CIRES Outstanding Performance Award (OPA)

← Return to Committee View

General Information

Nomination ID:231 - Submitted: 02-05-2024

David Zakavec

david.zakavec@colorado.edu

Nominated for Administrative Service Award

Nominator Information

Taylor Devlin

taylor.devlin@colorado.edu

Nomination Statement

This Outstanding Performance Award (OPA) nomination is for David Zakavec of CIRES IT. Dave provides outstanding customer service to CIRES employees. Every day, he helps researchers at NOAA and CU overcome technical difficulties and focus on their research. He has saved scientists hundreds of hours by efficiently fixing computer problems. In the event a problem cannot be quickly fixed, he creatively finds alternative solutions. He has saved critical scientific data that was not backed up and the loss of which would have been catastrophic. When CIRES employees moved to remote work because of the pandemic, he made this transition a smooth one. His eight years at CIRES have led to support requests getting much more quickly resolved--and have prevented many such requests in the first place. It is no accident that CIRES researchers are relatively free from the IT problems that plague other organizations. [1] CIRES IT provides exceptional customer service, and a big reason for this is Dave Zakavec.

Dave's attitude is always calm and helpful. He never makes anyone feel stupid for asking questions, and he always goes out of his way to find the best solution. This responsiveness sometimes makes more work for him. For example, if CU's Office of Information Technology (OIT) implements a new requirement or suffers a data breach, CIRES employees sometimes complain to Dave even though the issue is a CU-wide one. It would be quicker and entirely appropriate for Dave to direct these employees to the OIT help desk. This is what many in the IT industry would do; IT departments often shorten their own resolution times by elevating tickets to another department or referring the customer to vendor support. Dave almost never does this. Unless it's impossible, Dave resolves tickets himself. He provides a friendly, personal point of contact for everyone in CIRES.

Dave also excels in providing auto-visual support for conferences, workshops and events. He has therefore

considerably broadened the impact of CIRES research on the wider community.

Despite his skills, Dave typically deflects praise and does not call attention to himself. He is an outstanding IT support specialist, as the following section will demonstrate. He has contributed as much to CIRES as anyone in the organization. Being honored with an OPA Award would be a fitting recognition of Dave's service.

References
1. Eight IT Service Management Metrics that Matter Most. https://techbeacon.com/enterprise-it/8-it-service-management-metrics-matter-most, accessed Feb. 5, 2024. This article notes that cost to the first-point-of-contact group can be dramatically lowered by passing on requests to more expensive support resources. This may give the appearance of efficiency but in fact increases the total cost.

Criteria

Criteria 1: Considerable improvements to operational, technical, or business processes such as lab maintenance and development that aid in research, teaching, or outreach at CIRES.

Dave joined CIRES IT in 2016. Together with the recently appointed CIRES IT Director, Nate Campbell, he implemented a process for quickly responding to customer support requests. Previously, tickets had often remained open for months. Dave made it a point to respond to customers personally within a few minutes of receiving their request. Eight years later, he still does this. CIRES has grown larger, and the move to hybrid work has resulted in many more tickets--Zoom issues, unstable VPN connections, and so on. But Dave still acknowledges support requests personally almost as soon as they come in. His median first response time is two minutes. For comparison, the IT industry average is over seven hours.[2] His quickness sets the standard for the CIRES IT department as a whole, which averages under ten minutes for the first response. Dave's technical expertise is both broad and deep. He is equally adept at handling hardware failures, website updates, and equipment purchases. When OIT had a data breach, Dave was the one ensuring that CIRES IT's forty-plus secondary accounts had their passwords updated within hours.

His commitment to customer service and his IT expertise are evident in the numbers. He resolved 1,500 tickets in the last year, handling almost half of the requests that the nine-member IT department receives (see supplemental materials). Since the beginning of his time at CIRES, Dave has closed eleven thousand IT tickets. His support promotes work across all CIRES divisions: NOAA, the National Snow and Ice Data Center, CIRES Education and Outreach, and administrative groups like CIRES Finance, Communications, and HR teams. Clearly, Dave's reach is broad. Moreover, some of these tickets are quite complex. On multiple occasions, for example, he has rescued scientific data from when older instrument computers have failed. Dr. Veronica Vaida, a Professor of Chemistry and CIRES Fellow, noted that Dave rescued her research group from a situation like this when literally no one else at CU was able to help. The quality and efficiency with which Dave approached and solved the problem saved an important research project. Dr. Vaida stated, "Dave Zakavec is an exceptional partner for my group and me in teaching and research."

