

Karin Öberg was awarded a Barry Prize for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement in 2024. In [this video](#), Santiago Schnell of Dartmouth interviews Dr. Öberg about the university as a “civic friendship,” and how science pursues a deep human need not only to know but to experience awe and wonder at the beauty of our world.

Santiago Schnell, Dartmouth

My name is Santiago Schnell. I'm the William K. Warren Foundation Dean of the College of Science, and I'm professor of biological sciences and applied and computational mathematics and statistics at the University of Notre Dame. I'm as well a member of the American Academy of Sciences and Letters, and I serve on the board of the academy. It's my distinguished pleasure today to interview Professor Karin Öberg. She's the Thomas Dudley Cabot Professor of Natural Sciences and professor of astronomy at Harvard University. She recently received the Barry Prize for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement from the American Academy of Sciences and Letters.

Karin, welcome. It's a pleasure to have you here, and I have three questions for you so let's see what you have for us today. The first thing that I'm interested in knowing is, what are some unappreciated ways that the work you have done in your field contributes to human understanding and well-being? Sometimes it is not clear how astrophysics, knowing about the stars and the planets and the universe, can help us to be better human beings.

Karin Öberg, Harvard University

Thank you for that question, and the first thing that I would like to do is to remove them so that there's a sharp distinction between “understanding” and “well-being.” We are the kind of creature that really wants to know things, that desire to know a thing deeply. Just how little we like being lied to reveals this, but the kind of joy that we must get out of grasping something or understanding something for the first time shows this even more profoundly. In some sense, astronomy is in the business of deepening our understanding about our place in the cosmos. When I think about us humans, we want to understand our origins as a country, as a civilization, as humanity, as a living thing, and as a dweller in the cosmos. Just in giving us this broad and deep view of what the material order around us is like really does contribute to human well-being as well as understanding.

But we actually do one more thing that is maybe underappreciated even though I think it's commonly felt. Astronomy also really provides a deep contribution to the beautiful, another thing that we desire deeply as human beings. It's the privilege of the scientists generally to help uncover a hidden order underneath what we can directly see, and that order is very often beautiful. In astronomy, it's just that much more apparent when we see what the observations of the night sky look like. That is actually a great gift that astronomy provides to humanity.

Schnell

That's fantastic. Your analogy reminds me, when my children were very small, they would laugh the first time you switched the light bulb on and they would see the flame. It's that discovery that suddenly provides you joy of knowing that you move the switch and a light just turns on. Similarly, your academic enterprise, your work illuminates and creates well-being.

Öberg

Absolutely. Even though we may see it the most obviously with little children, I have seen exactly the same reaction in many much more grown up humans. It's good to remember that we want our health, we want to be well fed and well clothed and all those things, but we also have these spiritual needs, and understanding what's going on around us is one of them.

Schnell

The beauty as well is connected to all these issues that you brought up. We need beauty to experience happiness and as well awe to some degree because beauty is always unique.

Öberg

We do, and one of the things that modernity in some sense has robbed us of—and I'm not saying this as someone who's generally pessimistic about technological progress—is the night sky. It is worth pondering how much of the beauty of the skyscape we have lost when almost all of us live in heavily light-polluted areas. In some sense, astronomy is giving some of that back by sharing widely the kind of images that we get from some of the really amazing telescopes that now exist.

Schnell

Now that we have talked about truth and beauty to some degree, I always think that the mission of the university is somewhere connected to truth and beauty, and maybe solidarity. I wonder how would you describe that? What is the mission of the university? What ought it to be, and why it's important?

Öberg

Maybe the first thing to say is that the university does have a unique mission, and we lose sight of that at our peril. At its deepest core, the university is or should be a community and therefore a kind of civic friendship that is in the business of the pursuit of truth. That is really important, whether we do it as teachers, so we teach our students how to gain understanding and gain the tools to continue the pursuit of truth independently, or it's our scholarship that reveals new understanding or new truths about the world around us. That is what makes the university a common good. It's not just benefiting us who are lucky enough to be inside of it, but the society as a whole. When we lose sight of that, we really risk no longer being that kind of common good. When we privilege our own comfort, for example, over the pursuit of truth, that is privileging us over this common good or societal good that the university should be.

