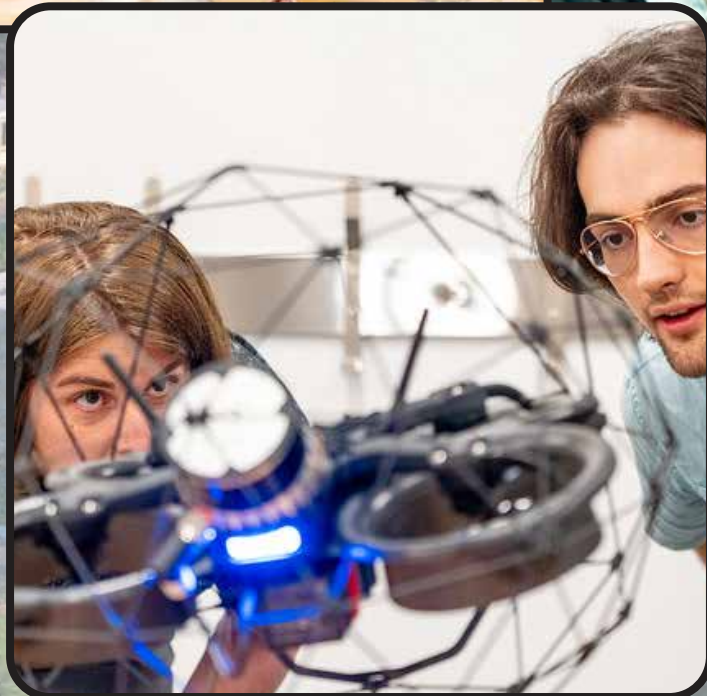


# COMPUTER SCIENCE NEWSLETTER 2026



*For Alumni & Friends*



DEPARTMENT OF  
COMPUTER SCIENCE



## LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

What a year it has been. And what a year it is shaping out to be! All-things AI. Budget matters. Faculty hiring. And more. All the while, through the good, and the uncertain, I am happy to report that we are forging ahead, continuing to provide our students across our five degree programs an incredible, hands-on, genuine learning experience, in and outside of the classroom.

AI has taken the world by storm, with the promise to revolutionize entire industries and impact many aspects of our day-to-day lives. Discussions are on-going regarding the role of AI in education. As one can imagine, there is a balance to be struck. To the benefit of our students in CS, Data Science, Cybersecurity, and BAE-CS BS degrees, and our graduate MS program, we have challenged ourselves to forge ahead and innovate the curriculum via the introduction of no fewer than a half dozen classes such as Large Language Models, Agentic AI, and Applications of ML in Cybersecurity. These add to the list of existing established classes such as Machine Learning, Deep Learning, and Robotics, to ensure that our graduates are poised to become efficient users, and architects and innovators, of current cutting-edge and future AI technologies. At the same time, we recognize, through a very active work group charged to envision the future of AI in CS at Western, that lasting success in Computer Science is rooted in the depth and mastery of fundamentals, and not in the mastery of a single tool nor technology. To that effect, we as faculty and staff are committed to the success of our students. Our goal is to empower our graduates to lead and innovate, with or without AI.

Speaking to budget matters, the funding climate at both the national and state levels is challenging to say the least. We've been tasked to become more lean. Nimble. Efficient. But at the same time, we are fortunate to have the support of the university administration who has given the go-ahead to hire new faculty. Erik Fretheim, as the architect and inaugural Director of the Cybersecurity program, retired this past year. We are presently conducting a search for his replacement. Add to that, we are seeking to hire two additional tenure-track faculty, either in AI or cybersecurity. The future looks bright.

A few notable highlights, from a far longer list, include continued success at securing external funding, such as Dr. Elglaly's recent NSF grant to Pioneer Accessibility in Computing Education. Several groups of students were honored with awards at the 2025 Scholar's Week, including Cooper Morgan, Ada Kolze, and Kyle Peterson winning the People's Choice Award for their Vulkan-based Synthetic Vision System, and graduate students Keagan Edwards and Wilson Zuber winning the graduate student People's Choice Award for Understanding Misaligned Objectives in Autism Technology Research. Our competitive programming club continues to impress; they came home as winners of division II for Washington state at the 2025 Pacific Northwest Region of the International Collegiate Programming Contest, beating out dozens of other teams.

