

UI recognizes top student employee

Nine other students will be recognized at Presidential Luncheon



Kasra Zarei, a third-year biomedical engineering major and research assistant at the Wynn Institute, is this year's University of Iowa student employee of the year. Photo by Tim Schoon.



An interdisciplinary project aimed at curing blindness was what originally drew Kasra Zarei, the University of Iowa's 2015–16 student employee of the year, to the Wynn Institute of Vision Research. In April 2013, Zarei learned about the institute while still a senior at West High School in Iowa City. Before he graduated, he was hired by his current mentor, Dr. Michael Abramoff, a professor working in ophthalmology, electrical and computer engineering, and biomedical engineering.

A third-year biomedical engineering major, Zarei is also a research assistant at the Wynn Institute, where he leads a number of independent research projects, including a vision test for Alzheimer's disease.

Out of the 24 student employees nominated, Zarei and nine others will be recognized with certificates of appreciation or distinction. All were nominated by their supervisors for their reliability and the quality of their work, as well as their initiative, professionalism, and the uniqueness of their contributions.

The Student Employee of the Year honor is awarded based on criteria established by the [National Student Employment Association](#). Students are nominated by their supervisors for reliability, quality of work, initiative, professionalism, and uniqueness of contribution. Visit the [Office of Student Financial Aid](#) to learn more.

Zarei was nominated because he has consistently surpassed expectations. According to Abramoff, Zarei has distinguished himself not only among other undergraduate employees at the institute but among the graduate students as well. And he's more than just a student: "Kasra has proved to be a valuable asset to my lab's work," Abramoff says.

Shortly after beginning at the institute, Zarei was assigned a project that was expected to require possibly a year or more to complete—he finished it in two months. You would expect this type of work from graduate students, explains Abramoff, but Zarei is an undergraduate, which makes his accomplishments exceptional and promising.

In 2015, Zarei received campuswide attention for winning both an Excellence in Undergraduate Research Award and a Goldwater Scholarship, the premiere undergraduate award for students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields.

Zarei is close to publishing a first-author paper on one of the several applications he has developed—one promising to improve animal testing for glaucoma. He completed his honors thesis as a sophomore.

Zarei also developed novel vision-testing software that can run on a smart phone. If validated, this test could become a useful screening tool for eye disease, as well as for Alzheimer's and other telemedicine applications.

"Being able to truly take ownership of professional-level work in the sciences has been gratifying and educational in so many ways," says Zarei. "While this is an area of our higher-education system that has to be refined, I do believe that experience working (in whatever discipline or position) truly augments the educational experience of a student in a way that cannot be achieved currently inside the classroom."

After completing his undergraduate education, Zarei hopes to expand his research experiences in grad school. He wants to become a professor in order to teach and mentor his own students.

"I'm deeply interested in getting involved with academic administrative responsibilities on a local and national level, where I can help improve the state of higher education and STEM education nationwide," he says.

The UI began recognizing student employees of the year in 1995. Since then, 10 of the 21 students selected have worked in one of the UI's many health care-related departments.

Of the 32,150 students at Iowa, about 7,000 are employed by the university and about 1,000 hold work-study positions.

"The university wants to thank all of its student employees for their contributions, without which the university could not reach

its goals,” says Cynthia Seyfer, senior associate director of the Office of Student Financial Aid. From April 11 to 15, supervisors across campus are celebrating National Student Employment Week to show their appreciation.

Seyfer says being employed by the university can also play a significant role in student success.

“Student employment is a win-win,” she says. “Employers are able to work with students who often bring cutting-edge knowledge from the classroom to the job. Students get an opportunity to develop transferable skills for future employment. The retention and graduation rates are higher for student employees than for their non-working peers. A common misconception is that student employees have less time for academics, but the average student employee’s GPA matches and sometimes surpasses that of their non-working peers.”

President Bruce Harreld will honor Zarei and nine other student employees during an April 15 luncheon at the President’s Residence.

Other UI award recipients include:

Daniel Sullivan, Division of Sponsored Programs (DSP) (Certificate of Distinction)

As a DSP student accountant, Sullivan, a fourth-year accounting major, reviewed 700 budgets in the last nine months for adherence to federal, state, and sponsor regulations. Many of those budgets are multi-million-dollar, multi-national projects. Sullivan’s nominator, Associate Director of Sponsored Programs Paul Below, was impressed with how Sullivan’s positive attitude and steadfast work ethic survive the stress of these major projects and their review deadlines. Sullivan’s responsibilities require him to review the accuracy and permissibility of budgets for university research and scholarly activity. However, he has also taken it upon himself to lead meetings, research industry practices, assist in developing new DSP electronic systems, and build, as well as present, both an in-person and an online budget course. Sullivan began working for DSP in May 2015. He is from Lockport, Ill.

Emmy Szymanski, Psychiatry (Certificate of Distinction)

Rarely does an undergraduate edit and prepare manuscripts for submission and publication in medical journals, according to Constituent Relations Coordinator Sean Thompson, Szymanski’s nominator. Szymanski is a fourth-year English major from Hickory Hills, Illinois, who joined the Huntington’s Disease Society of America (HDSA) Center of Excellence editorial team in August 2015. There are only two people on the team, a feat Thompson claims is only possible because of Szymanski’s accomplished editing and writing skills and her embrace of social-media-management and advocacy responsibilities. Szymanski’s father suffers from the degenerative and genetically inherited illness known as Huntington’s Disease, which gives Szymanski a 50-50 chance of developing the disease herself. This not only impassions Szymanski but gives her a perspective that is vital to the HDSA’s work.

