Inaugural CUES Fellows Aim to Revolutionize Teaching and Learning

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Six UA faculty members will explore ways to revolutionize teaching and learning across an array of disciplines as the inaugural cohort of the Center for University Education Scholarship’s Distinguished Fellows.

The fellows, and their projects, were announced in late January. They are:

- Mahmoud Azaz, assistant professor of Middle Eastern and North African studies
- Paul Blowers, Distinguished Professor of Chemical and Environmental Engineering
- Cheryl Lacasse, clinical professor of nursing and director of teaching/learning practice and evaluation
- Brian Mayer, associate professor of sociology and public health
- John Pollard, associate professor of practice of chemistry and biochemistry and interim assistant dean for academic affairs in the Honors College
- Vignesh Subbian, assistant professor of biomedical engineering and of systems and industrial engineering

Click here to learn more about the fellows' projects.

The center, known as CUES, was established in late 2016 with a $3 million gift from a donor who asked not to be identified. The center aims to provide resources for all faculty to explore evidence-based teaching and learning.

The CUES Distinguished Fellowships program serves as the center's "marquee program," said Debra Tomanek, the center's director and professor emerita of molecular and cellular biology. The fellowship provides a $20,000 grant for between one and three years for each fellow to work on a project in their discipline that explores new ways to approach teaching and learning. Participants will retain the title of CUES Distinguished Fellow after the funding period.

For the fellowship's first year, the center allowed only two nominations from each of the UA's colleges. There were 15 nominations from nine colleges, Tomanek said. Department heads and deans helped review the proposals.

"It was very difficult to decide which six faculty we'd fund in the first year," Tomanek said. "All had to demonstrate that they weren't starting from scratch."

The fellows will meet for the first time as a group on April 6 at Design for Learning a daylong event open to all faculty. There, fellows will present their projects before holding table discussions and Q&A sessions. Tom Angelo, founding executive director of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Center for Innovative Pharmacy Education and Research,
will deliver the keynote address at the event. A workshop will be held in the afternoon.

The event "will kind of be the way to germinate some interest in what we call the Teaching Scholar Circles," Tomanek said. "I'm hoping that there's a feeding frenzy that will develop around some ideas of interest in teaching and learning."

Fellows' projects take a variety of approaches, like partnering with the Tucson community or simulating a health-care system in an online environment.

Mayer's two-year fellowship will expand on one of his existing courses, the Poverty in Tucson Field Workshop, which sends 50 to 60 undergraduate students into Tucson neighborhoods to survey low-income households. The information aims to connect residents with organizations that provide social services. The new course Mayer is designing for the fellowship, Building Stronger Communities, will use that information to create innovative ways for community programs to build social capital in impoverished neighborhoods. The class will partner with the Tucson Fire Department's Tucson Community Collaborative Care Program, which aims to reduce the tens of thousands of nonemergency 911 calls placed in Tucson every year, Mayer said.

"I'm trying to transform our approach to education and how we design courses to make sure they're at least getting some of those applied engagements in the classroom so when they go out and get internships, they're getting better internships," he said.

The course is expected to begin in spring 2019.

Lacasse's project sets out to build an online, virtual health care system that includes sections like administration, integrative health, discovery and evidence-based care, acute care, and palliative care, among others. Through the simulated environment, graduate-level nursing students will learn leadership skills in those areas.

Lacasse said her interest in teaching grew while she was working as a nurse. That fueled a passion for studying ways to engage students in the most active ways possible. As the coordinator of the College of Nursing's online Master of Science in Nursing program in clinical systems leadership, Lacasse said teaching students through an online curriculum comes with its own challenges.

"You have to connect with students in a very different way and you have to create teaching and learning opportunities that engage them in ways that help them learn exactly what you'd want them to learn in a live classroom," she said.

The virtual health care system is still in the planning stage, Lacasse said, adding that she aims to have a prototype and begin pilot testing by the second year of the project.

The amount of interest across campus that the center has generated in just the last year, Tomanek said, has been a pleasant surprise.

"Our faculty care a lot about their teaching and they recognize the importance of expertise on that," she said.

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