Ready or not, the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence is ushering in a new era of innovation.
Spring in their step

The Broncos are ready for battle! New head football coach Lance Taylor leads the team out of the tunnel onto the field of Waldo Stadium for the annual Spring Showcase, capping off Western Week on campus and offering a sneak peek at the upcoming football season. The Broncos face Saint Francis University at the home opener on Aug. 31.
12. Facing the future
It’s no longer a sci-fi plot line; artificial intelligence is rapidly working its way into everyday life. Western’s AI experts explore how generative technology is opening up a new world of possibility as well as ethical concerns for our future.

20. Unbridled success
Everything’s coming up roses for Western alumni Brian Ductor and Chase Chambers, creators of innovative investment group Commonwealth, whose horse Mage won the Kentucky Derby.

24. The plant prodigy
Aspiring plant parents are turning to Western’s own green thumb, student Jacob Soule, who has cultivated a million followers on TikTok for his insightful plant wisdom and authenticity.

26. The ultimate Bronco
The journey to earning a degree is a feat for any student. For James Rhodes, he’s mastered it—six times—and all at Western.

28. Next-level success
Two new initiatives supported by the Empowering Futures Gift launched in spring, giving students new avenues for support to keep them on the right track and give them resume-worthy experiences.

Rian Johnson, a digital media and journalism major, navigates the unique runway design at the 2023 Merchandising Opportunities & Design Association (MODA) annual spring fashion show, "Ultra Reflections." For a sold-out crowd at the Kalamazoo Expo Center, the student organization challenged student designers to reflect on the environmental impact of their fashion lines.

The W Magazine for summer 2023 will be a digital-only edition available in August at wmich.edu/magazine.
ith the rapid release of artificial intelligence tools in recent months, the ethical implications of products like ChatGPT, Google’s Bard and other communication tools are coming into question. Will artificial intelligence expand the opportunities for or improve the efficiency of the way we communicate? How can we harness this tool to improve our world when there are so few regulations to monitor its use or prevent abuse?

Artificial intelligence and humanity can fit hand-in-glove when there’s a balance of one helping the other improve. At Western, we’re extensively researching these tools to see how they can be best utilized in higher education to encourage our students to achieve a higher level of critical thinking and improve their communication skills.

Some of us have lived long enough to remember the ethical debate about permitting the use of hand-held calculators in classrooms in the late 1970s—the argument being that such an instrument would interrupt the learning of fundamentals or perhaps would promote cheating.

Today, calculators have become so commonplace that everyone takes their use for granted inside and outside of the classroom. The device became known as just a tool for students to use no different than a pencil or a microscope. It is seldom seen as a device for cheating. Fast forward 50 years: Will ChatGPT and other AI platforms be a new “calculator?”

Broncos are built to be curious and to want to share that thirst for knowledge with the world, and new technology can help them do that. Take first-year environmental sustainability student and Finch Greenhouse caretaker Jacob Soule. Now with 27 million likes and a million followers on TikTok, he’s imparting green-thumb knowledge to novice gardeners around the world.

Meanwhile, the financial expertise of Dr. Onur Arugaslan, professor of finance and co-director of the Sanford Center for Financial Planning and Wellness, is sought after as rising prices grip Americans and beyond and the importance of planning for retirement becomes even more critical. A Bankrate survey finds more than half of Americans say they are behind on retirement savings, making this a most worthwhile discussion.

Forget about inflation, it’s our graduates in the College of Aviation who are really soaring. Alumnus Steve Denomme has built a storied career as a captain for Delta Airlines. First beginning his time in the industry pulling planes in and out of the hangar at the college, he’s propelled himself through industry-rattling moments like 9/11, the recession, pandemic—even the blackout of 2003. Through it all, he persevered using his knowledge and experiences in our top-ranked aviation program.

As society continues to adapt to change, the students, alumni, faculty and staff at Western are on the cutting edge of technological advancements and ideas to make this world a better place. While new technology can induce anxiety and even fear of change, it is new ideas, new knowledge that can offer opportunities for advancement and growth. You need both to thrive, and at Western, we will remain strong for years to come. ■
College of Aviation to invest in new fleet to enhance top-ranked program as pilot shortage looms

The University’s top-flight College of Aviation is getting new wings. In March, the Board of Trustees approved a multimillion-dollar investment from the WMU Foundation to support the purchase of a new fleet of aircraft, expanding the college’s training capabilities at a time when demand for pilots is skyrocketing and replacing its aging fleet with the newest technology in the field.

“When we acquired our previous fleet of Cirrus aircraft, Western stood out for the type of training and skills students were able to develop because of the quality of the planes and the high level of technology we equipped them with,” says Dr. Raymond Thompson, dean of the College of Aviation. “It was essential to moving us up to a top three aviation program in the country. This next fleet will take us to the next level.”

The WMU Foundation loan, which has been approved up to $20 million, will support the purchase of up to 32 new primary training aircraft as well as a Super Decathlon training aircraft, which is used to develop specialized skills. The College of Aviation expects the first round of new aircraft to arrive on campus in 2024.

“This investment means we will continue to attract the best and brightest students to apply to Western Michigan University’s aviation program because we make these kinds of investments in equipment and educational experiences,” Thompson says. “Being able to purchase the new aircraft rather than lease them allows us to start building equity right away and ultimately save money, which is a win for the University and for our students.”

This is He’s third Fulbright Specialist Award, cementing his status as a world-leading scholar in hydrology and water resource management. The 2023-24 award will give him the opportunity to travel, conduct research and lecture at the National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University in Taiwan, particularly with topics regarding dryland hydrology, hydrological modeling and water resources management.

Han will complete a project at National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University in Taiwan to exchange knowledge and establish partnerships benefiting individuals, institutions and communities in the U.S. and Taiwan through education and research activities in health information technology. To learn more about Han’s work, visit page 15.

