

2026 Christine Mirzayan Science and Technology Policy Graduate Fellowship

Fellow Biographies



Himanshu Ahuja

National Academy of Engineering (NAE)

The Grainger Foundation Frontiers of Engineering program
Home Institution: Exponent Inc.

Himanshu Ahuja is a Human Factors scientist at Exponent, where he applies cognitive science research to safety assessments and risk analysis for products, warnings, and accident-related matters. He earned his Ph.D. and M.A. in Brain and Cognitive Sciences from the University of Rochester. His doctoral research examined how context and prior expectations shape the integration of touch with posture and support everyday sensorimotor decisions. He also holds a bachelor's degree in computer science and engineering from Delhi Technological University, where he focused on developing and publishing several artificial intelligence-based approaches. Alongside research, Himanshu has spent considerable effort in recent years on applying evidence to decision-making. Before joining Exponent, Himanshu was a NYSERDA Clean Energy Fellow with the Climate Solutions Accelerator of the Finger Lakes. He developed testimony and discovery questions for utility rate cases and supported interactions between stakeholders and decision-makers. He also contributed to policy briefs and led discussions with elected officials through Citizens' Climate Lobby on topics such as grid modernization, workforce development, and distributed energy resources. During graduate school, he worked with coalitions to push for better graduate worker policies and helped design and conduct surveys that influenced university-wide decisions on student mental health and stipends. These experiences reflect Himanshu's longstanding commitment to working across science, governance, and public engagement while focusing on interdisciplinary thinking, collaboration, and sustained institutional dialogue. Outside of work, Himanshu enjoys hiking and recently completed all 46 high peaks of New York State, earning recognition as an Adirondack 46er.

LinkedIn Profile: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/ahujahim/>



Charlotte Benedict

Center for Health, People, and Places (CHPP)

Earth Systems and Resources (ESR)

Home Institution: The Ohio State University

Charlotte holds a BS in Biology from Auburn University and is currently a PhD candidate and Presidential Fellow in the Department of Evolution, Ecology and Organismal Biology at the Ohio State University. Her doctoral research integrates perspectives from phylogenetics, biogeography, and genomic diversity to build a holistic understanding of how marine biodiversity is generated and maintained. Her work has been supported through fellowships at the Smithsonian National

Museum of Natural History and funding through the American Museum of Natural History. During her graduate program, Charlotte became increasingly interested in science communication and further understanding how science shapes, and is shaped by, governance. She completed a graduate minor through the John Glenn College of Public Affairs in Public Policy and Management, followed by a fellowship at the National Security Commission for Emerging Biotechnology. During her time with the NSCEB she contributed to several different policy recommendations, primarily the Sequencing Public Lands Initiative, which has since been introduced into Congress as the America's Living Library Act. As a Mirzayan fellow she is excited to contribute to the Research Strategy for Seabed Critical Mineral Resources project, where she hopes to apply her marine science experience while developing science policy and communication skills.

LinkedIn Profile: www.linkedin.com/in/charlotte-benedict-4a1a4821b



Charles (Duke) Bickham

National Academy of Engineering (NAE)

Pathways into Engineering (Pathways)

Home Institution: University of Southern California

Charles (Duke) Bickham holds a PhD in Computer Science from the University of Southern California, where his research focused on advancing healthcare through artificial intelligence, with applications in eating disorders, anxiety, HIV, and cancer. His professional experience includes internships at General Motors, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), Accenture, and Farmers &

Merchants Bank, providing him with practical insight into the role of AI in addressing real-world challenges. As a McNair Scholar, ARCS Scholar, and GEM Fellow, he is committed to advancing education and driving meaningful societal impact through AI research. Beyond his academic and professional pursuits, he is dedicated to empowering future generations. To support this mission, he co-founded ScholarSoul, an organization focused on the matriculation, retention, and progression of

Black PhD students at USC. His ultimate goal is to leverage AI to drive transformative advancements in healthcare and society, creating a lasting and meaningful impact.