All-in-all, I remain very grateful for the wonderful community here in CS, and likewise want to thank you, our alumni and friends, for your continued support. We netted almost \$20,000 in donations at Give Day 2025 alone, with many more donations received throughout the year, including from former department chair and faculty emeritus Dr. Larry Menninga, whose significant donation has permanently endowed an annual student scholarship and student travel to conferences. Thank you all.

Filip Jagodzinski, PhD  
Professor, Department Chair



# A LASTING GIFT TO COMPUTER SCIENCE

**Dr. Larry Menninga, Faculty Emeritus, has very generously made a significant donation to the Computer Science Department.** Through his donation he has endowed a yearly scholarship, and separately, yearly travel for undergraduate and graduate students to attend conferences to present their faculty-mentored cutting-edge research. Dr. Menninga's donation will have a lasting and far-reaching impact on CS-- directly benefiting students and, in turn, strengthening faculty research programs and scholarly engagement.

Dr. Menninga was hired in 1970 to design and develop a Computer Science major within the Math Department; by 1971, there were 10 CS courses in the university catalog. Interest in CS grew, and in 1983, the Computer Science and Math Department split into two distinct majors. Dr. Menninga was on hand during those rapid growth years, spearheading many initiatives. He later served as Chair of Computer Science in 1988, during a pivotal time when computing and CS research were rapidly evolving into the major technological force that they are today.

**Thank you, Larry, for your extraordinary generosity and for your enduring commitment to the success of Computer Science and its students.**

