



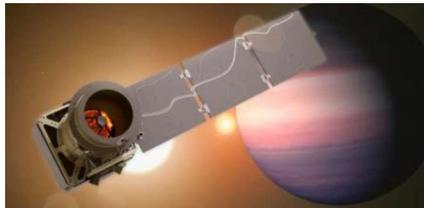
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA  
COLLEGE OF SCIENCE

# Astronomy & Steward Observatory

## February Newsletter

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### Pandora Launches, Opening a New Window on Distant Worlds



Artist's concept of NASA's Pandora mission, which will help scientists untangle the signals from the atmospheres of exoplanets – worlds beyond our solar system – and their stars.

Daniel Apai, a professor of astronomy and planetary sciences, leads the Pandora mission and its exoplanet science team on behalf of the U of A.

A new NASA mission will study exoplanets around distant stars.

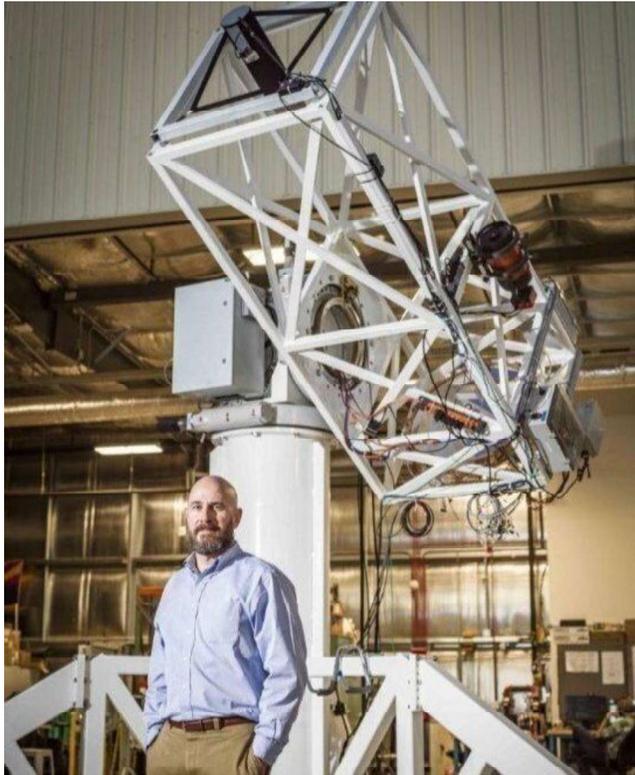
NASA's Pandora small satellite successfully launched on January 11, 2026, aboard a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket from Vandenberg Space Force Base as part of the Twilight rideshare mission. The latest addition to the University of Arizona's space science portfolio, Pandora is led by Daniel Apai, professor of astronomy and planetary sciences. The mission will advance the study of exoplanet atmospheres and help guide future efforts to identify potentially habitable worlds. [Learn more](#)

[U of A takes leading operations role in NASA mission](#)

[The Conversation: NASA's Pandora telescope will study stars in detail to learn about the exoplanets orbiting them](#)

[NASA Featured Story: NASA's Pandora Satellite, CubeSats to Explore Exoplanets, Beyond](#)

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UA Chad Bender, Team Leader, the Large Fiber Array Spectroscopic Telescope (LFAST)

### **Eric and Wendy Schmidt to fund space telescope, three ground-based observatories**

One of the three ground-based telescopes will be the **Large Fiber Array Spectroscopic Telescope (LFAST)**. LFAST will consist of a large array of small telescopes designed specifically to perform spectroscopy on faint objects.

The array will use optical fibers to feed light from each mirror to a spectrograph, with mirrors grouped into subarrays of twenty 30-inch telescopes on a single structure. Led by University of Arizona scientist **Chad Bender**, the scalable design could range from the equivalent of a 3-meter telescope to a collecting area comparable to a 30-meter-class observatory. **Kitt Peak** is the preferred site, with **Mount Lemmon** and **Mount Hopkins** as alternatives. [Learn more](#)

[Scientific American: The First-Ever Private Space Telescope Could Launch before Decade's End](#)

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**Awards of Distinction**

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## Steward Observatory's Kate Alexander and Carl Fields Win Prestigious Scialog Awards



Steward Observatory's Kate Alexander and Carl Fields are recipients of the 2025 Scialog Collaborative Innovation Awards

University of Arizona astronomers have been recognized with prestigious awards to advance groundbreaking research using the Vera C. Rubin Observatory's Legacy Survey of Space and Time (LSST). [Learn more](#)

Read more about U of A's involvement in [mirror casting](#) and [sensor development](#) for the LSST.

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## Steward Observatory's Marcia Rieke wins prestigious award for her influential career in astronomical research

In January, at the American Astronomical Society (AAS) meeting in Phoenix, Arizona, AAS awarded the 2025 [Henry Norris Russell Lectureship](#) to Steward Observatory's Regents Professor of Astronomy Marcia

Regents' Professor Marcia Rieke is the recipient of this year's Russell Lectureship, which honors a full career of eminence in astronomical research.

