

CASCA Awards Committee Report – May 2024

Members

The committee membership for the past year (2023-2024) consisted of:

- Vincent Hénault-Brunet (2021-2024), Saint Mary's University (Chair)
- Pauline Barmby (2022-2025), Western University
- Craig Heinke (2022-2025), University of Alberta
- Tracy Webb (2022-2025), McGill University
- Jon Willis (2023-2026), University of Victoria

The term of one committee member (Vincent Hénault-Brunet; current chair) ends on 30 June 2024.

Interest from the CASCA membership should be solicited to fill the open spot on the Awards Committee (2024-2027 term). A new committee chair should also be identified, ideally from the current committee membership given their experience on the committee.

The size of the Awards Committee was reduced from 7 to 5 members a few years ago. 5 members works well but this should not be further reduced to maintain diversity (geographic, gender, language, research expertise area, etc) and to best deal with cases where committee members need to recuse themselves from discussions of specific nominations due to conflicts of interest.

Awards

The following prizes were awarded this year following recommendations by the Awards Committee:

- J. S. Plaskett Medal: **Antoine Bédard**
- Carlyle S. Beals Award for outstanding achievement in research: **Julio F. Navarro**
- Dunlap Award for Innovation in Astronomical Research Tools: **Roberto Abraham and the Dragonfly team**
- Qilak Award for Astronomy Communications, Public Education and Outreach: **Laurie Rousseau-Nepton**

Reflections and Suggestions

- This year, we received six nominations for the Beals Award, two for the Dunlap Award, five for the Plaskett Medal, and two for the Qilak Award. These numbers are similar to recent years and generally considered healthy given the size of the community and the associated workload for the Awards Committee.
- For all prizes awarded this year, the Awards Committee was highly impressed with the quality of *all* nominations and selecting winners was again a very difficult task that required careful deliberations. In future calls for nominations, we stress again that renominations should be highly encouraged for all awards (when nominees are still eligible) so that highly deserving nominees who were previously unsuccessful are considered again.
- ~30% of nominees for the different awards this year were women. Despite recent efforts by the Awards Committee to improve diversity and gender balance in the pool of nominees, this is still low and should be improved. In the coming years, the Awards Committee should renew efforts to liaise with the Equity and Inclusivity Committee (EIC) to proactively solicit nominations from underrepresented groups early in the award cycle.
- This year again, as part of continued efforts to make the selection process more inclusive, members of the Awards Committee were asked to complete three online training modules from the Toronto Initiative for Diversity and Excellence (TIDE; <https://www.toronto-tide.ca/education-modules/>) and consult associated resources ahead of reviewing nominations. This online training is valuable (and not too time consuming), but the committee remains open to receiving

more comprehensive and active learning-oriented training on an annual basis should the EIC have specific recommendations.

- Self-nominations are now accepted for post-PhD awards (for the first time in 2023-2024) following recommendations by CASCA's EIC, and the award guidelines have been updated accordingly. The goal is to remove barriers for potential nominees. Effectively this has meant removing the requirement for a nomination letter from two CASCA members in good standing, and allowing nomination letters from anyone (including self-nominations), as long as the nominee is a CASCA member in good standing. While this hasn't clearly led to an increase in the number and/or diversity of nominations received, we recommend maintaining this possibility going forward.

Further discussions with the EIC liaison on the CASCA Board led to a suggestion to improve this procedure and the associated guidelines, and ask people to keep who the nominator is anonymous when writing their nomination letter (i.e. word the nomination letter so that people who self-nominate aren't penalized). That way, someone who wrote the nomination letter for themselves wouldn't be treated as less worthy than a nominee who had someone senior write a nomination for them, because you couldn't tell who wrote the letter. The rest of the application materials (external references, etc.) would remain the same. The Awards Committee chair would still receive the nominations and see who the letter sender is, so the process wouldn't be completely anonymous, but at least the rest of the committee would read the letters without knowing whether it was a self-nomination or a nomination written by someone else.

The call for nominations had already been sent out when this suggestion was made, so this was not enforced for the 2023-2024 cycle, but we recommend modifying the award guidelines to reflect this change in 2024-2025 and going forward.

- Some guidelines for different awards would benefit from clarifications:
 - Some required letters (e.g. external support letters) have a page limit, but nomination letters for some awards have no page limit. Clarify the page limit for letters in the guidelines for all awards and try to make it the same across all awards.
 - Since a team can be nominated for the Dunlap Award and the Qilak prize and the CV of the nominee is required for the nomination package, clarify that the CV of the team leader/PI only is sufficient when a team is nominated.
 - The eligibility period for the Plaskett Medal is somewhat ambiguous, requiring that the thesis was "submitted [...] within the last two calendar years". For future years, it would be worth modifying the guidelines to specify the exact range of dates eligible and what exactly is meant by "submitted" (if not the same as the date the degree was awarded or the date the thesis was defended).
- Enquiries about awards and application procedures from potential nominators/nominees are often received as early as September-October even though the deadline for all awards is now January 15th, so going forward we recommend updating the CASCA Awards web pages (both English and French) earlier on in the cycle, at least to clarify which awards will be offered in the current cycle and confirm the application deadline.
- We finally repeat a recommendation from previous years: the next time CASCA is able to endow a new award, this award should target postdoctoral scholars. The current array of awards given by CASCA is such that postdocs are left out (although in principle they can compete for the Richer Medal), even though a large fraction of published research in Canadian astronomy is produced by postdoctoral fellows. Such an award would bridge that gap and recognize a deserving postdoc's crucial contribution at a career stage where recognition can have a significant impact on their future career.