Schnell

Yes, and to some degree it's this light switch again, so that if it's not true, you're not illuminating something, then it loses its meaning and the magic of what we'll do in universities.

Öberg

It does. There's this wonderful saying by Chesterton that the problem of the day—a hundred years ago, but I think it's still true—is not that there's all these vices, but rather that there are virtues that are misplaced or unmoored. I think about that with the university; how it can lose its mission. It's not

because anyone is trying to do anything bad. It's because there are sometimes competing “goods.” If we lose sight that the core good of the university is truth, and if these other goods come into conflict with it, truth must prevail. That's when we start veering off course. I also want to emphasize the community part; there has to be this sense of a civic friendship within the university for that communal pursuit of truth to actually work out. The good and the true and the beautiful are deeply intertwined.

Schnell

Yes, so the solidarity in the university, that friendship, the fraternal contributions of working together.

I'm curious about another thing. Now that you're working at the university, you do research. What things have pleasantly surprised you in your work over the last five years? If you want to share something at a dinner table to excite people about your work over the last five years, what would it be?

Öberg

I have been on this four- or five-year journey of falling back in love with the academy or the university. So, there are a lot of things that I have discovered about the university that I really, really love. A major thing is the students, though I'm going to be more specific. One of the things that I started doing about four years ago is working with a group of students at Harvard to think about how we could make the university increase intellectual vitality at the university. To see the students take the lead on this, putting themselves out there, was this deeply humbling experience. A little bit of guilt also; maybe we as faculty should have taken the lead on this. But to have the students in the driver's seat and just be there to assist them was such a lovely experience. It shows the quality, both the intellectual and the moral quality, of the students that end up at this kind of university. So that was a fantastic experience.

The other thing is just how many great colleagues I have at Harvard. I've had the pleasure of getting to know people from across all the schools the past few years in working on different kinds of committees and projects, thinking about excellence and open inquiry. Finding that there really is that friendship, and that the friendship is there because we have the same sort of mission in sight. That's what makes the university such a joy to work at. I'd say, just in general, discovering how much common ground there is across the university to recenter what the university is for has been a joy.

I could *not* not mention just how fun it has been to be an astronomer the past couple of years with the launch of our amazing new telescope, the James Webb Space Telescope. It feels like every day we're discovering something new. Now we have this new pair of glasses to peer into the cosmos with. One of the reasons that I know that it's part of human flourishing to understand new things or to see new things is just the joy that I feel and I see with my students when we discover new things, however small, about the cosmic story we are in. Those are a couple of tastes of what's kept me very happy and cheerful the past few years.

Schnell

That's fantastic. And I love the fact that you brought the students in. So we, the ones who are more senior in the universities, are stewards of the institution for the younger generation and they are so heavily engaged and they want to continue keeping the university moving forward. So it's absolutely a joy to hear that.

Öberg

That has really been my experience the past few years, that there's this hunger among the students to grapple with difficult things, to have intellectual challenges, and that's why they want to be here. It's been very impressive to see that, for some of them, when they feel they haven't gotten all of that the way they should, that instead of complaining about it, they actually get to work pushing us as their faculty and administrators to do the right thing and to sometimes feed them better. I love it. It's been a joy.

Schnell

This is a unique challenge. I always say that academics have two kinds of children: our biological children and the ones who inherit what we leave behind in the academic enterprise. It's very important. So we just keep cultivating that.

Karin, it has been a pleasure to have you here. I enjoyed this conversation very much.

Öberg

Thank you so much. The pleasure has been all mine.

Schnell

And congratulations for receiving the Barry Prize for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement.

Öberg

Well, that was the honor of a lifetime, so thank you very much.