



Kristin Schirmer is awarded EPFL students' prize

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Topics: Organisation & Staff

At the EPFL's "Magistrale" graduation ceremony this year, Kristin Schirmer was recognised for her teaching work at the institution. In this interview she explains what this work means to her.

Every year in an anonymous voting process, the students at the EPFL award the "Polysphere" prize to their professors in recognition of their services to academic teaching. One prize is awarded in each faculty. On October 2nd 2021 at the EPFL graduation ceremony, known as the "Magistrale", Prof. Kristin Schirmer had the honour of receiving this year's Polysphere in the School of Architecture, Civil and Environmental Engineering (ENAC).

Since 2011, Prof. Schirmer has been engaged as adjunct professor at EPFL, and teaches ecotoxicology on the Environmental Sciences and Engineering bachelor's degree courses. In addition, she supervises and mentors master's and PhD students in the field of ecotoxicology. At Eawag, Prof. Schirmer has been Head of the Environmental Toxicology department since 2008. She is also adjunct professor at ETH Zurich.

Kristin Schirmer, what does this prize mean to you?

Kristin Schirmer: A great deal. I really value my interactions with young people, and it is very important to me to be able to impart my knowledge to the next generation. I would like to make sure that they are well placed to drive ecotoxicology further forward as a field of study – also at Eawag wherever possible. In doing so, I always try to show an interest in the students and their needs, and work with them as part of a team. So the fact that my commitment to them is recognised and valued means an awful lot to me.

What does excellent academic teaching mean to you?

I want to connect with the students on the level of everyday life – how ecotoxicology relates to them in their lives. For example, who hasn't stood in the shower in the morning reading the ingredients on the label of the shower gel, and wondering what impact these substances might have on the environment once they disappear down the plughole? That's where I come in. I believe also that people learn best when they have to work things out for themselves. For this reason, I usually take an interactive approach, with exercises, discussions and surveys. This also works very well in online classes, thanks to the various digital tools that are available. This year, as we were all sitting at home in front of our computers, I introduced a "song of the week", which was always related to the topic at hand. A great [playlist](#) has come out of that, as well as an extra helping of fun and variety.

Can you tell us about any special experiences you've had in connection with your teaching?

I always encourage the students not to hold back with feedback to me – both positive and negative. On many occasions, the feedback has been very moving, and has stuck with me. For instance, I have been told that my course was the highlight of the week, or even the semester. It's also especially nice to see that the students have taken something with them that they can apply in their careers. One former student, for example, wrote to me and thanked me, saying that he was in Brazil doing a work placement at an engineering firm and was able to apply certain things from our course when carrying out a sediment assessment. Those are wonderful boosters.

The interviewer was Annette Ryser

Cover picture: Eawag, Peter Penicka

Related Links

[Ecotox playlist on YouTube](#)

[Kristin Schirmer's CV and publications](#)

[Polysphere Award](#)

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