In the following pages, you will read about eight very impressive researchers and scholars who routinely go above and beyond the call of traditional academic responsibilities. The Office of Research instituted the Breakthrough Leadership in Research Award this year to honor individuals who stand out for their work but who also take the initiative to go a step further. Through interdisciplinary collaboration, mentoring junior faculty, recruiting and training under-represented minorities and reaching out to the larger community, these eight individuals set an example for the entire university. By recognizing their innovative approaches, the Office of Research aims to encourage a culture of academic leaders who value cooperation, connect with others to strengthen our mission and bring fresh perspectives into the university community.

This inaugural class of Breakthrough Leadership in Research Award recipients is leading the way, pioneering new approaches to research and scholarship and cultivating a future marked by diversity, innovation and engagement. Nominated by their peers, these exceptional individuals have not sought the limelight, but they have earned their recognition here, and we expect all eyes to remain on them as they continue to make a positive impact on USC and within the broader community.

Prakash Nagarkatti, Ph.D.
Vice President for Research
“There is little that is more gratifying to senior faculty than to help young people navigate the complexities and challenges of becoming a scientist and an academic. It is at the root of what I consider to be the most important role that I have.”

In 2002, Frank Berger organized the most extensive interdisciplinary enterprise in USC’s history with the launch of the Center for Colon Cancer Research (CCCR). Established with an $11 million grant from the National Institutes of Health, the center boasts members from many USC units, including the College of Arts and Sciences, the S.C. College of Pharmacy, the Arnold School of Public Health and the School of Medicine.

“There is a long list of junior faculty who have been mentored by the COBRE program, and in most cases personally by Frank,” said Michael D. Wyatt, an associate professor in the S.C. College of Pharmacy. “These faculty have excelled in establishing independent careers, successfully entered new research fields and obtained new grants. Frank’s efforts have greatly benefited the university at large.”

Beyond the basic research, Berger is proud of how the CCCR has evolved into an integral component of the state’s community outreach efforts to combat colorectal cancer. Through public service announcements, innovative programs like Shop Talk, screening programs for uninsured citizens and an annual fund-raising ball, the center has been at the heart of successful efforts to reduce the impact of colon cancer on South Carolinians from all walks of life.

“South Carolina often makes national news for the wrong reasons,” said Dr. March Seabrook, co-founder and past president of the S.C. Gastroenterology Association. “The colon cancer prevention movement in South Carolina is making national news, but for all of the right reasons. Innovative programs developed by the Center for Colon Cancer Research under Frank’s leadership are providing opportunities for national thought leaders to visit South Carolina to learn more about how these programs were conceived, developed, implemented and to receive guidance about how they can be replicated throughout the United States.”
“I see myself as a leader, but I also see myself as a servant of the people, particularly people who are disenfranchised.”

For Gloria Boutte, leadership means fighting for equity and access — as a researcher, as an educator, as a colleague and as a mentor.

“I’ve looked at the idea of equity at many different levels, including recruitment and retention of junior faculty members,” said Boutte, who routinely assists her colleagues as they review data and prepare presentations. “Another one of my primary goals is to provide access to students of color into the academy.”

By reaching out to under-represented populations when advertising for positions at USC and by encouraging the recruitment of faculty who have done work in equity research, Boutte has made the academy in general more diverse and more accessible. But the underlying philosophy that informs her efforts extends beyond her role on campus at USC.

Boutte’s extensive research on culturally relevant pedagogy has taken her to African-American communities in the Midlands as well as to communities in Sierra Leone and South Africa, where she looks to local leaders to determine the specific challenges faced by that community.

“I see myself as a leader, but I also see myself as a servant of the people, particularly people who are disenfranchised,” Boutte said. “That means not trying to do things for the people, not dictating ‘this is what needs to be done,’ but doing things with the people based on their community’s particular needs.”

“Not only does Dr. Boutte’s leadership and guidance inspire graduate students,” said associate professor of education Tasha Laman. “It also motivates and activates junior and senior faculty members to mobilize behind a mission of providing culturally-relevant equity research and scholarship — a focus that is under-represented in education.”
“Al is committed to helping others understand the practice of archaeological reasoning through their own process of discovery.”

“The work at Topper has been years in the making, involving a lot of really wonderful people — from donors and volunteers to students, news media and several talented colleagues. I'm truly amazed at the number of dedicated people who have had a hand in our success.”