References-Average customer support metrics from 1000 companies, https://www.jitbit.com/news/2266-average-customer-support-metrics-from-1000-companies/, Nov. 15, 2023.

Criteria 2: Development or improvement of a service that increases the effectiveness, efficiency, or quality of CIRES work and operations like assistance with grants, travel reimbursements, building and equipment maintenance, purchasing, or non-scientific software development.

One of Dave's first innovations when he joined CIRES in 2016 was the loaner laptop program. Before Dave created this program, CIRES researchers faced a big loss in productivity if their laptops were sent in for repair. It was inevitable that problems like faulty keyboards or failed hard drives would arise, problems that could not be fixed in house. But sending a computer in for repair was sometimes barely worth the lost downtime. If the user happened to have a personal computer available, they could transfer their software and data to that computer themselves. If not, they were out of luck, sometimes for several weeks.

The loaner laptop program changed all this. Dave started the program with five laptops. Scientists could borrow these laptops when their own went in for repair, and Dave helped sync the user's software and data to the loaner. (For Macs, the syncing was relatively easy to accomplish with TimeMachine, but PCs required a more manual process.) When the user's original computer was returned, Dave then synced the software and data from the loaner back to the original laptop. This process meant almost no downtime from repairs. The loaner laptop program has proven extremely popular, and CIRES IT now supplies up to 20 loaner laptops at any given time. In addition to providing the loaners, Dave facilitates the rest of the repair experience. He keeps excellent records of which machines are under warranty. It is usually he, rather than the customer, who contacts the manufacturer to inquire about technical issues and repair turnaround times. This yields big efficiencies of scale. Dave knows exactly which numbers to call and what likely causes of issues may be. Dave even helps with transport. During the height of the pandemic, Dave drove to employee residences two to three times a week to pick up or deliver computer equipment. This level of service is virtually unheard of. Because of all his efforts, he has saved CIRES researchers from many frustrating hours getting their computers fixed or replaced. They can spend that time on science instead. Probably no one at CIRES has done more to help increase efficiency for research scientists than Dave.

Dr. Veronica Vaida, who was mentioned earlier, recently benefited from Dave's help and the loaner laptop program. Dr. Vaida is a prominent scientist who belongs to both the National Academy of Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. While she was teaching a Physical Chemistry course, her computer began having intermittent problems. Dr. Vaida reported, "[Dave] worked with me at some lengths to identify a process that would allow me to continue teaching and research while the computer is being fixed." She called this assistance "invaluable" in allowing her to continue her job.

Criteria 3: Providing initiatives to advance Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), Human Resources programs, or other administrative divisions that support effective and invaluable work and operations at CIRES.

Dave's audio-visual (A/V) tech support is essential for promoting the excellent research happening at CIRES. He supports large events such as Rendezvous and on-campus conferences, and he also serves as an advisor to CIRES employees running events themselves. Dave is able to enter any stressful situation and bring a calm to the room while pragmatically correcting any issue. From securing a loose cable to rebooting an entire audio system, Dave approaches each problem with equanimity and always finds a solution. He gives all his customers this level of service. Whether the event includes the President of University or just a group of people having a hybrid meeting, he will prepare and make sure each event goes smoothly. He has an incredible depth of knowledge with hybrid events and the equipment necessary to support them. He is also able to learn new systems quickly and can adjust rapidly to the ever-changing hybrid landscape. Dave has been critical to the reintegration of the CIRES administrative and research staff on the CU campus after COVID, making sure all of our meeting spaces were up to the task of providing seamless hybrid meetings. These skills have also promoted the visibility of CIRES research to the wider community. As CIRES's Director

of Education and Outreach, Anne Gold, summarizes:

"Dave has provided outstanding support for various outreach events and activities. He has made live streaming and webinars possible and has been a terrific and reliable advocate. Dave is always ready to help with tech support. It feels like he always goes above and beyond in his contributions, is thoughtful, friendly and reliable, and for live events brings the calm into the room (virtual or in-person) that is needed for everyone to thrive. It is a tremendous pleasure to work with Dave and I am always excited when he picks up an IT ticket because I know that he will provide excellent support, be willing to brainstorm creative approaches to challenges and be there to support us when we need him. When I think of an outstanding example of service orientation, Dave is an excellent example. He is a tremendous asset to CIRES and well-deserving of the service award."

