Nomination of Associate Professor Vanessa K. Bohns
For the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Scholarship and Creative Activities

Nominator: George R. Boyer, Senior Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, ILR School, and Professor of Economics and International and Comparative Labor

It is my pleasure to nominate Vanessa Bohns, Associate Professor in the ILR School's Department of Organizational Behavior, for the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Scholarship and Creative Activities. Vanessa earned her Ph.D. in Social Psychology from Columbia University. After serving as an Assistant Professor of Management Science at Waterloo University, she joined the ILR faculty in 2014 and was promoted to Associate Professor with tenure in 2017. She teaches courses on organizational behavior, negotiation and conflict resolution, and morality at work.

Professor Bohns is a productive, creative, and influential scholar. Her main research stream is in the area of social influence, compliance, and consent. She examines how the tendency to overlook others' feelings of self-consciousness plays out in dynamics of power and social influence. Can someone tell when another person feels uncomfortable with a request, but feels they can't say "no" to it? The traditional focus in compliance research has been on the thoughts and behavior of persons *receiving the request*; it largely has ignored the perspective of persons *making the request*. Professor Bohns focuses on those making requests. In a series of studies, she finds that people consistently tend to underestimate the power and influence they have over others in certain situations. Her experimental paradigm consists of having participants ask other people for things: to borrow a cell phone, fill out a questionnaire, sponsor them in a race, escort them to a designated location on campus, or even to lie for them. Before the participants make these requests, she asks them to estimate the rate at which people are likely to comply with their requests. She consistently finds that the requesters underestimate, often by a very wide margin, the likelihood that those being asked will comply, and concludes that this

"underestimation-of-compliance" bias largely is due to the requesters' failure to appreciate the extent to which saying "no" is awkward and uncomfortable, leading people to agree to do things they would prefer not to do in order to avoid the discomfort of saying "no."

These robust findings have led Professor Bohns and coauthors to examine several follow-up questions leading to new research streams. Does the extent to which requesters underestimate compliance vary between more individualistic cultures and more collectivist cultures? Her study comparing the responses of participants in the United States and China indicates that American requesters were indeed more likely to underestimate compliance than were Chinese requesters. Do these findings depend on the specific nature of the request? In one study she had investigators ask strangers to sign a document stating that the investigator had made a marketing pitch that he or she did not actually make. In another, university student investigators asked other students to write in pen in a purported library book. Here, as before, investigators underestimated the social pressure they levied on others through simple unethical suggestions, as more agreed to engage in the behavior than the instigators predicted. She also examines whether the manner in which the request is made impacts the underestimation-of-compliance effect. She finds that, while investigators underestimate compliance in face-to-face requests, they *overestimate* the effectiveness of email requests for soliciting compliance from strangers. One of her studies found that "despite the fact that targets of a request . . . were 34 times more likely to comply in person than over email," requesters did not predict any difference in rates of compliance between in person and email requests.

Professor Bohns has extended her research to examine the important and timely issues of voluntary consent to police searches and to unwanted romantic advances. Police officers can search someone without warrant or cause in cases of "voluntary consent." About 90% of police searches are conducted this way, and virtually everyone asked says "yes" to such requests. Are

the targets of these searches truly consenting voluntarily? She examined the pressure felt by people to comply with search requests in several ways, and found that psychologically it is much harder to refuse consent than it seems, that the degree of pressure needed to get people to comply is shockingly minimal. Again, people vastly underestimate compliance. A group of survey respondents predicted that 65% of drivers stopped by the police grant consent to searches, when in fact 90% of drivers stopped say yes when police ask to search their car. Her studies show that even when people are told they have a right to refuse search requests, it does not change *how free they felt* to refuse. She concludes that "the social imperatives to comply with a police officer's request persist even when people are properly informed of their rights or given a consent form to sign—or just asked politely."

