



LOYOLA
UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

*The College of Arts & Sciences is excited to present
the*

**SUJACK AWARDS
CEREMONY**

honoring our awardees of

2025

*Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching
Excellence and Master Teacher awards*

&

*Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research
Excellence and Master Researcher awards*



PROGRAM

Welcome:

*Peter J. Schraeder, PhD
Professor and Dean*

*Introduction of 2025
Teaching Awards:*

*Kelly Howe, PhD
2025 Teaching committee
Chairperson*

*Introduction of
2025 Research
Awards:*

*Olegs Andrejevs, PhD
2025 Research committee
member*

Closing remarks:

*Douglas Woods, PhD
Provost & Chief Academic Officer
Peter J. Schraeder, PhD
Professor and Dean*

Congratulations to all our 2025 Award winners



2025 SUJACK AWARD WINNERS

2025 Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence

[Leanna Boychenko](#), Associate Professor, Classical Studies

[Jennifer Mierisch](#), Associate Professor, Biology

2025 Master Teachers

[Yuna Blajer de la Garza](#), Assistant Professor, Political Science

[James Devery](#), Associate Professor, Chemistry & Biochemistry

[Wendy Gruhl](#), Advanced Lecturer, Forensic Science

[Walter Tangarife](#), Associate Professor, Physics

2025 Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence

[Michael Grillo](#), Assistant Professor, Biology

[Yasin Silva](#), Associate Professor, Computer Science

2025 Master Researchers

[Minwoo Jung](#), Assistant Professor, Sociology

[Pengfei Li](#), Assistant Professor, Chemistry & Biochemistry

[Tracy Pintchman](#), Professor, Theology

[Michael Schumacher](#), Lecturer, Criminal Justice & Criminology



Statements from our Teaching and Research Award committees about our 2025 SUJACK AWARD WINNERS

Leanna Boychenko - 2025 Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence Top Award

Congratulations to **Dr. Leanna Boychenko** on the honor of being named one of this year's top teaching award recipients. Dr. Boychenko is an Associate Professor of Classical Studies and a faculty affiliate with Loyola's Institute for Racial Justice. She holds an A.B. from Harvard College and an M.A., M.Phil., and Ph.D. from Yale University.

The committee was immensely impressed by the materials submitted by Dr. Boychenko and the breadth and depth of her undergraduate teaching excellence. Boychenko has taught a particularly wide array of courses during her time at Loyola, including Ancient Greek 101 and 102, Intermediate and Advanced Greek, Classical Mythology (with a Women and Gender focus), and Humanism of Antiquity, to name just a few. Her extremely high course evaluations across the board—and her detailed, conscientious syllabi—offer ample evidence of stellar teaching. Her student nominator writes, “Dr. Boychenko does an exemplary job explaining intricate concepts in a brief amount of time. I was quite impressed with both the presentation style and her exceptional command of the material.” That same nominator also praised Boychenko for inspiring students “to strive for goals greater than themselves.” Beyond the formal classroom, Boychenko has also supervised many directed studies and engaged in a range of other forms of mentorship of undergraduates, including (but not limited to) serving as a Provost Classroom Mentor for LUC Empowering Sisterhood (for womxn of color, 2021 to 2025), a Provost Fellowship mentor, a summer research project mentor, an examiner for Senior Capstone oral demonstrations, and an evaluator for the Department of Classical Studies' essay contest and Greek translation contest.

Dr. Boychenko has been consistently committed to enhancing her own pedagogical skills, to scholarship on teaching and learning, and to Loyola's values of diversity, equity, inclusion, and cura personalis (care for the whole person). Those values not only manifested in thoughtful ways across her syllabi; they were also reflected in her work to earn a certificate in Ignatian Pedagogy and Experiential Learning and her record of presentations on diversity, equity, and inclusion pedagogy at Loyola's Focus on Teaching and Learning and at the annual meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South. Regarding her passion for ensuring a diversity of representation in her course materials, Boychenko offers, “As a Mexican American, this is personally important to me, but it is also important to our diverse student body.



I strive to be always mindful of students' different backgrounds and cultural expectations while also appreciating how each student's background and experience brings a richness to the classroom." As one of her examples of how her courses enact anti-racist work, Boychenko writes, "In my Alexander the Great class, we pay attention to migration and colonization and how the Classical past can be misused in the present to promote racism and xenophobia."

Across all of the categories considered for this award, Dr. Leanna Boychenko demonstrates exceptional pedagogical skill, ethical intentionality, and a profound care for her students. For these reasons and many others, we are very proud to recognize Dr. Boychenko as one of this year's recipients of the 2025 Edwin T. and Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence.