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Willa Brenneis

Center for Advancing Science and Technology (CAST)

Physical Sciences, Systems, and Infrastructure (PSSI)

Home Institution: Northwestern University

Willa Brenneis is a recent Ph.D. graduate in Chemical Engineering from Northwestern University. Throughout her scientific career, Willa's research has been motivated by the urgency of the climate crisis. During her dissertation work, Willa researched electrochemical energy storage systems, with a focus on sustainable manufacturing and structural analysis of lithium-ion battery cathodes, work supported by a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship. Prior to

Northwestern, Willa earned a B.S. in Chemical Engineering from Columbia University, where she conducted research on novel materials for carbon capture. To bridge research and impact, Willa emphasized scientific communication and implementation of climate solutions through training at Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism and Kellogg School of Management. By engaging in science policy, Willa aims to leverage her technical background and commitment to clear communication to advance equitable climate policies and broader access to climate technologies. In her free time, Willa enjoys exploring new coffee shops, reading, trying new recipes, and long walks along the Chicago lakefront.

LinkedIn Profile: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/willa-brenneis/>



Robert (Rob) Claassen

Center for Advancing Science and Technology (CAST)

Physical Sciences, Systems, and Infrastructure (PSSI)

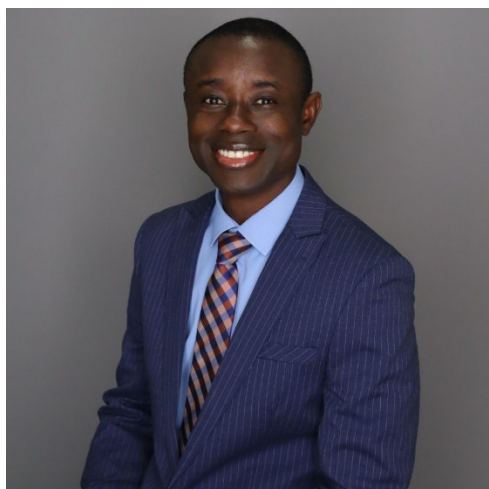
Home Institution: The Ohio State University

Rob Claassen recently earned his Ph.D. in physics from The Ohio State University. During his graduate work, Rob advanced the characterization and integration of a novel magnetic materials platform which could serve as a linker between quantum bits in next generation quantum computers. His research focused on exploring how interfacial conditions and growth regime parameters shape the magnetic response of magnetic films, with an emphasis on identifying mechanisms

of loss and improving dynamic behavior at low temperatures. Before graduate school, Rob completed his B.S. in physics at the University of Texas at Austin in 2020. When not in the lab, Rob works to

remain engaged in the graduate student community, serving on departmental and university committees. Rob often contributes to student-led initiatives that strengthened student support and graduate student well-being. As a Mirzayan Fellow, Rob looks forward to exploring the science policy landscape and better understanding how emerging materials research informs federal priorities, and vice versa. In his free time, he enjoys long walks, cooking, and reading.

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Olufemi Fatunsin

Gulf Research Program (GRP)

Home Institution: Alabama A&M University

Olufemi Fatunsin is a Ph.D. candidate in Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences at Alabama A&M University. He holds a Master of Science in Forest Resources Management and a Master of Science in Biology from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, and the University of Alabama respectively. He conducts research on forest ecology, climate resilience, and natural resource management. His work uses large-scale forest inventory and geospatial data to understand how biodiversity, forest structure, and environmental conditions influence

carbon storage and wildfire risk in forest ecosystems. Olufemi is passionate about bridging scientific research and public decision-making. In 2025, he received the Ecological Society of America's Katherine S. McCarter Graduate Student Policy Award, which strengthened his interest in science policy and environmental governance. His research has been recognized through multiple awards and presentations at regional and national scientific conferences. As a 2026 Christine Mirzayan Science and Technology Policy Fellow, Olufemi is interested in advancing evidence-based approaches to climate resilience, natural resource stewardship, and environmental equity. He hopes to build a career at the intersection of science, policy, and public service, helping translate scientific knowledge into solutions that benefit both communities and ecosystems.

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Veronica Valencia Gonzalez

Center for Health, People, and Places (CHPP)

Social and Economic Systems (SES)

