



LOYOLA
UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

*The College of Arts & Sciences is excited to present
the*

**SUJACK AWARDS
CEREMONY**

honoring our awardees of

2026

*Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching
Excellence and Master Teacher awards*

&

*Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research
Excellence and Master Researcher awards*



PROGRAM

<i>Welcome:</i>	<i>Douglas Woods, PhD Provost & Chief Academic Officer</i>
<i>Opening Comments:</i>	<i>Don Sujack</i>
<i>Introduction of 2026 Teaching Awards:</i>	<i>Margaret Guy, PhD 2026 Teaching Committee Chairperson</i>
<i>Introduction of 2026 Research Awards:</i>	<i>David Doherty, PhD 2026 Research Committee Chairperson</i>
<i>Closing remarks:</i>	<i>Peter J. Schraeder, PhD Professor and Dean</i>

Congratulations to all our 2026 award winners



2026 SUJACK AWARD WINNERS

2026 Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence

[Swarnali Banerjee](#), Associate Professor, Mathematics & Statistics

[Daniel Cavanaugh](#), Associate Professor, Biology

2026 Master Teachers

[Michael Burns](#), Associate Professor, Biology

[Kristin de Nesnera](#), Advanced Lecturer, Biology

[Eric Gobel](#), Senior Lecturer, Psychology

[Freya Möbus](#), Assistant Professor, Philosophy

2026 Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence

[Emily Hallett](#), Assistant Professor, Anthropology

[Pengfei Li](#), Assistant Professor, Chemistry & Biochemistry

2026 Master Researchers

[Yanan Chen](#), Assistant Professor, Biology

[Benjamin Johnson](#), Professor, History

[Tofigh Maboudi](#), Associate Professor, Political Science

[Christopher Skinner](#), Professor, Theology



Statements from our Teaching and Research Award committees about our 2026 SUJACK AWARD WINNERS

Swarnali Banerjee - 2026 Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence Top Award

Dr. Swarnali Banerjee is an Associate Professor in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics and the Director of the Data Science Program. She earned Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Statistics and completed her Ph.D. in Statistics at the University of Connecticut-Storrs. Dr. Banerjee joined the faculty at Loyola in 2016.

Dr. Banerjee has a strong record of teaching excellence and student mentorship. The courses that she teaches are foundational in the Mathematics and Statistics Department at Loyola. She frequently teaching introductory and upper-level courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels, including Probability and Statistics, Biostatistics, Quantitative Bioinformatics, and Statistical Design and Analysis of Experiments. Dr. Banerjee writes about the obstacles that students in statistics courses commonly encounter and her efforts to ensure student success. For example, she discusses the importance of allowing students to apply their budding knowledge to real world settings and working collaboratively to solve problems. She states, "I have learned over the years that these help students bridge the gap... They really start to see the 'why' and 'how' and have a better grasp on the material." Dr. Banerjee has shared that as a result of her teaching approach, not only do students demonstrate greater mastery of statistics, but they often consider integrating a statistics major or minor into their academic plan.

Dr. Banerjee also goes above and beyond in her mentorship of students. Since joining the faculty at Loyola, she has co-authored nine peer-reviewed journal articles with undergraduates and served as a mentor in the College of Arts and Sciences Undergraduate Summer Research Program. In relation to this work, Dr. Banerjee has been awarded an NIH Academic Research Enhancement Awards, which fund scientific work that enhances the undergraduate research environment and encourages a diverse student body to pursue careers in science. This very strong record of engaged research experience, including peer-reviewed scientific publications with undergraduate students sets Dr. Banerjee apart.

Dr. Banerjee's nomination speaks to her high commitment to student training and her strengths in the classroom. The student nominator wrote, "[Dr. Banerjee's] was easily the best class I have ever taken... Every time something new was taught, she would provide a real-world example to show exactly how it is used in context."



Highlighting her effective use of instruction time, the student added, “After every class, I felt that I had learned as much as I physically could have in the time given... she always had this enthusiasm for the subject that made it so much easier to learn.”

