Five questions for Laith Al-Shawaf[1]

Laith Al-Shawaf, Ph.D., is a professor and co-director of undergraduate education in the Department of Psychology at UCCS. He also is director of the Architecture of the Mind Lab.

An internationally recognized scholar whose research spans evolutionary science, emotion, cognition and personality, Al-Shawaf[2] is noted for his ability to integrate high-level research with innovative teaching practices.

Earlier this year, he was named to the newest cohort of President's Teaching Scholars[3]. The title honors excellence in and commitment to learning and teaching, as well as active, substantial contributions to scholarly work. President Todd Saliman solicits annual nominations of faculty across the four campuses for the designation, which is a lifetime appointment.

1. How did your journey in academia lead you to your current role at UCCS?

My path into academia started in a high school psychology class. I discovered that science could be used to investigate invisible, intangible aspects of the mind – things like emotions, thoughts and motivations – with the same rigor as any other scientific question. That realization hooked me. It sparked an excitement about studying the mind that has stayed with me ever since. More than any specific topic in psychology, it was that realization that drew me into the field.

I was – and still am – interested in many other disciplines alongside psychology, and that interest eventually led me to complete concentrations in philosophy and cognitive science as an undergraduate and later pursue specialized training in biology, anthropology and statistical modeling during graduate school. Each discipline offered a different way of thinking about mind and behavior, but I've always been interested in the questions they share: how minds work, how behavior emerges and how scientific explanations are built, tested and improved.

My academic journey took me from school and college in Lebanon to graduate school in the United States, a faculty position in Turkey, an interdisciplinary fellowship in Germany, another interdisciplinary fellowship during a research sabbatical in France and ultimately to my current position at UCCS. When it came time to look for my next position, I wasn't just looking for a job. I was looking for a place where research, teaching, mentorship and a healthy life outside of work could coexist. UCCS stood out because it seemed to genuinely value both teaching and research, encouraged intellectual independence and offered the freedom to pursue interesting questions wherever they led.

What's kept me at UCCS is that the reality matched the promise. I've had the opportunity to build a thriving research lab, create new courses, mentor outstanding students, engage in public science communication, collaborate across disciplines and countries, and put together an interdisciplinary handbook on emotion involving scholars from around the world. It's been an environment that has supported intellectual freedom, intellectual curiosity and a healthy balance between academic work and life outside the university. I'm very grateful for that.

2. You've been recognized for outstanding teaching, both in-person and online. How do you describe your approach to teaching in both settings? Which aspects are most different? Which are constant?

Thank you! The medium changes, but the underlying goal remains the same.

Whether I'm teaching in person or online, my goal isn't just to help students learn specific findings in psychology, but to help them understand how psychological knowledge is built, tested, challenged and improved. I want students to think like scientists: to understand how explanations work, where current theories succeed, where they fall short and how we can develop better explanations.

The biggest difference between in-person and online teaching is the interaction format. In-person teaching allows for spontaneous discussion and immediate feedback – you can see it in students' faces. Online teaching requires more deliberate course design and structure, with less room for spontaneity. But the core educational goals remain unchanged.

Some of my favorite moments in teaching happen when students stop asking whether a theory is correct and start asking why it succeeds, where it fails and how it might be improved. At that point, students are no longer just learning psychology. They're beginning to participate in the process of scientific inquiry and discovery themselves. And that's very exciting.

3. You have written many science essays for general audiences and have appeared on several science podcasts. What are the keys to communicating complex concepts in a way that engages audiences who might not have specialized knowledge about a topic?

I think a key principle is to respect the audience's intelligence while remembering that expertise frequently comes with blind spots. Experts sometimes rely too heavily on jargon, assume background knowledge that others don't have, or focus on questions that only specialists care about.

One common mistake is assuming that a lack of specialized knowledge reflects a lack of ability. Most audiences are smart; they just haven't spent years immersed in your field. Good communication isn't about talking down to people – it's about recognizing what they might want to know and then meeting them where they are and giving them the tools to engage with complex ideas.

Good science communication often starts by identifying the core question and "motivating" it for the reader or listener. Why does this idea matter? What problem are you trying to solve? Why should people care? Once the question and its importance are clear, people are often eager to work through it with you.

I've also found that stories, examples and everyday experiences can be powerful teaching and writing tools. Many scientific ideas become easier to understand or remember when people can connect them to their own lives.

