The Priestley Award was established by Dickinson College in honor and memory of Joseph Priestley, the eighteenth century scientist and theologian best known as the discoverer of oxygen. Every year the award is presented to a distinguished scientist for his or her discoveries or contributions to the welfare of mankind. The winner receives a monetary award as well as the Priestley Medallion. Dickinson College presented the first award in 1952 and has continued the presentations annually. Each year, a committee comprised of faculty and Dickinson alumni nominate up to three scientists they feel are deserving of this award before the final selection is made. In order to better represent the scientific community, the scientific field of the nominees rotates each year. Responsibility for the award also rotates among the different science departments at Dickinson.

The Priestley Award celebration includes a reception, a dinner, and a lecture in which the award recipient is invited to speak about his or her work. During this time, many of Priestley’s possessions, including the famed burning glass, are generally on exhibit in the College Archives. The Priestley Award celebration is considered to be among the more important events of the academic year at Dickinson College.

The Priestley Award collection is organized chronologically by the year in which the award was presented. Also included in this collection is some biographical information on Joseph Priestley, general information about the award itself, a history of the award written by Horace Rogers, financial receipts, and information on the 1973 Science for Survival Symposium. Each yearly award celebration series is further divided into different folders. These divisions
include folders for correspondence; event preparation; posters, programs, and invitations; news releases and publications; and nominating committee. Correspondence consists of letters concerning the award and celebration, inter-office memos, and invitations, all arranged chronologically. The event preparation file consists of various papers such as invitation lists, menus, sample letters, itineraries, speech transcriptions, and any other information collected by the President of the College in preparation for that year’s award. The posters, programs, and invitations folders contain ephemeral materials related to the annual event. In the news releases and publications file, all newspaper articles and other writings pertaining to the award or the award winner are maintained. Nominations, ballots, and letters and memos concerning the nominations can be found in the nominating committee file.

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