Dr. Banerjee demonstrates the unique ability to engage students in foundational mathematical courses at a high level, while also challenging them, and to extend this work beyond the classroom. This exemplifies why we are so proud to recognize Dr. Banerjee with the 2026 Edwin T. and Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence.

Daniel Cavanaugh - 2026 Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence Top Award

Dr. Daniel Cavanaugh is an Associate Professor in the Department of Biology at Loyola University Chicago. He earned a B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania, a Ph.D. in Neuroscience from the University of California, San Francisco, and completed postdoctoral training at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine before joining that faculty at Loyola in 2015.

Dr. Cavanaugh is a teacher of exceptional breadth, rigor, and sustained commitment to undergraduate education. Dr. Cavanaugh teaches across biology and neuroscience, including Introduction to Neuroscience, Sleep and Circadian Rhythms, and multiple undergraduate research courses. Over the past three academic years alone, he has taught 391 students in classroom, laboratory, and mentored research settings. His student evaluations are consistently strong, with course and instructor ratings ranging from 4.5 to 5.0 on a five-point scale. Dr. Cavanaugh demonstrates intentional design of his courses and an emphasis on active, evidence-based learning. His syllabi show carefully scaffolded reading guides, study guides, structured discussions, low-stakes formative assessments, and frequent opportunities for students to engage directly with primary scientific literature. In advanced coursework, students are not only asked to understand research findings, but to communicate scientific ideas in their own words, to critique data, and propose future directions.

Beyond the classroom, Dr. Cavanaugh’s mentorship record is outstanding. He has mentored several undergraduate researchers, helping students secure 20 Loyola research fellowships (in the past three years), present at regional and national conferences, and co-author multiple peer-reviewed publications.



His research courses emphasize partnership, professional respect, collaborative inquiry, and regular one-on-one guidance. Many former students have gone on to graduate, medical, and professional programs, reflecting the long-term impact of his mentorship.

Dr. Cavanaugh demonstrates a deep commitment to *cura personalis*, equity, and student belonging. His teaching statement emphasizes knowing students as individuals, understanding their aspirations, creating structured environments that support success, and highlighting contributions of scientists from underrepresented groups so that all students can see themselves in the discipline. Across all categories considered for this award, Dr. Cavanaugh exemplifies intellectual excellence, pedagogical intentionality, and profound dedication to student growth. For these reasons, he stands as a highly deserving candidate for recognition in teaching excellence with the Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence.

Michael Burns - 2026 Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence – Master Teacher

Dr. Michael Burns is an Associate Professor in the Department of Biology and the Bioinformatics Program. Dr. Burns earned his B.S. in Biochemistry from Minnesota State University, and his Ph.D. in Molecular Biology from the University of Minnesota. He joined the faculty at Loyola in 2016.

Dr. Burns has distinguished himself as an educator whose teaching combines intellectual rigor, evidence-based pedagogy, and a deep commitment to student success. Over the past three academic years, he has taught 289 undergraduate students and 58 graduate students across an unusually broad range of courses, including Cell Biology, Metagenomics, Honors, graduate seminars, and interdisciplinary courses with the Philosophy Department. Dr. Burns's instruction is grounded in the principles of Scientific Teaching: active learning, aligned assessment, and inclusive course design. Rather than emphasizing memorization alone, he structures his classes so students practice analyzing evidence, solving problems collaboratively, and thinking like scientists. For example, in large-enrollment Cell Biology courses, students engage in weekly quizzes, cumulative exams, group work, and case-based activities that build durable understanding and transferable reasoning skills.

Students consistently praise his ability to make difficult scientific ideas accessible and engaging. A student nominator wrote that Dr. Burns explains complex concepts in ways that are easy to grasp while drawing on research, scientific literature, and multiple teaching approaches. They share, "His way of presenting information while also sharing personal anecdotes made the class extremely engaging and unlike any other that I have taken before."



