

# They're All That

COLA faculty are recognized for excellence

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Friday, January 10, 2020

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Each year, the University of New Hampshire selects a small number of its outstanding faculty for special recognition of their achievements in teaching, scholarship and service. Awards for excellence in teaching are given in each college, and university-wide awards recognize public service, research, teaching and engagement.

The 2019 award recipients were announced and celebrated at a ceremony in December. Five COLA faculty were recognized with awards: Renee Heath, Alecia Magnifico and Charles Vannette for excellence in teaching; Jeannie Sowers for excellence in international engagement; and Svetlana Peshkova for excellence in public

service. The citations following were read and presented to award winners at the ceremony.

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## Renee Heath

Principal Lecturer, Department of Communication



RENEE HEATH, PRINCIPAL LECTURER IN COMMUNICATION  
*Excellence in Teaching*

Renee Heath starts every course discussing a quote from the author Tom Hayden. It begins: “Education in a democracy should be threatening and renewing....” By threatening, Hayden goes on to explain, he means we should critically examine our deepest-held beliefs “with a withering ‘why?’”

As a teacher and scholar of organizational communication, Prof. Heath works with students every day to critically examine their own and others’ assumptions within a context of respectful discourse. No actual threats are encouraged! She’s developed innovative courses that teach what she calls the art and science of facilitation.

Prof. Heath’s commitment to civil discourse is exemplified in The Civil Discourse Lab, an experiential opportunity she co-founded and co-directs. The Lab has involved hundreds of students, faculty and community members in civil dialogue events.

With work strongly grounded in theory (and she's written two award-winning books that prove it), Prof. Heath subscribes to what psychologist Kurt Lewin famously noted: "There's nothing so practical as good theory." She strives to create assignments that help students connect theory to their lives and the larger world.

It's an approach that students value. Prof. Heath's course waiting lists are long, as are the lines that form outside her office door. Students speak repeatedly of her charisma, enthusiasm and ability to connect. One former student, now pursuing a teaching degree, wrote: "If I can have half the impact on a young child's life that Dr. Heath had on mine, then I would have lived a fulfilled life."

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**Alecia Magnifico**

**Associate Professor, Department of English**



Here, we focus on the survival, success, and enjoyment of

Alexandra  
University of North Carolina

ALECIA MAGNIFICO, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH  
*Excellence in Teaching*

A teacher of future teachers, Alecia Magnifico teaches to the future. Since joining the faculty in 2013, she's exercised considerable skills that have profoundly impacted the English composition and teaching programs in distinctly 21<sup>st</sup> century ways. She's developed new courses — steeped in her own qualitative and quantitative research — to help students understand literacy in the digital media age. To ensure job-readiness for students, she's created mandatory undergraduate practicums and has shepherded students into graduate internships. She also works with teachers across the State to better prepare New Hampshire's high school students for college literacy.

Around a seminar table and in office hours, Prof. Magnifico displays potent qualities that don't fit as neatly on a C.V. She is caring, accessible, thoughtful and generous, say her students. She is particularly adept at building community. With high expectations and deep intellect, she creates an environment that encourages risk-taking, built on a strong sense of respect.

"Students learn successfully when they engage in real tasks from their discipline and participate in real conversations and communities," says Prof. Magnifico. She encourages students to enter the discourse communities of their field and prepares them to contribute meaningfully as professionals.

One such professional explains Prof. Magnifico's impact:

"Many educators in my life have inspired me to become an educator, but Alecia alone has inspired me to become *myself* first, and to bring that identity — that sureness in self, that flexibility in growth, that real person that students can truly connect to — into the classroom, and *then* to educate. Alecia is a living example of modeling how considering the whole student — and the whole teacher — brings a classroom community to life."