2026 Estes Endowed Fellow

Home Institution: University of South Carolina

Veronica Valencia Gonzalez, PhD, is a Research Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of South Carolina, where she is also affiliate faculty in Women's and Gender Studies and the Center for Civil Rights. Her work examines how law, policy, and institutions make violence visible or invisible, especially for survivors and communities whose experiences often fall

outside dominant legal and policy frameworks. Drawing on qualitative, community-engaged, and policy-oriented methods, Dr. Gonzalez studies intimate partner violence, gender-based violence, femicide, victimization, and institutional responses to harm. Her research has focused extensively on intimate partner violence in rural Michoacán, Mexico, where she examines how survivors navigate family, community, religious, and legal institutions in contexts shaped by inequality, migration, stigma, and limited access to formal support. Her scholarship has appeared in *Punishment & Society*, *Violence Against Women*, *Feminist Criminology*, *BMC Public Health*, *Criminology*, and other peer-reviewed outlets. As a Christine Mirzayan Science and Technology Policy Fellow, Dr. Gonzalez brings a sustained commitment to producing research that begins from lived realities and informs more accountable, equitable, and survivor-centered policy. Dr. Veronica Valencia Gonzalez is a 2026 Estes Fellow, a named fellowship of the Christine Mirzayan Science and Technology Policy Graduate Fellowship Program.

LinkedIn Profile: www.linkedin.com/in/veronica-g-a9a994239



Rebecca Grekin

Center for Advancing Science and Technology (CAST)

Physical Sciences, Systems, and Infrastructure (PSSI)

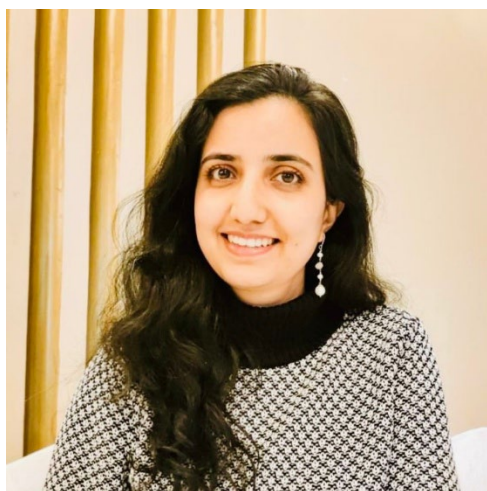
Home Institution: Stanford University

Rebecca Grekin graduated in 2026 with a Ph.D. in Energy Science Engineering (ESE) from Stanford University. She is passionate about using real world data to develop tools to quantify and mitigate emissions. Rebecca's Ph.D. focused on identifying low- and no-cost opportunities for demand response in older commercial buildings by changing heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) operations. Her work uses location-specific considerations of worst-case outside air

conditions instead of generic rules of thumb commonly used in HVAC systems. In addition, her research analyzed the potential for slight relaxation of indoor air humidity constraints (while maintaining occupant comfort and avoiding mold growth). Her work found up to an average of 29% reduction in cooling load with just a +2°F change in set point, highlighting a previously underutilized

opportunity for demand flexibility. Her Masters, also in ESE, focused on the impacts of using different emissions factors for food purchasing to help calculate Scope 3 emissions from purchased goods. Through this work, she developed Tastefood: The Automated Scope 3 Tool for Tracking Emissions from Food, which has now been used by more than 60 universities across the globe to estimate their emissions from food purchasing. Rebecca also has a bachelor's in Chemical Engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with minors in Sustainability and the Environment and in French. She was born in São Paulo, Brazil and grew up living both in Brazil and the US. Rebecca has always been passionate about sustainability and has dabbled in a large assortment of sustainability related projects and research including biofuels research, compostable plastic bacterial breakdown, allocation of emissions in circular systems, and sustainability focused student government positions. Outside of work, Rebecca is interested in crafts including ceramics, glass blowing, knitting, and quilling, and enjoys spending time with her friends, family, and dog, Pumpkin.

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Januka Gyawali

Office of International Networks, Cooperation, and Security (INCS)

Science and Technology for Sustainability Program (STS)

2026 Walter A. Rosenblith Endowed Fellow

Home Institution: Tufts University

Januka Gyawali is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Tufts University and a Fulbright Scholar. Her research focuses on advancing climate-resilient energy and infrastructure planning by evaluating offshore wind and wave energy development in the United States, modeling electricity system expansion under climate

uncertainty in Ethiopia, and investigating socioeconomic disparities in power outage impacts across communities. She is particularly interested in supporting data-driven decision-making that promotes sustainability, resilience, and equity. Before pursuing her doctorate, Januka spent more than a decade of working across government agencies, United Nations agencies, INGOs, consulting firms, and academia. Her work spans renewable energy, water resources management, climate adaptation, and disaster risk reduction. She has developed flood risk and inundation models, strengthened flood early warning systems, contributed to hydropower planning, and collaborated with multidisciplinary teams to advance climate resilience initiatives across South Asia and the Middle East. Through these projects, she worked closely with policymakers, technical experts, community stakeholders, and international partners to address complex environmental and development challenges. Growing up in Nepal and working at the intersection of engineering, development, and public service have shaped her commitment to bridging scientific research and policymaking. Her broader interests include the governance of artificial intelligence, data ethics in transparent, inclusive, and evidence-based public policy. As a Christine Mirzayan Science & Technology Policy Fellow, she seeks to strengthen connections between research, practice, and decision-making to support resilient infrastructure, sustainable energy transitions, and climate adaptation. Januka Gyawali is a 2026 Rosenblith Fellow,

a named fellowship of the Christine Mirzayan Science and Technology Policy Graduate Fellowship Program.