More broadly, I've come to think of teaching and public scholarship as closely related activities. In both cases, the goal isn't just to transmit information. It's to help people think more clearly, ask better questions and use scientific thinking to build a deeper and more accurate understanding of the world.

4. What does it mean to you to be named a President's Teaching Scholar at CU?

It's a tremendous honor, particularly because of what the award represents.

The President's Teaching Scholars Award recognizes faculty who have made meaningful contributions to teaching while remaining active scholars and researchers. That combination is especially important to me because I've never viewed research and teaching as separate activities. I see them as two sides of the same intellectual project.

My research, teaching, mentorship and public scholarship all grow out of the same underlying curiosity about how minds work and how our scientific understanding progresses, and the desire to share that knowledge with others. The questions I explore in research often find their way into the classroom, and conversations with students often influence how I think about scientific problems. The two enrich each other.

What makes this recognition especially meaningful is that it acknowledges the integration of those two activities. To me, the joy of teaching is not just about communicating existing knowledge. That's definitely important – but it's only the beginning, and usually not the part that has the biggest impact on students. The bigger and more exciting goal is to invite students into the process of discovery and help them understand how we use science to push the boundaries of human knowledge.

5. What's next for your teaching and research?

One of the best things about science is that there's always another interesting question to pursue. If you stay curious, you never run out of subject matter!

On the research side, I'm continuing to explore questions about emotions, human behavior and the evolutionary and cognitive processes that shape the mind. I'm particularly interested in working on interdisciplinary questions that

connect psychology with biology, philosophy and other disciplines that contribute to our understanding of the mind. That's the sort of thing we're working on in the Architecture of the Mind Lab, which I direct at UCCS.

On the teaching side, I'm excited to continue developing courses, mentoring students and creating opportunities for students to engage directly with scientific thinking. I'm particularly interested in creating interdisciplinary learning experiences that help students connect ideas across traditional academic boundaries. Having taught students in Lebanon, Turkey and the United States, and at very different stages of life – from gifted middle and high school students to graduate students and retired professionals in their 70s – I've been struck by how consistently curiosity and scientific thinking resonate across very different age groups and cultural contexts.

More broadly, connecting ideas across disciplines and audiences is an important part of my work. I'm excited to continue strengthening those connections – between psychology and neighboring disciplines, between research and teaching, and between scientific communities and the broader public. Becoming part of the President's Teaching Scholars community feels like a natural extension of that, and I'm genuinely excited about the collaborations and intellectual exchange it makes possible.
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Regents to consider resolution in solemn remembrance of Sept. 11[5]
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Update: The Board of Regents on Sept. 11, 2026, voted to approve the resolution.

The University of Colorado Board of Regents on Friday is expected to approve a resolution[7] in solemn remembrance of 9/11. Friday marks 25 years since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people in New York, Virginia and Pennsylvania.

Among those lost, the resolution notes, were 10 CU Boulder alumni and former students: Nina Patrice Bell, Chris Ciafardini, Scott Thomas Coleman, Brian Thomas Cummins, Leslie Whittington Falkenberg, Christopher Faughnan, Allison Horstmann Jones, Chandler "Chad" Keller, Joshua "Rosie" Rosenblum and Adam Shelby White, "whose lives of professional achievement, academic distinction, and personal promise were cut short in the World Trade Center and at the Pentagon."

"The University of Colorado has sustained their memory through lasting tributes, including the Chandler R. Keller Scholarship in aerospace engineering sciences, the Leslie Whittington Memorial Fellowships in economics, the service of faculty who assisted with victim identification in New York, academic research into the human and organizational dimensions of the disaster, and ongoing remembrances by alumni and the broader CU community," the resolution states.

"The passage of a quarter century has not diminished the duty of Americans to remember the victims, honor the heroes, support the survivors and first responders still suffering from related illnesses, and reaffirm the values of freedom, resilience, and national unity that the attacks sought to destroy."

The resolution concludes with the nine-member board stating:
"We pause to remember and honor the nearly three-thousand men, women, and children murdered on September 11, 2001, and all those who have since died from injuries and illnesses related to the attacks." "We express our deepest gratitude to the first responders, military service members, and ordinary citizens whose courage and sacrifice defined that day and the years that followed." "On this twenty-fifth anniversary we renew our commitment to support the families of the fallen, the survivors, and the responders still living with the physical and emotional consequences of that day." "We reaffirm the enduring strength of the American people and our resolve that the memory of September 11, 2001, shall never fade, and that the United States of America continues to be a shining city on a hill serving as a beacon of hope and optimism."
The board's formal vote on the resolution is tentatively scheduled for 8:50 a.m. Friday during the second day of the

regents' two-day meeting[8] at CU Anschutz.