Community outreach has been the touchstone of Al Goodyear’s professional career for the nearly 40 years he has been at USC. His research at Topper, an archaeological site in Allendale County, S.C., focuses on searching for the earliest humans in North America, including the Clovis people. He has introduced more than 1,000 volunteers into the realm of archaeological and anthropological research through the Allendale Paleoamerican Expedition, a month-long training event every May. These hands-on volunteers have provided not only labor but nearly $1 million in donations in support of two major excavation sites in Allendale.

“Al is committed to helping others understand the practice of archaeological reasoning through their own process of discovery, and he is providing them with unforgettable field experiences along the way,” said Charles Cobb, a professor and chair of the Department of Anthropology. Goodyear’s research has raised important questions about early humans in the Americas, Cobb said, and “he is well aware of the limits of any one person to tackle complex problems. He thus has created a network of scholars who are considering [these questions] from an impressive range of perspectives.”

USC students in the departments of media arts and visual communications have been a yearly presence at the Topper site since 2007. Their work in learning how to document and promote the dig is the very definition of interdisciplinary education.
Scott Gwara
Department of English and Literature / College of Arts and Sciences

“We accumulate these treasures for the state’s citizens, for every future student, but we share them with everybody. These digitization projects are about public generosity, public goodwill. And I think that’s a big part of the leadership equation.”

When people think about medieval manuscripts, they might picture a lone scribe hunched over a single codex intended to reach just a select handful of readers, one at a time. By spearheading an ongoing effort to research, digitize and publish medieval manuscript collections online, Scott Gwara is helping bring these prized antiquities to the wider world.

Over the past several years, Gwara has visited more than 100 libraries and examined more than 3,000 manuscripts as he prepares a book on medieval manuscripts in North America, but he’s not content to keep his research to himself. Instead, he’s worked with the Center for Digital Humanities and USC’s libraries to create Pages from the Past, a website that comprises a digital record of every medieval manuscript in South Carolina’s institutional archives.

He’s also helped USC build a comprehensive teaching collection of manuscripts that are now used in classes, displayed in exhibitions and, of course, reproduced online.

“We accumulate these treasures for the state’s citizens, for every future student, but we share them with everybody,” Gwara says. “These digitization projects are about public generosity, public goodwill. And I think that’s a big part of the leadership equation.”

“Over the past five years Dr. Gwara has led a group of library partners in analyzing, publicizing and expanding an extraordinary but previously invisible corpus of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts,” said David Lee Miller, an English professor and director of USC’s Center for Digital Humanities. “This public internet archive of 200 codices, fragments and single leaves housed in a dozen repositories represents the first comprehensive statewide collection of medieval manuscripts ever to be made available to the public.”
Simon Hudson

Center of Economic Excellence in Tourism / College of Hospitality, Retail and Sport Management

“There’s a couple of things we need in South Carolina. We need more tourism product, but we also need more promotion of what we have.”

Simon Hudson came to South Carolina — and more specifically, to USC — because he saw opportunity. The Palmetto State had been a popular tourism destination for years, but there was also a great deal of untapped potential. His efforts to promote one-of-a-kind attractions such as the Gullah Geechee Heritage Corridor, to boost the tourism industry’s economic impact on the state and to involve USC faculty and graduate students in those efforts have shown him to be a leader both at the university and in the private sector.

“Lots of destinations have great beaches, friendly people, wonderful restaurants, great weather, but they don’t have this unique history that we have,” he said. “When I came down here, that was something I saw that we could leverage.”

Hudson also wanted to leverage the talent of USC’s junior faculty and graduate students by involving them directly in projects that benefit local economies. That could mean working with rural communities to expand tourism or helping an established resort find trained hospitality staff.

“Our graduate students are almost like consultants,” he said. “Instead of having them do a thesis, I match them up with a client and they go out and solve a real-life problem. We’re giving them an authentic business experience. Rather than just learn a theory they learn how to apply the theory.”

Hudson has worked closely with industry partners to help grow S.C.’s tourism industry, including projects in Bluffton, Aiken and the rural Pee Dee region and to assess demand for water-based tourism on the lower Santee Cooper waterway. Hudson has also created a business incubator for tourism and hospitality entrepreneurs to turn their business ideas into reality.
Lucia Pirisi-Creek
Department of Pathology, Microbiology and Immunology / School of Medicine

“We are here to generate new knowledge and to teach. Ideally, the two activities should be one. Teaching and research become one when we mentor students in the laboratory.”

