



PRESS RELEASE

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Levon Esters Receives Debra W. Stewart Award for Outstanding Leadership in Graduate Education

Washington, DC – Levon Esters, Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the J. Jeffrey and Ann Marie Fox Graduate School at Pennsylvania State University, received the Debra W. Stewart Award for Outstanding Leadership in Graduate Education during an award ceremony at the Council of Graduate Schools' (CGS) 65th Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C.

Created in 2016 by the CGS Board of Directors, this award recognizes outstanding leadership in graduate education, with a focus on leadership qualities exemplified by the Council's fifth president, Debra W. Stewart. Esters said he was touched by the honor and appreciated the significance of this award.

"Receiving the Debra W. Stewart Award is both humbling and deeply meaningful. It recognizes not only my work but also the dedication of those who share a belief in the transformative power of graduate education," Esters said. "In today's rapidly changing higher education landscape, strong leadership grounded in integrity, collaboration, empathy, and purpose is more important than ever to support the success and wellbeing of our students."

In the three years he's held his position at Penn State, Esters has secured the naming of its graduate school and its \$20 million endowment, elevating the school among its peers in the Big Ten Academic Alliance. He has also secured a multi-year \$45,000 subaward from CGS for an NSF project promoting access to STEM graduate education. Esters also initiated the Graduate Student Funding Task Force to assess financial support for graduate students and address the cost-of-living gap for students. He's also made himself accessible to graduate students in many face-to-face opportunities like monthly "Coffee Chats" that have cultivated a community, especially among international students.

Chevelle Newsome, President of CGS, expressed that Esters exemplifies the true spirit of the award with his dedicated approach to leadership.

"Levon Esters has made a definitive impression as a leader in the graduate education community. Every initiative he has been involved in, from the casual coffee chats with students to his advocacy

work on Capitol Hill, is centered on students and elevating graduate education,” Newsome said. “It’s leaders like him that will reimagine graduate education and leave a lasting impact.”

Mary Stromberger, Vice Provost and Dean for Graduate Education at The Ohio State University, CGS Board Member and award committee chair, said that Esters exemplifies the visionary, ethical, and inclusive leadership honored by the award.

“His tenure at Penn State’s J. Jeffrey and Ann Marie Fox Graduate School has been marked by transformative achievements, including securing a historic \$20 million endowment, pioneering strategic initiatives that advance diversity and equity, and fostering a vibrant graduate community through innovative programs and tireless advocacy,” Stromberger said. “Dean Esters’ unwavering commitment to evidence-based innovation, student success, and fiscal responsibility has set a new standard for graduate education leadership, making a lasting impact on students and faculty at Penn State, as well as the broader graduate community.”

The selection committee considers nominees with a strong reputation for ethics and integrity, a history of active participation in the graduate community, and a record of strategic vision and actions resulting in meaningful impacts. Areas of special consideration include evidence-based innovation, program development, diversity and inclusion, student learning and career outcomes, personnel management, policy advocacy in support of graduate education and research, and fiscal responsibility.

Nominees for the award must be a current senior graduate dean at a CGS member institution and cannot be an active member of the CGS Board of Directors. Nominations are made by member institutions and are reviewed by a selection committee of former graduate deans in the CGS community.

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About CGS

The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) is an organization of approximately 460 institutions of higher education in the United States and Canada engaged in graduate education, research, and the preparation of candidates for advanced degrees. The organization’s mission is to improve and advance graduate education, which it accomplishes through advocacy in the federal policy arena, research, and the development and dissemination of best practices.