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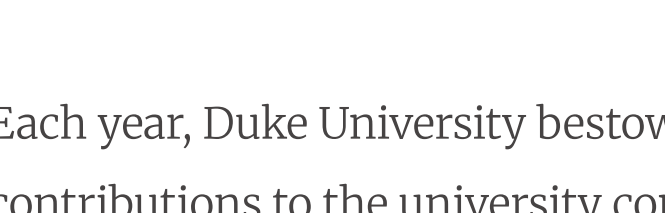
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STORY

2025 Forever Duke Student Leadership Awards Recognize Three Exceptional Graduate Students

By [Casey Griffith](#) / May 20, 2025

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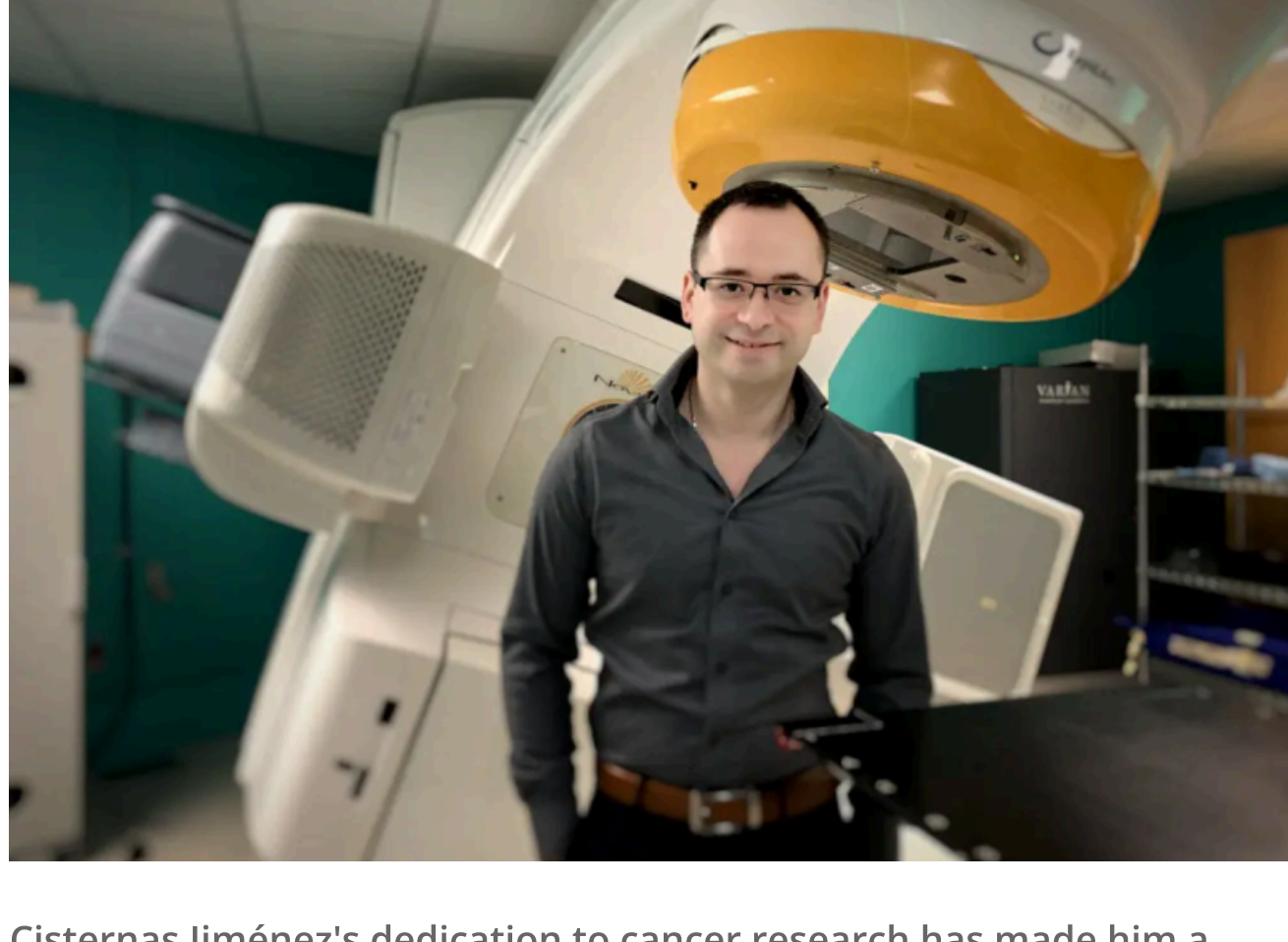