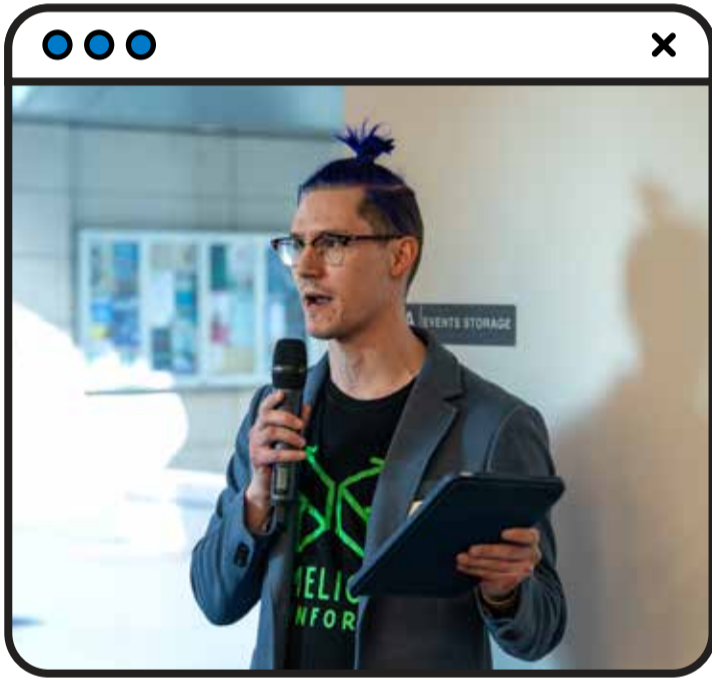
# CS DEPARTMENT GALA 2026

By Ada Kolze

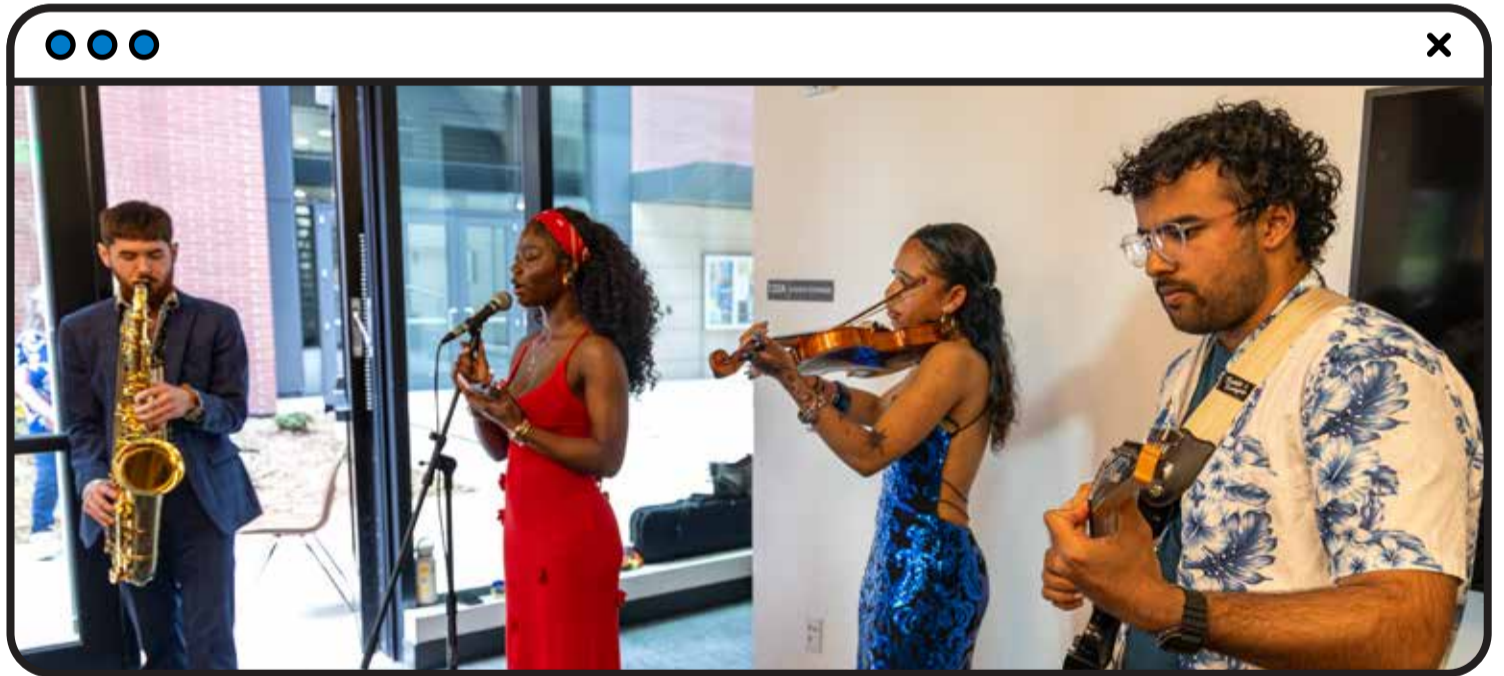
Last spring, the Association for Gender Inclusion in Computing (AGIC), Western's Computer Science Department, and the Western Foundation came together to host a gala celebrating the opag of the new Computer Science and Electrical Engineering building, Kaiser Borsari Hall. As the current president of AGIC, I was integrally involved in organizing the event.

The idea for the gala was first proposed by Dr. Filip Jagodzinski, chair of the Computer Science Department, who envisioned an event reminiscent of past alumni gatherings in Seattle. It has been years since the department hosted a large celebration that brought together students, faculty, and alumni, and the opening of the new building provided the perfect occasion to reconnect and celebrate.

AGIC officers began planning this event Fall 2024, slowly bringing together plans for the event itinerary, logistics, advertising, and alumni contacts. Current and past officers of AGIC played a vital role in the gala planning, with Kiley Schutte, Wil Zuber, and me taking the lead.

