UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

September 29, 2026
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John Bowers honored by UC Regents for a lifetime of innovation

For innovations with lasting impacts on society and for his influence on generations of inventors and entrepreneurs, UC Santa Barbara professor John Bowers, a pioneer in silicon photonics, received the Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award at the inaugural UC Regents Innovation Awards.

The awards program was established to celebrate UC inventors and entrepreneurs whose work is uplifting the human condition, and to further encourage the UC community of faculty and researchers to solve the world's most pressing challenges.

"Congratulations to Professor John Bowers on this well-deserved Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award from the UC Regents," UCSB Chancellor Dennis Assanis said. "Throughout his career, John has displayed eminence as a researcher, teacher, mentor, entrepreneur, humanitarian and visionary leader at UC Santa Barbara. His accomplishments are numerous and wide-ranging, including innovations in silicon photonics and energy efficiency that have quite literally transformed our society. He has frequently partnered with UC Santa Barbara students and graduates to launch cutting-edge companies based on their research on our campus. And in everything he does, John embodies the highest aims of our mission, and we are deeply grateful to call him one of our own."

The Fred Kavli Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Materials and Electrical & Computer Engineering, Bowers was the founding director, in 2008, of the university's Institute for Energy Efficiency (IEE), which he led for 17 years. His research on campus has produced advances in integrated lasers, photonic switching and optical communications, including pioneering work in heterogeneous integration. His innovations have also helped dramatically reduce the energy required to move vast amounts of data, addressing a fundamental challenge of an increasingly connected world.

"I've always wanted the research to have an impact, to move beyond the lab and become something people actually use," Bowers said. "It's been very satisfying to see how far silicon photonics has come and, at this point in my career, to help students and colleagues succeed and carry that work forward."

Products based on the technology Bowers and his team developed at UCSB went on to generate more than $1 billion in revenue. He has repeatedly brought technologies from his research into the commercial world, including through technology licensed to Intel. He also co-founded Terabit Technology, Calient Networks, Aurrion, Aerius Photonics, Nexus Photonics, Qudara and Quintessent, with several of those companies later acquired by major technology firms.

Bowers was involved in the original proposal for the American Institute for Manufacturing Integrated Photonics (AIM Photonics) and served as deputy CEO for nearly six years, leading its West Coast efforts to engage companies and universities.

At UCSB, Bowers began teaching entrepreneurship in 1992 and helped build the effort that grew into today's Department of Technology Management. He also co-founded Unite to Light, a nonprofit that has distributed nearly 300,000 solar lights over 15 years to people living without reliable access to electricity.

"I've always thought it was important to work on something that, if the vision is successful, can be successful and adopted," Bowers said. "I often ask students, 'Suppose you're completely successful at this — will anyone care?' It's important to look at impact and to work on problems that can make a real difference."

A member of the National Academy of Engineering and the National Academy of Inventors, Bowers also is a fellow of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, Optica and the American Physical Society.

Bowers was one of 23 people, across five categories, to be recognized in the 2026 UC Regents Innovation Awards. Winners were chosen from a group of nominees representing all 10 UC campuses and three affiliated national labs.

In addition to Bowers, UCSB had multiple nominees, including Tyler Susko, a teaching professor of mechanical engineering, in the Gamechanger Awards category; Kevin Plaxco, a distinguished professor of chemistry and biochemistry, in the Disruptive Research Awards category; and Elliot Hawkes and David Haggerty, of mechanical engineering, in the category Best Startup.

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