

The Graduate School Citations for Academic Excellence



**THE GRADUATE
SCHOOL**

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY®

Winter 2026

Presented by The Graduate School

318C DeVos Center

616-331-7105

www.gvsu.edu/gs

gradschool@gvsu.edu

in collaboration with the
Graduate Student Association (GSA)





Dear friends and members of our graduate education community,

At the end of each academic semester, we have the great pleasure to honor those students, staff, and faculty who have distinguished themselves in graduate education at Grand Valley State University. The Graduate School Citation Awards for Academic Excellence and the Graduate Student Association Faculty Awards are proud Grand Valley State University traditions that began in 2006 thanks to the combined efforts of the University Graduate Council and the Graduate Program Directors. The Graduate School and the Graduate Student Association serve as co-sponsors for this event.

The Graduate School Citation Awards recognize excellence in academic performance in several categories. Graduate students are nominated for these awards by staff or faculty members, advisors, graduate program directors, and departmental chairs or school directors. Each recipient receives a certificate of recognition and a graduate honors cord. We are excited to continue the Jennifer Rose Palm Memorial Award for Excellence in Service to Graduate Education, which honors GVSU staff who demonstrate exceptional dedication to supporting graduate students. Additionally, the Graduate Student Association honors members of our graduate faculty who have distinguished themselves in mentoring and supporting our students at Grand Valley. Their noteworthy dedication helps to create a vibrant and engaged learning community.

Grand Valley State University is extremely proud of the accomplishments of these graduate students, staff, and faculty members. I commend each of our award winners and wish them a very successful future.

Congratulations!

Erica Hamilton, Ph.D.

Vice Provost for Distributed Learning and Dean of the Graduate School
Grand Valley State University

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GRADUATE SCHOOL CITATIONS RECIPIENTS FOR WINTER 2026

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE IN THE DEGREE PROGRAM

College of Computing

- Bharani Srinath Jonnada, Health Informatics and Bioinformatics
- Fahim Morshed, Applied Computer Science
- Jacinta Babu, Data Science and Analytics
- Yu-Ting Liu, Health Informatics and Bioinformatics

College of Education and Community Innovation

- Douglas Ferguson, Public Administration
- Kennedy Sowell, Criminal Justice
- Kylie Brigham, Literacy Studies
- Samuel Ahurtovie, Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration

College of Health Professions

- Amy Rogers, Medical Dosimetry
- Anastacia Tucker, Doctor of Physical Therapy
- Jaclyn Driesenga, Public Health
- Justen Knape, Doctor of Audiology
- Rachel Postma, Clinical Dietetics
- Olivia Koole, Athletic Training

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

- Avery Meade, School Psychology
- Eric Janson, Biostatistics
- Gabriella Barajas, Cell and Molecular Biology
- Logan Clark, Biology- AWRI
- Lucy Groothuis, Biomedical Sciences
- Maria Widmann, Communications
- Nicole Devries, Applied Statistics

Kirkhof College of Nursing

- Julia Treme, Doctor of Nursing Practice

Padnos College of Engineering

- Charles DiCanio, Engineering

Seidman College of Business

- Charles Jagger, Business Administration

OUTSTANDING MASTER'S THESIS**College of Computing**

- Christopher Khajira, Applied Computer Science

College of Health Professions

- Coeli Fitzpatrick, Public Health
- Samantha Schulz, Clinical Dietetics

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

- Kaylynne Dennis, Biology - AWRI
- Kyle Shutz, Cell and Molecular Biology

Padnos College of Engineering

- Abigail Robbins, Engineering

OUTSTANDING FINAL PROJECT**College of Computing**

- Fedi Naimi and Halee Belghouthi, Health Informatics and Bioinformatics
- Yu-Ting Liu, Health Informatics and Bioinformatics

College of Education and Community Innovation

- Candace Murray, Literacy Studies

College of Health Professions

- Bridget Gaier, Isaac Francis, and Josie Kasmauskis, Clinical Dietetics
- Cierra Gabrielse, Melina Tofilovski, Taylor LaCombe, and Tristen Wesenberg, Doctor of Physical Therapy
- Kendra Leep, Marirose LeFevre, and Olivia Koole, Athletic Training
- Melissa Stone, Public Health

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

- Samantha LaMantia, Cell and Molecular Biology
- Sydney Kamps, Communications

Kirkhof College of Nursing

- Chelsea Ericson, Doctor of Nursing Practice

OUTSTANDING PUBLICATION

College of Computing

- Nishan Khanal, Data Science and Analytics
- Pravallika Manchu and Swarna Bharathi Kathi, Health Informatics and Bioinformatics

College of Health Professions

- Madeline Krawciw, Public Health
- Natalie Stahl, Public Health

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

- Jillian Greene, Biology - AWRI

EXCELLENCE IN SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY OR PROFESSION

College of Education and Community Innovation

- Christopher McGuire, Public Administration
- Kennedy Sowell, Criminal Justice

College of Health Professions

- Chloe Bowyer, Clinical Dietetics
- Clayton Lewis, Doctor of Physical Therapy

- Robert Manson, Doctor of Audiology
- Sydney Johnson, Public Health

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

- Hannah Meade, School Psychology

Kirkhof College of Nursing

- Lora Rademacher, Doctor of Nursing Practice

EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP AND SERVICE TO GVSU

College of Computing

- Ranjith Kumar Patil, Applied Computer Science

College of Education and Community Innovation

- Elora Ferrie, Public Administration
- Lauren Hellman, School Psychology
- Rebeca Barajas-Juarez, Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration

College of Health Professions

- Josie Kasmauskis, Clinical Dietetics
- Valerie Caylor, Doctor of Physical Therapy
- Vincent Choi, Public Health

Kirkhof College of Nursing

- Sarah King, Doctor of Nursing Practice

Padnos College of Engineering

- Samrawit Tewelde, Engineering
- Scott Strayer, Engineering

EXCELLENCE IN PROMOTING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION AT GVSU

College of Education and Community Innovation

- Rowan Hawthorne, Public Administration

College of Health Professions

- AJ Walstra, Public Health
- Emma Jones, Doctor of Physical Therapy
- Mackenzie Malone, Clinical Dietetics

Kirkhof College of Nursing

- Joslyn Lypka, Doctor of Nursing Practice

EXCELLENCE IN SUSTAINABILITY**College of Education and Community Innovation**

- Cassandra Chaphalkar, Public Administration

College of Health Professions

- Corryn Willson, Clinical Dietetics
- Tucker McLane, Public Health

Kirkhof College of Nursing

- William Serano, Doctor of Nursing Practice

*Congratulations to the Winter 2026
Graduate School Citation Award Recipients!*

**GRADUATE SCHOOL JENNIFER ROSE PALM MEMORIAL AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE
IN SERVICE TO GRADUATE EDUCATION
Winter 2026**

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

- Barbara Ellis, Department of Biology

**GRADUATE STUDENT ASSOCIATION FACULTY AWARDS
Winter 2026**

OUTSTANDING TEACHING AWARD

College of Computing

- Yong Zhuang, Information Sciences & Technologies

College of Education and Community Innovation

- Larry Warkoczeski, School of Community Leadership and Development

OUTSTANDING MENTORSHIP AWARD

College of Computing

- Sara Sutton, Information Sciences & Technologies

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

- Alexandra Locher, Department of Biology

*Congratulations to the Winter 2026
Staff and Faculty Award Recipients!*

**GRADUATE SCHOOL CITATION FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE IN THE DEGREE
PROGRAM
WINTER 2026**

College of Computing

- **Bharani Srinath Jonnada, Health Informatics and Bioinformatics**

Bharani is recognized for his strong academic performance. He has maintained an excellent GPA while successfully completing a demanding curriculum. Bharani distinguishes himself through persistence, discipline, and a clear commitment to continuous improvement. Throughout the program, he has consistently sought guidance, asked insightful questions, and actively pursued opportunities to strengthen his skills. His steady progress reflects a strong work ethic and genuine dedication to mastering complex material. He contributes positively to the academic environment through initiative and a strong desire to learn.

- **Fahim Morshed, Applied Computer Science**

Fahim is an exceptional graduate student, maintaining a perfect 4.0 GPA while completing 36 graduate credits and earning the Software Design and Development digital badge. He completed a rigorous thesis evaluating large language model pipelines for CV question answering, designing controlled experiments with large, human-annotated datasets. He also contributed significantly to AI-assisted decision support systems for graduate admissions and to cybersecurity research involving distributed simulations and service function chaining. Fahim's work reflects independence, technical leadership, methodological rigor, and collaboration.

- **Jacinta Babu, Data Science and Analytics**

Jacinta has demonstrated strong academic excellence, maintaining an impressive GPA. Her performance reflects a solid command of complex technical material and the analytical depth required in a rigorous curriculum. She approaches her coursework with diligence, consistency, and intellectual focus, earning recognition for her thoughtful engagement

with challenging concepts. She consistently shows initiative and approaches her responsibilities with integrity. Jacinta's determination to excel and her scholarly professionalism exemplify the high standards expected of graduate students. Her academic contributions and commitment to learning make her a deserving candidate for this recognition.

- **Yu-Ting Liu, Health Informatics and Bioinformatics**

Yu-Ting is an exceptional student, maintaining a perfect 4.0 GPA across a rigorous 36-credit curriculum. She consistently excels in both core and advanced coursework. Her academic work is distinguished by clarity, precision, and a strong ability to integrate computational and biological concepts. Yu-Ting approaches complex analytical challenges with discipline and rigor, producing projects that exceed program expectations. She demonstrates intellectual curiosity and initiative in tackling advanced topics, particularly in the analysis of complex genetic data using emerging computational approaches. Her consistent excellence and engagement elevate the academic standards of the program and reflect a deep commitment to scholarly achievement.

College of Education and Community Innovation

- **Douglas Ferguson, Public Administration**

Douglas is recognized for outstanding academic achievement, maintaining an exceptional GPA. His performance reflects strong intellectual ability, thoughtful leadership, and a consistent commitment to excellence. Douglas is highly regarded by faculty for his preparedness, engaged participation, and superior writing skills. His Municipal Profile project was exemplary, incorporating interviews with local officials and effectively applying theoretical frameworks. Likewise, his sustainability research on local food cooperatives demonstrated scholarly depth, strong research skills, and a clear understanding of triple-bottom-line principles.

- **Kennedy Sowell, Criminal Justice**

Kennedy is an exceptional student whose academic excellence and service make her deserving of recognition. She has demonstrated an unmatched quality of work throughout her coursework, consistently exceeding expectations and contributing meaningfully to collaborative research. She participated in faculty-led research projects and assisted with an ongoing cold case investigation as a graduate assistant. Her leadership was especially evident in a group research project examining racialized violence and immigration enforcement, resulting in a manuscript submitted for publication. Kennedy's strong academic record, service, and commitment to social justice reflect her readiness for future success.

- **Kylie Brigham, Literacy Studies**

Kylie is recognized for her strong academic performance and leadership. She has maintained a high GPA and consistently earned excellent grades throughout her coursework. Kylie has demonstrated exceptional initiative and applied expertise. In the literacy professional development course, she designed and implemented meaningful professional development for teachers at her school, grounded in research-based literacy practices. She also participated in the program's Mentoring initiative, culminating in a presentation at the Michigan Reading Association conference. Her dedication to student learning, reflective practice, and continued personal growth distinguishes her as a valuable contributor to literacy education.

- **Samuel Ahurtovie, Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration**

Samuel has demonstrated intellectual curiosity, academic strength, and a collaborative approach to learning. He consistently offers thoughtful and meaningful contributions, particularly in small-group settings where his teamwork and reliability stand out. He is a strong writer who articulates original ideas with clarity and continues to refine his skills. Samuel has shown remarkable perseverance, balancing graduate studies, family responsibilities, and adjusting to a new academic and cultural environment. His resilience, insight, and commitment to learning make him a highly deserving recipient of this recognition.