“His work will be a great addition to our faculty,” says Dr. Bernard Han and Chansheng He each earned highly competitive Fulbright Specialist Awards from the U.S. Department of State. The WMU scholars are two of only 400 U.S. citizens selected for the honor this year.

The program pairs highly qualified U.S. academics and professionals with host institutions abroad to share their expertise, strengthen institutional linkages, hone their skills, gain international experience and learn about other cultures while building capacity at their overseas host institutions.

As Bryan Newland, U.S. assistant secretary of Indian affairs, visited campus in April, WMU officially announced the creation of its Graduate Certificate in Tribal Governance in cooperation between the School of Public Affairs and Administration and the local tribal councils of the Three Fires Confederacy. Implementing a certificate program in collaboration with three tribal nations allows the opportunity to provide tribally endorsed resources to increase capacity building within communities in southwest Michigan. Students can engage with various tribal entities through subject-matter experts and content endorsed by each tribal nation.

“My heart is full seeing how pertinent Native American culture has become at Western Michigan University,” says Skyler Wolverton, president of the Native American Student Organization at WMU. “I am overjoyed that more attention is being brought to this beautiful way of life and that we have received so much support from various organizations, tribes and departments within the University.”

Western is currently planning cohorts that will include government, gaming and economic development corporations within each tribal nation. This will promote a collaborative to explore best practices in policies through the creation of service-learning projects.

“The inclusion of digital storytelling allows our narrative to be preserved and protected for generations. Not only will the certificate program assist the students and wider community partners in understanding our story, but it also allows professional development and networking opportunities,” says Samuel Ribeau, citizen of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi and WMU faculty instructor for the graduate certificate program. “It has been an honor to see this dream come to fruition.”

Professors receive Fulbright Specialist Award for their groundbreaking work

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Dr. Kenneth Li, chair of the Department of Chemical and Paper Engineering, has been awarded an endowed professorship during the spring 2023 semester.

The Office of Research and Innovation is recognizing three faculty members for their advanced and creative study.

Amy Brooks, digital projects librarian and associate professor of University Libraries; Dr. Kristina Lemmer, associate professor of mechanical and aerospace engineering; and Kelsey Paschich, assistant professor of dance, have been awarded three-year Presidential Innovation Professors.

The awardees were determined by a selection committee and announced at Spring Convocation. Launched in January 2020 to spark innovation in teaching and research, Presidential Innovation Professors recognize and provide funding to outstanding faculty members for creativity in research and entrepreneurial approaches to their disciplines.

“Presidential Innovation Professors are one of the many ways we recognize our distinguished faculty members who make notable scholarly contributions in their respective fields,” says Dr. Remzi Seker, vice president for research and innovation. “With this new mechanism, research, innovation and scholarship should support our students’ growth and learning. These awards are meant to increase the impact these top-notch faculty members have not only in their scholarship area but also in the classroom.”

Five years after signing an institutional agreement to create a smoother process for Kellogg Community College graduates to continue their education at Western, representatives from both institutions renewed and expanded the partnership.

Leaders from WMU and KCC signed an institutional articulation agreement and a series of program articulation agreements, all of which are designed to facilitate the transfer of credits from KCC’s associate degree programs to specific bachelor’s degree programs at WMU.

The institutional agreement assists students who are seeking a seamless transition from KCC to WMU that minimizes the loss of earned credits and prevents the duplication thereof. The credits from select KCC programs—each of which are described in program-specific articulation agreements—will be included in the total credit hours required for a specific WMU associate degree at KCC. The credits from select KCC programs may also be included in the total credit hours required for a specific WMU associate degree at KCC.

KCC-WMU institutional articulation agreements for courses in disciplines relevant to their desired careers, says Carla Reynolds, a KCC trustee and WMU alumnus. “The agreements we’re signing and renewing today will help students save time and money in the long run and point them toward rewarding professions in a variety of sectors.”

Joe Sobieralski, president and chief executive officer of Battle Creek Unlimited, expressed enthusiastic support for the KCC-WMU partnership, in part because it represents two institutions of higher learning working collaboratively for the benefit of students pursuing careers and employers seeking qualified job applicants.

“As an economic developer who works regularly with KCC and who also is a Western alumnus, I am delighted to see these legacy institutions acting purposefully to smooth out the education-to-workforce pipeline, which is crucial to south central Michigan’s capacity for maintaining a highly qualified workforce,” Sobieralski says. “Battle Creek Unlimited supports employers in all sectors who tell us one of their greatest challenges in this dynamic economy involves the ongoing development of a diverse, well-trained applicant pool.”
The printing press, electricity—the internet—human innovation has fueled the evolution of society for centuries. Now artificial intelligence (AI) is opening up a world of possibility that could redefine the future and revolutionize the way we communicate, work and live—for better or worse.

“It’s definitely going to take the world of work by storm. We’re going to see massive implications,” says Dr. Chad Edwards, professor of communication, who co-directs the first-of-its-kind Communication and Social Robotics (Combot) Labs at Western alongside Dr. Autumn Edwards and in collaboration with colleague Dr. Patric Spence at the University of Central Florida.

While forms of AI have been around for decades, the emergence of generative AI, which uses algorithms and large language models to create original text, images, audio or video, is relatively new. It’s not Alexa telling you the weather or Siri digging up an obscure fact on a celebrity; this technology is learning from data sets, iterating and improving its output as time goes on.

Tech company OpenAI opened the floodgates when it released ChatGPT to the masses in November 2022. Google followed with Bard and Microsoft introduced its Bing chatbot in early 2023.

“I think that really did create a massive, game-changing event for the general public,” Chad Edwards says. “I think it captured a lot of imagination. I, personally, would put it on the scale of the Wright Brothers flying at Kitty Hawk—it’s that big.”

AN UNSTOPPABLE FORCE

The speed at which these chatbots can sift through large volumes of data has the potential to make both work and home life more efficient. It can help with meal planning, creating grocery lists and recipes for an entire week in minutes, or devising a workout plan based on specific goals. Need an explanation of quantum physics for a group of middle schoolers? It can do that. Want to create an agenda for a work meeting combining analytics and reports from the previous month? Save yourself a few hours and let the chatbot do it for you.

