Name: Jason Dunick

Department: Economics

Number of Nominations: 1

Previous Years’ Nominations: 2015

1. What characteristics make the nominee an exceptional mentor?
   - Patience, caring, unlimited energy for students.
     ~ Colleague

2. If you personally worked with the nominee, please describe your experience.
   - I have worked as his department chair for the last several years. Jason is outstanding in every way, a real credit to Mason.
     ~ Colleague
Narrative Statement

Students shape their future professional identities through the relationships they cultivate while in college. Mentoring is the opportunity to model the professional relationships that are essential for any successful career. A good mentor will understand this role and ensure that each interaction with a student provides an opportunity to do more than solve the problem at hand. An effective mentor will see each conversation—however short or long it might be—as an entrance point for the important work of helping to cultivate our students’ future professional selves. In doing this, we can help students to understand how those immediate difficulties fit into their larger aspirations.

In my work, I interact with students as an instructor, as an academic advisor, and as a thesis advisor. In these interactions, students often come to me with specific questions, but I don’t want students to solely rely on me for the answers. Eventually, students will need to be confident enough in themselves to be the source of the answers that they seek. So a question that is meant to understand a concept like inflation might lead to a response like “why do you think this issue is so controversial?” A question like “what classes should I take?” is met with a response from me that asks, “what do you want to do with your degree?” A question about “how do you do research?” is met with a response of “what have you read that peaks your interests?” Pushing a conversation in this way opens the door for students to think more deeply about their relationship to the knowledge and scholarship that they see in their courses. With this push, students will begin to try on the role of knowledge creator instead of being a passive consumer of knowledge.

Mentoring helps to launch a student’s professional self-identity with the confidence to create their own knowledge and give back solutions to the problems we face. Thus, success in mentoring will yield professional relationships that are mutually beneficial to the student, the mentor, and the wider world.

I have a significant amount of experience as an academic advisor and mentor in higher education. I have worked with students who have struggled academically and were at risk of academic suspension and I have worked with brilliant students whose intellectual ability and personal ambition seems boundless. I am grateful for the opportunity to be a mentor for all of these students and to help them reach the next level—no matter where they start!
The thesis mentoring examples include:

**2014 Cohort**

**Olivia Gonzalez**
*Thesis Topic:* Regulation and Innovation in the Oil Industry  
*Presentation:* CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium  
*Professional Activity:* Research Assistant for the Mercatus Center  
*Academic Achievements:* Applying to the Ph.D. program in economics at George Mason

**Dana Shaat**
*Thesis Topic:* General & Vocational Education’s Impact in the Labor Market  
*Presentation:* CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium  
*Professional Activity:* Research Assistant for the American Enterprise Institute  
*Academic Achievement:* Currently enrolled Ph.D. program in economics at the University of Illinois

**Akira Laffey**
*Thesis Topic:* Price Elasticity of Anti-Psychotic Drugs  
*Presentation:* CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium  
*Professional Activity:* Research Intern for Fannie Mae. Working currently for a tech start-up company.

**2015 Cohort**

**Anjana Radhakrishnan**
*Thesis Topic:* Education and Labor Market Outcomes for Women in Kerala, India  
*Academic Achievement:* Currently on a Fulbright Scholarship in India to continue her research. Winner of the top research paper at the 2015 CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium.

**Amy Handlan**
*Thesis Topic:* Financial Crises and Democratization  
*Presentations:* Eastern Economic Association and the OSCAR Research Symposium  
*Academic Achievement:* Currently enrolled Ph.D. program in economics at the University of Minnesota, received an honorable mention for a NSF Graduate Fellowship based on her undergraduate thesis research.