College of Health Professions

- **Amy Rogers, Medical Dosimetry**

Amy is an exceptional graduate student who consistently demonstrates excellence across academic, clinical, and research domains. She has maintained an outstanding GPA while excelling in a rigorous and highly technical curriculum. Amy's coursework reflects a mastery of complex dosimetric and clinical concepts, paired with advanced critical thinking and organization in her written work and projects. In the clinical setting, she approaches treatment planning with precision, professionalism, and a clear commitment to patient-centered care. Her consistent performance and dedication reflect the very highest standards of graduate education.

- **Anastacia Tucker, Doctor of Physical Therapy**

Anastacia is an exceptional student, recognized for her academic excellence, discipline, and dedication. She holds an outstanding GPA in a highly rigorous curriculum, ranking second in her cohort. Anastacia achieved this level of success while competing on GVSU's Cross Country and Track teams, earning two individual NCAA Division II All-American honors as part of national championship teams. Her ability to balance elite athletics with academic performance reflects remarkable commitment and resilience. In addition, Anastacia demonstrated strong leadership and ownership in planning and executing her DPT research project.

- **Jaclyn Driesenga, Public Health**

Jaclyn consistently embodies academic excellence throughout her graduate studies, maintaining an exceptional GPA and ranking among the top students in her cohort. Her coursework reflects a rare combination of intellectual rigor, originality, and analytical depth. Jaclyn's scholarly strengths are evidenced by her winning the 2026 Three Minute Thesis competition at GVSU and by her recent publication in the journal *Including Disabilities*. She routinely exceeds expectations by producing methodologically sound and intellectually compelling work. She demonstrates thoughtful leadership, accountability, and a collaborative spirit that elevates group outcomes.

- **Justen Knape, Doctor of Audiology**

Justen is an outstanding student, recognized for excellence in both academic coursework and clinical practice. He approaches learning with the intent to deeply understand and apply material, consistently exceeding expectations across assignments, labs, and clinical experiences. Justen actively seeks and incorporates feedback to refine his skills, reflecting his commitment to becoming an exceptional clinician. He also demonstrates a remarkable ability to connect with others. His ability to balance rigorous academic training with professional and service commitments highlights his discipline and dedication.

- **Rachel Postma, Clinical Dietetics**

Rachel is an exemplary graduate student who demonstrates advanced knowledge, clinical skill, and professional competence in dietetic education. She earned a perfect 4.0 GPA while completing 1,200 hours of supervised practice, reflecting exceptional academic discipline and mastery of complex clinical content. Her written assignments and patient case studies consistently display advanced critical thinking, precision, and synthesis beyond typical graduate-level expectations. Rachel approaches each rotation with professionalism, initiative, and a strong commitment to evidence-based nutrition care. She is widely recognized for her readiness to enter professional practice as a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist.

- **Olivia Koole, Athletic Training**

Olivia has excelled in the classroom, at her clinical site, and engaging in scholarly activities. Olivia has demonstrated that she has a strong foundational knowledge in the profession of athletic training and has demonstrated an appreciation for the importance of interprofessional education, research, and scholarly endeavors as a means to advance her chosen profession. She is thoughtful, reflective, inquisitive, and respectful.

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

- **Avery Meade, School Psychology (M.S., Psy.S.)**

Avery has consistently performed at the highest level, earning a perfect 4.0 GPA. She achieved the highest marks in the program's most rigorous courses and is known by faculty for producing timely, high-quality work. Avery's practicum and internship experiences in K–12 schools have been exceptional, as she consistently exceeds expectations and seeks opportunities to expand her skills. She has pursued extensive professional development in suicide prevention, crisis intervention, mental health first aid, and special education best practices. Her dedication, professionalism, and initiative distinguish her as an outstanding graduate student.

- **Eric Janson, Biostatistics**

Eric is widely recognized for his attention to detail, strong work ethic, and leadership in class discussions and group projects. His coursework is marked by high-quality written work and presentations, including an advanced statistical flowchart project that ranked among the strongest his program director has seen in nearly two decades. He continued to apply these skills through an internship with Corewell Health and a statistical support GA in the Physician Assistant Studies department. Faculty praised his ability to manage multiple projects, adapt to time-sensitive priorities, and improve statistical problem-solving processes.

- **Gabriella Barajas, Cell and Molecular Biology**

Gabriella is nominated in recognition of both her perfect GPA and her exceptional scholarly abilities. Faculty consistently describe her as intellectually curious, analytical, and capable of making novel connections across complex scientific concepts. Her written and oral work demonstrates remarkable clarity of thought, depth of analysis, and sophisticated engagement with primary scientific literature. Gabriella approaches challenging problems with enthusiasm, insight, and dependable consistency. Her ability to excel academically while managing significant professional responsibilities is extraordinary.

- **Logan Clark, Biology – Annis Water Resources Institute**

Logan has maintained a perfect 4.0 GPA, reflecting exceptional academic achievement. Beyond grades, Logan has made outstanding contributions through his coursework and research, consistently demonstrating intellectual curiosity and a commitment to lifelong learning. He actively engages in thoughtful, respectful dialogue on a wide range of topics, enriching the academic environment. Logan also serves as an informal mentor to incoming graduate students and is a strong advocate for his peers. His leadership, scholarship, and commitment to community have made a meaningful and measurable impact on the graduate program.

- **Lucy Groothuis, Biomedical Sciences**

Lucy quickly distinguished herself as an exceptional graduate student. She earned a 3.948 GPA and achieved the top grade in BMS 607: Infection and Immunity, ranking among the strongest students her instructor has taught. Lucy is consistently praised by faculty for her academic excellence and mentorship of fellow graduate students. She played a central role in developing an open-access undergraduate immunology lab manual, leading a team of fifteen students, collecting and analyzing data, and contributing to manuscript preparation. Her work evolved into an independent thesis project using accessible cell-line models, significantly strengthening the manual's impact. Lucy demonstrated advanced proficiency in immunological techniques and a deep understanding of scientific methodology. She served as lead author on multiple conference presentations and will be first author on forthcoming peer-reviewed publications. Her integrity, curiosity, leadership, and resilience mark her as an outstanding scholar with strong potential for future graduate training.

- **Maria Widmann, Communications**

Maria Widmann demonstrates an exceptional level of mastery in theoretical, research, and professional communication studies that exceeds typical graduate-level expectations. She earned a GPA of 3.90, reflecting consistent academic excellence throughout the program. Maria's performance is distinguished by her deep knowledge of communication

scholarship and her ability to thoughtfully apply theory to professional problem-solving contexts. Her work consistently surpasses program standards and reflects intellectual rigor and clarity. Maria's commitment to graduate education highlights her passion for learning and dedication to lifelong intellectual growth. She has also emerged as a leader among her peers, serving as a role model and source of inspiration within the program. Faculty value her contributions and professionalism, and she is widely regarded as an outstanding scholar. Maria is well prepared to make meaningful and lasting contributions to the field of communication throughout her career.

- **Nicole Devries, Applied Statistics**

Nicole is an outstanding graduate student known for her exceptional attention to detail, strong work ethic, and active engagement in the classroom. She consistently demonstrates leadership in group projects and contributes meaningfully to class discussions. Faculty describes her as one of the top performers in advanced statistics coursework, noting her clarity, communication skills, and collaborative spirit. Nicole served as a graduate assistant in the Statistical Consulting Center, where she was praised for her initiative, creativity, and ability to lead projects through completion. Following a successful statistics internship, she began a graduate assistantship providing statistical support in the Physician Assistant Studies department. In this role, she demonstrated versatility across quantitative and qualitative analyses and quickly adapted to new methodologies. Nicole's professionalism, curiosity, and energy made her an invaluable contributor to the statistics community.

Kirkhof College of Nursing

- **Julia Treme, Doctor of Nursing Practice**

Julia exemplifies academic excellence, professional integrity, and leadership as a graduate nursing student. Her performance consistently exceeds expectations, demonstrating mastery of coursework and producing scholarly work of exceptional quality. Julia balances the rigorous demands of graduate study while simultaneously serving in a full-time clinical leadership role, doing so with remarkable discipline and organization. She

approaches her academic responsibilities proactively, completing work to the highest standards with intellectual depth and attention to detail. Julia actively seeks feedback and engages in professional dialogue with openness and respect, reflecting a strong commitment to growth. She skillfully integrates faculty guidance with her developing expertise, modeling reflective practice and mature leadership. Her influence reflects dedication to excellence and the advancement of the nursing profession, making her highly deserving of this recognition.

Padnos College of Engineering

- **Charles DiCanio, Engineering**

Charles is widely regarded as a highly motivated and talented scholar with a strong commitment to research and academic excellence. In his graduate research on damping optimization of actively controlled structures, he has demonstrated outstanding intellectual curiosity and a deep, research-oriented approach to learning. Charles consistently exceeds expectations, completing more progress than planned and showing remarkable initiative. He is a careful, creative thinker with strong attention to detail, logic, and rigor. His discipline, self-motivation, and dedication distinguish him as one of the most impressive students in the program.

Seidman College of Business

- **Charles Jagger, Business Administration**

Charles is recognized as one of the most outstanding students in the MBA program. Beyond strong academic performance, he distinguished himself through a highly collaborative and engaged approach to graduate study. Charles consistently enhanced class discussions by integrating real-world professional insight with academic concepts. Notably, he developed and shared a practical presentation on overhead allocation drawn from his role as Director of Production at Henry Mast Greenhouses, bringing meaningful clarity to complex accounting topics. His ability to synthesize professional experience with coursework enriched the learning environment for both peers and faculty. Charles is widely regarded by faculty as a top candidate for academic excellence. His leadership, collegiality, and applied scholarship reflect exceptional merit and sustained contribution to the program.

GRADUATE SCHOOL CITATION FOR OUTSTANDING MASTER'S THESIS
Winter 2026

College of Computing

- **Christopher Khajira, Applied Computer Science**
 - **Thesis Title:** Improving Human Visual Search: Enhancing Lung Cancer Nodule Detection in Medical Images

Christopher is an exceptional graduate researcher whose thesis demonstrates outstanding interdisciplinary rigor and innovation. His work, *Improving Human Visual Search: Enhancing Lung Cancer Nodule Detection in Medical Images*, bridges cognitive science and computer science to advance human-centered, evidence-based health technologies. Christopher designed and conducted a large-scale, IRB-approved study involving over 180 participants across multiple experimental conditions, examining how feedback and cueing improve human sensemaking in complex medical image interpretation. He led every phase of the research, from IRB preparation and experimental design to computational infrastructure development and data analysis. His work demonstrated measurable improvements in human performance and yielded insights into underlying cognitive processing architectures. Christopher also developed a scalable research platform to support future studies. His rigor, independence, and interdisciplinary expertise distinguish him as a leading scholar.

ABSTRACT

Human visual search involves the identification of relevant signals within information-rich environments, which is a fundamental problem in visual perception. While detection accuracy and response time are commonly used to evaluate performance in visual search, these measures do not reveal the underlying cognitive and computational structure that produces observable behavior. A key challenge lies in distinguishing between competing processing architectures, particularly in complex visual domains where different models can produce similar behavioral outcomes. This study addresses this challenge by developing a computational experimental framework for analyzing visual search behavior using System Factorial Technology (SFT). The experimental framework integrates naturalistic medical image data and controlled stimulus manipulation to enable human architecture-level analysis. A total of 191 undergraduate participants from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences completed three experimental conditions to search for lung cancer nodules. In the first condition, participants performed a target detection task without feedback, establishing baseline performance. The results suggested that the participants were randomly searching, with a lower accuracy of 31 percent. In the second condition, trial-by-trial feedback was introduced to evaluate the effect of feedback on detection accuracy and response patterns. The accuracy of nodule detection for this condition increased by 6 percent. In the third condition, a computationally generated circular stimulus was embedded at target cancer lung nodules, with intensity dynamically adjusted to match local image statistics. We found a significant improvement in visual search to 74 percent accuracy, up from a 31 percent baseline. Results show that masking type, feedback, and cueing influence the stopping rules and cognitive architecture used to interpret lung medical images. We also validated the use of SFT in the diagnosis of complex medical health images. Overall, this work demonstrates a scalable computational framework for analyzing human cognitive performance and informing the design of intelligent visual systems.

