scientists," training her students in synthetic chemistry and exposing them to multidisciplinary research. Another detailed her outreach work, including a program called Chemistry Discovery, which has brought more than 700 students from local middle schools to campus for educational activities led by undergraduate and graduate students.

The award includes a $10,000 prize.

Early Career Scholars Award
Laura Condon | Assistant Professor, Hydrology and Atmospheric Sciences
Lindsay Montgomery | Assistant Professor, Anthropology
Stefano Bloch | Assistant Professor, Geography, Development and Environment
Jameson Lopez | Assistant Professor, Educational Policy Studies and Practice
Antonio José Bacelar da Silva | Assistant Professor, Latin American Studies
Jessica Brown | Assistant Professor, Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences

The Early Career Scholars Award recognizes early-career faculty members at the forefront of their disciplines for highly valued contributions to teaching, creative activity and service.

One nominator praised Condon, who joined the University in 2018, for her ability to lead collaborative projects involving faculty and international and industrial partners, calling it "almost unheard of for faculty at her early career stage." Another cited her efforts to share her research broadly, including the development of a web application providing an interactive environment for kids to learn about groundwater.

Montgomery came to the University in 2016. One nomination letter touted her work to impart "deep and much-needed changes" in the field of archaeology through the incorporation of Indigenous voices from throughout the country. A second called her a dedicated and talented educator who is "at the forefront of Indigenous archaeology."

Bloch "has become a rising star in urban and cultural geography," according to one nominator, who said his research on criminalization and policing is "marked by respect for all those he studies, from gang members to the police." Another cited feedback from teacher course evaluation surveys, in which students frequently note that Bloch helped them get excited about course material and learn critical thinking skills. Bloch began working at the University in 2017.
Since joining the University in 2018, Lopez has proven himself to be someone who "unapologetically does his work with and for Native communities," according to one nominator. Another calls his work on Indigenous quantitative research groundbreaking, citing his development of new models, outcomes, sampling strategies and measurement tools for conducting research with Indigenous communities.

Silva began at the University in 2017. One nominator detailed his role in revitalizing the University's Brazil Studies Network, which promotes scholarship on different aspects of social and political issues in Brazil. A second said Silva's sustained activity has led to him being recognized as "an upcoming star in the field of Afro-Latinx studies."

One of the nomination letters for Brown, who began at the University in 2017, says she has embraced the Grand Challenges pillar of the University's strategic plan by establishing clinical and research collaborations with the athletics and medical community to take on the issue of recovery and quality of life in individuals with acquired brain damage. Another noted student praise for her mentorship, citing one who said that Brown "changed my life and inspired me to pursue a doctoral degree."

The award includes a $5,000 prize.

Graduate and Professional Education Teaching and Mentoring Awards

Mary Carol Combs | Professor, Teaching, Learning and Sociocultural Studies
Desiree Vega | Associate Professor, Disability and Psychoeducational Studies

These awards honor faculty members who excel in their teaching and mentoring of graduate students.

Many of the nomination letters cited Combs' commitment to making graduate students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds feel comfortable and represented in her courses. One student nominator said Combs "has given me an unparalleled experience in the graduate program during the times when I was questioning my own potential and scholarly development." Combs has been with the University since 1996.

Vega joined the University in 2016. In praising her educational approach, one nomination letter detailed how Vega "challenges her students to be critical of seemingly insignificant aspects of psychological practice as it relates to serving culturally and linguistically minoritized students." Another said that despite many course and research requirements, Vega was never too busy for her students, adding that "she met each of us where we were in order to walk alongside us."

The award includes a $2,500 prize.

Gerald J. Swanson Prize for Teaching Excellence

Paul Blowers – Distinguished Professor, Chemical and Environmental Engineering
John Pollard – Professor of Practice, Chemistry and Biochemistry
Ashley Jordan – Assistant Professor of Practice, Psychology
Robert Stephan – Assistant Professor, Religious Studies and Classics
Shawn Jackson – Senior Lecturer, Physics

Blowers joined the faculty in 1999. One nominator recalled Blowers putting a poor exam performance in perspective. "He showed me exams he had kept from his undergraduate years in which he did comparatively worse on his first exam and then maintained a positive trajectory by applying a growth mindset through well-proven learning techniques," he wrote. Another said Blowers has become a key resource at the University for active teaching training for faculty.

One of Pollard's nominators said his love of teaching and active learning dramatically transforms his students' experiences. "He is legendary among students and a respected leader on campus and beyond," he wrote. Others praised his contagious enthusiasm for learning and tireless work to improve chemistry education. Pollard worked at the University from 1992-1997, then returned in 2000. (You can learn more about Pollard's approach to active learning in this UA@Work story on active learning.)

Jordan began at the University in 2017. One of her nominators said Jordan made her feel welcome and empowered as a non-traditional student, and boosted her classes through uplifting emails, video messages, interactive conversations and more. Another lauded her empathy in addressing student concerns about challenging courses. "Feeling that your professor understands your mental and emotional barriers to learning can be key for many students in eliminating those barriers," the nominator wrote.

Stephan joined the University in 2016. "I have never had a professor that has so much passion for what he is teaching as well as want his students to thrive and succeed in his course," wrote one nominator. "I can't remember a single time leaving Dr. Stephan's class in a worse mood than when I arrived, his energy is that contagious," wrote another. Stephan also won the Margaret M. Briehl and Dennis T. Ray Five Star Faculty award.

One nominator praised Jackson's work as master of ceremonies for the annual Physics Phun Night, a popular program for students of all ages featuring fun science demonstrations. Another referenced Jackson's communication skill, wit and reflexes for teaching. "Shawn Jackson is a rare breed," the letter read, "being adept at both the complex world of physical sciences as well as the pragmatic realm of effective pedagogy." Jackson has worked at the University since 2006.
See previous honorees on the Faculty Awards & Honors [3] website.

Note: In the June 23 issue of Lo Que Pasa, we will highlight the Awards for Excellence, recognizing individual employees and teams for outstanding achievements.

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