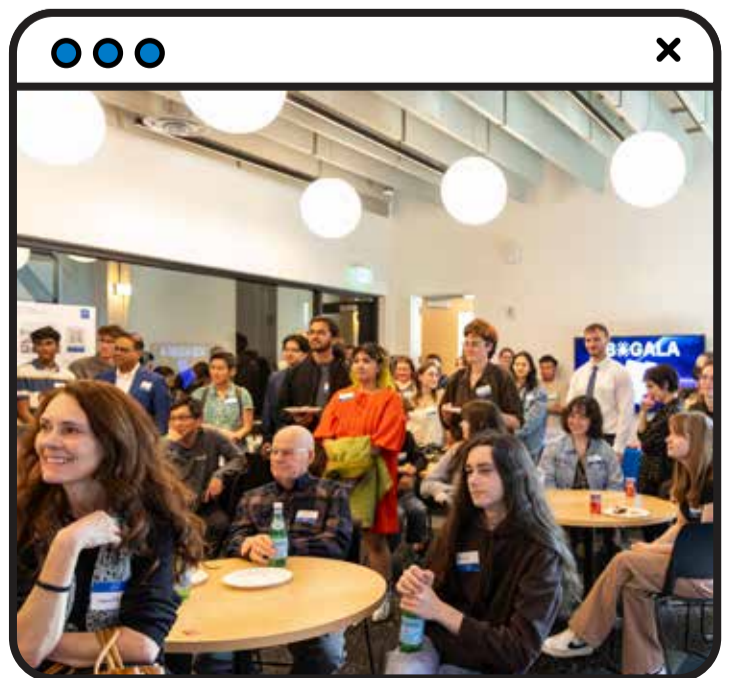


The KB Gala was an enormous success. After months of preparation and promotion, over one hundred attendees packed the event space. With the large turnout and the beauty and novelty of the new building the atmosphere was alight with excitement! Dozens of alumni dating back to the 1980s and faculty emeritus of the same era came. As a student, I really enjoyed seeing past alumni and hearing how Western has changed since they were students, as well as hearing about their career paths. The event featured live music by a student band, a poster session, and a keynote talk from alum Neal Digre, who shared his award-winning work that earned the XPRIZE.



This gala celebrated important growth of Western's Computer Science Department. The department has been steadily graduating more students and welcoming new and innovative faculty. The new building supports growth by providing more faculty offices, student gathering spaces, and cutting-edge technology labs including a robotics lab.

The gala reminded me that earning a degree here is not just about completing coursework, but also about becoming part of a vibrant community that continues long after graduation.





# GRAPPLING WITH AI

All of us who teach at Western are grappling with surprising new AI technologies such as ChatGPT. From the technical side, I find these advances exciting and marvel that artificial neural networks can do what they do.

Seeing such rapid progress driven by larger networks and vastly more training data — “scaling” in the parlance of the field — inspires me to try and understand why they work. It’s why I’ve been an organizer of the Conference on the Mathematical Theory of Deep Neural Networks and why many of us in the department have published research on neural algorithms and learning in the brain. AI is already transforming the field of programming by letting you generate or refactor sophisticated software infrastructures using a few prompts.

**Yet my colleagues and I are afraid of what this might mean for our students.** Dr. Caroline Hardin worries that “If AI is all we say it is, we don’t need universities any more... because AI will teach us everything.” If an AI tool can produce the perfect answer to a homework problem, how do I encourage students to struggle through it themselves and assess their work? We can change the kind of problems we assign and move to pencil-and-paper, but we also need to prepare students to inevitably use these tools in their future jobs.

**Kameron Decker Harris, Ph.D.**



Current AI does not work like real brains or truly understand the world (yet?), and teachers are as important as ever for connecting with students at both intellectual and personal levels to help them reach their full potential. Across the University, groups are exploring how to foster teamwork, close reading, writing, and deep thinking skills in our students. These matter as much as ever in a world with AI.

# STUDENT NEWS



## WWU PROGRAMMERS SECURE STATE AND REGIONAL SUCCESS AT ICPC

**Western Washington University's Competitive Programming Club had an outstanding showing at the ICPC Pacific Northwest Regional Competition this fall. Western brought five Division 1 teams and one Division 2 team, with the Division 2 team earning 1st place in Washington State and 3rd place overall in the Pacific Northwest.**

This year's Division 1 problems were especially challenging, with the average team solving only about one problem. Despite this, Western's five Division 1 teams performed strongly, completing several difficult challenges against top regional competition. The teams representing WWU in the advanced division were the Backfill Boys (Abdiel Ramirez, Ryan Gehrig, Mitchell Dohrman), Error 418 (Daniel Venable, Sam Johnson, Alex Shepler), getTeamName(); (Naima Zida-Brown, Jackson Seal, Eric Tootill), the Java Jumbos (Isaiah Hardy, Grayson Koch, Israel Avendano), and touch grass.sh (Neil Macneale, Taiming Yuen, James, Jakob Wiley).

Together, these teams secured regional placements and delivered an excellent showing at the highest level of ICPC competition.