College of Health Professions

- **Coeli Fitzpatrick, Public Health**

- **Thesis Title:** Rhetorics of Responsibility: Public Health Messaging and The Role of the Individual in Federal Health Discourse.

Coeli Fitzpatrick is recognized for the exceptional quality and relevance of her master's thesis, *Rhetorics of Responsibility: Public Health Messaging and the Role of the Individual in Federal Health Discourse*. Her research examines public health communication during a major political transition, addressing timely debates about governance and public responsibility in the United States. By analyzing messaging from high-ranking government officials, Coeli offers insight into how public health priorities are constructed and communicated. Her focus on social media highlights its growing influence and challenges in disseminating public health information. Using critical discourse analysis, she uncovers how narratives around health freedom, neoliberal ideology, and responsibility contribute to vaccine skepticism and public distrust. The thesis demonstrates strong analytical rigor and theoretical depth while offering meaningful policy implications for public health communication in politically polarized contexts. Coeli's work reflects scholarly maturity, originality, and significant potential to inform future research and practice.

ABSTRACT

The 2024 election that brought the Trump administration back into power for a second, nonconsecutive term brought the “Make America Healthy Again” (MAHA) movement, led by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., into government. In early 2025, Kennedy was appointed by Trump to lead the Health and Human Services Department (HHS) and was quickly confirmed by the Senate. MAHA’s agenda for public health rests on a platform of individual responsibility, vaccine skepticism, and a theory of state power that combines suspicion of existing federal health agencies with an aggressive effort to use state authority to reshape public health toward a more anti-regulatory, free-market vision. Officials occupying top offices in HHS, including Kennedy, are prolific users of the social media platform X, where they frequently spread messages about health freedom and responsibility, and criticize public health. Critical Discourse Analysis is a qualitative methodology that examines rhetorical strategies, particularly their power connections. Using CDA, this thesis analyzes social media posts of high-ranking MAHA-affiliated officials in their first year in office on the social media platform “X.” Posts were coded, and three discourse domains emerged: individual responsabilization, state overreach, and vaccine-related posts. These findings have implications for public health communication, specifically regarding the efficacy of health behavior models.

- **Samantha Schulz, Clinical Dietetics**
 - **Thesis Title:** GLP-1 Receptor Agonists and Disordered Eating: Clinical Indicators and Patient Narratives.

Samantha distinguished herself as an emerging scholar through the ambition, rigor, and sophistication of her master's thesis, GLP-1 Receptor Agonists and Disordered Eating: Clinical Indicators and Patient Narratives. Her research design was notably complex, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods in a multi-stage study that required advanced methodological skill. Samantha approached each phase of the project with exceptional care, developing a clear analytic framework and ensuring ethically sound and methodologically robust data collection. She demonstrated remarkable perseverance in recruiting participants, refining strategies and maintaining consistent communication to meet recruitment goals. This determination reflected strong professionalism and deep respect for the research process. Throughout the project, Samantha showed sustained intellectual maturity, analytical precision, and commitment to scholarly integrity. Her work exemplifies high-quality graduate research and merits strong consideration for this distinguished recognition.

ABSTRACT

Introduction: The use of GLP-1 receptor agonist (GLP-1 RA) medications for weight loss has increased exponentially in the United States over the past decade. The continuing rise in demand for the use of GLP-1 RA medication for weight loss justifies the need to better understand the physical and psychological effects that can occur with significant weight loss. By combining a standardized screening tool for eating disorder (ED) risk with narratives from patients undergoing GLP-1 RA treatment for weight loss, this study examines associations between GLP-1 RA use patterns and risk of disordered eating behaviors (DEB) and explores patient experiences, including the role of registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs).

Methods: A mixed-methods study was conducted using a survey of adults (N=843) currently or previously using GLP-1 RAs for weight loss. The Eating Attitudes Test-26 (EAT-26) assessed DEB risk (≥ 20 indicating risk). Quantitative analyses included chi-square tests and logistic regression. Qualitative responses were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results: Most participants (73.5%) were not at risk for DEBs; mean EAT-26 score was 15.5. Shorter duration of GLP-1 RA use was associated with higher DEB risk ($\chi^2=22.47$, $p<.001$). Intermittent medication use was also associated with increased risk, with each stop–restart episode nearly tripling odds of DEB risk (OR=2.99, 95% CI: 1.36–6.62). No significant differences in DEB prevalence were observed by RDN use. Qualitative findings indicated that supportive RDN involvement improved nutrition knowledge, self-management skills, and side effect management. Participants also reported reduced food preoccupation and, in some cases, improvement in pre-existing disordered eating symptoms.

Conclusions: Shorter and intermittent GLP-1 RA use are associated with increased DEB risk. While many individuals report psychological benefits, findings highlight the importance of screening for eating disorder risk and integrating RDNs into care. Interdisciplinary approaches may improve outcomes and mitigate unintended behavioral risks associated with GLP-1 RA therapy.

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

- **Kaylynne Dennis, Biology – Annis Water Resources Institute**
 - **Thesis Title:** Trends, drivers, and implications: Measurements of production and respiration reveal net autotrophy in a Great Lakes Estuary.

Kaylynne is an exemplary graduate student in the Biology/Aquatic Science program whose thesis research has made significant contributions to environmental science. Her interdisciplinary study, Trends, Drivers, and Implications: Measurements of Production and Respiration Reveal Net Autotrophy in a Great Lakes Estuary, examined carbon cycling in Muskegon Lake with implications for the global carbon cycle. Kaylynne successfully completed multiple seasons of rigorous fieldwork and laboratory experimentation and defended her thesis in Fall 2025. Her findings demonstrate that Great Lakes estuaries function as net carbon sinks, a discovery with broad scientific relevance. She presented her research at three national conferences and is preparing a first-author manuscript for submission to the Journal of Great Lakes Research. Kaylynne's work has also been featured by the American Geophysical Union, reflecting its continued impact. Her initiative, technical skill, and scholarly maturity distinguish her as a highly deserving candidate for this recognition.

ABSTRACT

Metabolism is the sum of primary production (photosynthesis; PP) and respiration (R) and determines whether an ecosystem functions as a carbon sink or source. Inland waters are warming faster than the atmosphere and oceans. However, their contribution remains poorly quantified within the context of the global carbon budget. Muskegon Lake, Michigan, USA, a drowned river mouth, model Great Lakes estuary, and recently delisted Area of Concern (AOC), has been the subject of two decades of seasonal pelagic (2004-2024) and recent high-frequency littoral (2023-2024) metabolic sampling. This study examined long-term and spatial patterns of metabolism in surface waters, as well as environmental and nutrient drivers, including temperature, dissolved oxygen (DO), chlorophyll-a, pH, nitrate (NO₃), ammonia (NH₃), and total phosphorus (TP). Pelagic sites exhibited significant seasonal variability but were spatially consistent in rates of net primary production (NPP), R, and gross primary production (GPP), suggesting a well-mixed surface layer offshore. Average pelagic rates of NPP, R, and GPP, were 3318, 1890, and 5208 mgCm⁻²day⁻¹, respectively, while littoral averages were 400, 348, and 748 mgCm⁻²day⁻¹. The pelagic GPP:R ratio was lowest in spring (2.76) and highest in fall (6.52), whereas the littoral zone showed the opposite pattern, with the highest GPP:R in spring (6.03). These differences indicate a state of annual net autotrophy throughout with contrasting metabolic dynamics between zones. Long-term declines in NO₃, and TP and increases in DO and pH in surface waters were also observed. Within the littoral zone, DO, chlorophyll-a, and pH varied significantly by site, and nutrients were seasonally dynamic in both lake zones, where NO₃ peaked in spring while TP rose through the growing season. Multivariate analyses showed pelagic PP correlated strongly with TP, pH, and chlorophyll-a, while littoral PP was highly correlated with temperature and DO, reflecting possible differences in ecosystem processes across zones. Bacterial secondary production amounted to ~8% of GPP over the years, emphasizing the role of the microbial loop in carbon cycling. Overall, Muskegon Lake's surface waters remain a significant carbon sink, though long-term warming and other anthropogenic stressors could change this metabolic balance, highlighting implications for Great Lakes estuaries under climate change.

- **Kyle Shutz, Cell and Molecular Biology**
 - **Thesis Title:** Can changing the density of the external medium alter gravity sensing and mimic microgravity?

Kyle is nominated in recognition of his ambitious, independent, and innovative graduate research. His thesis, *Can Changing the Density of the External Medium Alter Gravity Sensing and Mimic Microgravity?*, investigates competing models of plant gravity sensing using both *Arabidopsis* and rice. Kyle designed and built a novel hydroponic growth and imaging system that allowed for precise visualization and analysis of root growth responses to gravity and light. He complemented this physiological work with next-generation sequencing and transcriptomic analyses to examine gene expression under altered density conditions. His findings revealed significant overlap with microgravity analog studies, helping to resolve longstanding ambiguities in the literature. Kyle's research has been presented at international conferences and shared with research groups worldwide. His work provides a strong foundation for a unified model of plant gravity sensing with relevance to future space exploration.

ABSTRACT

Previous studies have demonstrated that the gravitational pressure model best explains plant gravity sensing. We follow up by developing methods to compare physiological and genetic responses of Arabidopsis and rice grown on the ISS with those grown on Earth in an environment mimicking microgravity. We developed a novel Rotatable Hydroponic Root Observation Box (RoHyROB) that allows observation of gravity response in roots under a variety of physical conditions, including simulated microgravity. The RoHyROB successfully replicated previous rice experiments supporting the gravitational pressure model. Analysis of differential gene expression between gravistimulated rice roots grown in control and simulated microgravity (increased density of the external medium) showed a significant increase in transcription related to reactive oxygen species management, consistent with observations in microgravity. Experiments with Arabidopsis in the RoHyROB did not show reduced gravity responses, suggesting that the gravitational pressure model may not be the sole mechanism of gravipreception across all species

Padnos College of Engineering

- **Abigail Robbins, Engineering**

- **Thesis Title:** The use of tactile stimulations to mitigate somatic anxiety responses

Abigail is nominated for her innovative research titled The Use of Tactile Stimulation to Mitigate Somatic Anxiety Responses. Her thesis exemplifies interdisciplinary excellence by integrating product design with biomedical signal analysis to address anxiety mitigation. Abigail designed and built a sophisticated haptic glove capable of delivering four distinct tactile stimuli—temperature, vibration, pressure, and texture—demonstrating exceptional technical skill and creativity. She developed and executed a rigorous, IRB-approved experimental protocol measuring real-time stress responses through skin conductance during cognitive challenges. Her work advances understanding of physiological anxiety responses and holds significant potential for real-world application and commercialization. Known for both technical expertise and clear communication, Abigail stands out within the combined BSE/MSE program. Her project reflects originality, academic rigor, and strong engineering judgment, making her highly deserving of this recognition.

ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: Anxiety is the body's response to detected danger or stress, with physiological responses including shallow breathing, increased heart rate, sweating, shaking, and muscle tension. Roughly 33.7% of the population experiences anxiety, creating significant personal, social, and economic burdens. Traditional treatments such as medication and psychotherapy can be effective but present barriers, including cost, accessibility, and side effects. As a result, there is a growing need for non-invasive, low-cost solutions to regulate physiological anxiety responses. This thesis investigates the effectiveness of four tactile stimuli, including vibration, cooling, massage, and textured material, at reducing physiological symptoms of anxiety.

SUBJECTS: Participants completed a controlled laboratory experiment involving an anxiety-inducing computational activity followed by recovery periods.

METHODS AND MATERIALS: A custom wearable haptic glove was designed to deliver stimuli while monitoring heart rate and skin conductance using electrocardiogram and skin conductance sensors.

RESULTS: There were significant differences in heart rate and heart rate variability between stimuli. For most participants, all stimuli reduced heart rate and increased heart rate variability. Skin conductance recovery showed reductions compared to control. Massage produced the largest reduction in heart rate, RR interval, and skin conductance, and was significantly more effective than cooling for skin conductance.

CONCLUSIONS: Tactile stimulation through wearable devices may be a promising, non-invasive, low-cost alternative for reducing physiological anxiety symptoms, with massage showing the strongest effects.

GRADUATE SCHOOL CITATION FOR OUTSTANDING FINAL PROJECT
Winter 2026

College of Computing

- **Fedi Naimi and Halee Belghouthi, Health Informatics and Bioinformatics**
 - **Project Title:** Clinical-Grade Infrastructure for Digital Cognitive Assessment

Fedi and Halee were nominated for their exceptional work in the Health Informatics and Bioinformatics program. Their project, Wayloom, offers an innovative digital approach to cognitive testing while maintaining clinical standards. They demonstrated strong technical, clinical, and analytical integration throughout the project. Their solution is thoughtfully designed, addressing real-world challenges in equitable cognitive assessment. The project reflects professionalism, interdisciplinary collaboration, and a clear understanding of healthcare needs. Their validation efforts strengthened the credibility and impact of their work. Wayloom has already earned external recognition, including success in a competitive pitch event. The project continues to advance toward practical implementation in clinical settings. Both students have shown exemplary performance and commitment to meaningful innovation. Their work stands out for its significance, quality, and potential real-world benefit. Their nomination for the Outstanding Final Project Award is strongly supported.

ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: Dementia affects millions worldwide, yet most validated cognitive assessments remain paper-based, limiting scalability and longitudinal analysis. This study developed and evaluated Wayloom, a clinician-controlled digital platform that preserves clinical validity while improving workflow efficiency.

SUBJECTS: 34 users, including clinicians and study participants, were enrolled in an initial pilot deployment following IRB approval.

METHODS AND MATERIALS: Wayloom was built as a modular platform supporting digitized assessments with auditable scoring logic, structured task generation, and standardized data capture within a secure, compliance-oriented architecture.

ANALYSES: Descriptive statistics from satisfaction and usability feedback were collected during pilot deployment.

RESULTS: 82% of users reported high satisfaction and 79% rated usability better than paper-based assessments. Clinicians reported reduced administrative burden (85%) and improved scoring confidence (88%). No critical issues were observed.

CONCLUSIONS: Wayloom demonstrates a scalable, clinician-centered model that supports both research and clinical care. Future work will evaluate longitudinal performance and broader deployment.

- **Yu-Ting Liu, Health Informatics and Bioinformatics**
 - **Project Title:** A Reusable End-to-End Pipeline for Public RNA-seq Analysis and LLM-Assisted Metadata Standardization

Yu-Ting is nominated in recognition of her sustained research contributions throughout her time at GVSU. Her work led to one manuscript currently under review at *Cell Press Patterns* and another in preparation for *Bioinformatics*. She developed and analyzed billion-parameter interpretable machine learning models for single-cell omics data. Her research provided insights into gene programs and mechanisms of cellular signaling regulation. She worked extensively with both R and Python across data engineering, machine learning, QA, and benchmarking tasks. Yu-Ting successfully presented her findings at multiple academic venues. For her final project, she created an end-to-end bioinformatics workflow applied to COVID-19 datasets. This work highlighted immune vulnerabilities in COVID-19 patients compared with non-COVID sepsis cases. Her findings offered actionable insights relevant to critical care and disease understanding. Yu-Ting's achievements reflect strong technical expertise and scientific rigor.

ABSTRACT

Public bulk RNA-seq datasets are valuable resources for studying gene expression, identifying disease-related pathways, and generating biological insights in health and biomedical research. However, reuse of these datasets is often limited by large-scale raw sequencing files, fragmented metadata, inconsistent formatting, and the time required to convert public data into analysis-ready outputs. To address these challenges, this project developed a reusable end-to-end computational pipeline for analyzing public GEO RNA-seq studies. The workflow automates processing from raw sequencing data to gene-level count matrices and uses a large language model (LLM) to extract and standardize metadata from unstructured study descriptions. The pipeline was applied to COVID-19 blood transcriptomic datasets to identify genes and pathways that distinguish COVID-19 from healthy controls and to compare features shared with or distinct from bacterial sepsis. This work demonstrates how computing, AI, and workflow automation can improve the reusability of public genomics data and support more efficient biomedical discovery.

College of Education and Community Innovation

- **Candace Murray, Literacy Studies**

- **Project Title:** Strengthening Analytical Comprehension in Upper Elementary Students Through Close Reading, Text-Dependent Questioning, and Text-Based Discussions

Candace completed her project with exceptional quality. Her work addressed the challenges upper-elementary students face when engaging with complex texts and producing evidence-based responses. Candace developed a comprehensive instructional framework integrating close reading, text-dependent questioning, and structured text-based discussions. The framework equips teachers with Tier 1 resources, including guidelines for close reading, questioning tools, discussion protocols, scaffolding supports, and sample lessons. She also created student tracking tools to support ongoing monitoring of comprehension and evidence use. Her appendices were notably extensive, offering practical, ready-to-implement materials for classroom use. Candace grounded her work in research while contributing original resources to the field. Her project demonstrates both scholarly rigor and real-world applicability. She is emerging as a leader in literacy education. Candace's dedication to students and to her own professional growth is clearly evident.

ABSTRACT

Upper elementary students frequently struggle to move from literal to analytical understanding of complex texts due to limited explicit reading instruction. This project developed a classroom framework that combines close reading, text-dependent questioning, and structured text-based discussions to strengthen comprehension and evidence-based reasoning. Grounded in Vygotsky's social constructivist theory and supported by research, the framework provides Tier 1 teacher resources. These include guidelines for close reading, questioning tools, discussion protocols, scaffolding, lesson plans, and student tracking tools. Implemented in whole-class instruction and aligned with the Common Core State Standards, the framework helps teachers foster analytical thinking and independent, evidence-based reading.

College of Health Professions

- **Bridget Gaier, Isaac Francis, and Josie Kasmauskis, Clinical Dietetics**
 - **Project Title:** Perceptions and frequency of screening for aspects of quality-of-life by registered dietitian nutritionists

Josie, Bridget, and Isaac are recognized for their outstanding project examining how Registered Dietitian Nutritionists use and perceive Quality of Life (QOL) assessments. Their study addresses a meaningful gap by evaluating both the perceived value of QOL tools and the frequency with which they are applied in practice. Through an exploratory survey, they gathered responses from 89 RDNs, revealing that 92% view QOL assessment as important. Their findings also highlight variability in how consistently different aspects of QOL are evaluated. The project establishes a strong basis for future work on integrating QOL measures into nutrition assessment. Their research contributes to improving patient-centered outcomes within the field of dietetics. The team demonstrated professionalism, initiative, and strong collaboration. They approached each stage with optimism, independence, and a clear sense of purpose. Their resilience and thoughtful engagement with feedback strengthened the quality of their work. The group consistently balanced autonomy with effective communication and teamwork. Their scholarly contribution and their integrity mark them as emerging leaders in nutrition and dietetics.

ABSTRACT

Quality of life (QOL) is a measure of how comfortable a person is physically, emotionally, socially, and/or spiritually, and is used to assess patients and healthcare outcomes. Although research exists on the use and impact of QOL tools in other health professions, there is a gap in understanding how registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) perceive and use QOL. A survey was distributed to Michigan dietitians in January 2026. The survey aimed to evaluate RDNs' perceived usefulness and frequency of use of aspects of QOL in patient care. 92% of RDNs surveyed indicated that assessing QOL was useful or very useful in their practice. Appetite or weight are assessed daily or weekly by over 60% of RDNs, while aspects such as social health are assessed by around 40% of RDNs. Understanding the frequency and use of QOL aspects by RDNs lays the foundation for the potential impact on nutrition assessment and patient outcomes.

- **Cierra Gabrielse, Melina Tofilovski, Taylor LaCombe, and Tristen Wesenberg, Doctor of Physical Therapy**
 - **Project Title:** On Time Power Mobility Use in a SSRD with Children Aged 12-36 Months with Cerebral Palsy

Cierra, Melina, Taylor, and Tristen demonstrated exceptional performance in planning and completing their research project. Their work contributes to a broader research effort focused on improving mobility opportunities for young children with severe disabilities. This line of research supports children's cognitive, emotional, and environmental engagement, making its impact especially significant. Their specific project examined the interrater reliability of a tool used to assess powered mobility learning. They also applied the instrument to evaluate learning progress in new users who received no formal instruction. These findings are essential for informing the development and application of the Explore Mini mobility device. The team's dedication, efficiency, and high-quality execution were consistently noted by their faculty mentor, Dr. Lisa Kenyon. Their early and successful completion of the project further reflects their strong collaboration and professionalism. The group's contributions advance an important area of pediatric mobility research.

ABSTRACT

Purpose: ON Time Mobility stipulates that independent mobility is a human right. For young children with severe cerebral palsy, this can only be achieved using power mobility devices such as the Explorer Mini. This project was conducted as part of an A-B-A multiple-baseline single-subject research design. Parents recorded weekly videos of their children using the Explorer Mini. Subjects: Nine children with severe cerebral palsy aged 12 to 36 months. Method: After establishing intra- and inter-rater reliability, 4 blinded raters reviewed the videos in a randomized order. Each video was scored using the Assessment of Learning Powered Mobility (ALP). Results: The raters scored 314 videos ranging from 5 to 25 minutes in length. The most frequently observed ALP stage was Stage 1 (80.8%). No videos were scored at ALP Stage 3. Conclusion: These results suggest that, for these participants, learning to use a power mobility device was a variable process

- **Kendra Leep, Marirose LeFevre, and Olivia Koole, Athletic Training**
 - **Project Title:** Bioelectrical Impedance And Heart Rate Variability in Response to Exercise

Over the past two years, they have excelled academically across multiple courses in the curriculum. They completed their research project, “Bioelectrical Impedance and Heart Rate Variability in Response to Exercise,” under the guidance of Dr. Brian Hatzel and Dr. Ross Sherman. Their work involved developing a proposal, completing a full board IRB submission, formulating research questions, and conducting data collection and analysis. They also produced a thorough write-up of their results, discussion, and conclusions. The group demonstrated a strong commitment to high-quality research and scholarly inquiry. They showed a solid understanding of how research informs and advances the field of athletic training. Their leadership, maturity, and enthusiasm for the profession were consistently evident. Each student contributed thoughtfully and exceeded expectations throughout the project. Their professionalism and reflective, inquisitive approach set them apart as emerging leaders.