LinkedIn Profile: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jgyawali/>



India Jackson

Center for Advancing Science and Technology (CAST)
Science and Engineering Education and Workforce (SEEW)
Home Institution: Georgia State University

Dr. India Jackson is a heliophysicist who began her academic journey in mathematics at Georgia State University (GSU), earning a B.S. in Mathematics followed by an M.S. in Mathematics and Statistics. This strong quantitative foundation shaped both her teaching and research. She has taught hundreds of students across metro Atlanta in collegiate mathematics, preparing the next generation of scientists and professionals. Her statistical expertise led to her involvement

with GSU's Solar Informatics Group where she applied modeling techniques to predict solar flares. This entry into heliophysics opened the door to a deeper focus on the Sun's dynamics and their effects on Earth. Motivated by this work, she pursued further graduate studies at GSU, earning M.S. degrees in Physics and Computer Science and ultimately became the first Black woman to receive a Ph.D. in Physics from the university. During her doctoral studies, Dr. Jackson completed two NASA internships at Johnson and Goddard Space Flight Centers, applying statistical methods to study solar energetic particles and using computer vision to analyze coronal mass ejections. She is also an alumnus of NASA's Heliophysics Mission Design School. Her research focuses on using machine learning (ML) and artificial intelligence (AI) to classify, predict, and forecast solar events and their associated energetic particles, while also building cyberinfrastructure to ensure public access to space weather data. She is an NSF Atmospheric and Geospace Sciences Postdoctoral Fellow, developing open-source tools that integrate solar image processing, AI, and computer vision to improve space weather forecasting.

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Yufan Ji

Center for Advancing Science and Technology (CAST)
Physical Sciences, Systems, and Infrastructure (PSSI)
Home Institution: The Ohio State University

Yufan Ji is a PhD student in Civil Engineering at The Ohio State University whose interdisciplinary research bridges engineering, economics, and data science to inform U.S. retail electricity market design and consumer protection policies. Her research emphasizes equity and efficiency within deregulated retail electricity markets, employing diverse empirical methods including mixed-methods and machine learning techniques. Yufan analyzes an extensive database of

daily retail electricity choice offers filed within Ohio from 2014 to 2023. Complementing this, she conducts conjoint surveys to understand consumer preferences for electricity contract features, utilizing hierarchical Bayesian modeling to evaluate heterogeneity and distributional impacts. Her recent findings on economic inefficiency and inequality in deregulated electricity markets were published in the Journal of Critical Infrastructure Policy. She has also produced policy briefs that summarize these findings and offer actionable recommendations to policymakers. Her recent analysis estimated profit margins on renewable retail electricity products, highlighting how wholesale market conditions and contract features influence supplier pricing strategies. Yufan's work uniquely integrates detailed market analysis with practical policy implications, aiming to further explore energy equity, market efficiency, consumer-supplier interactions, and demographic patterns in retail energy decision-making. Beyond research, Yufan was featured in the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Energy & Environment program newsletter (April 2025). Her project, "Illuminating Disparities: The Impact of Solar Panel Adoption on Energy Pricing and Social Equity in Ohio's Deregulated Market," received a 2025 Sustainability Institute Student Grant (\$5,000).