Supporting Documentation

- David_Zakavec_supportingdocs_02_05_24_427.pdf

⬇ Download All Documents as a ZIP File

Supporting Statements

Nathan Campbell

nathan.campbell@colorado.edu

It is hard to put into words how much I support David Zakavec for this years Outstanding Performance award.
Dave is the embodiment of the word "outstanding". If I were to go into detail about each time that Dave has gone above and beyond, this statement of support would be multiple chapters. Dave has implemented a business process for CIRES IT that allows CIRES him to provide service that not only exceeds our users expectations, but far surpasses the industry standard. Dave is able to respond to issues generally within minutes of the request and most requests are handled and completed same day. The Office of Information Technology (OIT) on campus generally will not respond in under 1-3 days. He not only handles issues quickly, he also also performs them with a high level of perfection.
Not only does Dave help support IT on campus, he often times will also cover for AV support and can help provide code development support to our application developers. His depth of knowledge is jaw-dropping and there is not issue he is not willing investigate and figure out an excellent solution.
Dave's expertise allows our researchers in all facets of our institute to perform their work without having to worry about their computers getting in their way. From providing the Chu group with backup solutions from Antarctica to restoring computer that have been soaked in water from frozen pipes, Dave always goes the extra mile to do everything it takes to keep the systems running smoothly.

Linda Pendergrass

linda.pendergrass@Colorado.EDU

This is an enthusiastic letter of support for David Zakavec and his nomination for an Outstanding Performance Award for Rendezvous 2024. I work directly with Dave on major CIRES events, and he provides AV and hybrid support for these events. There is a lot that goes into successful CIRES events and people do not realize all the steps that need to be taken for our CIRES events to run smoothly. Every event is unique which requires figuring out what is required for AV and now it seems almost all events have a hybrid component attached to them whether it is recording the event or live streaming. Dave always has a 'can do' attitude when prepping for these events, will research the technology and carries through with all the needed support. Many times, this is a full-scale event with multiple cameras, switchers, multiple laptops, screens, etc. just to name a few requiring complicated set-ups days before our events and tearing down afterwards. There are so many things that can go wrong in an instant with events however CIRES participants do not even notice as Dave takes care of them efficiently, calmly and acts as if everything is going perfectly. Something that is required for successful events and an outstanding feature that Dave brings to the team. I not only work with Dave on events but am also on the same Operations team and watch as he manages the CIRES Trouble ticketing system again with calmness and delivering excellent customer service to our CIRES Scientists and Researchers. Dave does so many behind the scenes action items that like events, no one sees, but keeps CIRES running smoothly and confidently forward. He is always on the lookout for improving our systems, making them more efficient and keeping up with the latest technology for events. We were all a bit thrown in to the hybrid world with COVID and Dave has helped us to be successful in this new world. There is so much to Dave that is hard to summarize in a letter of support but if you took the time to get to know Dave, you would see why he would deserve this award. He deserves the recognition and kudos for doing not just his job and what is required but going above and beyond for CIRES every day, whether it is for events or to just keep us all doing our jobs on a daily basis. I would be happy to answer any questions the committee might have or to give you further information. Kudos to Dave and may he be recognized for his amazing contributions to CIRES!

Veronica Vaida

Vaida@colorado.edu

University of Colorado at Boulder
Veronica Vaida
Professor of Chemistry
CIRES fellow
(303) 492-8605
Vaida @Colorado.Edu
FAX: 303 492 5894
Department of Chemistry

Campus Box 215
Boulder, Colorado 80309-0215
U.S.A.

OPA Service award committee
University of Colorado, Boulder

2-11-2024

Dear Selection Committee,

I am writing in support of the nomination of David Zakavec for an OPA service award. I am a professor of chemistry and fellow of CIRES (see enclosed short bio). My teaching (graduate and undergraduate) and research have followed an interdisciplinary path at the interface of physical chemistry and atmospheric science, focusing on light-initiated reactions of molecules and aerosols of interest in planetary atmospheres including the contemporary and prebiotic Earth. In the years I have worked with Dave, he has been exceptional in his service of teaching and research as I will outline bellow. Dave is knowlegible, identifies and solves even difficult to diagnose problems and has provided exceptional service to me and my research group. Of all the people I have worked with in the last few years, Dave is the most competitive candidate I know for the OPA award.