And if you haven’t joined the chatbot revolution yet, its influence is nearly unavoidable with Microsoft’s next iteration, Copilot, which will put GPT software on all Office products. The company says it will create “the most powerful productivity tool on the planet.”

But the swift release of increasingly agile AI systems with little oversight and no system of checks and balances has many people on edge. Begin typing “will artificial intelligence” into a Google search bar and the engine’s autocomplete function paints a bleak picture drawing from popular user searches: Will artificial intelligence take over the world? Take away jobs? Replace humans?

A contingent of dozens of tech leaders and researchers, including Bill Gates and Elon Musk, are also raising concerns. They signed an open letter in March urging AI developers to hit the proverbial pause button on the “out-of-control race to develop and deploy digital minds that no one … can understand, predict or control.” They recommend taking at least six months to temper the explosion of technology and allow for time to discuss potential impacts and create guardrails.

There’s one problem: The animatronic cat is already out of the bag. The evolution of AI is “unstopable—and we have already experienced several waves of it,” says Dr. Kuanchin Chen, professor of business information systems and director of the Center for Business Analytics, who has been studying AI for more than two decades. “The question is, how are we going to create unique opportunities for humans while using it?”

“There’s a lot of hype around AGI (artificial general intelligence) or super intelligence or consciousness of AI; that’s just hype. It’s really just code and math and algorithms. Of course you can do bad things with it, but it’s not going to suddenly become alive. That’s not how that works,” adds Chad Edwards. “It’s just important to think about how you’re using it and how other people are using it. It’s not a great answer, but it’s about all you can do short of regulations.”

Artificial intelligence is evolving at warp speed—but at what cost?
Potential regulations, Chad Edwards says, should involve transparency—knowing who is funding and developing software and where their data sets come from—as well as access to data and training data biases.

“What you get back (when you prompt ChatGPT) is a mirror of society. You get a reflection of the general mood of the Internet, in a way, because everything you’re hearing is what we’ve been putting out into the digital sphere for the last several decades,” Autumn Edwards says.

“As (AI) continues to grow with more and more data as people interact with it, those standards that we put in place to require the corporations that create these AI models are only so strong. So, we have to be really vigilant as users,” adds Dr. Gwen Tarbox, director of the Office of Faculty Development in WMUx. “We’re interested in what we tell us about ourselves and also how we can be mindful of the pitfalls of AI as well as the innovation.”

There are also ethical implications. AI can be used to disseminate misinformation in mass amounts and create deepfake videos that blur the lines of reality with the potential for widespread negative impact.

“How are we going to get a sort of defense against the dark arts fast enough to defend against all of this stuff?” asks Autumn Edwards. “It may come to the point where we have to consider whether our image, whether our radical social and biological physicality, is protected information in the same way that our genetic material or medical or biological waste if we go to a hospital is protected.”

A WORLD OF POSSIBILITY

While it’s essential to consider the implications of generative technology and the many other branches of AI, there are also countless applications that could transform society for the better. Chen emphasizes the importance of creating symbiotic opportunities to enhance both humans and technology.

“I’m not worried about job replacement as long as we’re using AI to play as strategic navigators in complex or novel scenarios and to make decisions that require an assessment of human needs.

“We’re talking about expanding the capabilities of humans. Right now, this can be in terms of additional capabilities that were not possible before or sharpening existing skills and making things faster or more efficient. The key is to think about how this collaborative relationship with AI brings about value or innovative opportunities for both parties.”

Chen has already worked with companies to improve user experiences and better predict user choices by integrating AI into their websites and has several projects in the works related to using voice AI for problem solving, educational assignments, clothing matching and improving personal performance through these emerging technologies. The possibilities, it seems, are endless—but it’s all about balance and seeing AI as a partner, not a rival.

“Everything’s moving so quickly. I think the best we can do is try not to get trapped in either a utopian or dystopian vision of it—that this technology is going to determine our path either in a good or bad way,” Autumn Edwards adds.

“It could be great. It could be terrible, but what really matters is our choices; that’s the only thing we can control. If we can intentionally, together in our communities, anticipate possible futures and try to link up potential choices we could make with their likely consequences at an early stage, then we’ve got the best chance of ending up living in a world where humans and intelligent machines can flourish together.”

ON THE LEADING EDGE

As AI and generative systems become more ingrained in society and more widely available, some academics are raising concerns about what it means for education. Could students use it to cheat and write papers? Will they ever complete research? And if they can generate summaries and reports in a matter of seconds?

“We’re not going to be able to ban it; that’s just never going to work. We need to be able to figure out how we can best train students that this is another tool. (Teach them) how to use it better, how to know when it’s not effective, how to use it for brainstorming or certain tasks and also how to edit it,” says Chad Edwards. In fact, there are infinite benefits when educators embrace AI and use it as a tool to spur creative thinking and innovation.

“The implications for teaching and learning are profound. We can use these technologies to help students and faculty work on each other’s writing projects, with creating lesson plans, there are so many ways,” says Tarbox.

Another key has taken a proactive approach to AI integration at Western, putting the University on the leading edge of institutions offering courses and training for faculty on the technology.

“We recognize that our students will be encountering and working with AI for the majority of their lives, so as faculty and as instructional designers and as Western’s innovation hub for teaching and learning, we at WMUx know that we need to be there for our faculty partners as they work on developing and integrating AI into their courses,” says Tarbox. “Many of our students will work with AI the next year or so for jobs where AI will be a major component of what they do.”

PREPARING FOR A CHANGING WORLD

The School of Communication has already begun incorporating AI into its curriculum, adding a user experience/human-computer interaction (UX/HCI) minor. Students in the program study the social and societal implications of human-machine communication and artificial intelligence as well as user experience and how to make technology for everyone. Other courses and programs are in development across the University, including a Haworth College of Business course on business and AI that will debut in the fall, which will focus on business implications, topics like digital future, social and ethical processing and generative AI.