Read the full resolution here[9].

CU Leads: In Innovation[10]

For 150 years, the University of Colorado has been a hub of discovery, innovation and progress – a place where bold ideas take shape, breakthroughs become real-world solutions and knowledge creates new possibilities for Colorado and the world.

CU's history is filled with discoveries and innovations that have transformed lives, launched industries and helped fuel Colorado's growth. It's the story of a university and a state growing, innovating and succeeding together.

And CU's discoveries go the distance. They move from labs and classrooms into hospitals, businesses and communities. They become new treatments and technologies, new companies and jobs, new art and new ways of seeing the world. They become new approaches to some of our most pressing challenges.

Ahead of CU Innovation Day[11] on Sept. 14 – an annual celebration of the amazing work happening across our campuses held in partnership with Colorado Startup Week[12] – we're highlighting four stories that show CU innovation in action and its impact in Colorado and beyond.
[13]

CU Anschutz | Colorado's Cell Therapy Frontier: How the Gates Institute Is Building the Future of Medicine[14]

Imagine a cancer treatment that doesn't rely on harsh chemotherapy or radiation but instead reprograms a patient's own immune cells to hunt down and destroy cancer.
[15]

CU Boulder | From Python Biology to Human Therapies: How Arkana Therapeutics Will Change Lives[16]

Leslie Leinwand has asked a simple question: What can extreme animals teach us about human disease?

CU Denver | Why Entrepreneurial Education Is Booming: Jenna Bono and CU Denver's One-of-a-Kind Program[17]

Across higher education, a quiet shift is underway. While enrollment in many traditional programs is declining, interest in entrepreneurial education is climbing.

UCCS | Building a Legacy: How UCCS Helped Bridget Guerrero Turn Purpose into Impact[18]

When Bridget Guerrero moved to Colorado Springs to work at UCCS, she arrived knowing almost no one, but with a clear mission.

Want to learn more about innovation at CU? Read this year's Innovation and Entrepreneurship Impact Report.[19]

'Like driving off a cliff at 2 mph': A water expert's take on what's coming for the Colorado River [20]

College of Business and College of Engineering and Applied Science launch Business and Engineering Career Hub [21]

Meet The Phoenix Center team who helps interpersonal violence survivors and their supporters [22]

Is poor sleep contributing to the country's weight issues? [23]

Federal update: Government funding patch, more [24]

From Sept. 4, this update from CU Federal Relations and Counsel includes information on Government Funding Patch, U.S. Space Academy, Duration of Status Lawsuit, and DOJ In-State Tuition Lawsuits.

Click here to read the post.[25]

For the latest communications and federal memos, please visit the CU System Federal Updates and Actions[26] page.

Safran wins American Ornithological Society Elliott Coues Award [27]

Kenney named Staff Employee of the Month [28]

Regent Emeritus Bosley recognized among 150 Most Influential Coloradans[29]
[30]

As Colorado celebrates the 150th anniversary of statehood, The Denver Post recently recognized BOLDERBoulder co-founders Steve Bosley and Frank Shorter among the state's 150 most influential and notable figures. The honor recognizes individuals whose achievements have helped shape Colorado's history, culture and identity. The list can be viewed here[31] (subscription required).

Bosley served 12 years (2005-2016) as a member of the CU Board of Regents, including two years as chair.

For more than four decades, Bosley and Shorter have helped define Colorado's running culture through the creation and growth of the BOLDERBoulder, an event that has become one of the world's premier road races and a longtime leader in innovation within the running industry. Founded in 1979, the race began with approximately 2,200 finishers and quickly became a Memorial Day tradition. This year, 53,826 people registered for the BOLDERBoulder, with 47,645 crossing the finish line inside CU Boulder's Folsom Field, where runners, joggers and walkers of all ages and

abilities are welcomed and celebrated in one of the sport's most unique finish-line experiences.

"To see what started as an idea become part of the fabric of this state has been incredibly rewarding," Bosley said. "To now be recognized alongside Frank as two of the people who have helped shape Colorado's history is an extraordinary honor, particularly as our state celebrates its 150th anniversary."

Read more at BOLDERBoulder.com[32].

How Much Is That Gene-Edited Dog in the Window?[33]

New Air Force ROTC detachment opens at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs[34]

What a Sundance-Tied Class Teaches Creative Students[35]

Links
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