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Two UC Santa Barbara Professors Elected to National Academy of Sciences

UC Santa Barbara's Matthew Fisher, a professor of physics, and Napoleon Chagnon, an emeritus professor of anthropology, have been elected to the National Academy of Sciences (NAS).

Fisher and Chagnon are among 84 new members from the U.S., and 21 foreign associates from 15 countries, elected to the Academy today in recognition of their distinguished and continuing achievements in original research. The election of Fisher brings to 36 the number of active UCSB faculty members elected to the NAS.

"Our UC Santa Barbara community proudly congratulates Professors Fisher and Chagnon," said Chancellor Henry T. Yang. "Election by one's peers to this prestigious academy is not only a milestone achievement, but also a most meaningful recognition of years of hard work, pioneering research, and unique contributions to the field. We are delighted to see our distinguished colleagues honored in this way."

Election to the NAS is considered one of the highest honors that can be accorded a U.S. scientist or engineer. Those elected today bring the total number of active members to 2,152, and the number of foreign associates to 430. The new members will be inducted into the academy next April at the group's annual meeting in Washington, D.C.

"We are easily among the top 10 universities in the country for science, as measured by the number of members elected to the National Academy of Sciences in the last few years," said Michael Witherell, UCSB's vice chancellor for research. "The Physics Department is doing particularly well, with one new member elected in each of the last four years."

Fisher is a professor in the Department of Physics. His research focuses on quantum condensed matter theory, including exotic quantum behavior of electrons in solids, especially Mott insulators, quantum magnetism, topological order, and superconductivity.

"As I was awakening this morning, I received two congratulatory phone messages, one from Mike Witherell, our vice chancellor for research, and one from my father, both of whom are members of the NAS," Fisher said. "I am honored and, of course, delighted by this news.

"Theoretical quantum physics, especially concerning the collective quantum behavior of electrons in crystalline solids, has been my passion for many years, and this honor reflects the great strides that our field has made over the past few decades," he said. "The physics department and the broader physics community here at UCSB have provided a unique, supportive environment, where I have been surrounded by world-class colleagues, first-rate postdocs, and students. I am most grateful to them all.

"UCSB has been my physics mecca," Fisher added.

Fisher joined the UCSB faculty in 1993, taking a leave of absence in 2009 to teach at Caltech, and returning to UCSB in 2010. In 1995, he received the Alan T. Waterman Award from the National Science Foundation, and he was also the recipient of the National Academy of Sciences Award for Initiatives in Research in 1997.

Chagnon, who came to UCSB in 1984 and retired from teaching in 1999, now lives in Traverse City, Mich. Much of his 35 years of research was devoted to extensive studies of the Yanomamö Indians, a tribe located on the border of Venezuela and Brazil. In one of Chagnon's early books, "Yanomamö: The Fierce People," the author described a society permeated by violent warfare, which dominated all facets of life, including marriage, sex, and politics.

Chagnon's research has been a subject of controversy, since Patrick Tierney, a self-described "anthropological journalist," accused Chagnon and colleague James Neel of harming the Yanomamö in an article Tierney published in 2000. Tierney accused Chagnon and Neel of introducing a measles epidemic to the Yanomamö tribe. However, according to most of Chagnon's anthropology colleagues, the accusation was completely untrue. In fact, in an article published last year in the journal Human Nature, Alice Dreger, a Guggenheim Fellow and a professor of medical humanities and bioethics at Northwestern University, said of the charges: "The truth was quite the opposite."

"I am still stunned by the phone call I received this morning from my Anthropology colleagues who are in the National Academy of Sciences, who personally informed me of my election to the Academy," Chagnon said. "This is a great honor for any researcher, especially one whose work has provoked a great deal of controversy like mine has done since 1968 because of an article I published in the journal Science. In the end, my defense of the scientific method won. This defense is spelled out in my forthcoming book, ‘Noble Savages' (Simon & Schuster, January 2013).

"My election to the National Academy of Sciences is a kind of victory for those of us who regard science and its methods as the most certain route to understanding the world around us –– including and especially our own behavior," Chagnon added.

In February, Chagnon was appointed an adjunct research scientist at the University of Michigan, his alma mater, where he will be putting the results of his life's research efforts into an archive that will eventually be made available to academics at major research universities.

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Matthew Fisher

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collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.