

Five faculty members honored with prizes for exceptional teaching

By Susan Gonzalez | MAY 8, 2019



One Yale professor created a final exam that was itself a “masterpiece.” Another seems to have an “endless reserve of patience.” A third returned papers with extensive and thoughtful comments in blue ink, while a fourth conveyed that the Chinese language is “beautiful.” Another asked provocative questions in class but also during office hours, so she could get to know each of her students individually.

For these respective qualities and more, the five faculty members — Jill Campbell, Wei Su, Mary Miller, John Geanakoplos, and Debra Fischer — were honored with this year’s Yale College undergraduate teaching prizes, a top faculty honor.

Three of the faculty members were presented their awards by Yale College Dean Marvin Chun at a ceremony held May 8 in the Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning. Miller and Fischer were unable to attend the event, but some of their students were on hand to celebrate the honor.

“We pride ourselves on being the research university most dedicated to teaching,” said Chun. “Today we celebrate our very best.” He added that the awardees reflect the admiration of their students, who took special care to write thoughtful recommendations for their teachers.

The prizes and the award citations — drawn mainly from students’ comments about their teachers — follow.

Jill Campbell, the Sidonie Miskimin Clauss ’75 Prize for teaching excellence in the humanities



Jill Campbell with Dean Marvin Chun (Photo credit: Patrick O'Brien)

“Jill Campbell, professor of English, your students praise you for your ‘meticulous feedback, heartfelt concern [...], and commitment to intellectual curiosity and academic rigor.’

Here they are, in their own words, describing how you have improved their writing:

‘She puts so much time into advising each student before each paper, and gives them so much feedback in return.’

‘Campbell’s comments were extensive: sometimes, entire pages would be covered in blue ink.’

‘I cannot stress how much my writing improved in this class...’

And here is how they describe the way you make them feel valued:

‘Professor Campbell truly cares about each of her students, and wants them to succeed.’

‘She treats my ideas very seriously, and I can tell that she’s thought a lot about what I have to say and how I choose to say it.’

One student sums it all up by writing: ‘There are so many reasons why Professor Campbell is qualified for this prize, but ultimately, it boils down to her passion for literature, and her willingness to inspire others.’

For your devotion to teaching, Yale College proudly awards the Sidonie Miskimin Clauss ’75 Prize for Teaching Excellence in the Humanities to you, Professor Jill Campbell.”

Wei Su, the Richard H. Brodhead ’68 Prize for teaching excellence by non-ladder faculty



Wei Su (Photo credit: Patrick O’Brien)

“Wei Su, senior lecturer in East Asian languages and literatures, your students are in awe of you.

One of them says of you: 'It is extraordinary that Su Wei can be, at once, such a dedicated teacher to the students in his classes, a generous advisor to students, like me ... and an active artist.'

Another one says: 'From him, I learned to fall in love with Chinese literature. He is passionate about the subject and he is even more passionate about teaching it to his students.'

Time and again, your students talk of the inspiration they found in your courses.

'He walks into every class with such dedication and passion to teach and share the wonders of Chinese into our lives.'

'I definitely came to Yale to improve my Chinese skills. However, I now think it is more important that I found my love for the language in the class.'

'From him, I have learned the intricate nuances and tantalizing flavors of the language. More importantly, I have learned that Chinese is beautiful.'

To recognize your dedication to teaching, Yale College is honored to award the Richard H. Brodhead '68 Prize for Teaching Excellence to you, Wei Su."

Debra Fischer, the Dylan Hixon '88 Prize for teaching excellence in the natural sciences



Debra Fischer

“Debra Fischer, professor of astronomy, you have a gift for teaching students who are not majoring in the sciences. In your course ‘Origins and the Search for Life in the Universe,’ you weave together ‘physics, chemistry, and biology to explore an engaging, challenging question of whether life exists elsewhere in a manner that is rigorous but approachable.’

In nominating you for this prize, students praise you for being so extraordinarily effective at teaching science to non-science students:

‘Dr. Fischer’s course has helped me develop a greater appreciation for science as a powerful method for grappling with challenging questions.’

‘... [T]he exam was actually enjoyable[;] Professor Fischer created this masterpiece that allowed us to extrapolate upon everything we’ve learned this year.’

One student sums up the case for awarding you a prize like this: ‘As a few of my classmates discussed during finals, “Somebody give [her] a prize for being the best person ever!” While Yale doesn’t have the capacity to do quite that, I do at least hope that we can recognize her teaching.’

For your devotion to teaching, Yale College is delighted to bestow the Dylan Hixon '88 Prize for Teaching Excellence in the Natural Sciences and Mathematics on you, Professor Debra Fischer.”

John Geanakoplos, the Lex Hixon '63 Prize for teaching excellence in the social sciences



John Geanakoplos (Photo credit: Patrick O'Brien)

“John Geanakoplos, professor of economics, your students rave about you.

One of them, in praising you as a teacher, says, ‘Professor Geanakoplos truly holds himself to the highest standards, connecting his lessons to actionable real-world insights, ensuring mathematical rigor, and going above and beyond to help every student understand the material.’ Another writes that ‘Professor Geanakoplos had done what I thought was impossible; he made economics accessible and fascinating to the average undergraduate.’

Students also praise you for your dedication and caring toward them:

‘Professor Geanakoplos had a seemingly endless reserve of patience. No question was too trivial for him to answer thoroughly and seriously.’

‘I’m still astonished by how far he went out of his way to help us... ’

Finally, one student describes your teaching this way: ‘Not only has [it] been unparalleled, but the analytic rigor with which he approaches [the subject] has inflamed me with a love of [economics]’.

For your dedication to teaching, Yale College is proud to award the Lex Hixon ’63 Prize for Teaching Excellence in the Social Sciences to you, Professor John Geanakoplos.”

Mary Miller, the Harwood F. Byrnes/Richard B. Sewall Teaching Prize for a faculty member who over a long period of service has inspired a great number of students and consistently fostered the learning process both inside and outside the classroom



Mary Miller

“Since joining Yale’s faculty in 1981, Mary Miller, professor of the history of art, you have served the students of Yale College in so many roles: as a classroom teacher, director of undergraduate studies, chair of multiple departments, master of Saybrook College, and dean of Yale College.

Your students write repeatedly about your passion for art, the inspiration they have received from you, and the care you show toward them. Here they are in their own words:

‘She brings such enthusiasm to the subject and an obvious love of the material that it is hard not to feel the same way. She really cares about how her students are doing in class ...’

‘She is inspiring with her enthusiasm for the subject and learning in general. In addition, she is probably one of the most approachable teachers I have ever had. Her office hours were more than an opportunity to ask questions about the material, but a way for her to get to know you as a person and understand your interests.’

‘She constantly encourages her students to think about art in an unconventional fashion. In her exams and paper topics, she poses provocative questions. As we try to work our minds around these challenging puzzles, we come to learn for ourselves more about the manner in which the human eye and mind work in relation to each other. Professor Miller strives to cultivate the potential she sees in her students.’

For your dedication to Yale College students throughout your decades at our university, Yale College is honored to award the 2019 Harwood F. Byrnes/Richard B. Sewall Teaching Prize to you, Professor Mary Miller.”

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