I would like to mention recent instances where Dave diagnosed a difficult to track down problem and suggested creative and helpful solutions. The first example involves the computer which I use for teaching physical chemistry in addition to analyzing research results and overseeing the efforts of my research group. My computer was malfunctioning in several subtle ways that were making my work difficult and unreliable. Dave diagnosed the problems and suggested that the computer has to be sent for repair. He then worked with me at some lengths to identify a process that would allow me to continue teaching and research while the computer is being fixed. He found a loaner onto which my information can be copied and we are in the process of implementing his solution. His help in this regard, is invaluable to allow teaching (I currently teach a junior level physical chemistry course) and research to continue and upgrade the computer for the short and long term.

My research group uses computers to control experiments, collect and analyze data. A couple of weeks ago, my graduate student informed me that the computer driving the main experiment on which her PhD thesis is based, started working intermittently and relatively soon after stopped working. This is a specialized computer for a home built experiment needed for the NSF supported research on multiphase organic chemistry of environmental systems. The student's PhD seemed in jeopardy. While unable to identify where we could get help, the student contacted CIRES IT. The next day, Dave came to our lab, identified a problem with the hard drive, was able to save all the information on the old computer's hard drive, replace it and return the computer seamlessly to perfect working order. My research group is extremely grateful for the help. I wanted to mention that we could not have received help with this problem anywhere at CU. That alone is invaluable but the quality and efficiency with which Dave approached and solved the problem saved an important research project on fundamental chemistry in planetary environments including the contemporary and ancient Earth's atmosphere.

Last but not least, a flood in February 2023 dumped dirty water on a sensitive experiment flooding the spectrometer which had to be replaced as well as the computer driving the experiment. Dave immediately came, examined the situation, and within a few days was able to get a new computer and get it working again. This incident saved a state of the art experiment and the PhD thesis of now Dr. Deal who was able to finish and defend her PhD in April 2023. This would not have happened without Dave's expert help.

Dave Zakavec is an exceptional partner for my group and me in teaching and research. His work and service promote the research excellence at CIRES and the teaching and research mission of the University. I support his nomination for the OPA service award with great enthusiasm.

Sincerely,

Veronica Vaida
Professor of Chemistry

Veronica Vaida, received her B.Sc. degree (1973) in chemistry at Brown University and completed her Ph.D. (1977) degree at Yale. In 1977 Dr. Vaida went to Harvard University, as a Xerox post-doctoral fellow, then as an assistant and associate professor in chemistry. In 1984 Prof. Vaida moved to the University of Colorado, Boulder where she is currently a Professor of Chemistry and a fellow of CIRES (Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences). Her teaching and research have followed an interdisciplinary path at the interface of physical chemistry and atmospheric science. At the University of Colorado, she focused on light-initiated reactions of molecules, radicals, water complexes and aerosols of interest in planetary atmospheres including the contemporary and prebiotic Earth. Veronica Vaida has been a fellow of the Sloan Foundation (1980), a Camille and Henry Dreyfus Teacher Scholar (1984), Erskine Fellow (University of Canterbury, New Zealand 1994), a fellow of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard (2004-2006), was elected fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and the American Physical Society (APS). She received the American Chemical Society (ACS) Wilson award in spectroscopy in 2011 and the ACS Langmuir Award in chemical physics in 2020. Veronica was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2012 and the National Academy of Sciences in 2020.

Current Research Interests:
The aim of the scholarly work in my group is to study sunlight driven chemical reactions of organic species in planetary atmospheres including the contemporary and ancient Earth. To this work, I bring tools of physical chemistry. The work explores the building of complexity with sun-light. Water plays a very important role in atmospheric radiative transfer and therefore in climate, my group investigates the role of water on chemistry in all phases and at interfaces.
I proposed that organic films form on atmospheric aerosols and impart on the system unique morphological, optical and chemical properties. My group has extended these ideas to propose atmospheric aerosols to be effective chemical reactors in the contemporary and prebiotic atmosphere. Life requires the nonenzymatic synthesis of biopolymers with the simultaneous development of membrane- enclosed protocells. Recent experimental studies in our group have found chemical processes at the water-air interface such as would be available on oceans, lakes and atmospheric aerosols, for the nonenzymatic synthesis of peptides from condensation of amino acids. Photochemical synthesis at the water surface under plausible prebiotic conditions yielded membrane components and the formation of vesicular compartments.

← Return to Committee View