“AI is traditionally offered as a computer science course. It has been like that for years, and that is how my AI training years back began as well,” Chen says. “But AI has evolved to a point that we see consumer AI everywhere.”

WMUx is also in the process of creating two working groups related to AI. One will focus on AI and ethics, encompassing not only issues of academic integrity but also ethics of AI and best practices. Another will examine bias in AI.

“Our main goal is education. Having the tools so we can make educated and informed decisions as we work with people,” says Alyssa Moon, associate director of instructional design and development in WMUx. “The more people can get involved in getting those multiple perspectives, the better it is.”

WMUx will be inviting the University community to participate in the working groups beginning in fall 2023. The unit has already created a clearinghouse for information called AI (g W MU), which is hosting a series of events designed to familiarize the University community with ChatGPT and other generative AI technologies. Workshops are planned for the summer on creating generative pre-trained transformer (GPT) prompts, bias in AI and using AI in course planning and design. Plans are also in the works for an AI speaker series in the fall, which will include nationally recognized experts in a variety of fields. Tarbox says the goal is to be a conduit of information for the Western community. She says it’s important to recognize that although the evolution of AI is uncertain, the University has a responsibility to prepare students to take on the challenges of tomorrow and equip faculty and staff with the tools to guide them.

“People are worried it’s going to grow a brain and take us over and I think that’s a concern,” says Tarbox. “I think the concern will be different. We don’t want to be dominated. We don’t want to lose control.”

Dr. Bernard Han receives highly competitive Fulbright Specialist Award for smart medicine research

Dr. Bernard Han, professor of business information systems, has been awarded a highly competitive Fulbright Specialist Award from the U.S. Department of State. The honor recognizes Han’s achievements on an international stage. For one of only 400 U.S. citizens who share expertise with host institutions abroad through a Fulbright Specialist Program each year.

Han will complete a project at National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University in Taiwan that aims to exchange knowledge and establish partnerships benefiting individuals, institutions and communities in the U.S. and Taiwan through educational and research activities in health information technology. Specifically, his project will focus on state-of-the-art smart medicine through the application of artificial intelligence and data analytics using real-time data collected by Internet of Things devices. In addition, he will mentor research on local policy formation for enhancing health information exchange and outpatient care management.
High tech at low cost: That’s Dr. Alessander Danna-dos-Santos’ mission. An associate professor of physical therapy in the College of Health and Human Services as well as a neuroscientist, his research focuses on human movement and control—especially related to degenerative diseases and traumatic events. His passion lies in developing technology to bridge the gap between marginalized and underserved populations and affordable health care. Artificial intelligence has allowed him to ramp up the impact of his work.

“There are people who use some of this (AI) technology for making a killing on the stock market or helping them with getting better chances on the lottery. That’s not my mission. My mission is to create things and make things a little more accessible for people who need them. And we’re very much on the front of the wave when it comes to technology.”

Danna-dos-Santos learned how to code so that he could write a program to bring PT to patients. It would allow a physical therapist to enter suggested treatments and exercises for patients based on their abilities and enlist a virtual assistant to monitor movement and suggest exercises in real time.

“The idea is that you have the potential to reach these patients, allow them to have access to cutting-edge technology that is reliable, and at the same time you save them time and money on transportation, allowing them to stay at home and avoid other potential traumas like falls,” he says. AI also allows practitioners to have better documentation of patient cases by tracking data over time. It could be useful in detecting deterioration in things like range of motion or balance—a potential game changer for patients with degenerative diseases.

“All of the physiological changes that impact the central nervous system start decades before the first symptoms start showing up. More and more (with the help of artificial intelligence) we are able to pick that up,” he says. Danna-dos-Santos is working on developing affordable technology that trains AI on all potential parameters to indicate abnormalities in the central nervous system well in advance of a traditional diagnosis.

It could eventually be used for screening patients at higher risk of developing neurological diseases such as Parkinson’s or Alzheimer’s. “Not only would it help with early detection, but it also could make quality of life much better for a patient over time. Most neurodegenerative diseases have a good response with very simple changes in life such as exercise, healthier diet or relief of stress.”

“IT’s a big believer that technology doesn’t surpass people. Our brain, our abilities, our skills as human beings—we’re able to do much more than computers. Computers are going to be helping us, robots are going to be helping us, but it’s just a matter of how we apply that.”

Improving quality of life, enhancing degenerative disease detection

Cost and access to transportation can be prohibitive to physical therapy (PT) treatment. Danna-dos-Santos shows students how AI technology can detect slight shifts in balance, allowing doctors to track changes over time and potentially create exercises for patients to improve balance.

Danna-dos-Santos presents stability research to students.

Artificial Intelligence

Projects in progress

Using AI technology for early detection of neurological diseases by detecting slight changes in a person’s balance and movement

A virtual physical therapy assistant that can monitor movement and suggest exercises in real time

Inertial motion units: Technology that uses sensors to map a person’s body and track movements in real time and enable a full analysis of motion over a span of time
Embracing Communication. This group, who are his colleagues Drs. Chad and Bryan Abendschein, are studying how people interact with pets. In late 2019 with Dr. Bryan Abendschein, it are comfortable with. Instead of being wary, Dr. Bryan Abendschein, who could benefit the most from these advancements in technology, focuses less on their own anxiety. The newness (of technology) can be reinvigorating,” he says. “Can this spur interaction between people?”

As this type of technology is increasingly adopted, those gaps are going to widen,” says Gerlach-Houck. “If AI can’t understand what you’re saying, you’re not going to have a fair shake.” Gerlach-Houck’s role on the NSF project team focuses on the stigma and potential biases embedded in the technology. The team is currently surveying a diverse pool of people who stutter to identify what type of voice-activated technology they currently use and where it falls short.

