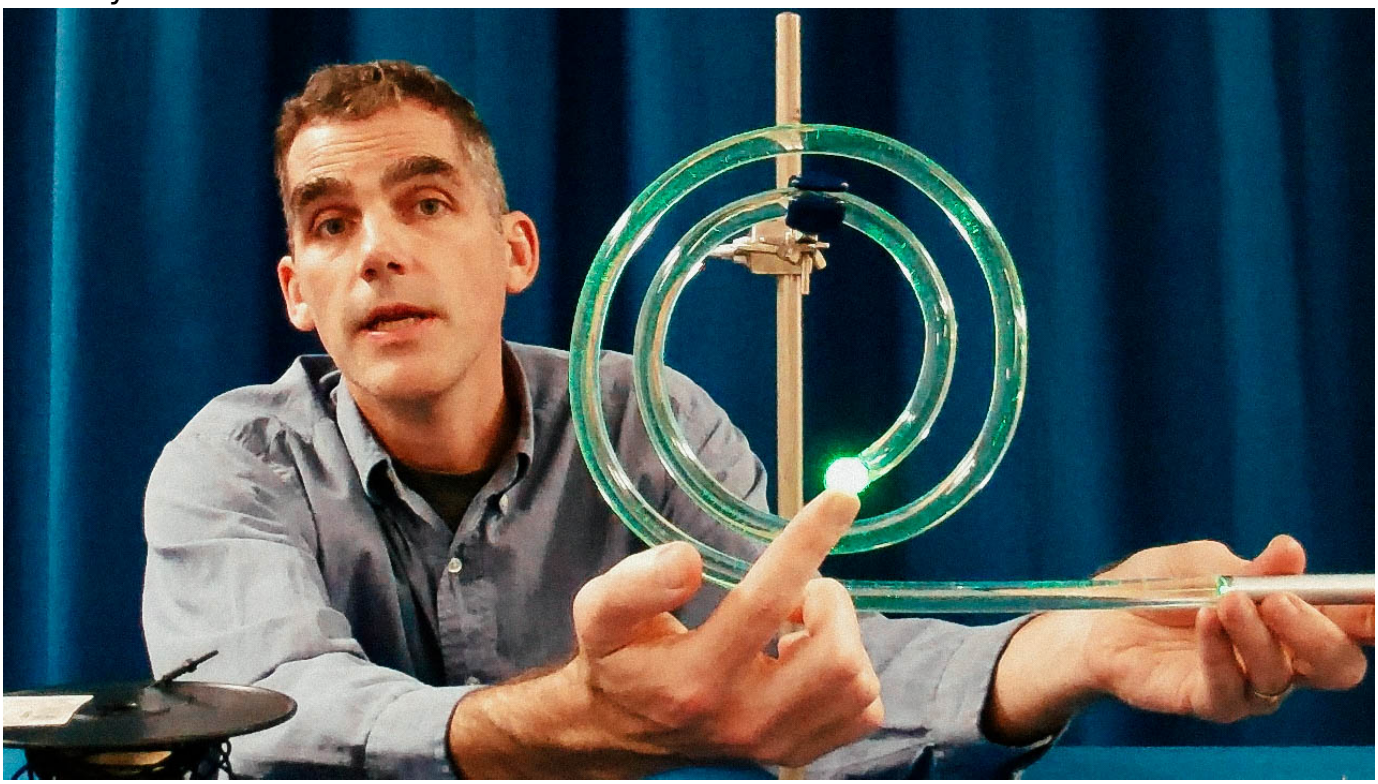
Philip Collins is Instructor of the Month at the School of Physical Sciences

Collins recognized for leading the School’s teachers into the online realm, and, now, for pivoting to help students face a hard pandemic job market

Tuesday, September 22, 2020

Lucas Joel
UCI Physical Sciences Communications



Professor Collins' teaching frequently concentrates on the practical applications of physics. Here, for an online, introductory physics course, he explains the physics of optical fibers using a green laser pointer. "You could say that I'm illuminating the topic," said Collins.

Picture Credit:
Philip Collins

In years past, the conversations Professor Philip Collins would have with students in his Research Communication class often had an air of optimism, because part of his course is about helping seniors get ready for the next steps in their professional lives — be it making the push into a graduate school program, or applying for an industry job — and those were things to look forward to. But when a pandemic gets tossed into your plans, talking about what the next few years will hold suddenly becomes a bit like knowing what you'll be eating for lunch 11 days from now. You can't say.

"We don't even know what's going to happen in November," Collins said, alluding to the current job market.

This month, Collins is the School of Physical Sciences' Instructor of the Month — a new distinction started in May that honors teaching excellence at the School. He earned the honor because, about 10 years ago, he started doing something few others at UCI did at the time: teach classes online. Back then, many saw the remote teaching as crude — but because time can transform the meanings of things, when the pandemic hit "teaching" suddenly became synonymous with "remote," and a once-niche ability went mainstream.

Collins helped make UCI's online shift happen by offering workshops and advising faculty as they developed their first online courses.

But even as a remote teaching expert, Collins sees his upcoming class as a challenge.

"My course is all about communication as a career skill, so students need to imagine their future careers," Collins said. "Right now, though, the students are anxious and worried. Fewer students expect to go to grad school, fewer expect to be hired."

As the pandemic continues unfurling, Collins is getting ready to have conversations with students about futures that will be anything but certain. And with remote learning, he'll be forced to lead those conversations by video chat rather than face-to-face.

View PDF