Dr. Burns has a strong record of undergraduate mentorship and broader educational leadership. He has directly supervised numerous undergraduate researchers whose work has been presented at Loyola's Undergraduate Research Symposium and supported by competitive university fellowships. Additionally, he has participated in the CAS Undergraduate Summer Research Experience and undergraduate mentees from his lab have served as co-authors on peer-reviewed publications from his lab. Beyond research mentoring, he has led community-engaged learning partnerships with organizations across Chicago and has become a campus leader in workshops on pedagogy, mentoring, interdisciplinary teaching, and emerging technologies. For his outstanding teaching, transformative mentorship, and leadership in advancing student learning, we are proud to honor Dr. Michael Burns with a 2026 Sujack Master Teacher Award.

Kristin de Nesnera - 2026 Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence – Master Teacher

Dr. Kristin de Nesnera is an Advanced Lecturer in the Department of Biology. She holds a B.S. in Biology from the College of William and Mary and earned her Ph.D. in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of California Santa Cruz in 2016. Dr. de Nesnera joined the faculty at Loyola in 2021.

Dr. de Nesnera teaches General Biology I and II for majors, a writing intensive course on Marine Ecology, a lecture on Ecology, and the General Biology Laboratory. Although Dr. de Nesnera began her career conducting field research to inform restoration practices of rocky intertidal mussel beds following oil spills along the coast of California, her pedagogical chops and curiosity led her away from marine environments and into the biology classroom. Dr. de Nesnera explains that she was fascinated by “how people learn biology, what makes certain concepts so difficult to learn, and how to teach biology in a more effective and inclusive way.” In her classroom, Dr. de Nesnera explains, she “seek[s] to create an inclusive learning environment where students actively participate, evaluate new ideas with peers, and have multiple opportunities to demonstrate what they know.” To do so, Dr. de Nesnera deploys her considerable knowledge on evidence-based teaching practices, whether by emphasizing the importance of learning by doing, or by facilitating the social interactions among students proven to be crucial for their learning and success in the classroom.

Dr. de Nesnera's statement of teaching philosophy conveys the many hours she has spent ruminating on how to teach biology to undergraduate students in ways that are effective and inclusive. This attention is also captured in her syllabi, where Dr. de Nesnera explains her endorsement of open pedagogy and her support for students' diverse needs.



For example, Dr. de Nesnera offers her students the ability to individually decide whether attendance will count toward their final grade or not, depending on the circumstances they are facing when they enroll in the course. This kind of responsiveness to students' heterogeneous needs exemplifies Dr. de Nesnera's commitment to an inclusive classroom. Through all these practices, Dr. de Nesnera achieves something rather remarkable: she manages to make students feel seen even in the very large lectures she teaches. One student wrote, of how Dr. de Nesnera "made [her] feel like [they] mattered in a class full of 100 students." Similarly, a student nominator wrote: "she truly cares about her students and we can clearly see that from her actions. She teaches wholeheartedly and truly wants the best for her students."

Dr. de Nesnera has published several pieces on science education and she has attended an impressive array of courses at Loyola to continue improving her already excellent teaching. Moreover, she has helped develop, fund, and implement a long-term research project to assess the impact of course materials on student learning of introductory biology. Dr. de Nesnera can easily be described as having a vocation for teaching and we are delighted to name her a 2026 Sujack Master Teacher.

Eric Gobel - 2026 Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence – Master Teacher

Dr. Eric Gobel is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Psychology and the Co-Director of the Interdisciplinary Neuroscience program, serving as the Director of the Cognitive/Behavioral Neuroscience area of the program. Dr. Gobel earned his Bachelor's degree in Preprofessional Studies (Biology) from the University of Notre Dame and completed his Ph.D. in Neuroscience at Northwestern University. He joined the faculty at Loyola in 2018.