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Kasra Khodkar

Office of International Networks, Cooperation, and Security (INCS)
Earth Systems and Resources and the Office of International Networks, Cooperation (ESR/INCS)
2026 Walter A. Rosenblith Endowed Fellow
Home Institution: Oklahoma State University

Kasra Khodkar is a Ph.D. candidate in Biosystems Engineering at Oklahoma State University (OSU) under the mentorship of Dr. Ali Mirchi. He is also a Staff Engineer/Intern at Standard Engineering + Field Services. He holds a M.Sc. degree in Civil Engineering-Environmental Engineering from University of

Tabriz and a B.Sc. in Civil Engineering from Sahand University of Technology. His doctoral research

focuses on integrating process-based models, AI models, and GIS analysis for simulating scenarios of augmenting agricultural water supply by leveraging saline water resources alongside available freshwater resources during periods of extreme water scarcity. His research is part of a USDA NIFA funded project on Conjunctive Freshwater Saltwater Management for climate-resilient agroecosystems. He participates in field monitoring efforts, deploying continuous measurement equipment in streams and wells, and collecting samples for laboratory analysis to build a comprehensive basin-wide dataset. He also works with the AccelNet: PEER2PEER International Convergence Research Networks in Transboundary Water Security project as an Early Career Researcher, where they bring together global networks focusing on transboundary water management. From 2025 to 2026, Khodkar served as the Graduate Student Member of the Board of Directors of the Universities Council on Water Resources (UCOWR). He also served on the Student Activities Subcommittee of the Conference Planning Committee for the 2026 UCOWR Conference, contributing to initiatives aimed at enhancing student engagement and professional development within the water resources community. Kasra Khodkar is a 2026 Rosenblith Fellow, a named fellowship of the Christine Mirzayan Science and Technology Policy Graduate Fellowship Program.

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Harshita (Hershey) Kondeti

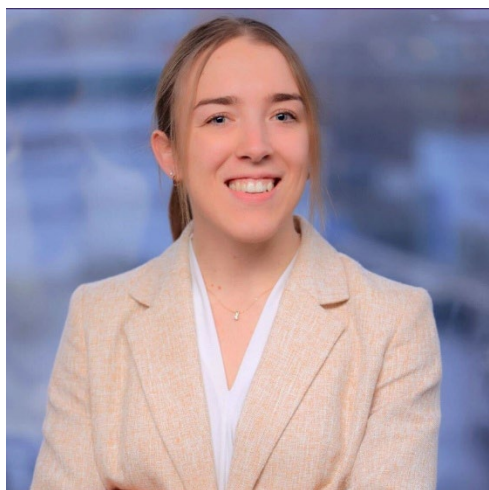
Center for Health, People, and Places (CHPP)

Biomedical and Health Sciences (BHS)

Home Institution: Loyola University Chicago

Harshita (Hershey) Kondeti is a neuroscientist, science communicator, and emerging science policy professional. She recently earned her Ph.D. in Molecular Pharmacology and Therapeutics from Loyola University Chicago, where her research focused on developing targeted drug delivery strategies for Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease type 1X, an inherited peripheral neuropathy. Through her doctoral work, she combined approaches from neuroscience, immunology, and nanomedicine to address barriers to treatment delivery in diseases of the peripheral nervous system. Throughout graduate school, Hershey was committed to leadership, advocacy, and public engagement. She served as President of the Loyola University Chicago Graduate Student Council, where she worked to expand professional development opportunities, promote interdisciplinary collaboration, and advocate for graduate student needs. Her interest in science policy grew through these experiences and through her work as an ASPET Washington Fellow, where she participated in federal advocacy efforts and engaged with policymakers on issues related to biomedical research and science funding. Prior to the Mirzayan Fellowship, Hershey completed an internship with the National Institutes of Health Office of Science Policy. She hopes to build a career at the intersection of science, policy, and public engagement, helping strengthen evidence-based decision making and support the biomedical research enterprise. Outside of her professional interests, Hershey owns a small baking business and enjoys expressing her creativity through baking, art, and music. She also enjoys attending concerts and exploring new coffee shops.

LinkedIn Profile: www.linkedin.com/in/harshita-hershey-kondeti



Kelly Matuszewski

Center for Advancing Science and Technology (CAST)
Physical Sciences, Systems, and Infrastructure (PSSI)
Home Institution: Northwestern University

