Four Physical Sciences professors honored by UCI Academic Senate

The awards recognize contributions made to research, teaching, mentoring and service.

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Top: Professors Celia Faiola and Asaf Ferber **Bottom:** Professors Renée Link and John Chaput.

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The UC Irvine Academic Senate recently recognized four professors in the School of Physical Sciences for excellence not just in research, but in mentoring, too. From

ensuring our graduate students receive the mentoring they need, to designing the fundamental building blocks of molecules that may one day lead to the discovery of next-generation pharmaceutical drugs, our scientists continue to advance our school's mission of teaching and research excellence.

Professor Celia Faiola, Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology & Department of Chemistry: Distinguished Early-Career Faculty Award for Teaching

As a scientist, Professor Celia Faiola spends her time researching how chemical processes in the atmosphere interact with plants on land. As a teacher, Faiola constantly tinkers with and reinvents the way she teaches in order to produce the best learning outcomes for her students — work that this year earned her UCI's Distinguished Faculty Award for Teaching. Recently, Professor Faiola adopted a course design called "specifications grading with mastery learning," which is a teaching approach that saw Faiola do away with traditional point scales and instead focus on simply whether or not students could demonstrate mastery of a particular topic, all while giving them multiple chances to revise and resubmit assignments. "This award was truly humbling because I know how many amazing educators we have on campus, and I am honored to be recognized," said Faiola. "Engaging with students in and out of the classroom is one of my favorite parts of this job — they are an absolute pleasure to work with."

Professor Asaf Ferber, Department of Mathematics: Distinguished Early-Career Faculty Award for Research

Professor Asaf Ferber studies math that lies at the intersection of three disciplines: probability, linear algebra and graph theory. It's a toolset that helped Ferber's research group to, among other things, make progress on an unsolved mathematical problem first proposed in 1940s known as "Ramsey numbers," which deals with how large a graph can get before certain patterns emerge. "I felt proud and satisfied to learn that my hard work has been acknowledged," said Ferber of his UCI Academic Senate Distinguished Early-Career Faculty Award for Research. "I also felt and feel grateful to my students and collaborators, all of whom made a significant contribution to my research.

Professor of Teaching Renée Link, Department of Chemistry: Distinguished Faculty Award for Mentorship

You can find Professor of Teaching Renée Link's work to mentor the next generation of UCI scientists in almost every corner of our graduate student community. Link organizes and leads laboratory TA training for every annual cohort of Ph.D. students in the Department of Chemistry; she mentored faculty at the start of the pandemic, helping them learn how to run classes on Zoom; and she created the Chemistry TA Mentorship Program to help incoming graduate students transition into working as a TA while also juggling their new research obligations. Link transforms her students' learning experiences, and for her work the UCI Academic Senate recognized her with their Distinguished Faculty Award for Mentorship. "One of the true joys of my job is helping others — undergraduate students, graduate student TAs, and colleagues — achieve their educational and teaching goals," Link said. "It's an honor to have this work I love doing recognized with an award at the Academic Senate level."

Professor John Chaput, Department of Pharmaceutical Science & Department of Chemistry: Distinguished Mid-Career Faculty Award for Research

Professor John Chaput's lab works in the earliest stages of drug development; the group makes molecules that play a role in drugs that won't be available for up to 10 years from now. Chaput's students are designing artificial molecules that look like DNA and RNA, but which don't degrade as easily and which are useful for stopping the progression of diseases. It's work playing a key role in UCI's response to the pandemic, as it's helping the UCI Medical Center detect the specific coronavirus variants a patient may be infected with. For his lab's efforts, Chaput received the UCI Academic Senate's Distinguished Mid-Career Faculty Award for Research. "This achievement reflects the hard work and dedication of all the students that have trained in my lab over the years, many of whom have now gone on to successful careers of their own," said Chaput. "It's really a team effort, and so I'm touched by both the generosity of my colleagues, as well as the drive and determination of my students."

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