ABSTRACT

Context: Bioelectrical Impedance Analysis (BIA) detects changes in tissue damage/reactance (X_c) and inflammation/resistance (R). Heart rate variability (HRV) is used to assess fatigue and recovery. This study investigated whether exercise induced muscle damage (EIMD) would create changes in lower extremity X_c and R, and systemic HRV (RMSSD). Methods: Sixteen participants were randomized to the exercise ($n=8$) and control ($n=8$) groups. The exercise group completed 10x10 eccentric depth jump squats. Measurements were taken pre, post, 24, 48, and 72 hours for HRV, BIA, soreness (VAS), and pain pressure threshold (PPT). Results: Significance was found in RMSSD, R, X_c , VAS, and PPT ($p<0.05$). A correlation existed between RMSSD and X_c ($r = .703$). Conclusion: BIA and HRV assessment suggest changes identified from a single bout of eccentric exercise. HRV may be beneficial to utilize for monitoring acute autonomic stress following exercise, and BIA for identifying tissue status.

- **Melissa Stone, Public Health**
 - **Project Title:** Severity Indicators and Health Complications in Infants with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome in Michigan

Melissa has been an exceptional student since beginning the program, working closely with faculty across multiple courses and through her master's project. Her research focuses on maternal substance use and infant health outcomes, an area of significant public health importance. Her project, "Severity Indicators and Health Complications in Infants with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome in Michigan," examines demographic and clinical factors associated with NAS from 2019–2023. She also analyzes the relationship between NAS and short-term infant outcomes such as preterm birth, low birth weight, jaundice, feeding issues, respiratory diagnoses, and seizures. Using five years of statewide birth hospitalization data (n=500,276), Melissa independently designed the study, developed methods, and conducted all statistical analyses. She applied complex coding techniques to identify drug-exposure outcomes using validated diagnostic codes. Her work demonstrates rigorous scientific writing, strong methodological skills, and a clear understanding of perinatal epidemiology. The significance of her research was recognized by the Michigan Public Health Association, where she was selected to present at the 2026 MPHA Epidemiology Conference. She intends to submit her findings to a peer-reviewed journal focused on maternal and infant health.

ABSTRACT

Neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS) has declined across the United States, while in utero drug exposure without a NAS diagnosis has increased. This study examined demographic and clinical characteristics of infants in Michigan. Using Healthcare Cost and Utilization Project state inpatient discharge data, we conducted a cross-sectional analysis of birth hospitalizations from 2019–2023 (n=500,276). Validated ICD-10-CM codes identified NAS (n=2,823) and drug exposure without NAS (n=2,031). Lower income, White race, Medicaid or Medicare payment, and residence in medium metropolitan or micropolitan counties were associated with higher odds of both conditions. Both groups had increased odds of adverse infant outcomes. Infants with drug exposure without NAS had greater odds of preterm birth and low birth weight, while infants with NAS had higher odds of feeding difficulties, respiratory diagnoses, seizures, and jaundice. These findings highlight the burden of prenatal substance exposure in Michigan and guide public health interventions and resource allocation efforts.

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

- **Samantha LaMantia, Cell and Molecular Biology**
 - **Project Title:** SUMOylation and Mitotic Catastrophe in High-risk ETS-fused Pediatric Acute Myeloid Leukemia

Samantha is nominated for her exceptional work. For her graduate internship, she joined the Triche Lab at the Van Andel Institute to investigate molecular mechanisms underlying high-risk pediatric acute myeloid leukemia. Her project, “SUMOylation and Mitotic Catastrophe in High-risk ETS-fused Pediatric Acute Myeloid Leukemia,” addresses one of the most aggressive childhood cancers. Sam identified a hyper-proliferative, MYC-driven phenotype characteristic of ETS-fused pediatric AML. Her findings highlight the poor survival and high relapse rates associated with this leukemia subtype. By targeting supportive molecular mechanisms, she and the team identified a novel therapeutic target for this ultra high-risk group. Her work represents a meaningful step toward developing targeted therapies where none currently exist. Sam has continued her research at the Van Andel Institute, demonstrating strong commitment and scientific maturity. Faculty describe her as an exceptionally talented young researcher. Her project’s scientific and medical significance make her an outstanding candidate for this award.

ABSTRACT

Pediatric acute myeloid leukemia (pAML) is an incredibly heterogeneous disease. This is evident particularly in patients with translocations involving an ETS transcription factor, such as those with t(16;21)(p11;q22) FUS::ERG pAML (Buteyn *et al.*, Blood 2021). Here, we present another high-risk ETS phenotype characterized by overexpression of the *MYC*, *MYCN*, and *MAX* transcription factors. 87.5% of patients relapse within the first year, with a 3-year survival rate less than 32%. In addition to heightened *MYC* expression, patients show significant overexpression of *Cyclin D/E*, *CDK2/4*, and SUMOylation pathway components, suggesting a hyperproliferative phenotype (further supported by clinical data). SUMOylation is required for proper spindle formation and chromosomal segregation; inadequacies result in mitotic catastrophe and apoptosis. We have shown that inhibition of the SUMOylation E1 complex with the SAE1 inhibitor TAK-981, halts proliferation. By targeting supportive mechanisms we have, for the first time, identified therapeutic targets for this ultra high-risk subset of pAML.

- **Sydney Kamps, Communications**
 - **Project Title:** Uncooperative Animals: Examining Big Data's Attack on Autonomy

Sydney is nominated for her exceptional work in communication studies. Her final project, *Uncooperative Animals: Examining Big Data's Attack on Autonomy*, tackles the profound societal implications of artificial intelligence. Sydney analyzes how AI and large-scale behavioral data collection threaten individual agency and democratic processes. She argues that corporate data surveillance now surpasses traditional government oversight in scope and influence. Her project offers a clear, urgent account of how predictive analytics reshape human autonomy. Sydney frames these developments as a critical communication problem with far-reaching social consequences. She raises awareness of the risks posed by unchecked technological power. The project concludes by identifying communication-based strategies for collective resistance. Her work is intellectually ambitious, theoretically sophisticated, and timely. Sydney demonstrates the curiosity, drive, and analytical skill characteristic of leading communication scholars.

ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: A contribution to existing literature on digital human rights concerns by deconstructing Big Data's covert methods of social control in the United States; it endeavors to present a case for policy, media literacy, and rights advocacy.

SUBJECTS: Behavioral data mining; artificial intelligence; predictive analytics; communications theory. **METHODS:** This multi-chapter interdisciplinary study involves literature review of various communications theorists as a foundation for its critical arguments, joined with assessments of relevant news events, a comparative analysis of the Chinese Social Credit System, and an analysis of tech industry rhetoric. **ANALYSES:** Thematic analysis and narrative synthesis shape proposals for individual, policy, and community action. **RESULTS:** AI advancements, systemic power imbalances, and lack of regulation concerning behavioral data present an acute threat to democracy and free will.

CONCLUSIONS: An effective response comprises educational strategy, interdisciplinary collaboration, and a demand for transparency under surveillance capitalism.

Kirkhof College of Nursing

- **Chelsea Ericson, Doctor of Nursing Practice**

- **Project Title:** Reducing physical restraint use for traumatic brain injury patients through diversional activities: a quality-improvement project

Chelsea is nominated for her exceptional DNP project focused on reducing physical restraint use in patients with traumatic brain injury. She secured a \$10,000 Corewell Health grant to support the implementation of diversional activities as an alternative to restraints. Chelsea designed a rigorous, evidence-based implementation study that was both systematic and thoughtfully executed. Her data collection and analysis were highly sophisticated, reflecting strong methodological skill. She effectively engaged unit staff, service line leaders, and organizational partners across multiple sites. Her final presentation was organized, detailed, and intentional in its structure and delivery. The project demonstrates sustainability, with potential for replication across additional units and the trauma service line. Chelsea's work successfully integrated best evidence into practice, achieving clinical improvements such as reduced restraint use and decreased length of stay. She has prepared a manuscript for publication and created posters for both the Kirkhof College of Nursing showcase and the Graduate Student Showcase. Throughout all DNP Scholarly Project courses, she excelled academically and actively sought opportunities to deepen her expertise. Her project reflects strong leadership, initiative, and commitment to advancing nursing practice.

ABSTRACT

Background: Traumatic brain injury (TBI) changes brain function and structures, altering behavior, emotions, and impulse control. **Local Problem:** Hospital policy required a trial of diversional activities for escalating behaviors prior to physical restraint use. However, the availability of standardized diversional activities were limited. **Methods:** Cycles of PDSA for quality and process improvement were completed with nurse champions, standardized work, and staff education. **Interventions:** A standardized, evidence-based Patient Activity Cart (PAC) stocked with differentiated activities for severity of TBI was created. **Results:** Twenty-five TBI patients were admitted to the trauma unit during the 3-month pilot period and 50% (n=13) experienced escalating behaviors. Of those with escalating behaviors, 69% (n=9) trialed a diversional activity. Of patients who trialed diversional activities, only 22% (n=2) were placed in restraints compared to 75% (n=3) of patients without a diversional activity. **Conclusions:** This standardized diversional activity quality improvement intervention reduced restraint use.

GRADUATE SCHOOL CITATION FOR OUTSTANDING PUBLICATION
Winter 2026

College of Computing

- **Nishan Khanal, Data Science and Analytics**
 - **Publication Title:** InfoST: An Information-Theoretic Framework for Evaluating Spatio-Temporal Prediction

Nishan is nominated for his first-author paper, *InfoST: An Information-Theoretic Framework for Evaluating Spatio-Temporal Prediction*. His work addresses a key limitation in forecasting research: traditional error metrics often fail to reveal how models differ in what they learn about spatial and temporal structure. InfoST introduces a model-agnostic, information-theoretic approach that quantifies predictive structure in space, in time, and jointly. The framework can be paired with standard forecasting models, making it valuable for both theoretical and applied domains. Nishan led the development of the theoretical measures and implemented the full evaluation toolkit. He conducted systematic experiments across multiple datasets to demonstrate the framework's ability to distinguish models that appear similar under MAE or RMSE. As first author, he coordinated collaborator contributions and prepared the final manuscript. The paper was accepted to the AI4TS Workshop at IEEE ICDM 2025, where Nishan presented the work. He is extending this research through new projects on explainability for spatio-temporal models, including a forthcoming submission to IEEE VIS 2026.

ABSTRACT

Performance of spatio-temporal predictors is notoriously dataset-dependent, complicating fair comparison and principled model selection. We address this challenge by introducing an information-theoretic evaluation framework that decomposes dataset structure into two complementary indices: *temporal predictability* and *spatial predictability*. Grounded in mutual-information measurements, these indices quantify how much signal is available along the temporal and non-temporal (e.g., spatial, variable, or channel) axes. Building on this formulation, we construct a controllable synthetic benchmark in which temporal and spatial regularities can be independently tuned, enabling factorial experiments that systematically vary task difficulty and structure. Evaluating representative models shows that rankings vary systematically with the balance of temporal versus spatial signal. On synthetic data, S-Mamba and iTransformer lead when temporal predictability dominates; their advantage narrows as spatial predictability increases. Revisiting widely used real-world suites through our lens reveals the same pattern: datasets with higher spatial mutual information favor models that explicitly exploit inter-variable structure, while low-spatial-MI datasets favor temporal-axis methods.

- **Pravallika Manchu and Swarna Bharathi Kathi, Health Informatics and Bioinformatics**
 - **Project Title:** Unmasking Inhibitor Development in Hemophilia A and B Using Interpretable Machine Learning: A Logistic Regression Approach on CHAMP and CHBMP Mutation Data

Swarna and Pravalika are nominated in recognition of their strong and consistent scholarly output over the past year. Under close mentorship, they contributed to three full manuscripts—one accepted for presentation at a highly selective venue and two currently under peer review. They also produced three research posters, demonstrating versatility in communicating complex ideas. One of their papers was selected for an oral presentation at the AMIA 2026 Clinical Informatics Conference, chosen from more than 400 submissions. Their research centers on interpretable machine learning in clinically meaningful applications, integrating technical rigor with domain relevance. Both scholars engage deeply with research problems and demonstrate independence in carrying out their work. They respond thoughtfully to feedback and consistently refine the quality of their contributions. Their collaboration is efficient, disciplined, and marked by clear ownership of responsibilities. Despite high productivity, their work maintains strong methodological depth and clarity. Their research reflects real-world applicability and careful interpretation. Swarna and Pravalika exemplify the rigor, initiative, and impact this award seeks to honor.