“We want to get a good feel for how much they’re using it, why they are not using it and what barriers and facilitators they have encountered,” she says, putting emphasis not only on accessibility but also on user experiences. “Even if AI understands what people who stutter are saying, AI still has built-in biases related to how people look, how they speak and if they stutter. Inaccessible and biased AI is a threat to human rights.”

Other groups have attempted similar projects, but she believes her team has the key to breaking down previous barriers because of the inclusive nature of their project. A person who stutters and the director of a nonprofit stuttering organization are part of their core research team. “We are approaching the project with a mindset that improved technology is not enough, and that true change will require social and political action in conjunction with the stuttering community,” says Gerlach-Houck.

Her team is in the process of collecting and inputting a variety of existing and live speech samples from the stuttering community, if their technology is successful, it could open the door to increased accessibility for many people. “If we have technology that’s more accessible for people who stutter, it’s going to have trickle down effects to other communities, including people whose communication varies from the norm or from the data sets that voice-activated technology systems are trained on, which are typically pretty homogenous in terms of dialect.”

In addition to creating the technology, the team coordinated an international conference on voice-activated AI, bringing together hiring professionals, advocacy organizations, engineers, organizational psychologists and members of the stuttering community to gain insight for their product and create a set of guidelines to ensure employers make their procedures more equitable for people who stutter in the future.

Advancements in technology may be moving faster than some who could benefit the most from are comfortable with. Instead of being wary, Dr. Bryan Abendschein, assistant professor of communication, is studying how people interact with technology—specifically soft, furry robotic animals—and the implications for providing emotional support and stimulation.

Abendschein began to study this interaction in late 2019 with his colleagues Drs. Chad and Bryan Abendschein, assistant professor of communication, and Dr. Hope Gerlach-Houck, assistant professor of speech, language and hearing sciences, who are part of a multidisciplinary team including researchers from Michigan State University who are working on a National Science Foundation grant to shift development of the technology into high gear. Within a year, the team is expected to research, conceptualize and prepare a product for market. The urgency reflects the increasing integration of AI in all aspects of our lives—from health care to employment systems. Several large companies, for instance, now use AI-driven interviews to prescreen applicants. Gerlach-Houck’s prior research has demonstrated that, compared to people who don’t stutter, stutterers are more likely to be unemployed, underemployed and earn less money for the same work.

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According to Dr. Hope Gerlach-Houck, the team is developing and testing technology that could be used to help people with speech differences. Gerlach-Houck is working with a multidisciplinary team to develop voice-activated technology that is accessible to those who stutter as part of a National Science Foundation grant.

The next level of Abendschein’s research will introduce these robots to patients with brain injuries to study if this interaction can stimulate brain function and activity as well as encourage more exchanges between patients and the people around them. “The newness (of technology) can be reinvigorating,” he says. “Can this spur interaction between people?”

There are many implications for how we think about and interact with technology,” he adds. “We talk so much about our fear of technology. My real excitement is for all of the good we can get from it, how this can supplement our lives and make them better.”

Si and Alexa can order groceries, turn on lights and appliances and even discover obscure facts to entertain our children. But there’s one thing our AI helpers haven’t mastered—patience. And it’s a huge problem—especially for people who stutter and those with other speech difficulties.

“We’re all misunderstood by Siri and Alexa—it happens incessantly to everyone—but it especially happens to people who stutter,” says Dr. Hope Gerlach-Houck, assistant professor of speech, language and hearing sciences and co-principal investigator on a National Science Foundation project aimed at creating voice-activated technology that is accessible to people who stutter. “This is about being understood, being seen as a human being and being known for who you are. Right now, inaccessibility of voice-activated technology is robbing people who stutter of that. And the longer this persists, the more inequity is going to widen.”

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The urgency reflects the increasing integration of AI in all aspects of our lives—from health care to employment systems. Several large companies, for instance, now use AI-driven interviews to prescreen applicants. Gerlach-Houck’s prior research has demonstrated that, compared to people who don’t stutter, stutterers are more likely to be unemployed, underemployed and earn less money for the same work.

“We know that people who stutter are already disadvantaged in the workplace, there’s inequity in quality of life. As this type of technology is increasingly adopted, those gaps are going to widen,” says Gerlach-Houck. "If AI can’t understand what you’re saying, you’re not going to have a fair shake.” Gerlach-Houck’s role on the NSF project team focuses on the stigma and potential biases embedded in the technology. The team is currently surveying a diverse pool of people who stutter to identify what type of voice-activated technology they currently use and where it falls short.

“We want to get a good feel for how much they’re using it, why they are not using it and what barriers and facilitators they have encountered,” she says, putting emphasis not only on accessibility but also on user experiences. “Even if AI understands what people who stutter are saying, AI still has built-in biases related to how people look, how they speak and if they stutter. Inaccessible and biased AI is a threat to human rights.”

Other groups have attempted similar projects, but she believes her team has the key to breaking down previous barriers because of the inclusive nature of their project. A person who stutters and the director of a nonprofit stuttering organization are part of their core research team. “We are approaching the project with a mindset that improved technology is not enough, and that true change will require social and political action in conjunction with the stuttering community,” says Gerlach-Houck.

Her team is in the process of collecting and inputting a variety of existing and live speech samples from the stuttering community, if their technology is successful, it could open the door to increased accessibility for many people.

“…”

Facing the Future

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Artificial intelligence

Embracing machines’ support

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Western alumni Chase Chamberlin, BBA ’12, and Brian Doxtator, BBA ’04, are celebrating a big Kentucky Derby win with Mage. They went from business Broncos to Kentucky Derby dynamos with their creation of Commonwealth, an innovative investment group that revolutionized ownership by allowing fans to purchase shares of a horse. “We come up against a lot of Ivy Leaguers in the tech world, and we’re proud to say we went to WMU. Go Broncos!” says Chamberlin.

Unbridled success

Mage crosses the finish line to win the 149th Kentucky Derby at Churchill Downs in Louisville.

