

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Alberta Scholars Honoured in 2026

CAFA Distinguished Academic Awards – 20th Anniversary Celebration

September 14, 2026 – Edmonton, AB – The Confederation of Alberta Faculty Associations (CAFA) is proud to announce the recipients of the 2026 CAFA Distinguished Academic Awards. This year marks a significant milestone as we celebrate the 20th anniversary of these awards, which recognize exceptional contributions in teaching, research, and service by academic staff at Alberta's public universities.

This year's honourees represent diverse disciplines and institutions, sharing a deep commitment to advancing knowledge, supporting students, and transforming communities through academic excellence.

2026 Distinguished Academic Award

Dr. David Wishart – University of Alberta, Department of Biological Sciences
Recipient, 2026 CAFA Distinguished Academic Award

Dr. Wishart is being recognized for his outstanding contributions to biological sciences, where his research and scholarly activities have made significant impacts on the wider community beyond the university.

Dr. Sriyak Bhatnagar – Athabasca University, Centre for Science
Recipient, 2026 CAFA Distinguished Academic Early Career Award

Dr. Bhatnagar is honoured for his promising work and research excellence at an early stage in his career, demonstrating a strong commitment to community-driven scholarship and innovation.

Dr. Rodney Schmaltz – MacEwan University, Department of Psychology
Recipient, 2026 CAFA Distinguished Teaching Award

Dr. Schmaltz is recognized for his excellence in teaching, demonstrating a commitment to student success that goes above and beyond his role as an instructor, while contributing positively to the broader community.

***Jennifer Faulkner – MacEwan University, Arts and Culture Management Department
Recipient, 2026 CAFA Distinguished Teaching Award for Precarious Faculty***

Jennifer Faulkner is celebrated for her innovative classroom techniques and pedagogical success. This award highlights her dedication to teaching and student engagement within the context of precarious employment.

“These honourees represent the best of Alberta’s academic community,” said CAFA President Dr. Lee Easton. “As we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the CAFA Awards, we reflect on the transformative role our public universities and their faculty play in our province. These scholars continue to exemplify the high standards of research, teaching, and service that CAFA is proud to champion.”

The CAFA Awards continue to celebrate academic excellence and recognize the ongoing impact of Alberta’s scholars across disciplines and institutions.

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For further information on the work of this year’s Award recipients, please see the attached backgrounders.

For more information contact:

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Background information 2026 CAFA Award Winners

Backgrounder: Dr. David S. Wishart

Recipient, 2026 CAFA Distinguished Academic Award

University of Alberta

Overview

Dr. David S. Wishart is a Distinguished University Professor in the Departments of Computing Science and Biological Sciences at the University of Alberta. An internationally recognized researcher, educator, and innovator, Dr. Wishart has played a pioneering role in establishing the field of metabolomics—the study of small molecules that provide critical insights into health, disease, nutrition, and environmental processes.

Key Scientific Contributions

Since joining the University of Alberta in 1995, Dr. Wishart has built a distinguished career spanning biological sciences, computing science, precision medicine, and bioinformatics. He is best known for developing globally used scientific databases and software platforms, including the Human Metabolome Database (HMDB), DrugBank, and MetaboAnalyst. These essential resources support researchers, clinicians, and industry professionals worldwide, driving advances in disease diagnosis, drug discovery, personalized healthcare, and environmental monitoring.

Translational Impact & Mentorship

As Co-Director of The Metabolomics Innovation Centre (TMIC), Dr. Wishart advances open science and knowledge mobilization while fostering partnerships that translate research discoveries into practical applications. His work has facilitated the creation of several successful biotechnology companies, generating significant economic and societal benefits. A proud Albertan of Métis heritage, Dr. Wishart pairs his research excellence with a deep commitment to Indigenous values of openness, collaboration and mentorship, having trained hundreds of students and postdoctoral fellows while strengthening Canada's national capacity in bioinformatics through collaborative training initiatives.

Select Honours

Dr. Wishart's achievements have earned numerous national and international honours, including Fellowship in the Royal Society of Canada, the NSERC Brockhouse Canada Prize for Interdisciplinary Research, Governor General's Innovation Award for 2026, Governor General's Innovation Award for 2026, and the NSERC Gerhard Herzberg Gold Medal for Science and Engineering.