ABSTRACT

Background: Inhibitor development remains one of the most serious complications in Hemophilia A and B, affecting up to 30% of patients with severe Hemophilia A, disrupting standard factor therapy and significantly complicating clinical management. Predicting which patients are at risk is challenging due to complex interactions between genetic, immunological, and clinical factors.

Objective: To examine whether pre-treatment mutation data can identify patients with a documented history of inhibitor development using an interpretable machine learning approach across both Hemophilia A and B.

Methods: Two CDC mutation registries were analyzed, CHAMP (Hemophilia A, n = 4,050) and CHBMP (Hemophilia B, n = 1,399). Logistic regression models were built incorporating variant type, mutation mechanism, exon location, and disease severity. SMOTE was applied to address class imbalance. Performance was evaluated using AUC, precision-recall curves, F1-score, and accuracy.

Results: The unified model (n = 1,090) achieved an overall accuracy of 84% and ROC-AUC of 0.78. Large structural variants showed inhibitor-positive rates of 37.7% in CHAMP and 26.0% in CHBMP. Nonsense, frameshift, and large structural deletions were the strongest predictors, and severe phenotype was consistently associated with higher inhibitor risk across both datasets.

Conclusion: Interpretable machine learning using genetic mutation data can meaningfully support inhibitor risk stratification in hemophilia care, providing a transparent and replicable framework for early clinical decision-making across both Hemophilia A and B.

College of Health Professions

- **Madeline Krawciw, Public Health**

- **Publication Title:** The Curious Kitchen: Healthy Cooking for Kids

Madeline has been an engaged and high-achieving student since beginning the MPH program. Madeline worked closely with faculty across multiple courses and during a study-abroad program in Sardinia, Italy. In Fall 2025, she played a central role in the Kids in the Culinary Academy pilot project. Her contributions spanned program design, implementation, data collection, analysis, and the development of a supplemental cookbook outline. A major outcome of this work was the 100-page children's cookbook she co-authored, featuring interactive, age-appropriate healthy recipes. The cookbook supports youth engagement in nutrition and serves as a sustainable educational tool for future MPH and Clinical Dietetics students. Madeline and her team have submitted their research to state and national conferences to share pilot findings. The program model is designed for replication in future years, extending the project's impact. Throughout her graduate work, Madeline has demonstrated strong scientific writing, professionalism, and independence.

ABSTRACT

The Curious Kitchen: Healthy Cooking for Kids is a cookbook designed to empower young chefs aged 8–16 to embrace nutritious eating through hands-on culinary exploration. Authored by a public health professor and public health student as part of a Culinary Academy event, the cookbook bridges nutrition science with real-world appeal, offering 32 kid-approved recipes across snacks, appetizers, entrees, and desserts. Each recipe features clear, step-by-step instructions alongside guidance on kitchen safety, ingredient substitutions, and nutritional benefits, equipping young cooks with both practical skills and food literacy. Interactive elements, including "Create Your Own Recipe" sections and personal note-taking pages, encourage creativity and ownership over the cooking experience. Designed for beginners and budding youth home chefs, the book fosters confidence, independence, and a lasting positive relationship with food. *The Curious Kitchen* serves not merely as a cookbook, but as a personalized culinary companion supporting children's long-term health and wellness.

- **Natalie Stahl, Public Health**
 - **Publication Title: Empowering Patients:** Using Creative Zines to Boost Health Literacy and Seizure Education

Natalie has made a significant contribution to academic and professional literature through her role as primary author of a peer-reviewed conference presentation featured at the Institute for Health Advancement health literacy conference. Throughout the Master of Public Health program, she has demonstrated exceptional initiative, intellectual curiosity, and academic discipline. Natalie led all aspects of the project, including conceptual development, synthesis of complex content, and clear, impactful dissemination of findings. Her publication, *Empowering Patients: Using Creative Zines to Boost Health Literacy and Seizure Education*, explores the use of accessible, plain-language zines to improve seizure first-aid understanding among patients and caregivers. The work highlights how creative, community-driven tools can dismantle medical jargon and counter harmful myths. Natalie's scholarship meets rigorous peer-review standards and reflects a deep understanding of health literacy principles. Her professionalism, integrity, and collaborative spirit further distinguish her as a strong scholar deserving of this recognition.

ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this publication is to empower patients, their caregivers, and healthcare providers on how to respond to and identify seizures. Patients and their caregivers are better equipped to identify what is happening and to respond calmly and safely when they understand seizure first aid in plain language. Increasing health literacy about seizures enables friends, caregivers, and onlookers to take appropriate action and avoid harmful myths. A zine titled "*Stay Calm: Seizure First Aid Made Simple*" was created to enhance health literacy and seizure education. Zines (self-published, small-circulation booklets) are particularly effective in healthcare because they break down complex medical jargon into accessible, visual, and community-driven narratives. **Methods:** The development of a lesson to help Master's in Public Health students in the development of zines to address a health issue within the community. The lesson addressed key health literacy competencies as defined by the NCHEC CHES®. The lesson addressed using communications theory to develop or select communication message(s), and tailoring message(s) for the audience(s). **Key Insight:** The development of zines allows for multiple forms of learning while remaining concise and easy to understand. The mixture of visual representations in the literature and the accessible reading level reaches a broader audience. Using this type of learning tool promotes health equity by enabling access to those in the community who may be harder to reach. **Implications:** A presentation on *Stay Calm: Seizure First Aid Made Simple* was delivered in an urgent care setting to healthcare providers to enhance education and patient care.

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

- **Jillian Greene, Biology**

- **Publication Title:** Quantifying methane emissions from Laurentian Great Lakes estuaries using in situ measurements, remote sensing, and machine learning

Jillian is nominated for her article in *Limnology and Oceanography Letters* titled “Quantifying methane emissions from Laurentian Great Lakes estuaries using in situ measurements, remote sensing, and machine learning.” Her publication introduces new satellite-based methods for estimating methane emissions from lakes, addressing a major challenge in measuring greenhouse gases across large lake-dense regions. The journal highlights cutting-edge, high-impact research, underscoring the significance of Jillian’s contribution. Her work involved extensive field research, including designing and constructing six automated floating chambers to measure emissions. She conducted laboratory analyses and developed remote-sensing algorithms to support the study. Jillian secured multiple competitive grants to fund chamber construction, fieldwork, and lab analysis. These awards came from the Michigan Space Grant Consortium, West Michigan Air and Waste Management Association, the Michigan Chapter of NALMS, and the GVSU Presidential Research Grant. Her achievements extend beyond this publication, including serving as a graduate research assistant for NASA’s Climate Change Research Initiative. She collaborated with NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies and the City University of New York during her master’s program.

ABSTRACT

Freshwater estuaries are natural contributors to the carbon cycle, including production and emission of methane (CH₄), a potent greenhouse gas (GHG); however, estimates of their contribution to global GHG emissions is uncertain. Recent research has identified the potential for quantifying limnetic methane using optical remote sensing coupled with machine learning. In this study, CH₄ fluxes were measured from three drowned river mouth (DRM) estuaries along the eastern shore of Lake Michigan using low-cost, autonomous floating samplers in the littoral zone and discrete samples in the pelagic zone from May to October 2024. Sentinel-3 Ocean and Land Color Instrument, Gridded Meteorological Data, and Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectrometer were used to calculate environmental variable proxies, which were used to estimate CH₄ fluxes with machine learning. Model performance ($R^2 = 0.50$) indicated ability to capture trends in CH₄ flux and extend predictions to other DRM estuaries. These results provide an accessible framework for reducing the current uncertainty in lakes' CH₄ emissions estimates.

**GRADUATE SCHOOL CITATION FOR EXCELLENCE IN SERVICE TO THE
COMMUNITY OR PROFESSION**

Winter 2026

College of Education and Community Innovation

- **Christopher McGuire, Public Administration**

Christopher is an exceptional student who consistently demonstrates the values of a dedicated public servant and emerging servant-leader. As President of the ICMA graduate student organization, he organized regular service activities, site visits, and guest speaker events that enriched students' understanding of public service. Christopher's positivity and commitment inspired his peers and strengthened the group's sense of purpose. His leadership style reflects humility, collaboration, and a genuine desire to support others. He consistently models the professional and ethical qualities central to public administration. He embodies the qualities of a servant-leader who will continue to contribute significantly to the field.

- **Kennedy Sowell, Criminal Justice**

Kennedy is graduating with the highest GPA in the Master of Criminal Justice cohort, reflecting exceptional scholarly achievement. Her academic leadership is evident in a major research project examining racialized violence, immigration, and border enforcement, with an abstract submitted to the *Journal of Ethnicity in Criminal Justice*. She also serves as the graduate assistant for the undergraduate cold case course, supporting investigative efforts and professional skill development. Kennedy has participated in advanced professional training with the Michigan State Police, including the Homicide Investigation School. Her commitment to social justice, scholarship, and public service will continue as she enters law school, making her a highly deserving candidate.

College of Health Professions

- **Chloe Bowyer, Clinical Dietetics**

Chloe is nominated for her sustained, innovative contributions to nutrition and dietetics. She has served as a Brand Ambassador, effectively translating evidence-based nutrition science into accessible public messaging for organizations including the Michigan Dairy Council and GVSU Campus Dining. She also led social media initiatives for the Clinical Dietetics and Applied Food and Nutrition programs and the Clinical Dietetics Student Group, significantly strengthening their digital presence and professional visibility. Her community service includes managing social media for a Grand Rapids nonprofit focused on food access and social determinants of health, where she amplified public health messaging and connected residents with critical resources. Chloe's communication is marked by clarity, compassion, and scientific integrity. Her creativity, professionalism, and commitment demonstrate the powerful role of digital engagement in advancing public health and the dietetics profession.

- **Clayton Lewis, Doctor of Physical Therapy**

Clayton is a third-year DPT student with an impressive 3.851 GPA, demonstrating strong academic performance alongside exceptional service. Clay has been one of the most dedicated volunteers in the GVSU DPT Pro Bono Clinic, which provides free physical therapy services to uninsured and underinsured community members. Faculty note that he has served patients in a supervised clinician role with professionalism, compassion, and reliability. He has also been a strong advocate for expanding student involvement in the clinic to ensure its long-term sustainability and mission. As a Pro Bono Clinic Coordinator, he managed scheduling for students and community clinicians, a role in which he excelled beyond expectations. His leadership strengthened the clinic's operations and enhanced its impact on the community. Clay's commitment, character, and service make him an outstanding candidate for this award.

- **Robert Manson, Doctor of Audiology**

Robert is nominated for his exceptional and sustained volunteer work with Special Olympics Michigan. He is a compassionate, thoughtful, and reflective student whose character naturally lends itself to service. Despite carrying a demanding academic load, Robert consistently volunteered for Healthy Hearing and Healthy Young Athletes events. He approached each event with preparation, professionalism, and a positive attitude, even during long 8–10 hour days. Robert’s ability to connect with athletes with intellectual disabilities stood out immediately to faculty and peers. Even while completing his externship in Wisconsin, he returned to Michigan to volunteer at the Special Olympics event in Escanaba. There, he served as a leader, guiding first-year Doctor of Audiology students and sharing his clinical knowledge. Faculty describe him as one of the most consistently involved and dependable volunteers in the program.

