

The College recognizes outstanding faculty with 2025 teaching awards

By Megan Neely, ASU News
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The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Arizona State University is home to over 1,300 faculty members and enrolls over 30,000 students every semester.

Every year, The College bestows teaching awards to recognize faculty who have gone above and beyond to help students succeed across the humanities, natural sciences and social sciences divisions through excellent and accessible learning experiences.

“The faculty and instructors who are nominated for these teaching awards embody The College’s goal of preparing our students for making a positive impact on communities locally and nationally,” said [Kenro Kusumi](#), senior vice provost and dean of The College. “Their commitment to their students is instrumental for ensuring the advancement and security of their respective fields for generations to come.”

Learn more about this year’s six awardees and the impact they’ve made inside and outside the classroom.

Outstanding Instructor Award

[Antonella Dell’Anna](#) has been teaching Italian at ASU since 2005 and has been instrumental in developing the [Italian](#) curriculum at the [School of International Letters and Cultures](#). She teaches a range of classes, from introductory Italian to the history and culture of mass media in Italy.

Dell’Anna helped revamp beginning and intermediate courses to incorporate Italian food culture and developed a fully online course as part of ASU’s [first-of-its-kind online minor in Italian](#).

“I am humbled and honored. I am grateful to my colleagues, who enrich me with their insights, and to my students, who keep me constantly updated on global transformations,” Dell’Anna said.

In 2016, she received the school’s Instructor of the Year award, based on peer reviews, students’ evaluations and service, and received the Arizona Language Association’s Recognition for Leadership, Dedication and Service award for her teaching and leadership skills.

Dell'Anna also frequently supervises students for their honors thesis projects or serves on their honors thesis committees through Barrett, The Honors College.

With all of her course levels, Dell'Anna strives to make her lessons enjoyable and engaging to further foster a stronger sense of community among her students.

"I believe the most valuable impact we can have on students is helping them realize that everyone can be an effective learner," Dell'Anna said. "The skills and learning strategies they develop in Italian courses can be adapted and applied to any subject, at any point in their lives."

Zebulon Pearce Distinguished Teaching Award in Humanities

[Ana Hedberg Olenina](#) is an associate professor of comparative literature and media studies in the School of International Letters and Cultures and is affiliated with the Melikian Center's [Russian, Eurasian and East European studies program](#).

"I am very honored to receive the Zebulon Pearce Outstanding Teaching Award in Humanities. Seeing our students light up in the presence of new ideas, discover new paths, overcome obstacles and succeed in their goals brings me tremendous joy," Olenina said.

Since coming to ASU in 2015, she has primarily taught a foundational foreign language course that analyzes media from different regions and artistic movements. The course intersects with film and media studies, film production, arts, media and engineering, history and political science.

Also the faculty advisor for ASU's [Russian Conversation Club](#), Olenina sees her role as an educator as helping students develop a strong foundation in cultural studies and inspiring the use of their skills and knowledge beyond the classroom.

"I am committed to helping each student achieve their personal best, cultivating diverse voices and talents, and mobilizing interdisciplinary resources to address complex issues in the real world. I invite students to explore their personal interests while developing projects for my courses," Olenina said.

"As a teacher, there is no greater joy than seeing my students realize their creative and intellectual potential."

Zebulon Pearce Distinguished Teaching Award in Social Sciences

[Brendan O'Connor](#) is an associate professor and a coordinator of undergraduate and graduate programs at the [School of Transborder Studies](#) and is an affiliated faculty member of the [Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation](#).

O'Connor is a linguist and anthropologist, working on language, culture and education in a variety of contexts, including high school- and college-aged Latino/a and Mexican American youth. O'Connor's co-authored book on Indigenous youth's language socialization and acculturation, "Everyday Futures: Language as Survival for Indigenous Youth in Diaspora," will be released in August.

He teaches courses that explore the borders of language, including examining language and identity from different perspectives.

“Honestly, this is the most meaningful award I could receive. I've been a teacher for a long time. I started off teaching third grade, and I've always tried to put all of myself into my teaching. My students are truly phenomenal and continually inspire me with their creativity, critical thinking and passion for social change,” O'Connor said.

