

2015 State Teaching Award for Two Professors of KIT

Biology Meets Ethics: Interactive Courses Enhance Students' Active Interdisciplinary Discussion



Winners of the 2015 State Teaching Award: Peter Nick (left) and Mathias Gutmann (right) of KIT. (Photo: Manuel Balzerk/KIT)

Discussing and finding solutions across the borders of disciplines: This is what biologist Peter Nick and philosopher Mathias Gutmann ask their students to do in their interactive courses held at Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT). For their innovative concept that bridges the gap between technology, biology, and philosophy and between science and application in everyday life, the two scientists are granted the 2015 State Teaching Award. The award in the amount of EUR 50,000 is handed over to Peter Nick and Mathias Gutmann today by the Baden-Württemberg Minister of Science, Theresia Bauer, in Stuttgart.

“Today, attention focuses on those who want to promote young people’s enthusiasm for the knowledge of the world. The award winners show which outstanding models and beacon projects of education we have in our state. I congratulate them cordially,” Minister Theresia Bauer says on the occasion of the State Teaching Awards ceremony in Stuttgart.

**Monika Landgraf
Chief Press Officer**

Kaiserstraße 12
76131 Karlsruhe, Germany
Phone: +49 721 608-47414
Fax: +49 721 608-43658
E-mail: presse@kit.edu

**For further information,
please contact:**

Margarete Lehné
Press Officer
Phone: +49 721 608-4 8121
Fax: +49 721 608-4 3658
E-mail: margarete.lehne@kit.edu

“In an increasingly interconnected world full of mutual dependencies, importance of interdisciplinary dialog in science increases,” the President of KIT, Professor Holger Hanselka, says. “Everybody knows that solutions to cope with challenges of society mostly also have a social and an ethic dimension. Hence, it is the task of universities to convey sensitivity for the different views during education already. In both courses winning the 2015 State Teaching Award, natural sciences and humanities meet to interact.”

“Studying is much more than qualification in a certain realm. It means thinking out of the box, acquiring social and communicative skills, and further developing one’s own personality,” KIT Vice President, Professor Alexander Wanner, emphasizes. “The joint courses of Professors Nick and Gutmann bring these aspects together in an ideal manner and encourage students to actively discuss across borders of disciplines.”

Peter Nick and Mathias Gutmann, a biologist and a philosopher, have jointly developed courses for studies of biology. Their main concern is to encourage students to think and reflect and to communicate about moral aspects of biology and technology. “The more our world is in interconnected, the more important is the skill to understand and to integrate other perspectives. This can be done best by inter- and transdisciplinary dialog,” both prize winners say. Above all, they want to make available the time for exchanging ideas and information , thus allowing for the joint development of new findings.

Both scientists also lecture in a team in the courses of “Modellbildung und Ethik in der Biologie” (modeling and ethics in biology) and “Wie evolvieren biologische Theorien” (how do biological theories evolve). Here, students can experience various perspectives and ways of speaking as well as their “translations” into the other discipline. A short keynote by one of the lecturers is followed by a group discussion. The concept of integrating topics into the research routine of biology meets with the positive response of students. According to KIT students of chemistry and biosciences, who proposed Peter Nick and Mathias Gutmann for the 2015 State Teaching Award, the lecturers have succeeded in demonstrating that science does not only exist at the laboratory or library, but that knowledge learned is also used in everyday life and may open up new perspectives on ethic and moral aspects. In the opinion of the students, this way of lecturing differs from other courses. The frequently existing lecturer/audience style is reduced and discourse as a means of learning and developing is moved into the focus.

Both professors plan to extend their teaching concept and open it to other subject areas. The prize money associated with the State Teaching Award will be used for the establishment of an academy for critical interdisciplinarity.

Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT) pools its three core tasks of research, higher education, and innovation in a mission. With about 9,400 employees and 24,500 students, KIT is one of the big institutions of research and higher education in natural sciences and engineering in Europe.

KIT – The Research University in the Helmholtz Association

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