- **Sydney Johnson, Public Health**

Sydney is recognized for exceptional service, leadership, and professional engagement beyond the classroom. She consistently demonstrates poise, initiative, and a strong commitment to making a meaningful community impact. Through her involvement in the Public Health Society and the Community Engaged Partnership Initiative, Sydney has gone beyond expected responsibilities to address real-world public health challenges. Her work reflects not only initiative but a genuine dedication to serving others and creating positive outcomes. As Social Chair of the Public Health Society, she has demonstrated effective leadership by fostering collaboration and translating academic knowledge into practical action. Sydney leads with integrity, empathy, and purpose, inspiring peers and cultivating inclusive environments. Her sustained service and leadership reflect the values this award seeks to honor, and she is highly deserving of this recognition.

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

- **Hannah Meade, School Psychology (M.S., Psy.S)**

Hannah is a third-year student completing her internship at Cedar Springs Public Schools and will graduate this year. Throughout her training, Hannah has applied her strong foundation in psychology and education to serve children, families, and school communities. As a graduate assistant, she played a key role in GVSU's partnership with the Children's Enrichment Center, helping create a more inclusive and structured early childhood environment. She supported PBIS-aligned practices, contributed to staff training, developed instructional materials, and provided direct support to children with higher needs, including those with autism. She also improved family access to mental health resources through needs assessment and outreach efforts. Hannah's professionalism, empathy, and commitment to meaningful service make her highly deserving of this recognition.

Kirkhof College of Nursing

- **Lora Rademacher, Doctor of Nursing Practice**

Lora is nominated for her sustained leadership and contributions to nursing education and practice. Throughout the program, she has demonstrated excellence, innovation, and commitment to advancing the mission of the Kirkhof College of Nursing. Lora contributed to a scholarship team featured in *Reach Higher* for re-envisioning nursing curricula to better support novice students. Her DNP project significantly impacted her health system by strengthening competency development for unlicensed assistive personnel and registered nurses. This work produced a new model in which high-performing UAPs lead education stations, improving retention and patient safety. She also holds NIH Stroke Scale certification and supports rapid neurological assessment. Her professional service includes active membership in Sigma's Kappa Epsilon at Large Chapter. Lora's leadership, scholarship, and dedication reflect exemplary service to the nursing profession.

GRADUATE SCHOOL CITATION FOR EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP AND SERVICE TO GVSU

Winter 2026

College of Computing

- **Ranjith Kumar Patil, Applied Computer Science**

As a graduate teaching assistant for Cloud Computing and Data Engineering, he demonstrated a strong dedication to student success by providing additional support, clear instruction, and individualized guidance. Beyond the classroom, Ranjith served as Vice President of the Graduate Student Association, where he helped manage the distribution of funding and contributed over 90 hours of volunteer service. He played a key role in organizing successful graduate events, including a Welcome Dinner, career development programming, and a professional headshot initiative supporting international students. Ranjith also extended his leadership through roles with International Friendships Inc. and the iAnchor Allies program, mentoring new international students and fostering inclusive community spaces. Ranjith's service is characterized by empathy, reliability, and a genuine commitment to helping others succeed.

College of Education and Community Innovation

- **Elora Ferrie, Public Administration**

Elora is nominated for her outstanding contributions as a graduate student and campus leader. Throughout the MPA program, Elora has distinguished herself as an engaged, thoughtful, and high-performing student. For the past two years, she has served as a graduate assistant in the Laker Academic Success Center, supporting programming and advising that promote student-athlete success both academically and athletically. Elora's contributions reflect the highest standards of the MPA program and of GVSU's commitment to student leadership. She exemplifies excellence in all she undertakes and is highly deserving of this recognition.

- **Lauren Hellman, School Psychology (M.S., Psy.S)**

Lauren is a third-year student who will complete her degree upon finishing her internship with Mona Shores Public Schools. She is widely regarded as a leader within her cohort, having served as Secretary and later President of the GVSU Student Affiliates in School Psychology (SASP). Under her leadership, SASP organized cross-cohort social and professional development events, including a workshop on self-care and preventing burnout. Lauren also led efforts to honor local school psychologists and successfully secured Graduate Student Association funding to support student attendance at state and national conferences. During her internship, Lauren demonstrated leadership by facilitating social-emotional learning groups and classroom lessons while collaborating on equity-focused, systems-level initiatives. Her service, leadership, and commitment to student wellbeing make her highly deserving of this recognition.

- **Rebeca Barajas-Juarez, Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration**

Rebeca brings her full professional and personal self to the classroom, demonstrating confidence, curiosity, and a collaborative spirit. She is a strong scholar who enriches discussions with her experience, insight, and thoughtful engagement with peers. Rebeca also serves as a key member of the Office of Student Support and Belonging, where she has stepped into both formal and informal leadership roles. Her willingness to assume additional responsibilities ensured the office maintained stability and continuity during times of need. She facilitated meetings, supported students directly, and integrated her academic learning into her professional practice with intention and care. Her work has strengthened both staff capacity and student support within OSSB. Rebeca's academic preparation, work ethic, and altruism position her as the kind of leader modern higher education needs.

College of Health Professions

- **Josie Kasmauskis, Applied Food and Nutrition and Clinical Dietetics**

Josie is nominated for her exceptional academic achievement, leadership, and sustained service to the dietetics community. As President of the Clinical Dietetics Student Association, Josie has been an energetic and highly effective leader, organizing events that strengthened student engagement and professional development. Josie independently planned a study-abroad experience in Argentina, demonstrating initiative, cultural awareness, and a commitment to expanding her global competencies. She has inspired other students by openly sharing her international learning experience. Beyond formal roles, Josie consistently volunteers at every AFN and Clinical Dietetics recruitment event—often without being asked. Josie leads with integrity, initiative, and a genuine desire to support others. Her contributions have strengthened the dietetics community and positively impacted the broader university.

- **Valerie Caylor, Doctor of Physical Therapy**

Valerie is a third-year student with an exceptional GPA, consistently demonstrating academic excellence alongside remarkable leadership. Val has served as class president for all three years of the DPT Class of 2026, leading a cohort of fifty-seven students with professionalism, warmth, and inclusivity. She has organized and led the student portion of orientation for the incoming DPT Class of 2027. Her work includes coordinating with community partners to plan networking events and lunch-and-learn opportunities for all three cohorts. She has also organized licensing exam preparation courses, secured GSA funding for professional development events, and planned the inaugural GVSU DPT Career Fair. Her dedication, organization, and service have strengthened the DPT program and exemplify the spirit of this award.

- **Vincent Choi, Public Health**

Vincent is nominated for his outstanding commitment to service, engagement, and academic excellence. He volunteered at the GVSU Public Health Equity Conference, supported Mental Health Week, and contributed to student engagement efforts through the Office of Inclusion and Equity. As a member of the Activation and Accountability Leadership Team, he participated in the GVSU Teach-In and served on the Justice and Equity Committee in the College of Health Professions. Vincent also supported GVSU faculty, students, and alumni by volunteering at the Michigan Public Health Association's Michigan Epidemiology Conference in 2025 and will volunteer again when the conference is hosted on the Pew Campus in 2026. His service extends beyond the university through his work with the American Red Cross, West Michigan Chapter. Since December 2024, he has served as a Volunteer Engagement Partner and currently leads youth programming for the Red Cross Experience Team across the state. Vincent's leadership reflects a deep commitment to public health, equity, and community engagement. Vincent is a highly deserving candidate for this award.

Kirkhof College of Nursing

- **Sarah King, Doctor of Nursing Practice**

Sarah is nominated for her exceptional commitment to the nursing profession and the university community. From her first semester, she has been an active member of the Michigan Council of Nurse Practitioners and the Graduate Student Nurses Association, consistently dedicating her time to strengthening student engagement and professional advocacy. As the KCON Student President of the MICNP chapter and the student representative on the Graduate Academic Affairs Committee, Sarah has been a thoughtful and effective advocate for her peers. Sarah was selected for the Peter C. Cook Leadership Academy in her first year, recognizing her strong potential and dedication to ethical, service-oriented leadership. Sarah's leadership has had a lasting impact on her peers, her program, and the broader GVSU community.

Padnos College of Engineering

- **Samrawit Tewelde, Engineering**

Samrawit is nominated for her outstanding contributions to the graduate engineering community. As President of the Professional Association of Graduate Engineering Students (PAGES), she has demonstrated exceptional leadership, initiative, and organizational skill. In this role, she has developed and implemented a wide range of programs that directly support graduate student success. Her efforts include coordinating professional development workshops such as mock interviews, résumé-building sessions, and networking events with industry professionals. Her leadership has strengthened connections within the engineering community and improved the overall graduate student experience. As a thesis student, she balances her academic responsibilities with her service commitments with remarkable dedication. Her work reflects a genuine commitment to improving the lives of her peers and contributing to the broader academic community. Samrawit exemplifies the qualities of leadership, service, and integrity that this award seeks to honor.

- **Scott Strayer, Engineering**

Scott is nominated for his exceptional leadership, initiative, and sustained contributions to the university community. As former President and current graduate advisor of GVSU's chapter of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, Scott has strengthened the organization through mentorship, professionalism, and service. He led a multidisciplinary student team in NASA's national engineering challenge to design a lunar flagpole for deployment on the moon. Under his leadership, GVSU advanced to Phase 2—an achievement earned by only a select group of teams nationwide—and was invited to manufacture and test the system at NASA's Johnson Space Center. GVSU was the only team to successfully deploy the flag within NASA's strict operational constraints, and the team earned NASA's STEM Outreach Award. Scott's leadership reflects both technical excellence and a deep commitment to service. His contributions have strengthened GVSU's engineering community and advanced the university's mission.

GRADUATE SCHOOL CITATION FOR EXCELLENCE IN PROMOTING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION AT GVSU

Winter 2026

College of Education and Community Innovation

- **Rowan Hawthorne, Public Administration**

Rowan is nominated for their deep and sustained commitment to advancing inclusion and belonging on campus. As a graduate assistant case manager in the Dean of Students Office, Rowan supports students facing academic, personal, financial, and cultural challenges with thoughtful, individualized care. They approach this work through an intersectional lens, recognizing the many identities and experiences that shape student well-being. Rowan collaborates closely with faculty, advising, counseling, housing, and accessibility services to ensure students receive coordinated, holistic support. Across all roles, Rowan uplifts diverse voices and fosters environments where students feel seen, valued, and supported. Their work has strengthened campus culture and expanded opportunities for belonging.

College of Health Professions

- **AJ Walstra, Public Health**

AJ is recognized for meaningful and sustained leadership in advancing inclusion, equity, and belonging on campus. Through both scholarship and action, AJ has demonstrated a deep commitment to fostering welcoming and accessible environments for all community members. AJ conducted a neuroinclusion audit to assess faculty preparedness in supporting autistic and neurodiverse students, work that will inform future training for faculty, staff, and students. Their advocacy related to service animals reflects a proactive approach to equity and accessibility. AJ consistently models inclusion through everyday interactions, creating spaces where diverse perspectives are heard and valued. Their ability to listen, lead, and advocate with cultural humility has positively influenced peers and faculty alike. AJ's efforts have strengthened campus dialogue around belonging and left a lasting, meaningful impact on the university community.

- **Emma Jones, Doctor of Physical Therapy**

As a third-year student, Emma has demonstrated a sustained commitment to fostering equity, belonging, and cultural humility within the program. Emma is a founder and leader of PTs for IDEAs, a student-led initiative dedicated to inclusivity and accountability among students, faculty, and staff. Under her leadership, the group established the guiding principle “Listen. Learn. Lead.” and created a supportive space for dialogue and growth. She mentors peers in developing cultural competence, modeling curiosity, empathy, and reflective leadership. Faculty describe Emma as a tireless advocate for justice, anti-racism, and community building. She has meaningfully shaped the culture of the DPT program. Emma’s integrity, compassion, and inclusive leadership have left a lasting impact on the GVSU community.