Chelsea Weis, Pentacrest Museums (Certificate of Distinction)

When people ask who designs the Pentacrest Museums’ publications, Communications Manager Casey Westlake says, they are surprised to learn it is a student graphic designer and not an outside firm. Though younger than most of the other applicants for her position, Chelsea Weis’ work stood out as particularly sophisticated and skilled. Since she joined the museums’ team in 2013, Weis has worked on everything from 10-foot posters to thumb-sized tattoos for RAGBRAI and has never failed to delight and surpass expectations, according to Westlake, who also nominated her for the award. Weis is a fourth-year journalism and mass communications major from Wausau, Wisconsin, and also does design work for *The Gazette*.

Danielle Boffice, Department of Physics and Astronomy (Certificate of Appreciation)

Although she is a business analytics major, Boffice does her job better than any of her science-track predecessors, according to her nominator, Instructional Services Specialist Dale Stille. Boffice hails from Elk Grove Village, Illinois, and has worked as an instructional resources assistant since March 2013. The position requires Boffice, a fourth-year student, to help with the presentation, development, and construction of instructional resources for all undergraduate classes in her department. As her title suggests, she has a knack for explaining concepts, and Stille has come to rely on Boffice’s skill and initiative working with a variety of tools, from power drills and soldering irons to web development and maintenance.

Alejandra Flores, Center for Diversity and Enrichment—TRiO Student Support Service (SSS) (Certificate of Appreciation)

Flores, a fourth-year psychology major from Sioux City, Iowa, is the only TRiO SSS student to serve as an intern in the history of the program, according to her nominator, TRiO SSS Project Director Sarah Billeter. This uncommon position was offered to her because of her uncommon initiative and dedication. Shortly after becoming a student worker in June 2015, Flores proposed to then began revamping the TRiO SSS Peer Mentors Program, working with fellow mentors, students, and staff to develop greater structure and support for current mentors and mentees. Her professionalism and deft interpersonal skills have earned her praise while developing a relaxed and social educational program called Girls' Night—and as she organizes and presents the First General Panel in summer orientation sessions.

Evan Flynn, CIMBA Italy (Certificate of Appreciation)

According to her nominator, local CIMBA Italy Director Brandelle Unkrich, Flynn's impact as part-time data specialist at the university's CIMBA Italy office is similar to that of one of the four full-time staff members she's trained since she began there in 2014. Her reliability and attention to detail help her manage the office database, where information about the program's hundreds of students is stored. Annually, Flynn, a fourth-year industrial engineering major from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, adds and tracks hundreds more entries from prospective students and is often on the phone answering their questions and assuaging their parents' anxiety. By playing a large role in many special projects and taking on extra responsibilities during staff transitions, she has demonstrated initiative and versatility crucial to CIMBA's success.

Fami Kiche, University Catering (Certificate of Appreciation)

Catering requires adaptability, receptiveness, commitment, and poise, which are all qualities present in Kiche, a fourth-year communications studies major and Iowa City native working as student manager for University Catering. "I consider him the most professional employee on our staff," says Catering Operations Manager Heather Davisson, Kiche's nominator, "and (he) is often requested by name from many of our most important clients." Kiche began catering in October 2014 and since then has excelled in his responsibilities, which include the logistical challenges of preparing for and executing catered events. By demonstrating a readiness to take on tasks outside his job description, he earned the trust of his supervisors, who rely on him to train and supervise his peers.

David Millmeyer, ITS Enterprise Infrastructure (Certificate of Appreciation)

Millmeyer, a second-year civil engineering major from Coralville, Iowa, spent his second summer working for ITS managing a team of students that installed more than 4,000 wireless access points in the university's residence halls. His position as physical infrastructure student assistant for ITS has him moving data cables, adding and changing voice lines, and moving ethernet cables. Since he began with ITS in June 2014, much of Millmeyer's work has had a direct impact on the reputation for professionalism within the department, claims George Stumpf, IT director of physical infrastructure and Millmeyer's nominator, "(his) attention to detail allows all students to access campus and internet resources with very little effort."

Sailahari Ponnaluri, Engineering Student Development Center (Certificate of Appreciation)

"Sailahari is beyond reliable," says Director of Tutoring Josh Atcher, one of two supervisors who came forward to nominate Ponnaluri. "Due to our limited resources," says Kelli Delfosse, director of engineering professional development and Ponnaluri's other nominator, "we count on outstanding students like Sailahari to help carry out our mission." Ponnaluri, a fourth-year biomedical engineering major from Aurora, Illinois, has filled two demanding positions in the Engineering Student Development Center since July 2015: peer advisor and lead tutor. In addition to advising students on career development, Ponnaluri is a tutor and coordinates more than 30 other tutors for core engineering courses. Among her greatest service accomplishments, Ponnaluri is spearheading a conference with faculty, students, and industry partners to connect employers with students and build relationships with researchers.



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