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Davisson earns prestigious honor



The American Heart Association recently awarded Dr. Robin Davisson one of the most prestigious scientific prizes of her discipline: the 2012 Arthur C. Corcoran Memorial Award and Lecture. Presented since 1977, the international prize honors its namesake and is presented annually at the High Blood Pressure Research Scientific Sessions to a distinguished honoree from the field of hypertension.

“Dr. Davisson’s selection to deliver the Corcoran Award lecture recognizes her leadership in the field of hypertension research and her enormous impact on the careers of young scientists,” said Dr. Michael I. Kotlikoff, Austin O. Hooey Dean of Veterinary Medicine. “Robin has made superb contributions that have both changed conventional thinking about cardiovascular science and traditional strategies for treating cardiovascular disease. We are extraordinarily proud of Robin in receiving this prestigious recognition of her outstanding science.”

Professor Davisson’s research focuses on mechanisms of function, control, and signaling of the cardiovascular system as well as disorders of these mechanisms in the context of diseases such as hypertension, heart failure, and pre-eclampsia. Continually funded since 1998 by organizations such as the National Institutes of Health and the American Heart Association, her investigations employ the interdisciplinary approach of “functional genomics,” an endeavor at the interface of physiology and molecular biology. She has received numerous awards for her research throughout her training and faculty career. Each has been an honor, but this award, she says, holds special significance.

“Arthur Corcoran was one of the forefathers of hypertension research,” said Davisson, who is the Andrew Dickson White Professor of Molecular Physiology at Cornell and holds a joint appointment at Weill Cornell Medical College and the College of Veterinary Medicine. “He helped established the field and was an advocate for research funding and higher education. His activist spirit inspired me to take my lecture in a somewhat unusual direction.”

At the award ceremony in Washington, DC, surrounded by former students, postdoctoral associates, many of her mentors, and numerous long-term colleagues, Davisson shared highlights of her research program and also described the importance of a robust research ecosystem - a set of scientific research and educational elements - that she said is currently at risk, given a variety of political and economic issues.

“[A scientist’s] work is dependent not only on the knowledge and skills of an incredibly talented investigative team but, in a more fundamental sense, upon a robust research ecosystem that has led to the unprecedented opportunities for discovery that all of us enjoy – opportunities that will quickly fade if we don’t defend and maintain the ecosystem,” said Davisson, explaining that this ecosystem begins in K-12 and requires supportive families; motivated science and technology teachers; adequate facilities; research opportunities throughout undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral study that is guided by devoted and talented faculty; job security for productive faculty to support the academic freedom needed to test risky or controversial ideas and hypotheses; and access to competitive, peer-reviewed research support. “We must effectively and tirelessly defend the need for our elected officials to appropriate sufficient funds for our various federal research agencies and programs. Our argument must be convincing and must include first, the critical need for more knowledge of life processes for the sake of understanding, as well as for the translational potential of that knowledge.”

Davisson has been actively engaged in graduate student education and professional development since the start of her faculty career. At the University of Iowa, she developed and taught a course called Survival Skills for a Research Career, which focused on the full spectrum of communication, grant-writing, and other essential skills needed to establish a successful research laboratory in an academic setting. She also spearheaded the first Master in Teaching program at Iowa, designed to educate graduate students about teaching in higher education. She has continued these efforts at Cornell and has received several awards for mentoring undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral students in the areas of research, teaching, and career development.

“Dr. Davisson has distinguished herself at each stage of her career,” said Dr. Curt Sigmund, professor at the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine, noting that she has essentially won every possible award for someone at her career stage in hypertension research. “But perhaps Robin’s greatest gift to the hypertension and greater scientific community has been her mentorship of numerous trainees. Among them are 20 past or current postdoctoral fellows and graduate students who appear to be receiving as many accolades as Robin did at similar career stages, thereby amplifying her impact on science many fold.”

Davisson has a longstanding interest in fiber arts and is an avid runner, skier, and scuba diver. She enjoys reading, cooking, and spending time with her husband, David Skorton, and their two Newfoundland dogs Billie and Louie.

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