- **Mackenzie Malone, Clinical Dietetics**

Throughout her 1200 hours of supervised practice in Clinical Dietetics, Mackenzie consistently demonstrated a deep awareness of how identity, power, and lived experience shape patient interactions and healthcare environments. She approached every rotation with integrity, ensuring that each patient and team member was treated with dignity, fairness, and cultural sensitivity. Her commitment to inclusion was active and intentional—she modeled inclusive practice through her communication, advocacy, and ethical decision-making. Mackenzie’s actions have strengthened the culture of accountability and inclusion within the university and the dietetics profession. She demonstrates exceptional professionalism, compassion, and ethical leadership. Mackenzie is an exemplary candidate whose contributions embody the spirit of this award.

Kirkhof College of Nursing

- **Joslyn Lypka, Doctor of Nursing Practice**

Joslyn excelled academically while also mentoring and leading undergraduate BSN students, modeling the compassion, professionalism, and integrity that define exemplary nursing practice. For her DNP project, Joslyn partnered with the Grand Rapids LGBTQ+ Consortium to create a comprehensive, accessible sexual-health resource for LGBTQ+ youth, their families, and healthcare providers. Her process centered the voices of LGBTQ+ youth, fostering dialogue that was inclusive, thoughtful, and responsive to community needs. The resulting resource strengthens healthcare equity and deepens relationships between GVSU and local organizations committed to supporting vulnerable populations. She consistently embodies the principles of equity, compassion, and ethical leadership. Joslyn's contributions have created real, sustainable impact within GVSU and the broader Grand Rapids community. She is an outstanding and highly deserving candidate for this award.

GRADUATE SCHOOL CITATION FOR EXCELLENCE IN SUSTAINABILITY

Winter 2026

College of Education and Community Innovation

- **Cassandra Chaphalkar, Public Administration**

Cassie has advanced sustainability across environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Her work in land-use planning, development review, and public engagement reflects a deep commitment to equitable, accessible, and community-driven decision-making. Cassie's review of site plans, rezonings, and ordinance amendments consistently balances environmental protection with economic growth and community needs. Through sustained engagement, she has strengthened community trust and advanced initiatives that support long-term resilience. Cassie's work demonstrates how thoughtful planning can promote fairness, accessibility, and shared responsibility for sustainable development. Her leadership has had a meaningful impact on the region and reflects the values of inclusion and community stewardship. She is a highly deserving candidate for this award.

College of Health Professions

- **Corryn Willson, Clinical Dietetics**

As a Human Milk and Formula Technician at Corewell Health Helen DeVos Children's Hospital, Corryn plays a vital role in supporting vulnerable pediatric patients with precision, safety, and exceptional attention to quality. As Treasurer of the Clinical Dietetics Student Association, she supports sustainable programming and contributes to the long-term success of student initiatives. What distinguishes Corryn is her forward-thinking approach to sustainability in healthcare. She consistently considers cost-effectiveness, resource stewardship, and long-term impact while maintaining a strong focus on patient outcomes. Her ability to integrate innovation, leadership, and practical application reflects a deep understanding of sustainability as both a clinical and organizational priority. Corryn is a self-driven, thoughtful, and highly capable emerging professional whose work embodies sustainability in action.

- **Tucker McLane, Public Health**

Tucker has demonstrated exceptional dedication to the Plainfield Fire Department (PFD) and the surrounding community. Through coursework and his master's project, he developed a deep understanding of how fire departments can serve as sustainable, long-term community resources. He reviewed global and national fitness standards and created a fitness training module to enhance firefighter readiness and reduce injury risk. Tucker also worked closely with PFD to strengthen fire marshal training, improving efficiency and service quality for township residents. His years of service as a volunteer firefighter reflect his commitment to community resilience and public safety. Tucker's work emphasizes that sustainability is rooted not only in financial resources but in determination, preparedness, and continuous improvement. He consistently demonstrates leadership, initiative, and a strong sense of civic responsibility. Tucker's contributions have strengthened PFD's capacity to serve as a sustainable community resource. He is a highly deserving candidate for this award.

Kirkhof College of Nursing

- **William Serano, Doctor of Nursing Practice**

William is nominated for his exceptional leadership, resilience, and systems-level thinking throughout his DNP program. From early in his doctoral journey, Will demonstrated the flexibility, problem-solving skills, and positive mindset essential for creating sustainable, long-term clinical change. He built relationships, identified local champions, and cultivated the partnerships necessary for long-term project success. His project integrates in-office education, after-visit follow-up, and home blood pressure monitoring, offering a sustainable model for improving hypertension control and reducing hospitalizations. This multifaceted approach reflects his understanding of sustainability as enduring, patient-centered clinical impact rather than a purely resource-based concept. Will consistently incorporates feedback, identifies growth opportunities, and pursues them with humility and dedication.

**JENNIFER ROSE PALM MEMORIAL AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN SERVICE TO
GRADUATE EDUCATION
Winter 2026**

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

- **Barbara Ellis, Department of Biology**
 - **Nominated By:** Eric Snyder and Joe Jacquot

Barb is nominated in recognition of her exceptional service to graduate education within the Biology MS program. For over twenty years, as the Biology Department Academic Coordinator, she has been a steadfast advocate for graduate students and a cornerstone of program success. Barb plays a vital role in fostering an inclusive and supportive environment through her active participation in departmental DEIA efforts and her consistent empathy toward all students. She expertly manages complex administrative processes supporting graduate assistants, funding, registration, and tuition coordination, ensuring students progress smoothly through their programs. Much of her work occurs behind the scenes, yet it is essential to student success and program continuity. Barb's deep institutional knowledge is relied upon by faculty and students alike, particularly for navigating policies, procedures, and evolving systems such as Workday. Known for her calm, solution-oriented approach, she mentors students and colleagues with professionalism and generosity. Barb's dedication, competence, and advocacy have been instrumental to the strength of graduate education in the Biology Department, making her highly deserving of this honor.

GRADUATE STUDENT ASSOCIATION OUTSTANDING TEACHING AWARD Winter 2026

College of Computing

- **Yong Zhuang, Information Sciences and Technologies**
 - **Nominated By:** Sri Rakumari Mendu

Dr. Zhuang is recognized for his outstanding commitment to graduate teaching and student learning. He excels at making complex technical concepts accessible by explaining them with clarity, patience, and real-world relevance. He thoughtfully supports students from diverse academic backgrounds, fostering confidence and engagement in challenging material. His teaching is highly interactive, incorporating problem-solving discussions and collaborative in-class activities that promote active learning. Dr. Zhuang creates a respectful and encouraging classroom environment where students feel comfortable asking questions and exploring ideas. His dedication, approachability, and genuine care for student success make him highly deserving of this recognition.

College of Education and Community Innovation

- **Larry Warkoczeski, School of Community Leadership and Development**
 - **Nominated By:** Grant Hoffman

Larry is recognized for his strong commitment to student success and career preparation in the MHA program. He is widely regarded as an impactful educator whose teaching has influenced current students and alumni alike. He emphasizes experiential learning through simulations and real-world casework, including health administrator leader-rounding simulations at the GVSU Simulation Center. He thoughtfully prepares students before and after these experiences with structured materials that deepen learning and reflection. His courses are carefully designed with projects that directly align with course objectives and build toward meaningful culminating assignments. Students consistently describe his instruction as intellectually challenging and developmentally rich. Larry's attention to detail, intentional pedagogy, and dedication to professional preparation equip students with skills they carry into the healthcare field.

GRADUATE STUDENT ASSOCIATION OUTSTANDING MENTORSHIP AWARD
Winter 2026

College of Computing

- **Sara Sutton, Information Sciences and Technologies**
 - **Nominated By:** Trevor Ouma

Dr. Sutton is nominated for her exceptional dedication to graduate student success in the Cybersecurity program. She is recognized for her approachability, clarity in teaching complex concepts, and consistent support of students' academic development. Through her mentorship, students have engaged in advanced research on fog-based Service Function Chaining, contributing to the design of experimental testbeds and the evaluation of cybersecurity threats in distributed environments. Her guidance has led to students' first peer-reviewed publications and strengthened thesis research through thoughtful direction and feedback. Dr. Sutton's mentorship reflects excellence, generosity, and sustained impact, making her highly deserving of this recognition

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

- **Alexandra Locher, Department of Biology**
 - **Nominated By:** Brody Gleib

Dr. Locher has served as an excellent example of what being a mentor, leader, and professor can and should be. Over the past two years as my graduate mentor, Dr. Locher has demonstrated a keen interest in my overall well-being, and has always been willing to listen to any issues I was having academically or otherwise. She has encouraged and motivated me to present at numerous important conferences in the field of Natural Resources. Dr. Locher has worked tirelessly with me on my graduate research involving deer management in Kent County, by writing multiple grants and acquiring other resources to garner my success. She has also supported me through and provided me with public speaking and networking opportunities with involved stakeholders. She is extremely driven and passionate about her impact on students at GVSU.

GRADUATE STUDENT PRESIDENTIAL RESEARCH GRANT RECIPIENTS

Fall 2025

Hussey, Alyssa; Department of Biomedical Sciences; Title: Can Consuming Red Beetroots Effectively Treat High Blood Pressure

Winter 2026

Brigman, Isabelle, Padnos College of Engineering, “Asymmetrical Transmission of Microwaves with Miniaturized 3-D Printed Configurations in Drone Applications”

Burrell, Madelyn, Padnos College of Engineering, “Experimental Measurement of the Forces Acting on a Submerged Beam Using High-speed Videography”

Hebbur, Haarika, Cell and Molecular Biology, “Measuring Gene Expression in Mouse Tumors using Bulk RNA Sequencing to Understand Anti-tumor Immune Responses”

Khanal, Ashim, Padnos College of Engineering, “Development of Generalizable Printability Windows for Extrusion Bioprinting Using Ashby-Style Dimensionless Mapping”

Lewis, Ashley, Kirkhof College of Nursing, “Increasing Colorectal Cancer Screening Rates in West Michigan Primary Care”

GRADUATE STUDENT ASSOCIATION OFFICERS

President: Afua Asante, Cybersecurity

Vice President: Ranjith Kumar Patil, Applied Computer Science

Finance Officer: Sai Ruthvik Uppala, Applied Computer Science

Communications Officer: Kwaku Boamah, Cybersecurity

Administration Officers: Cynthia Mutua, Data Science and Analytics

Advisors:

Dr. Matthew Christians, Cell and Molecular Biology

Dr. Sarah Nechuta, Public Health

Dr. Osman Patel, Cell and Molecular Biology

Dr. Mohammed Hossain, Social Work

GRADUATE COUNCIL OFFICERS

Chair:

Dr. Amy Campbell, Psychology

Policy Subcommittee Chair:

Dr. Gregory Warsen, Educational Leadership and Counseling

Curriculum and Program Review Subcommittee Chair:

Dr. Mark Staves, Cell and Molecular Biology



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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL STAFF

Erica Hamilton, Vice Provost for Distributed Learning and Dean of the Graduate School

Jennifer Moore, Associate Dean

Trista Shumway, Director of Graduate Programming and Communication

Sheri DeVries, Administrative Assistant to the Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

Graduate Assistants:

Samsriti Satyal, Applied Computer Science

Peyton Goch, Social Work

Nancy Odhiambo, Data Science and Analytics

Student Assistant:

Katelyn Keech, Health Communications (undergraduate)

The Graduate School

401 W. Fulton St

318C DeVos Center

Grand Rapids, MI 49504

Phone: 616-331-7105

Email: gradschool@gvsu.edu

Website: <https://www.gvsu.edu/gs/>