

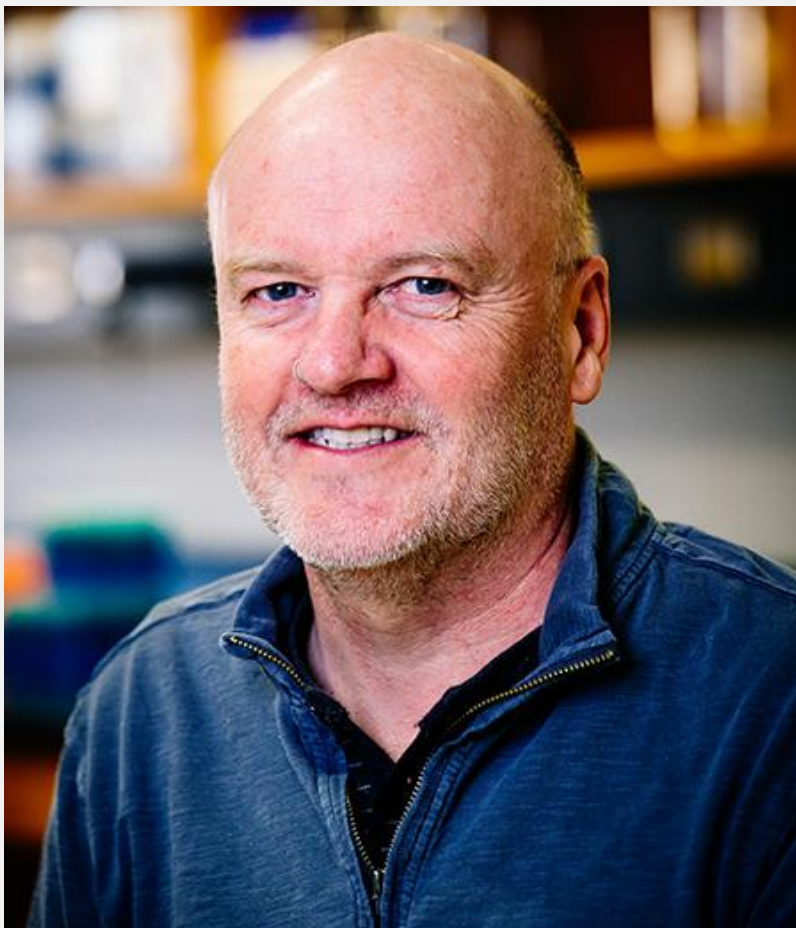
It's no surprise this renowned researcher has teaching on the brain

[Linda Gunter](#)

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Robin Lester, Ph.D., Lester will

receive the 2021 Ellen Gregg Ingalls/UAB National Alumni Society Award for Lifetime

Achievement in Teaching.

The human brain is a magical, mysterious thing. It sits at the center of our thoughts, emotions and physical response to the world around us. It perceives, detects, processes and reacts — often with no conscious effort on our part — to sights, smells, sounds, tastes and touches that bring us joy, sadness, fear, pain, satisfaction and knowledge.

Yet, despite having an entire branch of science devoted to its study, researchers still have much to learn about how the brain is structured, the ways in which it develops, how it operates flawlessly or malfunctions without warning — and even how it can be changed.

It was a desire to learn more about the latter — the plasticity of the brain and its ability to be altered — that drew Robin Lester, Ph.D., to the field and ultimately to UAB where he spent 17 of the past 25 years as an NIH R01-funded principal investigator. Here he developed a national reputation for research into the effects of addiction, but it may be his commitment to education that is his most enduring legacy.

For decades now, Lester also educated professional students in the schools of Medicine, Dentistry and Optometry — to great acclaim from his students — and he recently extended his reach to undergraduates.

"Few faculty demonstrate the intellectual agility or eagerness to challenge themselves to adapt teaching across so many levels."

Admittedly, when he joined UAB as an associate scientist in the Neurobiology Research Center in 1995, teaching was "not at the forefront" of his aspirations. But he discovered he enjoyed the learning that came with teaching. He also discovered it was not so dissimilar to research.