**Niko Paulson**
*Presentation:* CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium  
*Professional Activity:* Graduate school in statistics at Georgetown University

**Jennifer Storm**
*Thesis Topic:* Social Entrepreneurship Structure Across High- and Low-Income Countries  
*Presentation:* CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium  
*Professional Activity:* Deloitte consulting and non-profit consultant.
Jessica Carges  
*Thesis Topic:* The Impact of Charter Schools  
*Presentation:* CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium

Marcos Portillo  
*Thesis Topic:* Price Elasticity of Cocaine and Criminal Activity  
*Presentation:* CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium  
*Professional Activity:* Analyst position with the Department of Defense.  
*Academic Achievement:* Honorable mention for the 2015 CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium

2016 Cohort

Mariam Ghanem  
*Thesis Topic:* Foreign Direct Investment, Growth, and Economic Freedom: A Comparative Analysis of Turkey and Egypt  
*Presentation:* Invited to the Virginia Association for Economists spring conference

Matthew Anderson  
*Presentation:* Invited to the Virginia Association for Economists spring conference

Ian Campbell  
*Thesis Topic:* Do Welfare Programs Influence Immigration Patterns in the US?

Francisco Gracia  
*Thesis Topic:* Further Analysis on the Effectiveness of Renewable Portfolio Standards

Stepan Gordeev  
*Thesis Topic:* Estimating the Genuine Progress Indicator for Russia

Kenza Jabali  
*Thesis Topic:* Political and Economic Freedom’s Impact on Instances of Terrorism

Zachary Cady  

Maria  
March 16, 2016

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing on behalf of Jason Dunick who has been nominated for the OSCAR Mentoring Excellence Award. I have known Jason since he started at George Mason in 2012, and I am more than happy to support his nomination.

One of Jason’s main responsibilities when he came to Mason was to take on the role of Undergraduate Director for the economics program. As the Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Affairs for the college in which economics is housed, I have had opportunities to see him excel in this role. Importantly, there is every indication that he takes the work seriously. In other words, this is not something that he does on the side. This is not something that is secondary to his teaching or his research. He sees this as an integral part of his role at Mason and in his department. In this way, he has served his department and his college well, but the true beneficiaries have been the students who have had the opportunity to seek advice and mentoring from an accomplished researcher who is calm, level-headed, and supportive. Undoubtedly, the overall outlook for the students is improved by his consistent presence and solid academic advising. By engaging in conversation with Jason, the trajectory of the undergraduate careers of these students is greatly improved, especially as they are encouraged to consider internships and research.

It seems worth noting that it is somewhat unusual for a new hire to be placed in a role like this at the outset. It would be much more typical for an existing faculty member to take a position like this, as such a faculty member would be more familiar with the program, the faculty, and the students. The fact that Jason started his Mason career in this role speaks to his willingness to dig into the work and take on challenges. It also speaks to the confidence that the department had in his ability to do the work. From what I can tell, Jason has done extraordinarily well. I suspect his willing attitude is part of what allows him to be so successful in the work, especially in helping undergraduates engage in research opportunities. To assist and encourage undergraduates in this way is an uncertain task that does not guarantee success or reward. It is not something that all faculty members are willing to take on either. Are the students up to the work? Are the students going to see the work through to completion? Are the students going to engage in the material in appropriate and professional ways? And for those faculty members who are willing to wade in such uncertain territory, it is not an activity that always pans out. Moreover, just because a faculty member is a good researcher and/or a good teacher does not mean the faculty member will be a good mentor. Jason seems to be successful at all three.

I suspect part of what makes him successful is the positive outlook that he has for his students. He assumes they are capable, and it’s clear that they very often are and/or they rise to the occasion. The number of economics students submitting abstracts to the CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium has increased in recent years, and I am sure this has to do with Jason’s leadership and encouragement in the department. In fact, two of the seven awards given at the 2015 CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium went to economics students. There’s no doubt that this has to do with Jason’s work mentoring students through positive encouragement and constructive feedback. His work in the department is supported by an undergraduate honors program that had not been available to students.
before he created it. Prior to his arrival, undergraduate economics students rarely engaged in research. This activity was not a part of the department’s culture. Since his arrival, Jason has developed an honors option for the major, built on his experiences at other institutions and on similar honors programs here at Mason. This has moved undergraduate research into the forefront for capable, qualified students in the department. It’s clear that they are interested in the work and capable of doing it at a high level, too. Lucky for them, Jason is ready to work with them in exploring the possibilities of research and incorporating it into their undergraduate experience.

