Tanner Awards for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching
by Graduate Teaching Assistants

Seth Alexander is a fourth-year medical student who has taught anatomy classes in the Biology Department, as well as a summer class on the biology of blood diseases. Seth is a devoted instructor who took a gap year to get a Master’s degree in teaching and education. His students, many of whom are pre-med, are outspoken in their respect and admiration for him. A few comments from his nominations: “Seth reminded the entire class through his story of why he teaches, that it is most important to pursue a career that you enjoy and to have a reason why you get up and go to work each day.” “He’s a force for good and will touch a lot of lives and they will be better for it.” Whether he knows it or not, Seth played a large role in reaffirming my interests in medicine.” “With this class, I set my future as a physician.” “Mr. Alexander prioritized creating a positive learning environment in order to instill a sense of inclusion and belonging.” An interesting note is that Seth was an undergraduate at UNC—one who enjoyed his classes so much that he decided to return to teach them.

Elizabeth Baldwin, known to her students as Lizzie, is not just a teaching assistant: she is a role model, mentor and coach for her students in the School of Nursing. She assists students in the most difficult and demanding courses in the curriculum, and the students come out on the other side with a strong understanding and appreciation of the material. According to faculty observers, there are two reasons for this: Lizzie has a deep and nuanced understanding of the course material; in addition, Lizzie is strongly supportive, encouraging students to believe that they can not only succeed in the course but apply their learning in their subsequent careers. As one nominator put it, “She weaves in stories from her own clinical experience and makes room for others to share theirs. She offers us valuable words of affirmation, and everyone feels like she is in their corner.” Lizzie is a graduate of the UNC undergraduate nursing program, a working professional at UNC Hospitals, and a candidate for a doctorate in nursing. Her students say that she must have extra hours in her day, but they are deeply appreciative. As one put it, “By using her own lived experience, Lizzie affirms our experiences not only within the course but throughout the undergraduate nursing program.”

Abigail Newell is a graduate student in the Sociology Department who has served as a teaching assistant for five different sociology classes, as well as the instructor of record for classes on sex and gender in society. To students, sociology classes can sometimes feel like a minefield of hot-button issues and disturbing news, but Abby is skilled at fostering discussion and creating an atmosphere that promotes collaboration between students. A few comments from students in her nominations: “Every class began with a ‘check-in’ which was her way of drumming up conversation and getting the class focused, and it sooooo worked.” “Throughout the semester, we spent class time reflecting about our feelings and overall mental health.” “Ms. Newell made everyone in the class feel welcome while also addressing the inequalities within our society at the micro, meso, and macro level. She made sure everyone had their voice heard.” “She also told us if we ever needed time with her dog, we could visit him.”

Rafael Núñez Rodriguez is a graduate student in Romance Studies who specializes in Iberian and Latin American literatures and cultures. Rafael stands out for his innovative, rigorous and
extraordinarily engaged teaching. The breadth of his intellectual interests is reflected in the wide variety of classes he has taught. Rafael is renowned for creating a truly immersive language environment that, as one student put it, “challenged me to learn in a deeper way than I ever had before.” Students credit him for giving them a new understanding of Spanish culture, inspiring them to empathize and engage with Spanish-speaking students in Chapel Hill, as well as giving them the confidence to travel outside the country and pursue further foreign language studies. Students also commented on the energy and enthusiasm that Rafael brings to teaching and his ability to create a supportive learning environment in which everyone feels respected and inspired—not just to learn more about Spanish language and culture, but also to enter into both, first in the classroom and then often far beyond it.

Alexandra Wojda-Burljij, a graduate student in the Psychology and Neuroscience Department, is an outstanding and empathetic teacher. Her students say she inspires them to “think beyond the textbook” and push fearlessly into unfamiliar territory, helping them to gain expertise in technical areas that many students had not thought they could ever master. She has developed, largely on her own, an unusual case-based structure for her classes that puts the emphasis on critical-thinking skills rather than on rote memorization. Ms. Wojda-Burlijij has served as an instructor for an impressive number of undergraduate courses. She demonstrated her commitment to teaching when, during the pandemic, she restructured an entire class and transitioned to asynchronous teaching simply because her students indicated that this would better support their learning. Her students feel included and valued and many rate her classes as among the best they have taken at Carolina. A number also commented on her exceptional mentoring, which helped them prepare for their post-college futures.