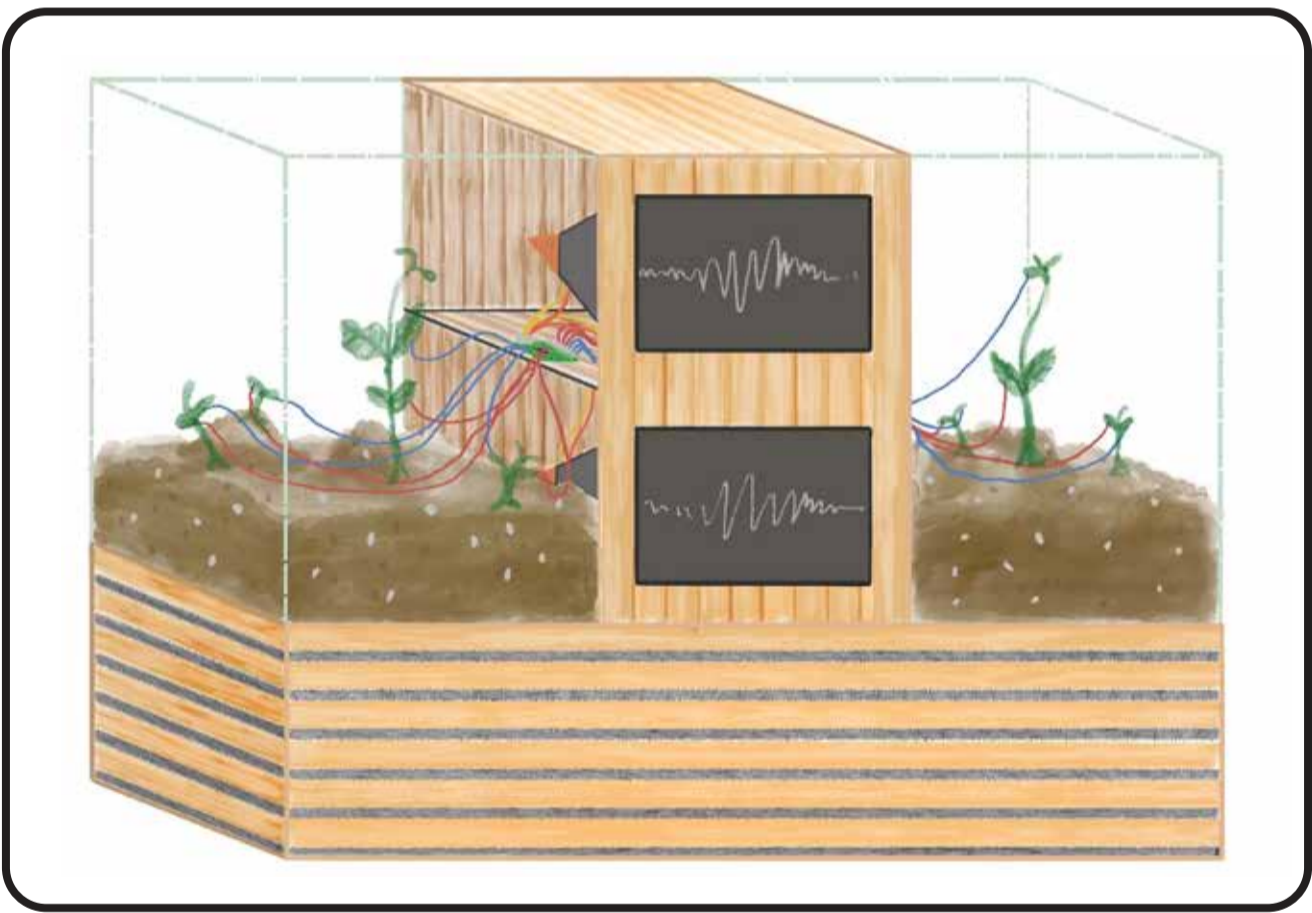
The club continues to grow and welcomes students of all experience levels. Congratulations to all competitors, and special thanks to Dr. See-Mong Tan, the club officers, and all who helped prepare Western's teams for success.

Led by club co-presidents Autumn Davis and Anabel Bedlan, the club prepares students through regular practice, mock competitions, and collaborative problem-solving. Teams qualified last spring and trained extensively leading up to the regional contest, held at UW Tacoma.

Competing against 142 teams from across the region, WWU's Division 2 team Suffer Overflow—Brian Rink, Daniel Perry, and Sam Bardsley—achieved a remarkable podium finish. Despite exceptionally difficult Division 1 problems, Western's five Division 1 teams performed strongly against highly experienced programs.



## SENIOR CAPSTONE PROJECT: SOUNDGARDEN



**Hamza Magsi, a Computer Science student, envisioned an innovative capstone / WWU Honors College project that merged plants, music, and bio-electric signal processing.**

The SoundGarden initiative drew inspiration from Kaiser Borsari Hall's carbon-neutral mission and its multidisciplinary integration of computer science, electrical and computer engineering, and environmental science. The SoundGarden displays plant bio-electricity into a medium that humans can understand – music and visuals. Hamza collaborated with faculty across disciplines: Tarek Idriss in Computer Science, Sasha Petrenko in Art, and Anu Singh-Cundy in Biology.