One of the revelations of the #MeToo movement is that many men appear "surprised" that their encounters with women were not consensual. In her 2019 paper in *Social Psychology and Personality Science*, Professor Bohns and a coauthor find that "romantic suitors generally underestimate the discomfort their unwanted overtures cause those on the receiving end." She finds that "in the context of romantic or sexual pursuit, people are not just bad at perspective-taking, [they] are systematically biased." They believe that the "receivers" of their advances feel more willing and comfortable to reject them than is actually the case. This "cognitive blind spot" leads suitors to view their actions as less coercive than they are viewed by others, and to misattribute receivers' reluctance to say "no" to their advances as genuine romantic interest. This bias can lead to romantic overtures escalating to the level of sexual harassment. She also finds that workplace interventions designed to foster employees' "perspective-taking skills" should help colleagues avoid romantic encounters that are not mutually desired.

Professor Bohns also does important research not directly related to the underestimation-of-compliance effect, concerning the subtle ways in which we influence others' behavior. These

research projects include: overestimating the likelihood that others will ask for help; the benefits of feeling guilty; the illusion of anonymity; and the interpersonal dynamics of embodied power.

Professor Bohns' research is interdisciplinary in both application and scholarship. It has appeared in top-tier academic journals in General Psychology (*Psychological Science*; *Current Directions in Psychological Science*), Social Psychology (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*; *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*; *Social Psychology and Personality Science*) and Management (*Organization Science*; *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*). She has 27 scholarly publications, 20 in peer-reviewed journals. Since coming to Cornell in 2014, she has 16 publications, 13 in peer-reviewed journals. Her research has been described as "highly innovative," "creative," "novel," "impactful," "rigorous," and "theoretically important," and it frequently is cited by others. She has nearly 1,400 citations (Google Scholar); three of her papers have been cited over 100 times, one over 400 times. She has chaired two symposia organized for the annual Academy of Management meetings, one of which was selected as an Organizational Behavior Showcase Symposium. She has presented papers at 26 national or international conferences, 15 since coming to Cornell.

Her research is well-grounded theoretically and also has important practical implications. As a result, its impact goes far beyond academic circles. Professor Bohns has done an outstanding job of disseminating her research to the broader community. She writes op-eds on compliance and consent which have been published in the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Hill*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Salon*, and several other outlets. Her work also has appeared or been covered, in print or online, in *Psychology Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Economist*, the *Financial Times*, *Forbes*, the *Washington Post*, the *LA Times*, *Scientific American*, and *Management Today*, among others. She has appeared on NPR's Here and Now ("Why is it so hard to say 'no'?") and Hidden Brain ("The Influence You Have: Why We're

Blind to Our Power Over Others"), Freakonomics Radio's No Stupid Questions ("Do we overestimate or underestimate our significance in other people's lives?"), and Bloomberg TV ("MeToo encourages companies to reevaluate workplace policies"). Finally, she has a forthcoming book, *You Have More Influence Than You Think* (W. W. Norton, Fall 2021), which summarizes her work for a popular audience.

Professor Bohns has actively applied for and been successful in securing federally funded research grants. She currently is PI on a National Science Foundation Grant ($250,855) on "Psychological assessment of voluntary consent," and she is Co-PI on a recent application (as of 11/2020) for a $1,197,740 NSF grant through the Information and Intelligent Systems division. She has received two grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. She also is the Co-Investigator on a Cornell Institute for the Social Sciences Collaborative Grant on "Prosocial behaviors in the digital age."

In 2018 Professor Bohns was the inaugural winner of Cornell's Provost Research Innovation Award in Social Sciences. In 2019 she became an elected fellow of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, an honor recognizing "extraordinary and distinctive contribution to the science of Personality and Social Psychology." She currently is an Associate Editor of the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* and serves on the Editorial Boards of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and *Social Cognition*. From 2015 to 2017 she was Associate Editor of *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*.

Professor Bohns' research is creative, theoretically important, methodologically and analytically sophisticated, and incredibly timely. It is academically rigorous and has important implications for pressing social issues, and she has succeeded in disseminating it to the broader public. This outstanding work warrants recognition. Professor Bohns richly deserves a SUNY Chancellor's Award for Scholarship and Creative Activities.