Awards of Distinction Recognize Excellence in Teaching, Mentoring, Research

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Seven faculty members and a staff scientist were honored for their teaching, mentoring and research at the annual UA Awards of Distinction luncheon and ceremony.

The awards were presented by the Office of the Provost [1], the Honors College [2], the Graduate College [3], and the GIFT Center at the UA Foundation [4]. This year’s ceremony, held April 1, included two new awards, the Excellence in Postdoctoral Mentoring Award and the Outstanding Postdoctoral Scholar Award, which were presented by the Postdoctoral Affairs Office [5].

The Margaret M. Briehl and Dennis T. Ray Five Star Faculty Award

Zoe Cohen
Assistant Professor, Department of Physiology

The Five Star Faculty Award was established in 1983 and is the only Universitywide teaching award whose honoree is chosen by undergraduates. In nominating Cohen, students described her as an "approachable and warm" professor with an "engaging, exciting and relevant" teaching style. Cohen's teaching methods, nominators added, encourage active student participation, and are particularly effective at helping them retain course content and develop translatable skills. "We thought Dr. Cohen best represented what it means to be an outstanding teacher at the University of Arizona," they wrote. Cohen, who has been featured [6] in The Chronicle of Higher Education for her teaching methods, began at the UA in 2007. The award comes with a $1,000 prize.

Graduate and Professional Education Teaching and Mentoring Awards

David Sbarra
Professor and Director of Clinical Training, Department of Psychology

Julia Annas
Regents' Professor, Department of Philosophy

These awards honor faculty who excel in their teaching and mentoring of graduate students. Sbarra's influence on graduate education at the UA extends "far beyond his advisees or the students in his laboratory, and far beyond those students in his graduate courses," according to his nominators. Sbarra works directly with all graduate students in his department, and has served on about 40 graduate committees in the last three years. Nominators called Sbarra's teaching in six graduate-level courses "exemplary," and noted that two-thirds of Sbarra's 64 publications since 2009 have involved students, former students or postdoctoral fellows as co-authors. Sbarra began at the UA in 2004. Annas' nominators called attention to her generosity as a teacher and mentor, noting that she often teaches independent studies and special topic
reading groups, sometimes as many as five each semester. Students also pointed to Annas' ability to lead engaging and thoughtful graduate seminars with students, even while she was completing a book. One nominator pointed to Annas' willingness to be flexible, noting that Annas researched Confucian ethics—a topic she had not previously studied in detail—so she could guide a student through an independent study project. Annas began at the UA in 1992. The awards include a $2,500 prize, a medallion and a plaque.

Excellence in Postdoctoral Mentoring Award

Joceline Lega
Professor and Coordinator of the Mathematics Postdoctoral Program, Department of Mathematics

This award recognizes a faculty member who provides exceptional mentoring to postdoctoral scholars. Lega was recognized for her work as the coordinator of the Postdoctoral Mentoring Program in the Department of Mathematics. Lega, according to her nominators, has "developed a model program" for the 28 postdocs that it serves. As coordinator of the program, Lega arranges weekly meetings for postdocs to discuss topics such as writing grant proposals and teaching statements, and she also provides opportunities to practice job talks, which are research presentations to prospective employers in academia. Lega, herself a former UA postdoc, was hired as an assistant professor in 1997. The award includes a $1,000 prize and a plaque.

Outstanding Postdoctoral Scholar Award

Michael Sori
Associate Staff Scientist, Lunar and Planetary Laboratory and Department of Planetary Sciences

This award recognizes a postdoctoral scholar who demonstrates excellence in research, communication and leadership. Sori was honored for his "outstanding contributions" to the UA's research, outreach and teaching missions. Since beginning his postdoctoral training at the UA in 2014, Sori has published 14 peer-reviewed articles in journals such as Nature and Science using funding he obtained through NASA. Nominators noted that Sori's work has led to major discoveries, including one study \[7\] that helped solve mysteries about volcanoes on the dwarf planet Ceres. Sori also has earned a reputation in the classroom as a "natural educator," his nominators wrote. The award includes a $1,000 prize and a plaque.

The University of Arizona Foundation Leicester and Kathryn Sherrill Creative Teaching Award

Molly Bolger
Associate Professor, Department of Molecular and Cellular Biology

This award recognizes excellence in the art of teaching at all levels but especially the undergraduate level. Bolger was recognized for structuring courses in ways that maximize her students' success, with one nominator calling her a "creative and innovative curriculum designer and instructor." Nominators noted Bolger's work to transition an introductory biology course to an active learning model. The newly structured class now provides an authentic biology lab experience to freshmen. Bolger also remains dedicated, nominators wrote, to measuring the effectiveness of her teaching methods and refining her approach. Bolger's
supporters also pointed to her community outreach, which includes collaborating with Pima Community College faculty to offer learning opportunities to their students. The award includes a $2,500 prize and a plaque in the Donna Swaim Honors Lounge in the Student Union Memorial Center.

The Henry and Phyllis Koffler Prizes in Research, Scholarship and Creative Activity

Donata Vercelli
Professor, Department of Cellular and Molecular Medicine, Associate Director of the Asthma and Airway Disease Research Center, and Director of the Arizona Center for the Biology of Complex Diseases

Ubirajara Van Kolck
Professor, Department of Physics

This award, made possible by donations from the 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, it was research, scholarship and creative activity. Vercelli was recognized for her long-standing expertise in the prevention of childhood asthma. Her research includes a study that demonstrated for the first time that children raised on farms have lower rates of asthma. Nominators noted that Vercelli is the first female secretary general of the International Allergy Collegium, an international group of scientists who study allergy and immunobiology. She came to the UA in 1999. Van Kolck’s award recognizes his position as an international expert in nuclear physics with many published articles that are widely cited. Colleagues who nominated Van Kolck wrote that he is responsible for “singlehandedly reshaping the fundamental theory of nuclear forces.” Van Kolck began at the UA in 2000. The Koffler Award is typically given to one honoree, who receives a prize of $10,000. This year's awardees split the prize and received medallions and certificates.

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