Johnston Award for Teaching Excellence: Dr. Gary Pielak

Dr. Gary Pielak, Kenan Distinguished Professor of Chemistry, Biochemistry and Biophysics, has been a beloved presence at UNC since 1989, where he has established himself as a top-notch teacher and researcher. Described by his department chair as a world-class academic, deeply respected by peers and colleagues alike, he is also known for being down-to-earth and accessible. Students love him, and his mentorship has helped to shape the trajectory of many distinguished researchers and professors who started in his lab as undergraduates.

The testimonials from past and present students speak to the care and kindness with which he treats his students. Here are a few excerpts from his nominations that demonstrate the qualities that set him apart:

“[H]is mentorship helped put me where I am today. He has served as an exemplary chemistry professor for decades and is a stellar mentor for countless students who have passed through UNC’s hallowed halls. It is impossible to determine the impact that he has had but I venture to say that many would agree with me when I say that Dr. P. has changed our lives for the better and has helped shape who we are.”

“I will never understand why Dr. P. took a chance on a bright-eyed first year like myself with no research experience to come assist in his ground-breaking research, but it was an opportunity that taught me so much about science and how to work on a scientific team. . . . Dr. P. taught me that it never hurts to ask for what you want, even if it feels unrealistic or scary, because if you ask you just might get what you were hoping for.”

“Gary’s brilliance as an academic and educator is seeing the potential in every one of his students, fostering a nurturing and inclusive learning environment for all. As a freshman in introductory biochemistry class, I was not only welcome at his graduate research lab meetings, I was invited to present my work to the group along with my undergraduate colleagues. His lab is a mix of graduate students from all over the world and a socio-economic mix of undergraduates from across the state of North Carolina—all interested in learning the scientific method. Several times a year, Gary hosts backyard barbecues for his students (some of whom are the furthest they’ve ever been away from home), and he treats them to lunch on his own dime—a special feeling of comradeship and belonging that in and of itself is extraordinary.”

“Joining Dr. P.’s lab was like reuniting with a long-lost family—a culture undoubtedly modeled from the top. The constant support and encouragement I received from Dr. P. and his students gave me a sense of purpose and belonging that I had never experienced previously. I will never forget a letter I received from him while struggling to make ends meet as a foreign exchange student in Spain my junior year. Within it was an encouraging note from Dr. P. and a couple extra euros for spending—an unsolicited act of kindness that I reflect on often.”

For his mentorship and care, for making his lab a welcoming and nurturing space, and for his deep and lasting impact on his students—many of whom are making impacts of their own in teaching and research—we are proud to award Professor Gary Pielak the James M. Johnston Award for Teaching Excellence.
Johnston Award for Teaching Excellence: Dr. Aalyia Sadruddin

Dr. Aalyia Sadruddin, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, is an inspirational teacher and mentor. Only in her second year at UNC, Dr. Sadruddin has revealed herself to be a passionate, engaging professor who has already touched many students’ lives, not only in her approach to teaching, but in the sincere care she shows her students. She makes students feel “seen and heard” in a way they had not experienced before. Her teaching has affected students’ career choices and made a permanent imprint on how they view the world. She is clearly someone who inspires emulation. According to her department chair, Dr. Sadruddin’s courses are among the most popular in the department, and her job talk was so moving it brought the audience to tears.

Dr. Sadruddin’s nominations speak to the impact she has made in and out of the classroom:

“On the first day of class, when Dr. Sadruddin introduced herself, she told us that she wanted to teach how we wanted to learn. I was so excited to attend my favorite class EVER at UNC. The ways in which she was SO passionate about knowledge and teaching actually encouraged me to try to be as awesome as her and do what she does. She increased my love of medical anthropology and, really uniquely, she inspired me to become a teacher. I hope to be just as awesome as her someday.”

“I took ANTH 390: The Anthropology of Care with Professor Sadruddin, who is the most caring instructor I have ever had at UNC. From this class I learned that care is more than just physical, it is relational. She encouraged us to share our diverse backgrounds and understanding of different topics based on our experiences and cultures. In this class, I was able to actually get to know my peers and understand where they were coming from—Professor Sadruddin made sure that our diversity was celebrated, talked about and accepted. I have never had more respect for a teacher for doing this.

“Professor Sadruddin was one of the most inspiring professors I have had the pleasure of learning from at Carolina. She encouraged us to actively question, critique, and reason through the topics we discussed on care. Although a broad concept, care is applicable to nearly every facet of our lives beyond simply the professional/academic. Professor Sadruddin made sure to emphasize this to us and encouraged us to reflect on the relevance of care to our future educational, professional, and personal lives. I know that as an incoming medical student, I will most certainly be taking all of the lessons I learned from this course and directly applying it to patient care. One of Professor Sadruddin’s most outstanding characteristics is her genuine commitment to the well-being of her students, beyond the academic sense. When UNC was going through a mental health crisis in the fall semester, she personally reached out to each student individually and asked how we were doing. She offered herself as a resource and mentor, someone we could openly speak to about any of the obstacles we were facing. This itself merits an award for [her] selflessness and dedication . . . Professor Sadruddin’s passion, enthusiasm, and erudition are unmatchable.”

For her passion for both her subject matter and the well-being of her students, for her ability to make students feel connected and inspired, and for the deep impression she has already made and her potential to continue shaping their lives, we proudly award Professor Aalyia Sadruddin the James M. Johnston Award for Teaching Excellence.