Jennifer Mierisch - 2025 Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence Top Award

Congratulations to **Dr. Jennifer J. Mierisch**, Associate Professor in the Department of Biology, for being named one of the 2025 winners of the Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence. The Sujack Committee was impressed by the quality of Dr. Mierisch's teaching, her outstanding commitment to mentoring undergraduate researchers, and her involvement with student organizations.

Dr. Mierisch holds a B.A. in Biology from Northwestern University and received a doctorate in Biology from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She was a postdoctoral fellow at Johns Hopkins University before joining Loyola in 2012 as an Assistant Professor. Over the past thirteen years Dr. Mierisch has been nominated for most of Loyola's undergraduate teaching and mentoring awards – in some cases more than once. She received the Sujack Master Teacher award in 2019, and the Langerbeck Award for Research Mentoring in 2022.

Biology courses taught by Dr. Mierisch combine traditional formats with discussion and work in small groups, lowering barriers to participation and encouraging students to share knowledge with their peers. Upper-level courses incorporate primary literature and ask students to examine both the technical aspects and ethical implications of scientific discoveries. Each semester Dr. Mierisch supervises multiple sections of Biology and Bioinformatics research courses where students develop the skills and knowledge needed to perform experiments, analyze data, and present results.



The Sujack Committee was especially impressed by her efforts to ensure that students with extensive family or work obligations also have access to this sort of training. As her nominating student noted: “Dr. Mierisch’s class structure and organization allows for students to thrive even when life gets in the way. It allows for the students to learn and still be a person who has more than school to do.” Dr. Mierisch developed BIOL 395L / BIOI 397, a Course-Based Undergraduate Research Experience, to serve students who do not have time outside of class to work in a lab. Participants cultivate research skills through a class-based project, then present their results to faculty and students at an end-of-semester symposium. Some students enrolled in the course have continued their research projects beyond the end of the term.

Among the 2025 Sujack nominees, Dr. Mierisch stands out for her work mentoring and collaborating with undergraduate researchers. Over the past three years she has mentored twenty-three Loyola undergraduates in her lab. Seven of these students appear as her co-authors on peer-reviewed scientific papers, and another twelve are co-authors on papers that have been submitted for publication. Her students have been supported by an array of fellowships and awards, including fifteen Mulcahy Scholars, seven Provost Fellows, and a Goldwater Scholarship recipient. In two of the past three years, students supervised by Dr. Mierisch have received Loyola's Undergraduate Research Award. Undergraduates in Dr. Mierisch's lab present their research at local, regional, and national meetings. These experiences have helped them establish professional connections that will serve them beyond their time at Loyola.

In addition to her teaching and mentorship, the Sujack Committee also recognizes Dr. Mierisch's involvement with campus organizations. She has recently served as faculty advisor for the TriBeta Biology Honor Society and the Science Literacy Initiative. Over the summer she has worked with Loyola undergrads to host Biology Scholars Workshops for students from nearby Senn High School. The Sujack Award Committee is proud to acknowledge Dr. Jennifer J. Mierisch's excellent teaching and mentorship by naming her a winner of the 2025 Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence.

Yuna Blajer de la Garza - 2025 Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence – Master Teacher

We are delighted to congratulate **Dr. Yuna Blajer de la Garza** on her selection as a 2025 Master Teacher. Dr. Blajer holds a B.A. (Licenciatura) from El Colegio de México and an M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. She is an Assistant Professor of Political Theory who has taught at Loyola since 2021.

Some of the courses that Dr. Blajer has taught recently include Introduction to Political Theory, Contemporary Political Thought, Global Justice, and Ethics of Artificial Intelligence. The committee was struck by the clarity and specificity of Blajer's explanation of her pedagogical aims. Blajer writes, "[P]olitical theory and ethical inquiry are often imagined as obscure and difficult topics. Many scholars seem to confuse obfuscation with brilliance. In contrast, I want students to realize that political theory is not beyond their reach; many of these texts were written for all to read. Building on my initial questions and through the use of metaphors, allegories, and thought experiments, I strive to make the seemingly complex arguments as clear and crisp as possible." From her fantastic teaching evaluations to the words of her student nominator, Blajer's success in connecting with students was evident. Her nominator offers, "Dr. Blajer was the first political science professor I had ever had. I was unsure if I had picked the right major going into the semester, but I was significantly more confident in that decision as a result of her Introduction to Political Theory course. This was due in large part to her understanding of undergraduate students." Blajer's particular skill in teaching undergraduates has also already been recognized with the Provost's Award for Excellence in Teaching Freshmen at Loyola.