**Hamza shared his experience of working on the project:**

Developing SoundGarden required me to learn a wide range of new skills, including design, grant writing, woodworking, electrical engineering, and signal processing. In the initial stages, I drafted prototypes, assembled a detailed budget, and experimented with unconventional hardware such as CRT televisions. Sustainability quickly became a central theme for me, and the decision to use CRT TVs reflects that commitment. Their components cannot be easily recycled and often contain harmful materials, which means they are usually discarded. By repurposing them, I aimed to give new life to a technology that would otherwise contribute to environmental waste.



Within the context of my Computer Science major, the project showed me that the field extends far beyond algorithms and efficiency metrics—it can be a creative medium that brings together multiple disciplines and encourages innovative thinking. This experience reinforced my desire to continue working at the intersection of computer science, design, and engineering. As it stands now, the terrariums, CRTs, and wooden base have all been completed. A new cohort of CS seniors will continue the work with added interdisciplinary collaboration in biology and design. Once fully finished, SoundGarden will be permanently installed in Kaiser Borsari Hall.

# 5 WWU STUDENTS WIN PRESTIGIOUS DoW SCHOLARSHIPS



**Five Western Washington University Cybersecurity students have been awarded highly competitive Department of War (DoW) Scholarships.**

Karish Bernard, Jayden Gatewood, Brian Lucio, and Quinn Stone were awarded the DoW Cyber Service Academy (CSA) Scholarship. Alex Glydewell was awarded the DoW Science, Mathematics, and Research for Transformation (SMART) Scholarship-for-Service.

Both scholarships provide full funding for undergraduate and graduate students at participating universities, including tuition, a generous annual stipend between \$24,000-\$29,000, and book allowances. Scholars also receive mentorship from experienced DoW professionals, summer internship positions, and are guaranteed employment at a DoW facility after graduation. For each year of full scholarship funding, recipients commit to an additional year of paid service with the DoW.

These scholarships are extremely selective: in 2024, only 8% of SMART scholarship applicants were chosen, with an average GPA of 3.73. Recipients include students pursuing bachelor's, master's, and Ph.D. degrees.

These awards not only provide financial support and professional development but also open the door to rewarding careers in national defense, allowing scholars to contribute to critical cybersecurity and STEM work while pursuing their academic goals.



# FACULTY & STAFF AWARDS

Faculty of the Year 2025



Logan Sizemore



Outstanding Staff Of The Year 2025



Mary Hall

Alumni of the Year 2025



Neal Digre

## STUDENT AWARDS 2025

Outstanding Computer Science Undergraduate:

Jed Pagcaliwagan  
Nina Ervin  
Wil Zuber

Outstanding Cybersecurity Undergraduate:

Emile Stettler

Outstanding Data Science Undergraduate:

Mayla Ward

Outstanding MS Graduate:

Vivian White

CS Department Student Citizenship Award:

Adrian Heffleman



# SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS 2025-2026

**Anthony G. Vallot, Jr. Memorial Scholarship**

Henry Hannawalt

**Lars and Elaine Giusti Scholarship for Computer Science**

Ella Frantsevich

## **CS Department Scholarship**

Siddhu Bhimireddy

Ruchi Gupta

Andy Ngo

Jackson Butler

Adrian Heffelman

Vinh Nguyen

Joshua Bishop

Adin Jura

Mohamed Ramadan

Josh Crain

Merwa Kedir

Austin Reyes

Danny Alder

Ada Kolze

Ryan Root

Ben Fry-Holman

Ella Moshay

Marco Soekmono

## **CS Graduate Fellowship**

Mitrasree Deb

Arun Shrestha

## **David W. Cole Endowment**

Maya Galley

Ben Derbecker

## **Dr. James Lee Johnson Memorial Endowment**

Hamza Magsi

Maryam Ashraf

Wilson Zuber

## **Terry Permenter Memorial Scholarship for Computer Science**

Dylan Pugh

## **Computer Science Distinguished Scholars Scholarship**

Gavin McNichols

Carlos Adams-Tres

Henry Hannawalt

Naima Zida-Brown

Ella Moshay

Katie Larios

Matthew Enertson



## HOW TO MAKE A DONATION

Thank you to our Alumni & Friends, your support makes a lasting impact.  
Help us empower the next generation of Computer Science students.

**Donate Here:**

<https://alumniq.wvu.edu/giving/to/ComputerScience>



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