Kelly is a fifth-year Ph.D. candidate in Materials Science and Engineering at Northwestern University, where her research focuses on developing materials that can selectively recover valuable minerals from water. She earned her B.S. at Penn State in Materials Science and Engineering and a minor in Polymer Science. For the past year, she was a visiting graduate student in the Applied Materials Division at Argonne National Lab, furthering her work on electrochemical approaches to

resource recovery. Kelly's research has shaped her broader interest in how science can inform decisions about water, energy, and critical resources. At Northwestern, she serves as the public engagement and outreach coordinator for the Science Policy Outreach Taskforce, organizing a monthly series of science presentations at local senior centers. She also contributes to the group's science one-pager initiative, translating research for Illinois state legislators to support evidence-based decision-making. In addition, Kelly is a wavemaker on the NU Center for Water Research planning committee. Outside of Northwestern, Kelly is a grid optimization fellow at The Carbon League, where she facilitates a year-long policy project with a task force of Chicago-area industry experts and energy policy leaders. In D.C., she has participated in the 2025 Science Outside the Lab program to provide hands-on exposure to careers in science policy, and she attended the 2026 AAAS CASE Workshop which culminated in a day of advocacy for scientific research funding on Capitol Hill. As a Mirzayan Fellow, Kelly looks forward to deepening her engagement with federal science policy while working in the Physical Sciences, Systems, and Infrastructure division on the Future of Large-scale Experimental Characterization Capabilities for the Basic Energy Sciences User Facilities. In her free time, she enjoys running, biking, hiking, and playing beach volleyball!

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Mahhad Nayyer

Center for Advancing Science and Technology (CAST)

Aeronautics, Space, Astronomy (ASA)

2026 Walter A. Rosenblith Endowed Fellow

Home Institution: Purdue University

Mahhad Nayyer is a third-year Ph.D. candidate in the School of Aeronautics and Astronautics at Purdue University. He holds a Master of Engineering in Space Systems and Business Engineering from the Technical University of Graz in Austria and a dual Bachelor of Science in Astronautical Engineering and Humanities from the United States Air Force Academy.

His research is broadly in the area of astrodynamics and space sustainability. He focuses on enhancing Space Situational Awareness (SSA) capabilities and Space Traffic Management (STM) protocols through his research on analytical orbital capacity and shell-slotting architectures in Low Earth Orbit. Mahhad is deeply cognizant of the international, national, and industry policy landscape of space exploration and is passionate about promoting the sustainable use of space as a common-pool resource. Apart from his research, Mahhad recently completed his term as Co-Lead of the Space Safety and Sustainability Project Group at the Space Generation Advisory Council (SGAC), where he helped lead a 200-member global volunteer team supporting research papers, webinars, workshops, scholarships, and capacity-building initiatives for young space professionals worldwide. He also serves as Vice Chair of the Asia-Pacific Emerging Space Ecosystems Subcommittee of the International Astronautical Federation (IAF). In 2025, he helped lead Pakistan's first experimental and cultural payload to the International Space Station, sending wheat seeds aboard SpaceX Crew-11. In recognition of his global thought leadership and service, Mahhad was named a 2025 IAF Young Space Leader and received the 2025 American Astronautical Society Patti Grace Smith Award. In his free time, he enjoys exploring architecture, especially Art Deco, visiting art galleries, listening to live music, and practicing photography. Mahhad Nayyer is a 2026 Rosenblith Fellow, a named fellowship of the Christine Mirzayan Science and Technology Policy Graduate Fellowship Program.

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Robin Oliverio

Center for Health, People, and Places (CHPP)

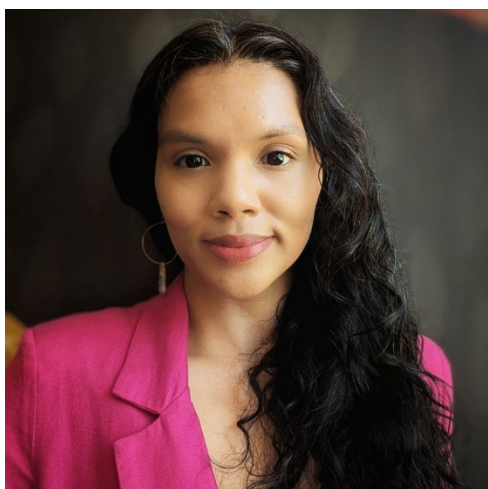
Biomedical and Health Sciences (BHS)

Home Institution: Static Media

Robin Oliverio received her Ph.D. in Neuroscience from West Virginia University in 2024. Her dissertation work focused on the relationship between traumatic brain injury and alcohol use disorder risk. Such work heightened Robin's existing interest in science policy, and she engaged in many opportunities throughout her graduate career to grow her knowledge of the field. Some of these included the Society for Neuroscience Early Career Policy Ambassador program, West

Virginia Science and Technology Policy Fellowship, and a volunteer position with a local science policy initiative in West Virginia. She has a strong passion for public engagement and making science accessible. As such, Robin was a Co-Liaison for the West Virginia Local Science Engagement Network — a program facilitated by the American Association for the Advancement of Science. In 2025, Robin was the Science Communications and Media Specialist at Kamin Science Center (formerly Carnegie Science Center), which is the most-visited museum in Pittsburgh. While there, she honed her skills in communicating science through diverse platforms. Later, she worked as a freelance journalist for Static Media, where she regularly wrote for their online science publication site Sciencing. She covered topics ranging from climate to evolutionary biology to research ethics. In her free time, she enjoys reading, playing piano, and dancing badly. Robin currently has one dog, but she would like seventeen.