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**Svetlana Peshkova**

**Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology**



SVETLANA PESHKOVA, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ANTHROPOLOGY  
*Excellence in Public Service*

Svetlana Peshkova has established herself as a deft facilitator of relationships with local Native American communities and a strong advocate for public education about Native American history. With local Abenaki leaders, her anthropology students, UNH colleagues and staff and interested local community members, several years ago she founded a group called the Indigenous New Hampshire Collaborative Collective. Among other things, this group has created a sophisticated ARCGIS Story Map that balances indigenous and non-indigenous versions of key places and historical events around the Granite State. The group has a blog that covers historic and current events and topics; they also have a podcast, a YouTube channel and Facebook and Twitter accounts. The collective has been showing up all over campus and beyond — at the Waysmeet Center during MLK celebrations; in the MUB for public lectures; in Concord during legislative hearings around establishing a statewide Indigenous Peoples Day.

This work is not only time-consuming, it is also politically fraught. But Prof. Peshkova has been able to navigate the complexities thanks to her deep understanding of colonialism, her incredible devotion and her good humor. It is no exaggeration to say that under Prof. Peshkova's guidance, the Indigenous New Hampshire Collaborative Collective is having a meaningful impact on New Hampshire's understanding of Native American history — and continued presence.

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## Jeannie Sowers

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science



JEANNIE SOWERS, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
*Excellence in International Engagement Award*

Jeannie Sowers is a nationally and internationally renowned scholar who conducts research on pressing global issues. Her scholarship is a vital tool for informing citizens and public policy debates.

Prof. Sowers' work is of critical importance for people living in conflict regions, as well as for policymakers struggling to address global crises. Her classes are often full, and students regularly praise her teaching abilities. She mixes lively lectures with class discussions, and students learn to articulate their views based upon empirical evidence while respecting their peers. This learning continues outside of the classroom, where she has been instrumental in planning global issues lectures through seminars and the Sidore Lecture Series.

In 2009, Prof. Sowers helped create the Middle Eastern studies minor. This minor has held appeal for students and assisted them in securing prestigious jobs. Not surprisingly, alumni maintain regular contact with her.

In her department, Prof. Sowers shoulders an exceptional amount of the daily work. She is instrumental in recruiting top candidates to expand expertise and mentors them once they arrive. Her mentoring extends beyond the department, developing a series of

workshops for junior faculty about the tenure process. Faculty find the events enormously helpful and praise her work.

Prof. Sowers is passionately dedicated to UNH's mission of internationalization and student engagement, and this dedication drives her research agenda, teaching, public engagement and service.

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## Charles Vannette

**Assistant Professor of German, Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures**



CHARLES VANNETTE, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF GERMAN  
*Excellence in Teaching*

Like a person talking seriously and quietly in a noisy room, Charles Vannette makes students lean in and pay attention, says a faculty colleague. He's thoughtful, deliberate, creative, well-prepared. And when they lean in, students find someone who listens and cares.

With his special intensity, Prof. Vannette has been teaching German language, literature and culture at UNH since 2015. A scholar of the Swiss author Robert Walser, it's Walser he turns to for grounding his teaching philosophy. Walser writes: "That,

which we hold to be certain, may never become fixed, lest it break. True certainty in action and disposition requires a constant, small fluctuation: an elasticity. The ground beneath our feet should rise and fall....”

For Prof. Vannette, helping students develop intellectual elasticity is the goal that underscores his teaching.

“Education is a process of careful destabilization,” he says. “Learning is the facility to explore and actively pursue knowledge, and to engage in a dialog with new and challenging ideas. Our graduates need to tread confidently on unsteady ground.”

It’s not surprising, then, that Prof. Vannette’s most meaningful UNH moments have been when students have demonstrated confidence in the face of the unknown, reaching for new experiences beyond UNH through Fulbright scholarships, graduate school, internships in German science labs or jobs at U.S. embassies abroad.

“To watch a student put their learning into practice, and to watch their future open up in front of them, gives enough cause to struggle through the grind of grading German grammar exams,” he says.

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#### FACULTY EXCELLENCE



University of New Hampshire

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