UC SANTA BARBARA

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The Primordial Fuse is Lit

The building blocks of life and how they evolve have long fascinated UC Santa Barbara biochemist and biophysicist Irene Chen and been a target of her scientific inquiry. Now, as a recipient of the 2018 Camille Dreyfus Teacher-Scholar Award, she has been acknowledged for her work and provided funds that will enable her to forge farther ahead with her research and teaching.

“I was surprised and delighted to be chosen a Dreyfus Teacher-Scholar in chemistry and join quite a list of UCSB faculty who have received this honor,” said Chen, an assistant professor in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry “To me, the program affirms the intertwined spirit of teaching and learning about the natural world.”

Chen is one of 13 recipients of the award this year, all young faculty who, according to the Camille and Henry Dreyfus Foundation, have created an outstanding independent body of scholarship and are deeply committed to education. Each Camille Dreyfus Teacher-Scholar receives an unrestricted research grant of $75,000.

“The Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry was thrilled to hear about Prof. Chen's Camille Dreyfus Teacher-Scholar Award,” said Department Chair Steven Buratto. “Her selection reinforces what we have known all along: She is one of the rising stars in biochemistry and systems biology. We are all very proud of her!”

“The funds from this award will help us carry forward research to understand two of the simplest evolvable biochemical systems: catalytic RNA and bacteriophages,”

said Chen. She was recognized for her project, “Probing Known Unknowns in Systems Biology.”

Chen joined the UCSB faculty in 2013, having received her bachelor’s degree in chemistry from Harvard University, where she went on to obtain her MD in health sciences and technology, and her Ph.D. in biophysics. As a Bauer Fellow in systems biology at Harvard, she worked to build primitive cells to study information transmission and the evolutionary landscapes of the origin of life.

The recipient of several awards for her scholarship, Chen earned significant acclaim for her work as a student — a trend that has continued in her young career as a researcher and educator.

In 2011 she received the David White Research Award, presented every three years from the International Society of the Origin of Life for outstanding contributions in astrobiology. Chen in 2013 was awarded a $1.3 million grant from the private New York City-based Simons Foundation as one of the first investigators in its Simons Collaboration on the Origins of Life. She was named a Searle Scholar and awarded a $300,000 research grant, in 2014, and received a $2.1 million New Innovator Award from the National Institutes of Health in 2016.

The Camille and Henry Dreyfus Foundation’s Camille Dreyfus Teacher-Scholars Awards Program annually supports the research and teaching careers of talented young faculty in the chemical sciences. Based on institutional nominations, the program provides discretionary funding to faculty at an early stage in their careers. Criteria for selection include an independent body of scholarship attained in the early years of their appointment and a demonstrated commitment to education, signaling the promise of continuing outstanding contributions to both research and teaching.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the

edge of the Pacific Ocean.