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Annie Y. Patrick

Center for Advancing Science and Technology (CAST)

Science and Engineering Education and Workforce (SEEW)

2026 Estes Endowed Fellow

Home Institution: Bucknell University

Dr. Annie Y. Patrick is an interdisciplinary researcher and scholar in applied science and technology studies (STS). Her career spans several disciplines and professions, united by a passion for learning, investigating the world around her, and engaging deeply with the communities she works in to improve outcomes. Her research draws on her experience in technology and innovation, engineering studies, healthcare, and

community engagement. Applying best practices from participatory research, STEM policy, and the social sciences, she has led recent projects on science diplomacy, engineering education, and responsible innovation through cross-disciplinary collaborations spanning higher education, international development, and the non-profit sector. Dr. Patrick currently serves as a research scientist at Bucknell University, where she applies care ethics and responsible innovation frameworks

to the study of technological design and implementation. She was also selected for the Science for Development Fellowship (SDF) at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), where she served as a Higher Education and Research Fellow in the Bureau for Inclusive Growth, Partnerships and Innovation. In that role, she drew on her background in technology, healthcare, and higher education to inform policies and programs aimed at accelerating local scientific research capacity. Prior to that, she was a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Studio for Transforming Engineering Learning and Research (STELAR) Lab at Georgia Tech's Coulter Department of Biomedical Engineering. She holds a Ph.D. in Science and Technology Studies from Virginia Tech, a Master of Science in Network Technology and Cybersecurity from East Carolina University, a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Mississippi College, and an Associate's Degree in Nursing from Holmes Community College. Annie Patrick is a 2026 Estes Fellow, a named fellowship of the Christine Mirzayan Science and Technology Policy Graduate Fellowship Program.

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Sweta Rijal

Center for Advancing Science and Technology (CAST)
Science and Technology Policy and Law (STPL)
Home Institution: University of California, Irvine

Sweta Rijal is a PhD candidate in Political Science at University of California, Irvine. Her research sits at the intersection of international relations, global political economy, and technology policy, with a focus on developing governance frameworks that are both politically feasible and capable of addressing social, ethical, and geopolitical complexities of emerging technologies. She earned her B.A. in International Relations from Wesleyan College. Her interest in bridging

research and policy was shaped by two formative experiences. As an Economic Security Policy Research Intern at Intel Corporation, she examined how semiconductor export controls, data governance rules, and international standards function simultaneously as security tools and value-embedding mechanisms, an experience that continues to inform her research on AI governance. At the Economic Empowerment Unit of UN Women Nepal, she witnessed firsthand how international organizations translate development mandates into practice on the ground, and whose voices tend to be centered and whose tend to be left out in that process. As a Mirzayan Fellow placed with the Science and Technology Policy and Law unit, she is eager to learn directly from practitioners across government, international organizations, and civil society about how scientific evidence is evaluated and applied in official policymaking arenas — and how researchers can most effectively advocate for the policy changes their work points toward. Outside of research, Sweta enjoys exploring the outdoors, from hiking in the mountains to ocean walks, and trying out new recipes in the kitchen.



Christine Smothers

Gulf Research Program (GRP)

Gulf Scholars Program (GSP)