In addition to her success as a course instructor, Blajer has made a meaningful impact as a teacher/mentor beyond the classroom. She has served as an independent research project supervisor and the advisor of two student organizations, Political Discourse Club and Ignite. She has also co-organized a two-week residential opportunity in political science for rising seniors from Chicago Public Schools, Speak Up Democracy. That project directly provided opportunities for current undergraduate students to expand and hone their skills because the program involved hiring those more experienced students to mentor and guide high-school students while they were on campus. In all the ways indicated here and others, Dr. Yuna Blajer de la Garza has distinguished herself as an educator who inspires and challenges her students, and we are proud to celebrate her work today.

James Devery - 2025 Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence – Master Teacher

Dr. James Devery is an Associate Professor in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry. He earned his Bachelor of Science degree in Chemistry and his Ph.D. in Organic Chemistry from Lehigh University. Dr. Devery completed postdoctoral fellowships in at Boston University and the University of Michigan before joining the faculty at Loyola in 2015.

Dr. Devery has a strong record of teaching excellence and student mentorship. Dr. Devery teaches several foundational courses in chemistry and organic chemistry.



He writes about the challenges of these courses and his efforts to create a learning environment that helps to ensure student success both in and outside of the classroom. For example, Dr. Devery has considered qualities that employers are seeking when developing course expectations. Dr. Devery also goes above and beyond through his mentorship of Loyola students. Dr. Devery has demonstrated a great dedication to undergraduate and graduate student mentorship. Since joining the faculty at Loyola, he has served as a research mentor for 41 undergraduate students, who have been supported through 21 internal research fellowships and have co-authored six peer-reviewed journal articles and 15 conference presentations with Dr. Devery. In relation to this work, Dr. Devery has been awarded two NIH Academic Research Enhancement Awards, which fund scientific work that enhances the undergraduate research environment and encourages a diverse student body to pursue careers in science. Dr. Devery demonstrates great skill in scaffolding student success across series of chemistry courses, while promoting community and development of empathy. An excerpt from Dr. Devery's nomination highlights his strengths in the classroom: "Organic chemistry is a very difficult subject, but he made the class eager and excited to learn and helped us relieve stress and believe in ourselves before every exam. His style of teaching made complex topics easy to understand and he was always energetic and ready to help."

This final sentence highlights an accomplishment that many educators aspire to, that is to challenge our students, while fostering growth and self-confidence. This balance is difficult to attain and exemplifies why we are so proud to recognize Dr. Devery with a 2025 Sujack Master Teacher Award.

Wendy Gruhl - 2025 Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence – Master Teacher

Ms. Wendy Gruhl is an Advanced Lecturer in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry and the Assistant Program Director of the Forensic Science program. She earned dual Bachelor's degrees in Chemistry and Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, as well as a Master of Science degree in Forensic Science. Ms. Gruhl joined the faculty at Loyola in 2020, and she is also in the progress of earning her Ph.D. in Chemistry.

Ms. Gruhl has a strong record of teaching excellence and student mentorship, the courses that she teaches are essential to the Forensic Science program at Loyola.



She brings her real-world knowledge on the Illinois State Police force into the classroom to train the next generation of forensic scientists. In the classroom she goes beyond sharing knowledge about forensic science to creating a space that engages students in “asking questions, failing, and growing,” as she shares in her statement. As a testament to Ms. Gruhl’s effectiveness, the student nominator shares, “Professor Gruhl possesses extensive knowledge of her subjects and inspires students to delve deeper into their learning. She often shares her personal experiences related to course content, demonstrating how she has applied various lab techniques in real-world scenarios. She challenges our thinking and ensures that our learning is relevant to our future careers as forensic scientists.”

Ms. Gruhl goes above and beyond through her mentorship of Loyola students in that as a non-tenure track faculty member, she is not required to participate in research or advising, yet she engages in this work frequently. Ms. Gruhl has served as the research mentor to students on projects that have resulted in student-led presentations at the Loyola Weekend of Excellence and the Midwestern Association of Forensic Scientists Annual Meeting. Additionally, as Assistant Program Director of the Forensic Science program, she has worked to ensure that the program meets all accreditation requirements. She also serves as the internship coordinator for Forensic Science students at Loyola, evaluating potential placements and assisting students through the application process.

Indeed, Ms. Gruhl’s Sujack nomination speaks of her unmatched student commitment. The student nominator wrote, “As the advisor for all forensic science majors and a teacher of advanced courses, Professor Gruhl is dedicated to connecting with every student in the program. She welcomes students to visit her during office hours to discuss any topic, whether it’s a personal issue, scheduling assistance, or clarification on course material. She is always eager to help. Despite working on her doctorate..., she continuously goes above and beyond in her commitment to education.”

