

A CATALYST OF CHANGE

Materials PhD student Julia Zuo receives Dixon-Levy Service Award from UCSB's Graduate Student Association for her efforts to improve graduate student life

Described by her nominator as “a true champion for graduate student rights and diversity efforts,” **Julia Zuo**, a PhD student in the Materials Department at UC Santa Barbara, has received the Dixon-Levy Service Award from the Graduate Student Association (GSA), the elected representative government for graduate students at UC Santa Barbara. The prestigious award, established by the GSA in 1998, honors students who have unselfishly devoted themselves to improving graduate student life.

“I am incredibly grateful to receive this award,” said Zuo, who is advised by materials professor **Stephen Wilson**. “Receiving this award means that my efforts have been appreciated and it will contribute toward my motivation and goals for the future.”

Zuo has participated in a variety of outreach activities at UCSB through the Center for Science and Engineering Partnerships (CSEP), and Math, Engineering, Science and Achievement (MESA), including co-teaching a summer transition program for incoming first-generation college students. Last fall, she and **Caroline Reilly**, a fellow materials graduate student, formed the first Materials Student Association (MSA). The MSA proved instrumental in helping to plan the department’s first all-virtual visit weekend for admitted students and organizing an outreach seminar series for prospective students.

“Especially during the pandemic, we realized that there were very few ways to build community in our department, since we had no formal organization or communication as students,” said Zuo, who earned a bachelor’s degree in materials science and engineering from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2017. “I think as a result, we have had a lot of productive conversations between students and faculty about how we can all work together to improve equity in our department. All of these experiences have only improved my professional life, and I am very hopeful for future improvements.”

As part of the Wilson Group, Zuo studies materials that exhibit exotic forms of magnetism in order to leverage those properties in electronic devices, such as non-volatile, energy-efficient magnetic-memory devices for computers. Her work focuses on understanding the fundamental ties between how atoms arrange themselves and the exotic magnetic properties. Zuo says that there are many benefits to dedicating time outside of research, including improved organization and communication skills, as well as increased motivation now that students have opened communication within the department.

“I think every graduate student, including me, is affected by his or her environment and deserves a space to work without having to struggle in a non-inclusive environment,” said Zuo, whose previous honors include a prestigious Graduate Research Fellowship from the National Science Foundation. “Improving communication between graduate students, faculty, and staff

can only benefit everyone in the future since we have to work together to make inclusivity a norm.”

According to her advisor, Wilson, and the unnamed person who nominated Zuo for the award, Zuo has made things better for everyone by connecting the department.

“In the past year, Julia has become the catalyst for incredible change in our department,” said her nominator in a letter of recommendation submitted to the GSA. “Julia has drastically improved student life, helping materials students feel more connected even after the many challenges of 2020.”

“I can't think of anyone more deserving, and she has played a sustained leadership role among the graduate students in our department,” said Wilson, her graduate advisor. “She is always a leader that we can count in our research program as well, so she carries this call to service in all aspects of her graduate career. I'm thrilled to hear that this hard work is being recognized.”

The GSA will honor Zuo and the other outstanding graduate students during a virtual ceremony on June 1. The dual name of the Dixon-Levy Award acknowledges that service to graduate students at UCSB comes in many forms, not only through serving as an elected GSA officer, but also through the advocacy of graduate student interests in various ways.