Rieke. The award is among the biggest honors offered by the AAS, celebrating a full career of eminence in astronomical research. [Learn more](#)

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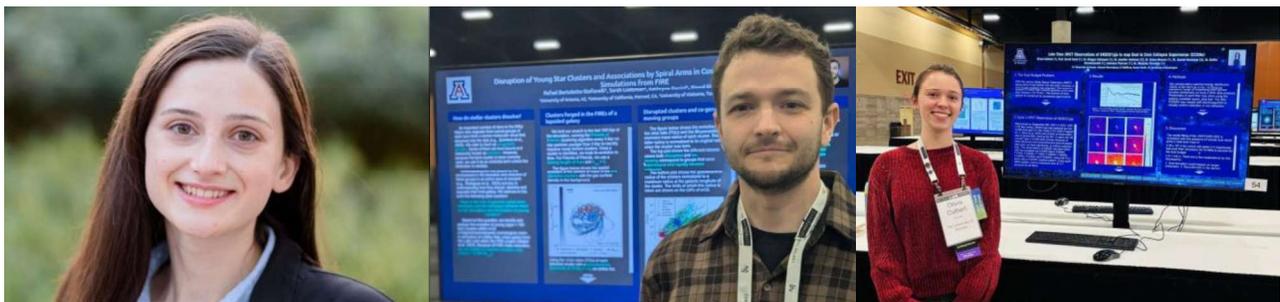
### **Chris Impey Wins 2026 Lewis Thomas Prize Honoring the “Scientist as Poet”**

The Rockefeller University has announced that U of A Distinguished Professor of Astronomy Chris Impey has been awarded the 2026 Lewis Thomas Prize for Writing about Science. This prestigious international honor, presented by The Rockefeller University, recognizes the rare individual who bridges the worlds of science and the humanities—what the prize describes as the “scientist as poet.” [Learn more](#)

Distinguished Professor Chris Impey will receive the 2026 Lewis Thomas Prize, for his work bridging science and the humanities.

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### **U of A Astronomy Students Shine at AAS Chambliss Poster Competition**



**Katherine Gold**, a 5th-year graduate student in

Chemistry with an  
astrobiology minor,

Rafael Bertolotto presents  
his poster at the January  
AAS conference

Olivia Culbert presents her  
poster at the AAS  
conference

The Department of Astronomy is proud to celebrate our exceptional students who distinguished themselves at the 247th American Astronomical Society meeting in Phoenix this January, earning recognition in the Chambliss Student Poster Competition.

With over 480 students entering the competition nationally, the AAS selected just 25 winners and 21 honorable mention recipients—making each recognition a significant achievement. The University of Arizona's representation among these honorees reflects the exceptional quality of research and mentorship fostered within our astronomy program. [Learn more](#)

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## Spring 2026 Public Evening Lecture Series

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### Monday, February 16, 2026

*Bear Down, Look Up: AI on the Cosmic Court*

*Panel Discussion*

Dr. Marcia Rieke, Dr. Chris Impey, Dr. Ann Zabludoff, Dr. Peter Behroozi, Dr. C-K Chan

### Monday, March 2, 2026

*Hot Dust Around the Star  $\kappa$  Tucanae A*

*Dr. Thomas Stuber, Steward Observatory*

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Lectures are in-person or

Watch via **ZOOM** link <https://arizona.zoom.us/j/4470189357>

Location: Steward Observatory Lecture Hall N210

**Doors open at 7:00 pm and Lectures begin at 7:30 pm MST**

Nearest parking 2nd Street or Cherry Ave Garage

Telescope viewing follows at 8:30 PM - Weather Permitting

[Videos of previous public lectures](#)



### **2026 College of Science Lecture Series**

20th Anniversary series begins Tuesday, February 4 at 7 pm. [Learn more](#)

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### **Space Drafts: Astronomy Lectures**

Space Drafts is moving! Join us on the third WEDNESDAY of each month at our new location, Zerai's International Bar (2725 E Broadway Blvd). Our next installation will be on wednesday, October 15th at 7:30 PM. Stay tuned to our communication channels for future updates. In addition to email announcements you can also follow us on social media, we're on [Facebook](#) and [Bluesky](#).

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### **Friends of Steward Observatory**

*"Your generosity powers discovery and inspires future astronomers."*

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### **Steward Observatory: Launching Into a New Year of Discovery**

As a new year begins, the University of Arizona continues its century-long journey at the forefront of astronomical discovery. From building some of the world's most powerful telescopes to training the next generation of scientists, **Steward Observatory** is shaping the future of research, education, and innovation.

### **A Fresh Year for Learning and Discovery**

At Steward Observatory and the Department of Astronomy, students start each year with hands-on opportunities to explore the cosmos, work alongside world-renowned faculty, and tackle the questions that will define the future of science.

### **Your Support Lights the Way**

Every breakthrough starts with your generosity. Philanthropy fuels scholarships, expands access to cutting-edge facilities, and gives students the chance to participate in transformative research. Together, we can make this year one of remarkable discoveries and bold exploration.

✦ **Step into the new year with us—help shape the future of astronomy.** ✦

[Learn more](#)

[Additional Astronomy Giving Options](#)

[Make a Gift](#)

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[Have a Friend Sign up For Our Monthly Astronomy Newsletter](#)

For more information or questions

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