Ms. Gruhl demonstrates the unique ability to challenge students to engage with material more critically, while providing holistic support for student welfare. This exemplifies why we are so proud to recognize Ms. Gruhl with a 2025 Sujack Master Teacher Award.



Walter Tangarife - 2025 Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence – Master Teacher

The Sujack Committee congratulates **Dr. Walter Tangarife**, Associate Professor in the Department of Physics, on being named a 2025 Master Teacher. Dr. Tangarife received his doctorate in physics from the University of Texas at Austin. He joined Loyola as an Assistant Professor in 2018. The committee was impressed by the active learning and innovative assessment methods used throughout his courses, as well as his extensive mentoring of undergraduate researchers.

Dr. Tangarife's classes follow the principles of "scientific teaching." The same rigor that guides his research is brought to bear on course design. Evidence-based methods are applied to pedagogical decisions and subject to a continuous process of assessment and re-assessment. The result is a classroom that mixes traditional methods like lectures and demos, with a variety of active learning techniques. "Think-pair-share" exercises combine individual reflection with group work, while just-in-time strategies prime students for new concepts and allow Dr. Tangarife to more effectively engage the class. Educative assessment methods recognize tests and quizzes as part of an ongoing learning process, inviting students to reflect on their performance, revise their work, and present the results in one-on-one meetings.

Over the past three years, Dr. Tangarife has mentored nearly twenty students engaged in undergraduate research, including seven who were awarded Mulcahy Scholarships. His students have worked on a variety of topics at the forefront of theoretical physics, in areas like cosmology, astroparticle physics, and quantum gravity. Their projects culminate in presentations at local and regional research symposia, and in several cases have been a first step towards prestigious summer internships and graduate study in physics. One of Dr. Tangarife's mentees reflected: "No matter the setting, he constantly strives to deepen both his student's knowledge of physics, and their passion for studying it. Dr. Tangarife is the best mentor and instructor I've ever had ... his dedication to his student's success is clear in everything he does and says."

The Sujack Award Committee recognizes Dr. Walter Tangarife's exceptional teaching and mentorship of students with a 2025 Master Teacher Award.

Michael Grillo - 2025 Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence Top Award

Dr. Michael Grillo is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Biology, specializing in evolutionary genetics and plant-microbiome interactions.

We are proud to honor Dr. Grillo with the Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence. Dr. Grillo's exceptional contributions to understanding plant adaptation and chemical defense mechanisms have significantly advanced the field of biology. His groundbreaking research on fungal-produced toxins in plants has reshaped scientific perspectives on plant defense strategies. In 2024, Dr. Grillo published four major peer-reviewed papers, including a landmark study on the toxin production of *Astragalus lentiginosus* (locoweeds).

His team conducted the most comprehensive survey ever undertaken of plant toxins, analyzing over 500 plants across the western United States. Their findings revealed unprecedented variation in toxin levels and provided new insights into the evolutionary role of these toxins in insect defense. Additionally, Dr. Grillo was awarded a prestigious \$1.09 million CAREER Award from the National Science Foundation (NSF), one of the most competitive grants awarded to early-career faculty. This project will identify the genomic basis of plant-microbiome variation while also integrating research with educational outreach in Chicago Public Schools. Beyond this achievement, Dr. Grillo has received three other major external grants, including a \$300,000 award from the Walder Foundation and two NSF Division of Undergraduate Education grants totaling over \$1.5 million. His remarkable level of extramural funding is unprecedented in the Department of Biology, underscoring his impact as both a researcher and educator. For these outstanding accomplishments, we are honored to present Dr. Michael Grillo with the 2025 Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence.

Yasin Silva - 2025 Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence Top Award

Dr. Yasin Silva is an Associate Professor in the Department of Computer Science, with expertise in interdisciplinary research at the intersection of computer and social sciences. We are proud to honor Dr. Silva with the Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence.

Dr. Silva's groundbreaking work in cyberbullying detection and prevention has made a significant impact in both academia and society. We recognize his leadership in the BullyBlocker Project, an innovative initiative that combines computational models with social science frameworks to analyze and mitigate cyberbullying on social networks. In 2024, Dr. Silva published six peer-reviewed papers in prestigious conferences and journals, including two at the renowned International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining. His research has deepened our understanding of social media interactions, cyberbullying dynamics, and the role of large language models in assessing social behavior. His team also secured a U.S. patent for a novel predictive framework designed to detect cyberbullying in scenarios with limited labeled data. Beyond his publications and patents, Dr. Silva has secured substantial research funding, including serving as Co-PI on a \$3.8 million National Science Foundation (NSF) CyberCorps Scholarship for Service grant—the largest award ever received by his department. He is also the principal investigator of an NSF-funded initiative focused on promoting well-being in social media, bringing nearly \$1 million in funding to both Loyola University Chicago and Arizona State University.

