



2025

NEW MEXICO STATE UNIVERSITY
DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI

**COLLEGE OF ARTS
AND SCIENCES**

DAWN M. GELINO, PH.D. '99, '01



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—Dawn M. Gelino,
Ph.D. '99, '01

When Dawn M. Gelino, Ph.D. '99, '01 goes to work in the morning, her job is to help answer the question, “Are we alone in the universe?”

Hired in 2024 by NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) to be Manager for NASA’s Exoplanet Exploration Program, Dawn was selected from more than 200 leaders in astronomical sciences from across the globe.

With a bachelor’s in physics magna cum laude from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and a Ph.D. in astronomy from NMSU, Dawn had been on a path to becoming an academic. She took a prestigious three-year postdoctoral fellowship at University of California, San Diego: “I had freedom to work on what I wanted — galaxies to quasars to brown dwarfs to black holes. But, as I was learning what it meant to be a professor,

it occurred to me that maybe I didn’t want to be a professor.”

During her postdoc, she had most enjoyed working as part of a community, both as a scientist and a leader. Her mentors convinced her to take a staff scientist job at the California Institute of Technology to be the liaison between NASA and the science community for the then-new NASA Exoplanet Science Institute (NExSci), which searches for habitable worlds. “At that time, fewer than 100 exoplanets had been identified. Now, I’m proud to have played a major role in growing this discipline.” Twenty years and 6,000 exoplanets later, she left as deputy director of NExSci for the position at JPL.

Dawn notes, “For 20 years, my job has been to enable cutting-edge science. Since 2008, I’ve overseen the NASA Sagan Program, and I created and ran the NASA Hubble Fellowship Program that kicks off brilliant, early career scientists who are answering the questions that shape our understanding of the universe.” She adds, “I even got to lead a global team to study habitability in the universe and helped choose researchers who use NASA’s time on the largest ground-based telescopes in the world.”

Dawn volunteers for the 9,000-member American Astronomical Society (AAS), currently serving her third year as vice president, and participates in many career panels: “I would not be where I am today if it weren’t for the support I’ve had from others in my field who gave back. That’s my motivation for giving back in the ways that I do.”

She credits retired NMSU Professor Tom Harrison with teaching her not only what she needed to know about observational astronomy but also about how to write clearly, submit proposals, and network: “He was always in my corner.”

Dawn’s many honors include being named a Legacy Fellow of the AAS, receiving NASA’s Exceptional Public Service Medal, and receiving a Certificate of Special Congressional Recognition. She also presented a TEDxCERN talk for which she spoke to a live audience of 1,200 that was streamed worldwide.

Her advice to students? “Work isn’t work if you love it, and the path is different for everyone. There is no one right answer — and you can change your mind. If you love what you are doing, just keep going. You do you.” ▲