Each year, Duke University bestows the [Forever Duke Student Leadership Award](#) on students who have made remarkable contributions to the university community, embodying the “Forever Duke” spirit in their service to the university. In 2025, The Graduate School is proud to highlight its three recipients of the award: Eduardo Cisternas Jiménez, Tyler Johnson, and Yicheng “Catherine” Wang. Learn more about this year’s recipients and how their unique research and leadership has positively impacted the Duke community and beyond.

A Champion for Support and Balance: The Medical Physics Trailblazer

Eduardo Cisternas Jiménez is a Ph.D. candidate in medical physics. He is currently concluding his research in biomedical applications for cancer radiotherapy in Dr. Fang-Fang Yin's lab in the Department of Radiation Oncology. His journey at Duke has been marked by academic excellence and a deep commitment to supporting fellow students.

Cisternas Jiménez’s involvement as an intern with the Sloan Scholarship Program through the University Center of Exemplary Mentoring was a cornerstone of his graduate experience. In this role, he provided hands-on support to the UCEM administrative oversight team in much of its programming. His nomination for the student leadership award underscored his crucial role in providing institutional memory during a period of transition within the Sloan program.



Cisternas Jiménez's dedication to cancer research has made him a global traveler, taking him to everywhere from Duke's Cancer Center (pictured) to Germany.

“Being part of this program has been amazing because it allows you to see how the administration works at a university,” he said.

Before his arrival at Duke, Cisternas Jiménez completed two B.Sc. degrees (one in physics and the other in economics) and an M.Sc. in Medical Physics in his home country of Chile at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile. He then earned an M.Sc. in Clinical Medical Physics at Heidelberg University in Germany. Beyond his research in medical physics, Cisternas Jiménez dedicated his time to mentoring and advising students from historically excluded backgrounds, such as first-generation students and those returning to academia.

“I can give advice to them on how to navigate [their] journey during grad school, because transitioning from undergrad or even your Master’s is different from when you do a Ph.D. The goals are different and I think that transition is very important,” Cisternas Jiménez noted.

Cisternas Jiménez’s ability to balance demanding coursework and impactful contributions to the university community was facilitated by a conscious effort to prioritize self-care, taking advantage of North Carolina’s natural environment for activities like biking and kayaking. In fall 2025, Cisternas Jiménez will continue his work in advancing cancer treatment and research at the Moffitt Cancer Center in Florida, where he successfully [matched](#) with his first-choice resident in Therapy Medical Physics.

A Foundation of Community and Opportunity: The Nuclear Policy Advocate

Tyler Johnson, Ph.D. ’24, completed a Master’s in physics in addition to his Ph.D. nuclear particle physics at Duke.

Johnson’s Duke experience was profoundly shaped by his involvement with the Sloan Scholarship Program through the University of Exemplary Mentoring (UCEM), where he was part of the inaugural cohort.

“[The Sloan Scholarship] became this really comfortable environment to just exist at Duke,” Johnson said, naming the [Early Start Research Immersion Program](#) as being particularly beneficial by allowing him to settle in and connect with his research lab before the academic year commenced.

Johnson emphasized the invaluable support received from staff like Former Senior Associate Dean Jacqueline Looney, Assistant Dean for Graduate Development [J. Alan Kendrick](#), and Assistant Dean for Graduate Student Professional Development [Melissa Bostrom](#), whom Johnson described as “titans at Duke.”