Home Institution: Case Western Reserve University

Christine Smothers, PhD, RN, is focused on challenges at the intersection of healthcare and STEM. She is a biomedical researcher published in Nature Communications, who has served five years on an advisory council in the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Christine is currently serving as a Mirzayan Fellow with the National Academies of Science, where she aims to deepen her understanding of science policy linking the US scientific enterprise and the

disaster preparedness of coastal communities and ecosystems. Previously, she served nearly five years on the National Advisory Council for Nursing Education and Practice within HHS, where she contributed to reports to Congress on healthcare policy recommendations addressing nursing workforce challenges. Christine's doctoral research investigated the relationships between emergency healthcare and innovation. In a landmark review of over 400 studies published in Nature Communications, she and her team scientifically documented widespread gaps between laboratory discoveries of molecular biomarkers for blood tests to identify stroke, and their real-world utility. In her dissertation, she then used clinical data and patient samples to test the real-world clinical performance of stroke recognition tools, including a viable blood biomarker of stroke, and assessed the tools' risk for disparate performance across racial and ethnic groups. Christine had an early interest in science and policy. As an undergraduate, her research in the biosciences and biomedical engineering was recognized by NSF and Case Western Reserve University, and she was the second nursing student ever to receive the federal Goldwater Scholarship for STEM research excellence. After Christine received the Goldwater Scholarship, she served on its nonprofit boards, contributing to fundraising initiatives supporting the next generation of the STEM workforce. She also led health policy initiatives as an undergraduate, serving on state and national boards of the 50,000+ member nonprofit National Student Nurses' Association.



Angélica Valdés-Valderrama

Center for Health, People, and Places (CHPP)

Health Care and Public Health (HCPH)

2026 Estes Endowed Fellow

Home Institution: Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy

Angélica Valdés-Valderrama is a social scientist trained in qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research in political science, agricultural economics, public health nutrition, and agroecology with expertise in policy and program research and evaluation. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Food and Nutrition Policy and Programs at the

Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Her research focuses on assessing innovations and emerging technologies for federal nutrition programs (SNAP and WIC) and food retail options. She focuses on applied, action-oriented research that provides evidence for building a society where everyone can thrive and always seeks to incorporate participatory methods that build mutually beneficial relationships with collaborators. Angélica also strongly believes that science should be civic, responding to social needs and incorporating the perspectives of those most affected by structural failures of the institutions that shape our society. She is a recent 2024-2025 Civic Science Fellow (Rita Allen Foundation) with Ciencia Puerto Rico and aims to continue working with science policy. She is also honing her agroecology farming skills through applied practice with the El Josco Bravo Agroecology School in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Angélica Valdés-Valderrama is a 2026 Estes Fellow, a named fellowship of the Christine Mirzayan Science and Technology Policy Graduate Fellowship Program.

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Vishnu Vijayasankar

National Research Council Executive Office (NRCEO)
Climate Crossroads and the Office of Congressional and
Government Affairs (CCX/OCGA)

Home Institution: National Laboratory of the Rockies

Vishnu Vijayasankar recently completed his Ph.D. in Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering at the University of Michigan, where his research focused on marine renewable energy, community-centered energy planning, and the design, modeling, and experimental testing of marine energy converters in collaboration with coastal, island, and tribal communities. His research integrated engineering, stakeholder engagement, and decision science to support the equitable deployment of emerging energy technologies. He recently joined the National Laboratory of the Rockies through the DOE ORISE Marine Energy Postdoctoral Fellowship, where he focuses on advancing sustainable wave energy solutions for remote and tribal communities through integrated technical, environmental, social, and policy perspectives. In this role, he also supports energy policy and market adoption initiatives that help inform federal decision making and accelerate clean energy deployment. Vishnu is particularly interested in the intersection of engineering, public policy, and community engagement, and in developing pathways that enable innovative technologies to better serve underserved communities. Outside of work, he enjoys private pilot training, playing cricket, traveling, and long drives with his wife.

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Liya T. Weldegebriel

Center for Health, People, and Places (CHPP)

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2026 Walter A. Rosenblith Endowed Fellow

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Liya Weldegebriel is an Environmental Engineer and Research Scientist specializing in ecohydrology, ecosystem services, remote sensing, and environmental monitoring. She completed her postdoctoral fellowship at Stanford University's Center on Food Security and the Environment and holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Engineering with a Designated Emphasis in Development Engineering from the University of

California, Berkeley. Her research focuses on evaluating sustainable land management and soil and water conservation interventions using low-cost monitoring approaches, hydrological modeling, satellite imagery, and statistical methods. Her work has examined agricultural impacts of armed conflict, conservation effectiveness, and resilience in Ethiopia. Most recently, Liya joined USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance as a Development Fellow (contractor), where she applied satellite data and statistical analysis to monitor the impacts of resilience and food security programs on smallholder farmers in East Africa. Liya Weldegebriel is a 2026 Rosenblith Fellow, a named fellowship of the Christine Mirzayan Science and Technology Policy Graduate Fellowship Program.

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