When Lucia Pirisi-Creek was at the beginning of her career, she had an open door policy for students. “They could come into my office at any time, sit down and talk and I would drop everything I was doing to listen,” she said. “I also spent considerable time in the lab, doing experiments with my students — those were good times!”

Now the principal investigator for a $16 million INBRE (IDEA Network of Biomedical Research Excellence) award aimed at improving the research infrastructure at the state’s regional universities, Pirisi-Creek no longer has time for an open door policy. “I now have an open e-mail policy: they can e-mail me at any time, and I will respond as soon as I can, often stopping whatever else I am doing to send out a quick note. This is the best way I’ve found to be there for them, and at the same time get everything done,” she said.

During her time at the School of Medicine, Pirisi-Creek has mentored or co-mentored 24 doctoral students, three master’s students and several undergraduates, as well as five postdoctoral fellows and several junior faculty members.

“We are here to generate new knowledge and to teach.” she said. “Ideally, the two activities should be one. Teaching and research become one when we mentor students in the laboratory.”

Pirisi-Creek plays an active role in the community and has varied interests in the arts including music, literature, poetry and dance. In 2003, she founded the S.C. Multicultural Arts Center Inc., which sponsored “Artists Against Breast Cancer,” a research, education and outreach program that uses the arts to promote breast cancer awareness and to encourage women to get screened for this disease.
Ron Prinz

Department of Psychology / College of Arts and Sciences

“The pursuit of scientific grants is a tedious and frustrating endeavor, under the best of circumstances having a success rate even lower than a baseball player’s batting average. I find great joy in helping early-career faculty navigate the grant minefield and land a new grant.”

Ron Prinz has invested his career in working to unite research efforts that benefit families, and most especially their most vulnerable members — children.

He was instrumental in the formation in 2003 of USC’s Research Consortium on Children and Families, which includes members from 15 academic departments from eight colleges and schools. As part of the executive committee that guides the consortium, he helps oversee an organization that brings disciplines together and collectively boosts grant funding for child research.

Prinz also directs the Parenting and Family Research Center, which, despite its small size, generates close to $3 million yearly in research funding. The center has an international reach, with five core faculty members from the Department of Psychology, complemented by more than 20 colleagues from around the world. Despite those obligations, Prinz has always made time for junior colleagues.

“Ron was always available to meet with me, listened carefully and provided sound research and professional advice,” said associate professor Kate Flory. “I still think of Ron as a mentor and frequently approach him for professional and research guidance.”

“Generally speaking, faculty members at a major research university like USC are evaluated predominantly on the basis of their individual achievements,” Prinz said. “However, the institution fares better when faculty take on leadership roles that promote the research efforts of others. I made a conscious decision several years ago to invest time, effort and interest in the research development of other faculty, while maintaining my own scientific program, and have never regretted doing so.”
"A big emphasis of mine in recent years has been mentoring junior faculty and graduate students."

When Michael Sutton arrived at USC 32 years ago, he was part of a wave of new faculty hires in the engineering college who were expected to teach and conduct research equally well. It suited Sutton to a tee. “I love research, and I’ve always enjoyed going to the lab with my students,” he said.

The only problem was that there was a dearth of mentors for young faculty. “I couldn’t go down the hall and talk with an older faculty member about what I was facing; when they had been hired it was just to teach,” he said.

Fortunately, Sutton had the benefit of stellar mentors in graduate school for both his master’s and Ph.D. degrees. They went out of their way, he said, to explain what the future likely held as he made his way into academia. Their advice helped prepare him for a career of change as the University of South Carolina eventually became a Carnegie tier-one research institution.

“A big emphasis of mine in recent years has been mentoring junior faculty and graduate students,” Sutton said. “I feel I owe that. It’s my responsibility to help these younger people because I didn’t have it when I came here, but I had it in spades when I was in graduate school. I feel an obligation to pay forward what others gave to me.”

Owing to Sutton’s pioneering work, the USC’s College of Engineering and Computing is recognized as the birthplace of “digital image correlation” techniques. The DIC technology became one of the most effective and popular measurement techniques in experimental mechanics throughout the world. Sutton has been recognized as the William M. Murray Lecturer at the 2013 annual meeting of the Society of Experimental Mechanics.