“They made the most inviting environment possible, lush with support from them and the other Sloan scholars who I started with,” Johnson said.

This strong sense of support provided a crucial foundation for Johnson’s academic pursuits and extracurricular engagements, including his involvement as an [Arms Control Fellow at the Stanford US-Russia Forum \(SURF\)](#), where he participated on a working group to help formulate policy recommendations on anti-ballistic missiles. Johnson’s participation in the SURF Fellowship was driven by his passion for nuclear policy, stemming from his work with the National Nuclear Security Administration.

Receiving the Forever Duke Award holds special significance for Johnson, as it represented the recognition of Deans Kendrick and Bostrom, individuals whom he deeply admires and trusts.

“I feel like it is most gratifying that [Kendrick] and [Bostrom] thought of me as someone who would be a good candidate for this award, more so than anything else. I feel validated in that way,” Johnson shared.

Johnson is now serving a term as a Post-Doctoral Researcher at Yale, where he studies quantum sensors, dark matter, and neutrinos.



Johnson (center) participating in a discussion at a lunch held for the Sloan Scholars.

Driven by Compassion and Resilience: The Disaster Planning Innovator

Yicheng “Catherine” Wang, a Master’s student in statistical science, has dedicated her efforts at Duke to addressing critical issues of climate change and community resilience. Her deep involvement in several initiatives, such as holding roles on the [Climate Commitment Advisory Council](#) Research Committee, serving as a Quality of Life Research Intern with [Duke Community Affairs](#), and completing the [Emerging Leaders Institute](#) program, reflects her commitment to making a tangible difference in addressing complex, interdisciplinary challenges. She explained that these activities complement her research well.

“[The] Climate Commitment Advisory Council is really related to my research goals. My research is working on climate change resiliency as part of community resiliency.”

Wang’s research focuses on disaster planning, including post-disaster energy restoration and accurately estimating insurance damage after natural disasters, including hurricanes and floods. This passion is deeply rooted in personal experiences with natural disasters, having grown up in Chengdu, China, a region prone to earthquakes, including a devastating one in 2008, and having attended high school in Florida, frequently impacted by hurricanes. [Research](#) in disaster planning offers opportunities to address the continuing economic burden of natural disasters in the U.S., of which tropical cyclones are the most costly. The National Office for Coastal Management reports that in 2024 alone, [hurricanes resulted in \\$182.7 billion dollars in damages](#).

“That’s the initial thing I want to start working on the disaster planning; to provide more reliability,” she recounted about her experience with earthquakes.

Receiving the Forever Duke award was a deeply gratifying experience, Wang expressed.

“It was really flattering. I never expect... it’s a really fantastic opportunity to acknowledge my work at Duke, because throughout these two years I really learned a lot,” she said.



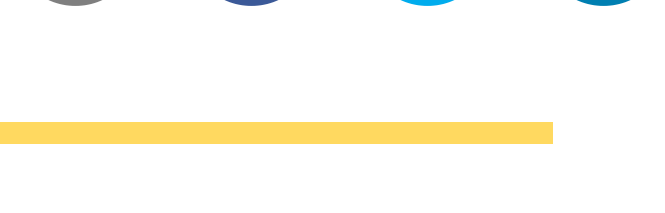
Wang presented on mathematical optimization enhancing disaster relief at the 2025 [Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy \(ARPA-E\)](#) Energy Innovation Summit as the winner of the [Student PITCHES](#) competition.

Creating Legacies of Greatness

The spirit of the Forever Duke Awards emphasizes the lasting legacy left by individuals on the university community, but also the dedication to academics, mentorship, and research instilled by recipients who take that spirit with them as they continue on their academic journeys.

Across widely different disciplines, Cisternas-Jiménez, Johnson, and Wang share one important thing in common: they have learned how to successfully leverage the power of collaboration and community in the service of advancing research.