(From left to right) Preston Troutt of WinStar Farm, a Commonwealth partner; Brian Doxtator, BBA ’04; Chase Chamberlin, BBA ’12; and jockey Javier Castellano celebrate with the Kentucky Derby trophy following Mage’s big win on May 6.
Steve Denomme’s movie script for his storied aviation career could be “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly.” But the first of the three adjectives would be the star of the show.

Denomme, BS ’00, has weathered the impacts of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, recession and pandemic on the airline industry to thrive as a captain. His career has taken him all over the United States, Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean. He thrived in Western’s aviation program despite knowing very little about the field when he began as a student.

“I knew that I wanted to fly, but where that would take me I didn’t know. I just jumped in with both feet, working my way to what interested me,” Denomme says.

He says he was “instantly sold” on Western’s aviation program during his first tour of campus, when he learned the program was opening a new facility at Kellogg Field in Battle Creek, Michigan.

“I immediately loved the campus, its vibrance and the people I encountered,” says Denomme, who grew up in Metro Detroit’s Waterford Township.

As a Bronco majoring in aviation flight science with minors in business management and geography, Denomme worked at the College of Aviation moving planes in and out of hangars.

“It was a great and fun job because it kept me at the airport where I wanted to be after my classes were finished for the day. It continued my learning of all things aviation.”

By his senior year, Denomme was tapped to be a certified flight instructor.

“That’s where I honed my flying skills,” he says. “I had amazing students, some of whom I currently work with. Others are throughout the world with major and national airlines or as medical flight operators. I’m proud of all of them.”

In August 2001, he began his career as a first officer at Mesaba Airlines, a regional operation based in Minnesota. But during his pilot training, he watched New York’s Twin Towers come down during the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

“I was on a week off between my Mesaba ground school training and prior to going to simulator training when I watched live coverage, like so many others, of the second tower getting hit and then both of the towers falling,” Denomme says. “This completely changed the course of aviation for the next few years and took everyone’s aviation career from advancing rather quickly to completely slowing our advancement to the next step: a major airline.”

The next few years were bumpy for the industry, as well as Denomme. Although he was called back to finish training, he was furloughed by Mesaba that October.

He worked as an instructor at Western until being called back as a first officer with Mesaba in March 2002, which lasted until fall when the industry saw a drop in travel demand due to the nationwide recession. In June 2003, he put on a Mesaba uniform once again.

“When the energy blackout gripped the East Coast and Midwest in August 2003, Denomme and his Mesaba crew in Detroit were about to start their flight ‘when everything went dark.’ After the emergency generators kicked on, he joined fellow pilots and first officers in the terminal to assist passengers stuck in stairwells, at the gates and wherever needed. Denomme eventually boarded a plane and for the next eight hours played ‘communications guy’.”

“I became the radio relay between our ground and flying aircraft and dispatch,” he says, “while sitting in a Saab 340 (aircraft) plugged into a ground power unit with the hose of a ground air cart running up the stairs into the cockpit cooling me down. Saabs are notoriously hot, especially in August. Leasing the airport that night was very eerie as the airport grounds were the only light source in the area. All of Metro Detroit was in total blackout.”

Denomme went on to fly for eight years as a First officer before earning his captain’s bars. Before 9/11, it would have only taken him about two years.

But once he reached his goal as captain, he continued to climb. He moved into management as Mesaba’s domicile chief pilot, managing the day-to-day flight operations at its Detroit hub. A year later, he became chief pilot for all Mesaba operations. And it wasn’t long before Delta Air Lines hired him in 2014 to fly out of Atlanta.

“It was an amazing part of my life and being part of Delta was an absolute dream,” he says. “Almost all the captains I flew with had been on the aircraft for at least a decade. They were some of the best people I ever worked with. The knowledge I gained is still invaluable.”

When he returned to Detroit with Delta, he became an assistant chief pilot. But in February 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and the industry again suffered. Once aviation began to recover, he earned his Delta captain’s wings in August 2021.

Denomme has been a role model as the first pilot in the family, now that a cousin and a niece who are Broncos have also earned their wings. They say he “loves sharing my experiences.”

“I would not be where I am today without Western and its mentors. I spread that message whenever and wherever I can.”

For Denomme, it hasn’t been an easy ride. But despite the ups and downs—the turbulence—it’s all been worth the ride.
Popular plant TikTok showcases student’s succulent humor and self care

If you’ve ever searched online to find out why the leaves on your Calathea orbifolia are turning brown or if you should really spend $40 on that fiddle leaf fig tree at Costco (you shouldn’t), chances are you’ve been treated to the delightful wisdom of undergraduate Jacob Soule.

Known by his social handle @theplantprodigy, Soule started sharing his obsession with house plants on TikTok in 2020, posting videos about his own plants and answering people’s questions about how to properly care for theirs. Today, Soule’s plant-powered TikTok is one of the most beloved on social media, with nearly 27 million likes and one million followers. He was one of Mashable’s “5 TikTok accounts to follow for houseplants” in 2021.

Several elements contribute to his unique online presence: his unbridled affection for Nepenthes, which are pitcher plants, and his instructional yet soothing “plant shower” posts being two standouts. But the plant prodigy’s key to success might very well be his authenticity. Diagnosed with autism when he was 3 years old, Soule routinely reminds viewers that his self-described obsession with plants stems from his neurodivergence—and he’s proud of that.

“I’d like to remind everyone that if it wasn’t for my autism, I wouldn’t be obsessed with plants. And if I wasn’t obsessed with plants, I would have never made a plant TikTok and I wouldn’t be here,” he explains in one of his videos.

The topic of neurodiversity—atypical cognitive functioning that serves as the hallmark trait in people diagnosed with conditions like autism or dyslexia—surfaces in Soule’s hashtags and encouraging comments from followers. It’s the unique combination of his exceptional thinking, subtle humor and self care disguised as plant care that make so many of his videos worth watching.

A first-year student currently mapping in environmental sustainability, Soule has two classes like biology that speak to his love of the natural world and is keeping an open mind when it comes to his academic focus. “I don’t know if that will be the major that I end college with, but I think I’ll definitely do something with plants,” he notes.

