

# A POTENT BLEND OF SCIENCE AND BUSINESS SMARTS



THE CAMPAIGN FOR JOHNS HOPKINS

Wisdom gained from her academic and corporate experiences helps Homaira Akbari make a lasting impact on the Henry A. Rowland Department of Physics and Astronomy



DOMINIKA WYLEZALEK, (LEFT) THE INAUGURAL RECIPIENT OF THE AKBARI-MACK FELLOWSHIP IN THE DEPARTMENT OF PHYSICS AND ASTRONOMY, SPEAKS WITH HOMAIRA AKBARI (RIGHT) — THE FELLOWSHIP'S DONOR AND THE DEPARTMENT'S ADVISORY COUNCIL CHAIR — DURING AKBARI'S VISIT TO CAMPUS IN JUNE.

*“A physics education makes you an independent thinker, and in this world, we need more people willing to think with an open mind. Physics, and the sciences, taught me this.”*

— Homaira Akbari

It's not a surprise that Homaira Akbari, chair of the Henry A. Rowland Department of Physics and Astronomy Advisory Council, has grown the board in number, diversity, and philanthropic potential over her five years of leadership. What is unusual? The former Hopkins postdoctoral fellow hasn't worked in physics since the mid-1990s, when she launched a successful second career chapter as a corporate leader. Yet it's that combination of science and business smarts that

*(Continued)*

has driven her lasting impact on the department's faculty and students.

"Homaira has redefined how this council works. They don't just come to Baltimore for a day — they are a group that's engaged with us throughout the year," says Tim Heckman, the Dr. A. Hermann Pfund Professor and chair of the department. "That's partly because she's able to speak the language of our business-focused advisers, but also our faculty. She's a very effective conduit between both sides."

Akbari's time as postdoctoral fellow on the physical Hopkins campus was quite short; within her first year, she became one of Hopkins' representatives at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN). But she appreciated the collaborations she had with the physics faculty and many others across the institution during visits to Homewood.

"What was evident when I went to Hopkins, and what I still appreciate to this day, is the diversity of people and disciplines it brings together," she says. "I met people from other schools and the medical side of Hopkins, and that was one of the most important and rewarding parts of my experience."

As chair of the Physics and Astronomy Advisory Council, Akbari enthusiastically supports the department's efforts to deepen interdisciplinary collaboration through initiatives like Space@Hopkins. She's also worked to strengthen the council through recruitment, expanding the roster from 11 to 25 members.

"These are people who are physicists, former physicists now in business, or businesspeople with a love for science and conviction for the positive impact

physics and astronomy has on our lives," Akbari says. There also are four women on the council — up from one, herself, when she joined the group in 2009.

Among Akbari's top priorities for the larger council has been to increase philanthropic support of the department's faculty and students — an endeavor that's proved successful. In the past three years, council members have made gifts totaling nearly \$2.6 million, supporting a Chair's Fund for postdoctoral fellows, a junior professorship, and two fellowships, among other priorities.

Akbari and her husband created one of those fellowships, and the couple plan to endow the fund with another gift. The inaugural Akbari-Mack Fellow,

says. "The budget for us was tight, so the Akbari-Mack Fellowship was very important in helping me meet and stay in touch with new collaborators."

Star fellows like Wylezalek may stay in the field of research for their entirety of their careers. Others may, by choice or necessity, choose other professional paths. But Akbari firmly believes that supporting more people interested in pursuing postgraduate studies in the sciences — particularly here, at Hopkins — is a small step toward a better world.

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Dominika Wylezalek, completes her Hopkins fellowship this year and has accepted a position with the European Southern Observatory's headquarters in Munich, Germany. Wylezalek, whose research focuses on distant galaxies and the supermassive black holes active within them, has used the Akbari-Mack funding to attend meetings and conferences around the world, creating important links in her scholarly network.

"As a young researcher, exposure to the community is invaluable. Building new collaborations needs to be done in person, and that requires travel," Wylezalek

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