I have had the opportunity to interact with Jason in other settings as well. He participated in a book group that I co-facilitated. I participated in a book group that he co-facilitated. We have had the opportunity to talk during the CTFE’s annual conference. In addition, he has been a member of the committee in CHSS tasked with reviewing abstracts for the limited number of oral presentations for the annual symposium event. In all of these settings, Jason has been personable and has always brought something helpful to the conversation. Not only is he a mentor to the students in his program, but he is a mentor to his colleagues in ways that are both humble and generous. Perhaps this is one of the things that makes Jason most deserving of this award. He is a mentor to faculty, staff, and students. It is not one segment of the Mason population that benefits from his presence but many.

If there are any questions, please don’t hesitate to contact me for additional information. I hope you will seriously consider awarding the OSCAR Mentoring Excellence Award to Jason Dunick, as I am sure he must be one of the most deserving candidates.

Most sincerely,

Katie Clare, Assistant Dean
Humanities and Social Sciences
To whom it may concern:

I have had the pleasure of being the product of Professor Jason Dunick’s mentorship and it’s with great confidence that I support his nomination for a mentoring award. Professor Dunick mentored me through my honors thesis from beginning to end my last year at Mason. He was an excellent guide and teacher who was always accessible to talk to about ideas, my career planning, and thoughts on my ongoing project. Most importantly, it was the honors thesis workshop he led that greatly impacted not only my college experience and scholarship but my career as well. Due to Professor Dunick’s teaching style, his honors thesis course was more of a weekly gathering of scholars than a 3-credit course. His guidance fostered a refreshing marketplace of ideas. He facilitated discussion among our group of student researchers as we shared our weekly tribulations of our intellectual journey. The projects seemed daunting at first and, at times, insurmountable. But he was able to facilitate our progress by keeping us on the beaten path with his invaluable feedback, enthusiasm, and support. It wasn’t so much by his expert suggestions (which, again, were invaluable), but through his socratic dialogue that would force us to answer the hard questions we were completely oblivious to or perhaps sub-consciously avoiding.

One of the more daunting tasks for a student about to undertake the honors thesis is coming up with a topic. Understandably so, there are countless topics, ideas, and rich areas of research to explore. Its easy to succumb to paralysis by analysis, or attempt to solve the world’s problems with an all-encompassing research project—biting off more than we can chew. He greatly helped me narrow the scope of my project by asking targeted questions that reframed the problem for me, from “what should I do my thesis on” to “what do I want to get from this experience?” Better programming skills? Better understanding of existing literature? Professor Dunick taught me that research and study is a long term pursuit and this project is but a small piece of a greater conversation. By focusing on the smaller parts, it allowed me to maintain momentum and produce a work I’m proud of. As a result, I won an award at the University's Annual Research Symposium for having one of the best presentations (out of 100 participants). More importantly, I was able to secure a great job right after graduation. The thesis was a major part of my resumé and was THE topic of conversation in every job interview I had. I received multiple job offers as a result. Under his mentorship, my honors thesis set me apart from all other recent graduate applicants. It not only demonstrated my analytical abilities but I was also very confident in my abilities having undergone the rigors of independent research. I finally accepted a very generous offer from the Department of Defense.

Professor Dunick has many qualities that exemplify mentorship, but three stood out to me the most: knowledgeable, intellectually curious, and genuine. Despite the diversity of thesis topics, he was equally enthusiastic and curious for each one. He treats his students as fellow intellectuals in the world of scholarship and research. It has the effect of inspiring you to rise to that level of expectation and earn the respect he gives. He is genuinely committed to the success of his students—I’m a testament to that fact. I’m proud of Mason because of its culture of student scholarship. Professor Dunick’s pedagogy is the epitome of that culture. He is a force multiplier, a scholar who produces more scholars and I hope he will be recognized for that contribution with this award.

Yours truly,

[Signature]

Marcos P. Portillo
Operations Research Analyst
Department of Defense
marcosportillo@me.com
910-494-6391