UMass Amherst Announces 2016 ‘Armstrong Fund for Science’ Awards

AMHERST, Mass. – A team of four University of Massachusetts Amherst researchers are the Armstrong Fund for Science winners for 2016, which is granting $40,000 over two years to encourage transformative research on campus that introduces new ways of thinking about pressing scientific or technical challenges. They were recognized at the UMass Amherst Honors Dinner on April 13.

This winning team consists of faculty from the departments of biochemistry and molecular biology and microbiology, including Li-Jun Ma, a fungal biologist recently named as a Burroughs Wellcome Fund investigator in the pathogenesis of infectious disease, Sergey Savinov, a chemist, and two microbiologists, Michele Klingbeil and Yasu Morita. They point out that “infectious diseases, caused by microorganisms resistant to
available anti-microbials, pose serious threats to public health worldwide.”

They plan to use the Plant Cell Culture Library (PCCL), a plant cell collection donated to the campus with associated equipment worth more than $1 million by Monsanto in 2014. The library contains cells from more than 2,200 plant species and is considered one of the largest and most diverse collections of cultured plant materials in the world, which includes cells capable of controlling drug-resistant pathogens.

The four say that this project harnesses the synergistic power of plant antimicrobials and integrates the research interests of their labs to identify novel compounds with antifungal, antitrypanosomal or antibacterial activities. They expect data to show the broad usefulness of the PCCL for discovering new compounds of high value to the pharmaceutical industry, and that the culture library should support future grant applications. Armstrong awardees agree to present a public “Science for Non-scientists” lecture when their work is complete.

Benefactors John and Elizabeth Armstrong established their Fund for Science in 2006 to identify and support promising research directions that do not yet have enough data for application to standard funding channels. “Elizabeth and I want to promote major scientific advances in society by supporting researchers with bold vision, documented credentials and a passion for results,” Armstrong says.

The UMass Amherst Office of Research and Engagement headed by Vice Chancellor Michael Malone administers Armstrong grants in a competitive proposal process. He says, “The campus greatly appreciates the Armstrongs’ generosity and confidence in our institution and faculty. Giving our faculty opportunities to innovate and excel in their research is an extraordinary gesture.”

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