Outside of class, Soule often can be found wandering around campus with his phone, identifying the abundance of plants thriving in the common areas of his university with nearly 27 million likes and one million followers. He was one of Mashable’s “5 TikTok accounts to follow for houseplants” in 2021.

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Six-time Western alumnus looks forward to next chapter

James Rhodes has had an epic journey at Western Michigan University. Over more than 40 years, the faculty specialist in computer science has earned six degrees from the University all while riding on the leading edge of the computer wave. In fact, most students he sat next to at his two latest commencement ceremonies in April, where he earned a master’s degree in data science and a PhD in computer science, have likely only seen in computer science, data science and a PhD master’s degree in history books.

Rhodes turned 60 this year, so completing his sixth degree at Western seems a fitting milestone and a good place to close the book on his student journey. But the legacy of Rhodes’ scholarship at the University will continue; his son just finished ceremonies in April, the latest commencement.

I thought (accounting) was just a bunch of number crunching, but accounting is much more than that. I fell in love with it,” he says. “People thought I was crazy for saying ‘I love this stuff!’”

His love of accounting sustained him through the journey of obtaining his second degree in 2004. Rhodes tapped into his business and technical credentials to work for Rapistan—now Siemens— in Grand Rapids for a few years, but then he felt called to move to Arizona.

“There has to be someone upstairs that’s kind of guiding me, because a lot of times I do things and I don’t realize until after I’m done why I did it,” he says.

Once in Phoenix, Rhodes discovered US Airways and America West were transitioning into one airline, so he helped merge their databases into one single server.

“It was challenging but very rewarding work,” he says. “The computer science degree definitely prepared me for my jobs and the accounting as well. Because in the corporate world, Finance and IT don’t talk the same language. So I was able to kind of bridge the gap and be a liaison between the two,” Rhodes says.

After working through another merger, Rhodes started back at Western on track to get a master’s in computer science, which he earned in 2018, and stayed to complete another master’s in cybersecurity while he was at it in 2021.

“That’s the thing about this field. I have to keep learning, whether it’s degree-oriented or just my own independent research. I have to stay up on the latest technology or I’m going to be pushed away along the currents,” he says.

He’s used his vast industry and educational experience to impart knowledge on the next generation as a faculty specialist in Western’s College of Engineering and Applied Sciences while at the same time pursuing two more degrees: a master’s in data science and doctoral degree in computer science. In between taking his own course load and doling out lessons and exams to his students, Rhodes managed to successfully complete and defend a dissertation on developing an efficient priority queue.

“Now that he’s finished? “I’m definitely going to sleep,” he laughs.

Rhodes turns 60 this year, so completing his sixth degree at Western seems a fitting milestone and a good place to close the book on his student journey. But the legacy of Rhodes’ scholarship at the University will continue, his son just finished his first year on campus.
Empowering Futures takes student support to new levels

Kannon Hoffman, a sustainability studies major, works with a three-row planter crafted to help farmers in third-world countries cultivate crops more efficiently during his internship at Tillers International.

PERSONALIZED SUPPORT WHEN STUDENTS NEED IT MOST
Student Success Hub launched one year after announcing the first comprehensive student support system of its kind. The new online portal connects undergraduate students with a personalized success team tailored to their needs, from career exploration and wellness to coaching to academic guidance and financial aid assistance.

“The goal is to have a system to more effectively serve our students and give them a more seamless experience while also trying to make it a more facilitated, coordinated experience for our staff behind the scenes,” says Dr. Edwin Martini, vice provost for teaching and learning and dean of Merze Tate College.

The portal also facilitates alerts to students to highlight potential roadblocks to success, like academic concern forms, low grades, withdrawal from classes or a delay in course registration for the upcoming semester.

Within two months of launch, Student Success Hub has issued about 15,000 alerts, the largest number being for students that hadn’t registered for fall 2023 classes. By April, retention had increased compared to the previous academic year, particularly among first-year students from historically marginalized populations.

Student Success Hub brings together student affairs, academic affairs, Merze Tate College, Multicultural Affairs for Students, the Office of Information Technology, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion and Institutional Research.

“It’s an incredible collaboration that is unprecedented in my 17 years at Western,” Martini says.

GAINING THE SKILLS TO SUCCEED
In May, 70 WMU students reported to internships as Broncos Lead interns. The unique program, supported by the Empowering Futures Gift, funds paid internships for students to access resume-worthy, network-building experiences while also benefiting businesses in Michigan.

“We’re really excited about this program and the opportunities it will create,” says Andrea Page, assistant director of internships.

Page connected with employers to create internship opportunities for the program, which focuses on nonprofits, minority-owned businesses, small businesses, startup businesses and businesses with a strong focus on diversity, equity and inclusion.

Students are paid $15 per hour for 20 hours per week during the 12-week program. But unlike other internship programs, they receive paychecks directly from their employer, even though the funding itself will come from Western.

“When students are employed directly by a business or organization, it’s more meaningful work. They tend to work harder because they feel as though they’re part of the team,” Page says. “And the ability for Western to pay the employers up front is huge to some of these small businesses and nonprofits who haven’t been able to host interns in the past because they simply can’t afford it.”

Western is ramping up the impact of its education with Broncos Lead, combining the internship experience with holistic support and academic opportunities.

“This is a complete program; it’s not just about the internship itself. Students will attend pre-internship workshops and paid professional development throughout the summer, gain mentorship and create a video presentation at the end that they will be able to add to their portfolio and share with potential employers,” Page says. “We’re just really excited about this whole program.”

Dedicated to student success and holistic well-being and bolstered by a historic and generous gift of $550 million to the WMU Foundation, Empowering Futures launched two new initiatives in spring semester—Student Success Hub and the Broncos Lead Internship Program—to give students wrap-around support as they prepare for a meaningful career and life well lived.