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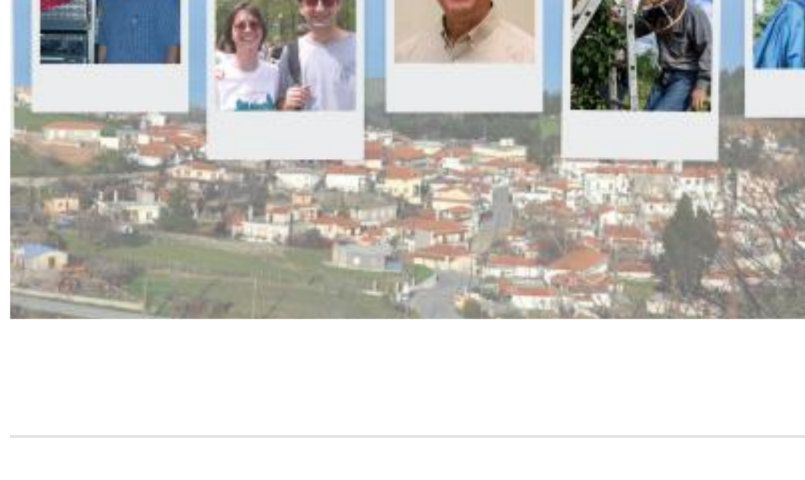


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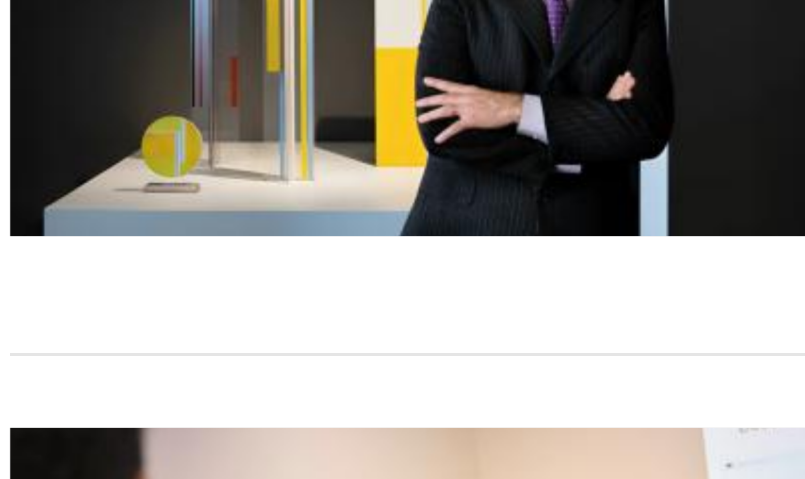


[Casey Griffith](#)

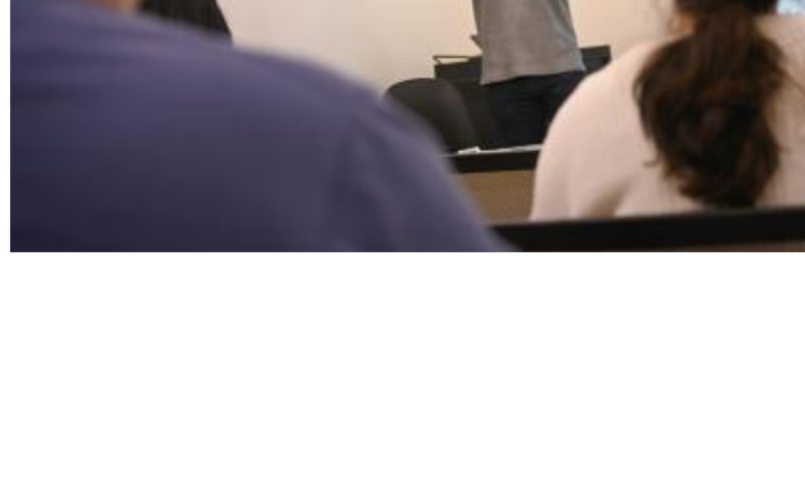
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