Backgrounder: Dr. Srijak Bhatnagar

Recipient, 2026 CAFA Distinguished Academic Early Career Award

Athabasca University

Overview

Dr. Srijak Bhatnagar is an Assistant Professor of Computational Biology and Microbial Ecology at Athabasca University. Since joining the university in 2021, he has established an innovative research program that combines environmental microbiology, genomics, molecular ecology, and community-driven scholarship to address pressing societal challenges, including climate change and Indigenous food security.

Research & Collaboration

A defining feature of Dr. Bhatnagar's work is his commitment to co-developing research with Indigenous communities. Through long-standing partnerships with communities in Alberta and Arctic Canada, including the Bigstone Cree First Nation and Inuit organizations, he works collaboratively to support biodiversity conservation, environmental impact assessments and advance community-led decision-making. His research emphasizes respect for Indigenous knowledge systems, demonstrating how scientific and Indigenous ways of knowing can work together to address complex environmental issues.

Impact & Engagement

Despite being at an early stage in his academic career, Dr. Bhatnagar has secured over \$3.5 million in research funding and built an extensive network of collaborations. He is widely recognized for his exceptional commitment to knowledge mobilization and public engagement, utilizing workshops, public lectures, and innovative science communication to make complex concepts accessible to diverse audiences. His contributions have already earned him significant recognition, including Athabasca University's Impact Award for Outstanding Community Service and an ASTech Award for his role in Alberta's COVID-19 wastewater monitoring initiative.

Backgrounder: Dr. Rodney M. Schmaltz

Recipient, 2026 CAFA Distinguished Teaching Award

MacEwan University

Overview

Dr. Rodney M. Schmaltz is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at MacEwan University and a distinguished post-secondary educator. With a teaching career spanning nearly two decades, Dr. Schmaltz is recognized for his commitment to scientific communication, critical thinking, and the integration of research into classroom pedagogy.

Teaching Philosophy & Impact

Dr. Schmaltz is renowned for his ability to make challenging material accessible and engaging. With a mean student evaluation score consistently above departmental and university averages, he is frequently cited by students as an empathetic and effective instructor. Beyond the classroom, he has co-authored a widely adopted introductory psychology textbook—*Psychology: From Inquiry to Understanding*—used at institutions across Canada. His supervision of honours and independent study students has consistently prepared them for competitive graduate programs and academic success.

Educational Leadership & Community Engagement

Dr. Schmaltz distinguishes himself through pedagogical innovation that extends into the community. He has initiated public-facing events such as the “Brew and Learn” student fundraiser and “Skepticamp”, both of which focus on advancing critical thinking. Internationally, he has established partnerships with the Instituto Questão de Ciência (Science Question Institute) in Brazil to promote scientific literacy and critical thinking exchanges. His work often bridges the gap between the academy and the public, evidenced by his contributions to science communication in public schools and media outreach. In 2019, he was recognized with the MacEwan University Distinguished Teaching Award.

Backgrounder: Jennifer Faulkner

Recipient, 2026 CAFA Distinguished Teaching Award for Precarious Faculty

MacEwan University

Overview

Jennifer Faulkner is a Sessional Instructor in the Arts and Cultural Management Department at MacEwan University. A dedicated educator with extensive experience in the arts sector, Faulkner is recognized for her “pedagogy of care” and her commitment to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL).

Pedagogical Innovation

Faulkner’s teaching is characterized by a relationship-centered approach that connects academic theory (“the what and why”) to industry practice (“the how”). She was the instructor for the inaugural interdisciplinary course that formed the foundation of the “Artistic Horizons” project, a collaboration with the Arts & Culture Council of Strathcona County. In this role, she guided a diverse cohort of students to create a virtual reality gallery that documented the stories of local artisans. Her ability to scaffold complex learning moments while prioritizing student voice and community relevance has been lauded by both her university colleagues and community partners as transformative.

Industry Experience & Mentorship

Before her academic career, Faulkner held senior leadership roles in the arts, including Grant Manager and Associate Executive Director at Alberta Ballet, where she helped raise over \$65 million. She leverages this deep industry knowledge to mentor students, helping them set realistic professional goals and navigate work-integrated learning projects. Her nominators describe her as an educator who empowers students to trust their unique skills, creating a classroom environment where students feel supported in their transition from learners to creative professionals.