



May 20, 2019

Dear members of the Dana Foundation Science Educator Award selection committee,

I am very pleased to present this letter in support of Dr. Cristian Zaelzer's nomination for the Science Educator Award supported by the Dana Foundation. In my time as a senior administrator in both the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Concordia University's Faculty of Fine Arts, no one has come close to exhibiting the same exuberance, inclusiveness, knowledge, and innovative approach to the public understanding of science as Dr. Zaelzer. In 2012 I helped to launch the Art, Science, Culture initiative connecting researchers at the University of Chicago with artists at the School of the Art Institute and, for me, this became the gold standard among platforms for exchange, collaboration, and communication amongst the science, art, and humanities disciplines. But then, back in Montreal in 2016, I met Christian and everything changed! He has completely altered the way our creative practitioners approach neuroscience and he has forever altered the way his neuroscientists think about arts and culture. Dr. Zaelzer's intervention in the Montreal scientific community has had profound ripple effects not just in our two universities of McGill and Concordia, but across numerous communities in institutions and organizations across the city.

As the Dean of Concordia University's Faculty of Fine Arts, I am committed to establishing significant collaborations with various partners inside and outside Montreal, so we were delighted when Dr. Keith Murai and Dr. Zaelzer approached us with a novel and thoughtful project idea that became *Convergence, Perceptions of Neuroscience*. What began as a conversation is now going into its third year as a complex platform of exchanges that include a full-year academic course across two universities, a seminar and public lecture series, website and blog updates, conference presentations, and full-scale exhibitions complete with printed and digital catalogues. The Science Educator Award rewards individuals engaged in active outreach activities. Of the list found on your website, I can confirm that, alongside his collaborators, Dr. Zaelzer carries out not just one or two of the stated activities, but all of them! *Convergence: Perceptions of Neuroscience* creates opportunities for the professional development of researchers, artists, and teachers; it builds capacity for student research mentorships across entirely disparate fields; it has developed educational resources through catalogues, lectures, websites, and public events; it routinely disseminates through a variety of media formats including blogs, videos, movies, and audio recordings; and the platform has produced exceptional exhibitions for a public audience that are at once beautiful, engaging, and highly informative.

One of the most impressive features of Dr. Zaelzer's vision is his absolute belief in meaningful cross-disciplinary exchange. At every step, he has scaffolded experiences for the students at both McGill and Concordia and worked to form an extended program of exposure, discussion, debate, and social exchange. Moreover, he extended the work of *Convergence* beyond the two Anglophone universities in Montreal in order to establish links with other institutions that would benefit from exposure to the initiative. Thanks to his outreach, the Faculty of Fine Arts became part of a network that included the Research Institute of the McGill University Health Centre (RI-MUHC), the Integrative Program in Neuroscience of McGill University, the Canadian Association for Neuroscience, the Montreal General Hospital Foundation, and the Visual Voice gallery.

The collaborative character of Dr. Zaelzer's ideas permeated every aspect of the project, especially this year as he worked alongside Concordia doctoral student, Bettina Forget, to construct and deliver *Convergence*. He has always envisioned the initiative as a platform for knowledge dissemination that is transverse and equitable. His approach continually stresses the importance of sharing—and not just delivering information—across disciplinary boundaries. He has stimulated and emphasized not simply the acquisition of basic neuroscience principles by our arts students, but has also reciprocally encouraged the scientists to commit to deeply understanding aspects of the creative mind. The respect that this information/interpretation “loop” generated, and that Dr. Zaelzer himself demonstrated in every one of his personal interactions, has created an ideal climate for our students to learn from neuroscience trainees, as well from each other. Our common purpose has been, through an extensive partnership, to bridge the arts and the neurosciences in order to generate conversation, to discover similarities, and to respect differences.

Dr. Zaelzer's ideas are not only exciting, but contagious. Together with colleagues, the academic course he has built around the *Convergence* platform set the formal frame for some of our most talented and ambitious students to participate in the larger project. In its very first year alone, the class received extensive interest (85 students) with 20 selected individuals being chosen to take part. Those 20 students were then paired with 16 neuroscience trainees in the Brain Repair and Integrative Neuroimaging (BRaIN) labs. Dr. Zaelzer participated actively throughout the entire process not only as a mentor, but also as a neuroscience advisor. In its second year running, the course is yet again thriving and Concordia has brought Dr. Zaelzer on officially as a Visiting Scholar in the Department of Design and Computation Arts. He also created and maintains the exceptionally dynamic *Convergence* website (www.convergenceinitiative.org) and produces the beautiful graphic materials that introduce conferences and activities to the community.

Dr. Zaelzer's work has been presented in conferences in Canada and the USA (NeuGeneration 2017, the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Association for Neuroscience (CAN), the Society for Neuroscience (SfN), the National Art Education Association (NAEA). Additionally, discussions and commentary about the initiative have been broadcast on CBC Radio Canada, Le Devoir, McGill Magazine, Concordia's The Link, NOW (Concordia newsletter), Montreal General Hospital Foundation website, and the Research Institute of the McGill University Health Centre website news. Significantly—and miraculously with limited resources—Dr. Zaelzer has designed and produced two beautiful catalogues documenting the collaborative work that our teams completed during the courses in 2017 and 2018-2019.

Convergence, Perceptions in Neuroscience connects the lab to the studio to the gallery. It allows individuals to share and contest new knowledge across the arts and sciences and to debate fundamental questions about the nature of our human condition. Ours has been an organically rich, vibrant university experience for all students, enhanced through cross-cultural experiential learning opportunities in the field: artists have developed a practice that identifies with or engages science, while scientists and neuroscientists have developed creative thinking and alternative communications skills. In the Faculty of Fine Arts, we experiment freely and frequently with pedagogy and I am grateful for the innumerable outcomes and realisations that the *Convergence* initiative has generated for our students, faculty and partners alike.

I cannot think of a more suitable person than Dr. Zaelzer for this award. I remember receiving his first communication expressing interest in forming a partnership with the Faculty of Fine Arts and am astounded at how much we have accomplished in three years. With the continuous energy that he has demonstrated and his genuine effort in continuing to grow the *Convergence* initiative, I am truly excited to see where this project will go next! Dr. Zaelzer is already full of ideas to make *Convergence* even more accessible to the public and we are pleased to continue to work with him on this exceptional endeavour.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebecca Duclos". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent initial 'R'.

Rebecca Duclos
Dean, Faculty of Fine Arts