These remarkable achievements reflect Dr. Silva's unwavering dedication to research with profound societal impact. For his outstanding contributions, we are thrilled to present Dr. Yasin Silva with the 2025 Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence.

Pengfei Li - 2025 Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence– Master Researcher

We are honored to recognize **Dr. Pengfei Li**, Assistant Professor in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry, for his groundbreaking research in computational modeling of metalloproteins. In 2024, he made significant contributions to the field, publishing eight high-impact journal articles, a book chapter, and a widely cited software package. His research deepens our understanding of how proteins bind metal ions, with far-reaching implications for biomedical applications, including metallodrugs and metalloenzyme inhibitors. Dr. Li has developed innovative computational models, including a fluctuating charge model for metalloproteins and AI-driven approaches that predict metal interactions with remarkable accuracy and efficiency. His work also advances multiscale simulations of catalytic mechanisms and enhances molecular dynamics simulations, pushing the boundaries of computational chemistry. Beyond his research, Dr. Li is a dedicated mentor, guiding graduate students and postdoctoral researchers while fostering a collaborative and dynamic research environment. For these outstanding contributions, we are delighted to name Dr. Pengfei Li a 2025 Sujack Master Researcher.

Tracy Pintchman - 2025 Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence– Master Researcher

We are honored to recognize **Dr. Tracy Pintchman**, Professor in the Department of Theology, for her groundbreaking research on Hinduism and diaspora religious traditions. In 2024, she published *Goddess Beyond Boundaries: Worshipping the Eternal Mother at a North American Hindu Temple* with Oxford University Press, a milestone achievement reflecting two decades of ethnographic research. This landmark work challenges conventional perspectives on diaspora Hinduism, offering a compelling study of a unique Michigan temple dedicated to a low-caste South Indian goddess and highlighting the dynamic nature of religious innovation in the American landscape. Beyond this monograph, Dr. Pintchman further enriched the field by contributing a chapter to *A Cultural History of Hinduism* and guest-editing a special issue of the *International Journal of Hindu Studies*. Her scholarship, widely recognized for its theoretical depth and profound engagement with Hindu traditions, has significantly advanced the study of South Asian religions. For these extraordinary contributions, we are pleased to name Dr. Tracy Pintchman a 2025 Sujack Master Researcher.



Michael Schumacher- 2025 Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence– Master Researcher

We are honored to recognize **Dr. Michael Schumacher**, Lecturer in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, for his outstanding research on terrorism, political violence, and counterterrorism policy. In 2024, he made significant contributions to the field, publishing four peer-reviewed journal articles and a book chapter while balancing a demanding teaching load. His work examines critical issues such as the influence of jihadist non-state actors on foreign policy, the anti-colonial roots of Osama bin Laden’s ideology, and the misuse of counterterrorism laws to entrench authoritarian power. Additionally, his study on terrorist attacks against U.S. diplomats provides valuable insights into security strategies and diplomatic protection. Notably, Dr. Schumacher co-authored all four articles with an undergraduate student, underscoring his dedication to mentorship and fostering student research. With publications in highly respected journals, his scholarship has made a meaningful impact on the field, advancing our understanding of global security challenges. For these remarkable contributions, we are pleased to name Dr. Michael Schumacher a 2025 Sujack Master Researcher.





Acknowledgements

Thank you to the 2025 Sujack Teaching and Research Award selection committee members listed below for their efforts on helping to choose this year's winners:

2025 Sujack Teaching committee members

Kelly Howe, Fine and Performing Arts, Committee Chairperson

Margaret Guy, Psychology

Robert McNees, Physics

Salma Muhammad, student member, Psychology major

Taylor Starkey, student member, Political Science major

2025 Sujack Research committee members

David Doherty, Political Science, Committee Chairperson

Olegs Andrejevs, Theology

Wei-Ming Yu, Biology

Additional thanks to Amanda Dennis in the College of Arts and Sciences Deans office for her work on compiling the videos submitted by our students who nominated our faculty teaching award winners.

Finally, we want to show our appreciation and gratitude to the Sujack family members Don and Peg Sujack, Steve and Reenie Sujack, Greg and Kate Sujack and Julie Sujack for their continued support of the annual Edwin T. and Vivijeanne F. Sujack awards. We are honored to have some of your family joining us this evening and look forward to celebrating again with you all again next year.