"In teaching, you have you keep things fresh. Just like bench science. You have to keep up to date with the material and the teaching methods," said Lester, now a professor of neurobiology.

"You have to approach learning from the student's perspective — what they find interesting — and build on that."

Craig Powell, M.D., Ph.D., chair of the Department of Neurobiology, weighs in with effusive praise for Lester's ability to do just that. "His presentation style and engaging course designs are unparalleled," Powell said. "He draws from every available mode of instruction with the possible exception of interpretive dance. Few faculty demonstrate

the intellectual agility or eagerness to challenge themselves to adapt teaching across so many levels.”

These are a few of the reasons Lester will receive the 2021 Ellen Gregg Ingalls/UAB National Alumni Society Award for Lifetime Achievement in Teaching. The award is presented annually to a full-time UAB faculty member who, throughout their 20-plus year career at UAB, demonstrates an outstanding commitment to teaching. Lester will be formally recognized during the annual Faculty Convocation in November.

A long way to get here

UAB long has been an international melting pot for students and faculty, and Lester, a British citizen with permanent U.S. residency, adds his own flavor to the mix. He hails from Liverpool, England, a city famous as the birthplace of the Beatles and for its football (the other kind); it’s a port city about a two-hour drive from Birmingham (the U.K. one). As a student, Lester attended the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom, where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree, with honors, in 1984 and his doctoral degree in 1988.

Then, he said, he became part of the “brain drain of the 1980s,” a period in which increasing numbers of students, postdocs and other professionals left their native countries seeking better pay, better resources and otherwise unavailable opportunities that could be found in America.

For Lester the elusive opportunity was a position in a lab pursuing research in synaptic plasticity and addictions. At the time, “the exact type of research and the technologies needed to conduct it were only available in a few places,” Lester said.

That search took him to Portland, where he completed his postdoctoral training at Oregon Health & Science University’s Vollum Institute in 1991. His first academic appointment followed at Baylor College of Medicine, in Houston, Texas, from 1992 to 1995.

Rising to the top

Lester joined UAB as an associate scientist in the Neurobiology Research Center in 1995. From there he rose through the ranks to assistant and associate professor, and he was nominated for Argus awards by students in the School of Medicine for best course, best lecturer and best organ module in neurosciences and received the 2010 President's Award for Excellence in Teaching for the Department of Joint Health Sciences. He became a full professor in 2011, and the accolades from students continued to accumulate.

Specifically, he has taught in the UAB School of Medicine Neuroscience Module since 1996, and he has been the course director for most of these years. He also directed the combined neuroscience course for the schools of Dentistry and Optometry from 2006 to 2012 and continues to teach in this course.

During this time, Lester said he came to realize that "teaching is a part of science that is as important as research." In this ever-expanding field, he tries to present digestible information across a range of topics using various presentation forms and engage students to use their knowledge in innovative ways. "Sometimes less is more," he said. "You can overwhelm students if you present too much."

"UAB has given me a great deal of freedom to be creative. That is satisfying. And fun."

More recently, Lester has designed, directed and instructed four courses for the university's highly successful [undergraduate neuroscience program](#), including 100 Things to Know About the Brain. "That course grew out of my fascination with TED talks and podcasts," he said. In it, he introduces students to concepts not generally discussed in neuroscience studies,

such as mind-reading, consciousness, dreaming and the perception of time.

His newest course for UAB Honors College students, Strange Brains: How Myths and Legends Shaped the History of Neuroscience, explores the early understanding of the brain by ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans and moves from the myths to modern science.

Gauging success in the classroom is a little harder than it is for research, which relies on more objective metrics such as the number of grants and publications. “Teachers rely on evaluations and feedback from students — anything that tells you that you had an impact on their educational experience,” he said.

“One of the things that gets lost in any job is how much overall satisfaction one gets from it,” Lester said. “This type of position gives me a lot of freedom. UAB has given me a great deal of freedom to be creative. That is satisfying. And fun.”

Lester says he is looking forward and expects to teach a few more years. “I still have a course I’m developing, and I expect I’ll teach as long as I’m evolving,” he said.