

2023 Larry Burkum Service Award Winner Announced

By Laura Smith, Chair, BAMJ Burkum Committee

Each year, the Broadcast and Mobile Journalism Division seeks to recognize someone who epitomizes service – service to our students, our division, our colleagues, our stakeholder groups and partners, and/or our profession. Heather Birks checks every box. This year, our committee was unanimous in its decision to honor Heather’s indefatigable dedication to broadcasting and journalism education with the 2023 Larry Burkum Service Award.

Whether at the start of their careers or seasoned industry professionals, in the United States or abroad, her global impact has been truly remarkable. Most of us know her as executive director of the Broadcast Education Association, where she’s been at the helm since 2006. But that’s just the tip of the iceberg.

For decades, she’s brought academics and professionals together in service to our industries and the communities they serve. As Arizona State professor emeritus Bill Silcock so perfectly put it, “Heather understands and engages in the vastly changing ‘alphabet soup’ of global journalism higher educational organizations.”

To name just some of her career highlights:

- Through the Radio Advertising Bureau, manages the RAB Student Scholars program, providing hundreds of students the opportunity to meet with top executives in the radio industry. As such, she is regularly selected as one of Radio Ink’s Most Influential Women in Radio
- Before leading BEA to the next level, served in NAB’s Education Foundation for a decade and deserved much credit for the Service to America Awards and the Broadcast Leadership Training Program, a 10-month program designed to enable talented senior level broadcast executives who aspire to advance as group executives or station owners
- Has long played an integral role on the Council of Communication Associations
- Helped organize two international workshops for media educators at annual conferences of the Broadcast and New Media Research Association of China
- As a member of the World Journalism Education Council, attended and/or organized panels and educational opportunities at all five WJEC congresses (Singapore, South Africa, Belgium, New Zealand, and France) and will do it yet again in 2025 in Perth, Australia

According to Nebraska’s professor of practice Ken Fischer, who nominated her, “Heather does not consider other mass communication organizations as competitors. Instead, she welcomes the new relationships they bring.”

In fact, relationship building is Birks’ forte. Bill Davie, associate professor and BORSF Regents Chair of Communication the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, says her ability “to forge the type of relationships essential to the BEA’s trajectory of growth by relying on her secure

corporate and academic alliances” is paramount to her success.

“No wonder her service to the BEA’s board has produced stability and growth despite undeniable tumult in the broadcast industry and its competitive platforms of digital media. This record of service shows not only her foresight as an administrator, but also her capacity for creating innovation with a clear vision of the future,” says Davie.

Mary Rogus, associate professor emerita at the University of Ohio, calls Birks an idea person.

“An idea pops into her head or is suggested and she jumps on it, expands it, and makes it work to the benefit of all of us. Even before the pandemic, she realized the organization needed to serve its members, and broadcast education, beyond the annual convention. As university budgets limited travel funds, increasingly BEA came to us with much more frequent and useful communication, social media, online resources, (BEA’s) ‘On Location’, mini-conferences and an international conference. That work has made a huge difference in our ability to remain relevant in the classroom to the current media industry.”

As a necessary sidenote, Rogus says no tribute to Birks would be complete without talking about her effervescent, energizer bunny, warm personality.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re meeting her for the second time or renewing a decades long friendship, Heather knows your name, something about you, and makes you feel as if you are the most important person she’s interacted with that day. Her enthusiasm is catching.”

Silcock agrees: “Heather inspires diverse new ideas without offending anyone. She dares young faculty and older scholars to dream (like her) of innovative new ways to extend membership events and benefits beyond four days every April in Las Vegas. Her energy is boundless.”

In considering individuals who have demonstrated extraordinary service to the academy and to industry, BYU associate professor Dale Cressman says he cannot think of anyone more deserving of this award. This year’s Burkum Committee concurs. Three faculty judges – each a former division head and/or Burkum winner – selected Birks for her outstanding service.

“If you could paint a picture of a person who does it all – it would be Heather,” says Laura Smith, former head of the BAMJ Division and current chair of this year’s Burkum Award committee. “For far too long, she’s quietly gone about her business by connecting us, speaking up for us and making us all look good while she rotates around the edges of the room. She is a beloved bright, shining star. I look forward to being in her orbit whenever, wherever I can.”

Debora Wenger, associate dean and professor in the University of Mississippi’s School of Journalism and New Media, won the Burkum award in 2018. Of Birks, she says: “Heather may not have professor in her title, but she has done an inordinate amount of good for broadcast education. By raising the profile of our discipline, recognizing student and faculty excellence and serving as a champion for what we do within the industry, Heather has enabled us to remain a vital part of the broadcast media ecosystem.”

According to Hubert “Hub” Brown, dean of the University of Florida’s College of Journalism and Communications, who won the award in 2016, “We are so fortunate to have Heather Birks as a partner in our teaching, research, and service mission. There is no one like her. She maximizes the connection between the academy and the profession on our behalf, and she brings tremendous energy and ideas to that partnership. It is difficult to imagine our institutions occupying their unique position without Heather’s help.”

Birks will receive this year’s award at AEJMC’s convention in Washington D.C on Tuesday, Aug. 8 at 7 p.m. in a ceremony at the American University Media Production Center.

Recent recipients of the Burkum award include: Jill Geisler, Loyola Chicago (2022), Nancy Dupont, Ole Miss (2021), Bill Silcock, Arizona State (2019), and Joe Foote, Oklahoma (2017).

If you would like to nominate someone for this award in the future, criteria include strong evidence of significant service contributions to journalism education and to the electronic news industry. Larry Burkum served the Broadcast and Mobile Journalism Division (then the Radio-Television Journalism Division) as secretary, newsletter editor and webmaster from 1995 to 2005. He was presented the inaugural Burkum Award at the 2005 AEJMC convention in San Antonio.