Dr. Gobel demonstrates a high level of dedication to Loyola's students and has a strong record of teaching excellence. The courses that he teaches are essential to the Neuroscience program and Department of Psychology at Loyola, including foundational and advanced undergraduate courses, such as Introduction to Neuroscience, Learning and Memory, Research Methods, and Laboratory in Cognitive Neuroscience. Dr. Gobel received the Liebenritt Faculty Development Opportunity Award to develop the Laboratory in Cognitive Neuroscience course, which provides students with impactful engaged learning opportunities through hands on neuroscience research experience in a course setting. Dr. Gobel is active in pursuing professional development, which he has utilized to implement effective evidence-based classroom policies. His style of teaching has resonated with his students. The student nominator wrote, "His reversed classroom teaching style, I believe, creates an experience that not only mimics a medical school setting, but also allows for the whole purpose of education. This is to engage with your peers and have discussions on the ideas you created and explored during your learning experience."

Dr. Gobel goes to great lengths to support undergraduate students in the interdisciplinary Neuroscience program. As Director of the Cognitive/Behavioral Neuroscience program, he advises all majors and minors, manages major curriculum, and monitors the daily operations of the program. Despite these significant administrative responsibilities, Dr. Gobel demonstrates great dedication and empathy to his students, embracing the Loyolan principle of cura personalis. The student nominator wrote, "I was incredibly nervous coming back to a college setting after spending months away [on medical leave]... [Dr. Gobel] truly saw my struggle... and understood that [recovery] is a long process... I cannot thank Professor Gobel enough for the kindness and understanding he showed me when no one else was there."

Dr. Gobel is effective in leading one of the largest undergraduate programs in the College of Arts and Sciences, while challenge students to engage with material more critically, and providing holistic support for student welfare. This exemplifies why we are so proud to recognize Dr. Gobel with a 2026 Sujack Master Teacher Award.



Freya Möbus - 2026 Edwin T. & Vivijeanne F. Sujack Award for Teaching Excellence – Master Teacher

Dr. Freya Möbus is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy. She holds Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Philosophy and German Language and Literature from the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn. Dr. Möbus earned her Ph.D. in Philosophy from Cornell University. She joined the faculty at Loyola in 2019.

Dr. Möbus teaches undergraduate courses, including Philosophy and Persons, Issues in Philosophy of Human Nature, History of Ancient Philosophy, and graduate seminars such as Plato's Early Dialogues, Socrates' Criticism of Rhetoricians, and Plato, Socrates, and the Task of Philosophy. In Dr. Möbus's statement of teaching philosophy, she beautifully conveyed the ways in which her own research informs how she approaches the classroom, the way she organizes her lessons, and the justifications she offers to students for her pedagogical choices. "In the classroom," she explains, "my goal is to foster the confidence to ask bold questions, the creativity to wonder about what others take for granted, and the companionship that unlocks ideas in others." Underscoring the connections with ancient philosophy, she added, "[f]or the ancients, philosophy is an activity—a skill to practice, not a set of facts to memorize. Philosophical thinking helps us understand what we know, what we don't know, and who we aspire to be. (...) I strive to create a classroom where students do not simply study philosophy, but begin to experience the pleasure of human flourishing."

The care Dr. Möbus puts in her teaching comes across in her syllabi, each of which includes a section of frequently asked questions that strikes a careful balance between providing information, establishing clear guidelines, and conveying the type of *cura personalis* that exemplifies the best kind of teaching done at Loyola. For example, she writes, "I want to hear what you think – all of it, especially if it starts with 'This doesn't make any sense to me...' or 'Here's a crazy idea...'" This attention to pedagogy was reflected by a student nominator, who wrote, "Dr. Möbus is a phenomenal professor, who inspires passion among her students towards philosophy."

Dr. Möbus's excellence in teaching is likely the product of her own talents and a great deal of work and devotion. Dr. Möbus has attended over ten pedagogy workshops at Loyola and completed the nine-week course "Basics of Online Learning and Teaching" through the Center of Integration of Research, Teaching, and Learning. Since 2019, she has also been the co-chair of the Philosophy Club at Loyola. Dr. Freya Möbus has distinguished herself as an educator who inspires her students and who curates the kind of classroom where they can flourish both as thinkers, writers, and as humans too. We are proud to celebrate her work today with the 2026 Sujack Master Teacher award.



