

FEATURE

Julio Ramirez Honored for Outstanding Mentorship by President Obama

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On January 27th of this year, Dr. Julio Ramirez, Founding President of the Faculty for Undergraduate Neuroscience (FUN) and Founding Senior Editor of the *Journal of Undergraduate Neuroscience Education (JUNE)* was honored by President Barack Obama as one of this year's recipients of the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics and Engineering Mentoring. This prestigious annual award recognizes those who have expanded educational opportunities for women, minorities and people with disabilities in science, mathematics and engineering. Julio was presented the award at a special ceremony, held at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building in Washington, D.C. after a 30-minute meeting with President Barack Obama in the Oval Office. He also gave a 10-minute talk at the National Science Foundation (NSF) on FUN, *JUNE* and mentorship of junior faculty and undergraduate students. For members of FUN who know Julio well, this most prestigious recognition of his extraordinary work in mentoring and establishing programs of mentorship was clearly well deserved.

For those readers who are new to *JUNE* or somewhat unfamiliar with FUN, Julio Ramirez has been the driving force for both FUN and its flagship journal. His motivation for expanding educational access for everyone, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, has deep roots in his own arduous journey to escape the projects of Bridgeport, Connecticut by taking full advantage of the educational opportunities he was offered. In 1977, Julio obtained his B.S. degree in Psychology from Fairfield University, where he worked with Ronald Salafia and Jack Boitano (who later became the fifth President of FUN). In 1983, Julio graduated from Clark University with an M.A. and a Ph.D. in Psychology, and where he did pioneering work in neuroplasticity with Don Stein. Julio then taught for four years at St. Benedict/St. John's University in Minnesota and did a year of postdoctoral work at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, before taking on his present faculty position at Davidson College. At Davidson, Julio has mentored over 100 students in an interdisciplinary neuroscience program he initiated. Julio's teaching and mentoring accomplishments at Davidson soon culminated in his being named the North Carolina Professor of the Year and the National Gold Medal Professor by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education in 1989.

During his first five years at Davidson, however, Julio realized that many of his needs as an educator from a primarily undergraduate institution were not being met by existing neuroscience organizations, including the Society for Neuroscience and the Association for Neuroscience Department and Programs, both of which had a primary



focus on graduate research and education. So in 1991, Julio and a handful of his colleagues took the initiative to form FUN, which he nourished through its initial three years as its first President. Over the years, FUN's membership blossomed from the handful of colleagues who assembled in a small room at the Society for Neuroscience meeting in 1991 to the hundreds of members who are now packing the ballrooms at the annual FUN Socials.

Through FUN, Julio's influence in providing and promoting mentorship opportunities for undergraduates took on new vistas. Julio was instrumental in establishing a partnership with the NSF-supported science education advocacy organization, Project Kaleidoscope, to host national conferences in 1995, 1998, 2001, and 2005. These conferences provided a forum for crafting curricular guidelines for institutions that were designing neuroscience programs. In addition, the conferences provided a plethora of educational innovations and proven laboratory exercises for attending faculty members to bring back to their home institutions. His mentorship outreach grew even further when, in 2002, he and Barbara Lom established *JUNE*, for which Barbara served as Founding Editor-in-Chief and Julio served as Founding Senior Editor during its first five years.

For his extraordinary achievements in teaching and mentorship, Davidson College awarded its first R. Stuart Dickson Professorship to Julio in 1998. Three years later, FUN presented him with its highest honor, the Career Achievement Award. Then, in 2004, the National Science Foundation awarded him with the Director's Award for Distinguished Teaching Scholars. He used the \$305,000 grant from this NSF award to establish SOMAS (Support of

Mentors And their Students in the neurosciences) a hugely successful national mentorship program that provides \$9,000 summer research support to a junior faculty member and his or her undergraduate student. Julio has worked tirelessly to find sources of funding for SOMAS. With funding from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) in 2008, Julio focused the SOMAS program on recruiting and retaining underrepresented groups in the neurosciences and renamed the program SOMAS-URM. His success with establishing and guiding this program was clearly a major impetus for his recent selection to receive one of this year's Presidential Awards for Excellence in Science, Mathematics and Engineering Mentoring.

This most recent award follows a long list of accolades for his work over the years, including being named as a Fellow of the Association for Psychological Science (APS), of the American Psychological Association (APA), of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), of FUN, and of the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR).

Despite the countless hours he has devoted in his selfless quest to establish programs to help colleagues and their students from diverse backgrounds, and to promote undergraduate neuroscience education, Julio has maintained his passion for personal interactions with his own students. He has continued to involve them in highly innovative and meaningful research projects, producing dozens of papers in high impact journals on which many of his students are coauthors. The high quality of his student-centered research program is exemplified by the continuous support he has received through competitive grants from agencies such as the NSF, the National Institutes of Health, and the HHMI, including the \$460,000 NSF grant he was awarded this year.

For a boy who saw education as his best hope to succeed in life and who took full advantage of the educational opportunities provided to him, Julio has dedicated a good part of his life to "give back" opportunities for so many of his students and his colleagues. His commitment to education is more than his chosen vocation – it is part of the integral fabric of his life. Julio and his wife Annie have made study time for their children, Elia and Julian, a top priority in their home life. Julio, himself, is a devoted lifelong learner.

For those of us who know Julio well, we are extremely grateful for all he has done for FUN, *JUNE*, and undergraduate education in general, and are equally as proud to have our founding FUN member receive the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics and Engineering Mentoring. It could not have been bestowed upon a more worthy recipient.

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