



SPOTLIGHT ON: Dean Frances Leslie

Champion of Graduate Education





Dean Frances Leslie: Leading By Example: A Mentor For Others



Charting a course in graduate education entails many challenges – it is a journey filled with opportunities and possibilities – and it is one that UC Irvine's Graduate Dean, Frances Leslie knows well. With over three decades in academia here at UCI, Dean Leslie has been a pioneer and innovator in graduate education. She holds a joint appointment in [Pharmacology](#) and in [Anatomy & Neurobiology](#) in the School of Medicine and has published more than [120 papers](#) in prestigious journals including [Neuropsychopharmacology](#) (May 2012) and [Hippocampus](#) (March 2012).

A neuropharmacologist by training, Dean Leslie received her doctoral degree from Aberdeen University in Scotland in 1977 (<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/>) where she played a role in landmark studies on the identification and mechanism of the action of enkephalin, the first endorphin to be discovered. The discovery and isolation of this endorphin and the importance of its discovery are detailed in the book [Anatomy of a Scientific Discovery](#) (by Jeff Goldberg (1988.)

Dean Leslie has many responsibilities that include overseeing day-to-day operations in the Graduate Division as well as working closely with the academic units on the development of new graduate programs. She continues to spearhead innovative programs within graduate education and [diversity programs](#) designed to foster equity and access for graduate students and postdoctoral scholars.

With responsibility for the academic welfare of close to 5,000 master's and doctoral students, she continues to conduct research and mentor undergraduate and graduate students in her laboratory. Dean Leslie is primarily interested in the mechanisms underlying tobacco addiction and in the effects of nicotine and other abused drugs on developing brain. She and her research team use an integrative range of experimental approaches, from molecular biology to animal behavior, to determine whether abused drugs have unique effects at various stages of brain development.



"A major focus of the lab's research is currently on analysis of drug responses during adolescence," she states. "My research team is evaluating acute and chronic effects of drugs during this critical maturational period, and the mechanisms underlying observed developmental differences. These groundbreaking studies suggest that many abused drugs have unique effects on adolescent brain."

A Passionate Crusader

Since being appointed Graduate Dean in 2009, Frances Leslie has been a passionate crusader for graduate and postdoctoral trainees. She was instrumental in the unveiling of the Graduate Research Center ([GRC](#)), one of the first in the nation to support graduate student professional, career, and personal development through a range of workshops and events. She has played a crucial role in the implementation of campus-wide strategies designed to spearhead the growth and enhancement of graduate programs on the UCI campus. She has established several new competitive fellowship award programs during her tenure, including the [Public Impact Fellowship Award](#) which highlights and supports doctoral students whose current research has the potential for substantial impact in the public sphere. She has also worked to provide greater support for [postdoctoral fellows](#).

She encourages graduate and postdoctoral trainees to explore the many opportunities and possibilities that await them here at UCI. "Since our foundation in 1965, UC Irvine has become a recognized leader in world-class research and scholarship," she notes.

According to Dean Leslie, it is the collaboration between accomplished faculty and exceptional students that allows the university to remain at the forefront of academic excellence. "Our graduate students and postdoctoral scholars work with eminent faculty in highly-ranked programs, benefit from unparalleled support services, and get to experience everything that a great Southern California location has to offer."

Finding Balance

When asked how she manages to 'keep it all moving', and still maintain a sense of balance, Dean Leslie is quick to point out that being able to compartmentalize is a key ingredient to success. "I have learned to compartmentalize" she says with a quiet smile. She does emphasize that while finding this balance is not always easy, it is essential.

"Being able to compartmentalize and focus on a task at hand is critical to being adequately equipped to undertake the role of a researcher or professor," she states. "This same skill set is equally important to maintaining balance between personal and professional lives."

With a daughter in college and a son preparing for graduate school, Dean Leslie understands the needs of students from multiple perspectives - that of administrator, professor and as a parent. "Times are very challenging just now" she says, "and it is critical for our children to get the best education possible, one that enhances their critical thinking and problem solving skills. I believe that we provide that here at UCI."

Making a Difference

As a mentor to the next generation of academics, Dean Leslie stresses the importance of finding one's own path –learning to embrace autonomy and independence. At the same time however, she notes it is critical that one learn to build a strong foundation – by collaborating with others. In May of this year, she was awarded the prestigious Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Research ([UROP](#)).



An annual award since 1997, the purpose of the Chancellor's Award is to recognize the meritorious contributions in support of undergraduate research by one faculty member in each school. She is quick to point out that her graduate students should share this award since they are the ones that primarily mentor undergraduate researchers in her lab. "It is important that we foster pathways to success, with each generation helping the next".

She calls to mind a quote from Polish multiple Nobel Prize winner Marie Curie, who was her childhood inspiration to become a scientist. "Nothing in life is to be feared. It is to be understood."

- by Camerone Thorson – UCI Graduate Division