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Emily Hallett - 2026 Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence Top Award

Dr. Emily Hallett is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology , with expertise in zooarchaeology and Pleistocene ecological niche modeling. We are proud to honor Dr. Hallett with the Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence.

Dr. Hallett's groundbreaking work on human evolution and dispersal has made a significant impact in both archaeology and evolutionary science. We recognize her leadership in research investigating why later migrations of *Homo sapiens* out of Africa were successful when earlier ones were not. In 2025, Dr. Hallett achieved an extraordinary milestone by publishing a first-authored article in *Nature*, one of the most selective and prestigious scientific journals in the world, titled "Major expansion in the human niche preceded out of Africa dispersal," alongside a second co-authored article in the same journal. Her research, which integrates archaeological data with advanced paleoclimatic simulations, has reframed long-standing debates by identifying ecological adaptability as a primary driver of global human expansion.

These publications rank in the 98th percentile for engagement among *Nature* articles, reflecting the immediate visibility and international significance of her work. Beyond her high-impact publications, Dr. Hallett has secured competitive funding, including a National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grant, and has led international collaborative research across Africa and Europe. These remarkable achievements reflect Dr. Hallett's unwavering dedication to methodologically sophisticated research with a global reach. For her outstanding contributions, we are thrilled to present Dr. Emily Hallett with the 2026 Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence.



Pengfei Li - 2026 Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence Top Award

Dr. Pengfei Li is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry, specializing in theoretical and computational studies at the interface of biochemistry and inorganic chemistry. We are proud to honor Dr. Li with the Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence.

Dr. Li's exceptional contributions to the development of computational models for predicting metal-protein interactions have significantly advanced the field of bioinorganic chemistry. His groundbreaking research utilizes artificial intelligence and quantum mechanical calculations to understand how biomolecules bind essential metal ions like calcium and magnesium. In 2025, Dr. Li published three major peer-reviewed articles in high-impact journals and contributed to the widely used AMBER molecular dynamics software package. His work included developing an efficient method to enhance binding free energy calculations and establishing a comprehensive set of atomic radii that has garnered international attention. These achievements are reflected in his remarkable citation impact, with over 2,800 citations in 2025 alone and a career total exceeding 13,000. Additionally, Dr. Li was awarded a prestigious \$1.7 million Maximizing Investigator Research Award (R35) from the National Institutes of Health in August 2025. This exceptionally competitive five-year grant recognizes his innovative research program and its potential for high impact in drug discovery and materials engineering.

Dr. Li has also been ranked among the top 2% of scientists worldwide for four consecutive years, further underscoring his influence as a global leader in chemical physics. His dedication to research excellence and the mentorship of graduate students continues to elevate the profile of his department and the university. For these outstanding accomplishments, we are honored to present Dr. Pengfei Li with the 2026 Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence.



***Yanan Chen - 2026 Sujack Family Award for Faculty
Research Excellence – Master Researcher***

We are honored to recognize **Dr. Yanan Chen**, Assistant Professor in the Department of Biology, for her transformative research in neurobiology and the cellular mechanisms of myelin-related diseases. In 2025, she made a significant impact on the field by publishing a landmark paper in the high-profile journal *Nature Communications*, which provides critical insights into the Integrated Stress Response (ISR) and its role in oligodendrocyte survival.

This groundbreaking work demonstrates that pharmacological attenuation of this response can prevent myelin loss, offering a promising new framework for therapeutic strategies to treat rare genetic leukodystrophies and Multiple Sclerosis. In addition to her high-impact publications, Dr. Chen has demonstrated exceptional success in securing competitive international funding, including a substantial grant from the ELA Foundation to evaluate preclinical treatments for neurodegenerative phenotypes. Her innovative approach, which combines molecular genetics with advanced mouse models to address complex questions in white matter injury and repair, has significantly moved the needle in the study of neurological health. For these outstanding contributions, we are delighted to name Dr. Yanan Chen a 2026 Sujack Master Researcher.