In 2011, he was named a Presidential Early Career Fellow by the Council on Anthropology and Education. His work has been featured in journals and outlets such as *Sapiens*, *The Conversation* and *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*.

“As an undergraduate, I attended a Jesuit university with an emphasis on educating the whole person, and I've tried to carry that with me,” O'Connor said. “I approach my students as whole people who want to belong and want to be challenged, and I orient my teaching and advising toward helping students achieve the goals they've defined for themselves.”

Zebulon Pearce Distinguished Teaching Award in Natural Sciences

[School of Molecular Sciences](#) Associate Professor [Scott Sayres](#) researches light and matter interaction, using ultrafast laser pulses to better understand how to direct the flow of energy through materials. He primarily teaches quantum mechanics and physical chemistry and particularly enjoys how the subject challenges perspectives on how the universe operates.

“I'm deeply honored to receive this award. It means a lot to me and shows that I have been successful in teaching and inspiring ASU students, both inside the classroom as well as in cutting-edge laboratory research, to become the next generation of scientists that will push new understandings about the how and why in scientific discovery,” Sayres said.

Sayres has been a part of the ASU community since 2014. His research group develops novel nanostructures whose properties are tuned through the addition and subtraction of a single atom to improve the efficiency and selectivity of photochemical reactions.

“Science is not solved. I push students with concepts that extend beyond the textbook and highlight today's unresolved scientific questions to show them that there is a place for them to be involved in cutting-edge scientific research in almost any area that grabs them,” he said.

Outstanding Teaching Professor Award in Social Sciences

[Kari Visconti](#) is an associate teaching professor in the [T. Denny Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics](#) and specializes in topics such as statistics, research methods in the social sciences, child development and early intervention. She has been a lecturer and professor at the university since 2014.

“I am incredibly honored to be selected for this award, especially knowing that the nomination came directly from students,” Visconti said. “There is really nothing better than being acknowledged for doing something that I love by the people that I am here to serve.”

With Teaching Professor and Director of Online Graduate Studies [Bethany Van Vleet](#), Visconti developed an [Online Undergraduate Research Scholars program](#) course that partnered with a nonprofit organization in Visconti's hometown and coached online students through conducting a community-based needs assessment.

Visconti's favorite class to teach is social statistics. While she has noticed students haven't always looked forward to taking the class due to its mathematical components, Visconti has challenged herself to structure the course in a way that supports students both in their learning and overcoming self-limiting beliefs about the ability to learn and use statistics.

"My approach emphasizes helping students find the practical applications of the course material and allowing them the flexibility to consider how it might fit their interests or future goals," Visconti said. "I think this approach leaves students with the ability to more readily internalize and retain course concepts and also to connect back to the things they have learned at ASU as they approach new challenges and situations in their lives."

Outstanding Teaching Professor Award in Natural Sciences

[Tuna Yildirim](#) joined the ASU community in 2015 and is currently an assistant teaching professor in the [Department of Physics](#). He is a theoretical physicist with a background in gravity and particle physics.

Yildirim teaches quantum physics, his favorite class based on its philosophical nature. He also advises two undergraduate research projects — one focusing on gravitation and the other on the impact of philosophy of science classes in science education.

"We still have not come up with a fully satisfying interpretation of quantum physics that does not sacrifice something that we think is foundational for some other part of physics," Yildirim said. "It is a lot of fun to stay after the class and discuss different interpretations of quantum physics with students for hours."

His research has followed topological field theories, their geometric quantization and the relation to knot theory. Yildirim has also worked on two-dimensional conformal field theories near black hole horizons.

Yildirim advises two clubs: [Scholars of Physical Mathematics at ASU](#), which was started by students in his mathematical methods in physics class, and the Philosopher's Guild, which was started by students in his history and philosophy of science class.

"The thing I enjoy the most about advising these clubs is getting to know the students well, and seeing how amazing and capable people they are outside of class. I also enjoy giving guest lectures in club meetings," Yildirim said.

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Main image



Armstrong Hall, the hub of The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences located on ASU's Tempe campus. ASU photo

Text image(s)



Antonella Dell'Anna



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