***Benjamin Johnson - 2026 Sujack Family Award for Faculty
Research Excellence – Master Researcher***

We are honored to recognize **Dr. Benjamin Johnson**, Professor in the Department of History, for his prolific scholarship and his major contributions as a senior scholar in Texas and Western History. In 2025, he published his fourth monograph, *Texas: An American History*, with Yale University Press, a milestone achievement that provides a provocative and multi-ethnic synthesis of the state's past. This landmark work offers a long-overdue reckoning by contrasting historical records with traditional self-images, challenging existing narratives and entering high-stakes public debates regarding the state's identity.

Beyond this monograph, Dr. Johnson's expertise in borderlands, Latinx, and environmental history is reflected in his ongoing leadership with the "Refusing to Forget" public history project, which has earned prestigious prizes from the American Historical Association and the Western History Association. His scholarship, which has been featured in the *New York Times* and major podcasts, is widely recognized for its ability to engage both academic and public audiences. For these extraordinary contributions and his status as an outstanding scholar at the peak of his career, we are pleased to name Dr. Benjamin Johnson a 2026 Sujack Master Researcher.



Tofigh Maboudi - 2026 Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence – Master Researcher

We are honored to recognize **Dr. Tofigh Maboudi**, Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, for his productive and influential research bridging environmental politics, constitutional law, and climate litigation. In 2025, Dr. Maboudi established a pioneering research profile by publishing seven peer-reviewed articles in high-impact journals, including the top-ranked *Environmental Politics* and *Global Environmental Politics*, where he examined the determinants of green citizenship and the influence of "climate bads" on public attitudes.

Beyond his impressive publication record, he secured a major National Science Foundation (NSF) award to further his innovative research, which blends rigorous methods with significant policy relevance. Characterized by a strong commitment to scholarly community building and collaboration, his work has significantly advanced the study of how political systems and constitutional frameworks respond to the climate crisis. For these extraordinary contributions and his rapid mastery of emerging subfields in political science, we are delighted to name Dr. Tofigh Maboudi a 2026 Sujack Master Researcher.

Christopher Skinner - 2026 Sujack Family Award for Faculty Research Excellence – Master Researcher

We are honored to recognize **Dr. Christopher Skinner**, Professor in the Department of Theology, for his outstanding scholarship in Biblical Studies, particularly on the early Christian Gospels. In 2025, he published a monograph on the Gospel of Mark with Zondervan Academic, now in use as a textbook at several colleges and universities, along with four peer-reviewed articles examining the Gospels of Mark and John through historical, linguistic, and literary approaches.

His work demonstrates notable methodological breadth, illuminating the relationships, theological developments, and interpretive traditions across Gospel texts. He also delivered three invited presentations to diverse academic audiences and expanded the reach of his scholarship through a podcast interview. Further underscoring the significance of his research, Dr. Skinner received a \$15,000 grant from the Catholic Biblical Association of America to support his forthcoming Anchor Yale Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas with Yale University Press. For his exceptional productivity, intellectual versatility, and impactful contributions to the field, we are pleased to name Dr. Christopher Skinner a 2026 Sujack Master Researcher.





Acknowledgements

Thank you to the 2026 Sujack Teaching and Research Award selection committee members listed below for their efforts on helping to choose this year's winners:

2026 Sujack Teaching committee members

Margaret Guy, Psychology, Committee Chairperson

Yuna Blajer de la Garza, Political Science

James Devery, Chemistry & Biochemistry

Nathan Candelaria, student member, Psychology major

2026 Sujack Research committee members

David Doherty, Political Science, Committee Chairperson

Tracy Pintchman, Theology

Wei-Ming Yu, Biology

Additional thanks to David Priester in the College of Arts and Sciences Deans office for his work on compiling the audio recordings/videos submitted by our students who nominated our faculty teaching award winners.

Finally, we want to show our appreciation and gratitude to the Sujack family members Don and Peg Sujack, Steve and Reenie Sujack, Greg and Kate Sujack and Julie Sujack for their continued support of the annual Edwin T. and Vivijeanne F. Sujack awards. We are honored to have some of your family joining us this evening and look forward to celebrating again with you all again next year.