The portal also facilitates alerts to students to highlight potential roadblocks to success, like academic concern forms, low grades, withdrawal from classes or a delay in course registration for the upcoming semester.
Expert Insights

Think you need millions for retirement? Maybe not, says finance professor

“It’s never too early to begin saving and planning for retirement,” says Dr. Onur Arugaslan, professor of finance. “Thanks to the ‘power of compounding’ as we call it in finance, even humble deposits grow to significant amounts over a long investment horizon.”

He recommends that individuals start their retirement planning as early as possible, saving and investing when they can and as steadily and intentionally as possible. Index funds—mutual funds or exchange-traded funds—are a great tool for risk-averse investors willing to assume market risk. And as people age, they should move their assets into less risky investments such as bonds. In terms of the pitfalls that people can fall into when it comes to retirement, waiting to think through a retirement plan and an associated lifestyle is the most common. “Postponing retirement planning until you are in your 50s is a big mistake,” says Arugaslan. “Investing in middle age may not give you enough time to build a decent retirement nest egg.”

Another common misconception that Arugaslan points to is that Social Security will provide a comfortable retirement. He notes that ever since the beginning, Social Security has been intended only as a safety net. “I do not think that the government will allow Social Security to become insolvent. However, they may increase the upper limit on Social Security income, raise the payroll tax which currently sits at 6.2% to increase the age when you qualify for Social Security benefits.”

He notes that growth in Social Security is also highly dependent on long-term population growth through births and immigration, and policies that support more labor participation. In any case, he counsels that U.S. citizens should not rely on Social Security alone and plan for additional resources in retirement.

It’s common to see articles in business publications and others forecasting what is recommended in terms of retirement savings—these projections often exceed a million dollars or more per person in a household. But beware! If you read the comments attached to any of these articles online, you will find people who argue the projections are way too high or far too low. “These projections are based on expectations for inflation, interest rates, and asset returns in the future,” says Arugaslan. “They are also heavily impacted by retirement lifestyle and location as well as life expectancy. Given the uncertainty about all of these factors, people should have low confidence in any projection for the total needed to retire except for a specific financial plan tailored to their income, lifestyle and personal circumstances.”

One of the variables that is top of mind for current retirees and everyone active in the workforce is inflation. According to Arugaslan, “Persistent inflation will hurt everybody, including retirees. Delaying retirement and cutting spending if you are already retired should be considered.”

The Federal Reserve has been combing inflation by raising interest rates and limiting the money supply. Retirees and workers close to retirement should take advantage of these higher interest rates that are also reflected in higher bond yields.

1. At the Sanford Center for Financial Planning and Wellness in the Haworth College of Business, trained student interns provide financial coaching to WMU students, especially in the areas of budgeting and debt management, for free. WMU Haworth is 100% committed to introducing financial planning as soon as possible to add all WMU students in financial decisions.

2. Don’t assume that you only need a financial planner if you have a list of money. In fact, financial planning is useful for everyone. It involves not only retirement planning and investments but also insurance planning, tax planning and estate planning, among other important financial considerations. Many financial planners provide pro-bono advice to people at all income levels.

3. Plan for the distribution of your retirement savings in a way that will minimize taxes while lasting for the rest of your life, if at all possible.

Arugaslan has some parting pieces of advice about retirement planning and fiscal fitness in general:

Homesteading as a woman is a serious decision. It is a risky bet in the world that has never delivered on its promise. For Lawrence, a 27-year-old Korean War veteran, his parcel of 150 acres is an opportunity to finally belong. For Marie, an 18-year-old from a town north of Houston, Texas, the land is an escape from the empty future she sees spinning out before her. A risky bet is better than no bet at all. But over the next few years, as they work the land in an attempt to secure a deed to their homestead, they must face everything they don’t know about each other. As the Territory of Alaska moves toward statehood and inexorable change, can Marie and Lawrence create something new or will they break apart trying?

Published in February, WMU’s alumna Dr. Melinda Moustakis’ debut novel, “Homestead,” is set in Alaska and already garnering acclaim. The New York Times Book Review praises the book’s prose, calling it “… spare and exquisite, tough and lovely. The sentences build on themselves, becoming expansive and staggering in their sweep.”

The novel offers a portrait of the turbulent marriage of two unlikely homesteaders in 1950s Anchorage. When Marie and Lawrence first lock eyes at the Moose Lodge, they are immediately drawn together. But when they decide to marry, days later, they are more in love with the promise of homesteading than anything. For Lawrence, a 27-year-old Korean War veteran, his parcel of 150 acres is an opportunity to finally belong. For Marie, an 18-year-old from a town north of Houston, Texas, the land is an escape from the empty future she sees spinning out before her. A risky bet is better than no bet at all. But over the next few years, as they work the land in an attempt to secure a deed to their homestead, they must face everything they don’t know about each other. As the Territory of Alaska moves toward statehood and inexorable change, can Marie and Lawrence create something new or will they break apart trying?

Moustakis holds a doctorate in creative writing from Western. The same year she earned her PhD, Moustakis won a Flannery O’Connor Award for Short Fiction for “Bear Down Bear North: Alaska Stories.” She also has been honored as the winner of National Book Foundation’s 5 Under 35 award.

Untamed Shrews: Negotiating New Womanhood in Modern China

By Dr. Shu Yang

The forthcoming book “Untamed Shrews” traces the evolution of unruly women in Chinese literature, from the reviled “shrew” to the celebrated “new woman.” Notorious for her violence, jealousy and promiscuity, the character of the shrew personified the threat of unruly femininity to the Confucian social order and served as a cultural metaphor for the reclamation of women’s rights in China. “Untamed Shrews” traces the evolution of the “shrew” from the early Republican suffragettes and Chinese Noras to the Communist and socialist radicals. Criticism of the shrew endured, but her vicious, sexualized and transgressive nature became a source of pride, placing her among the ranks of liberated female models.

“Untamed Shrews” shows that whether male writers and the state hate, fear or love them, there will always be a place for the vitality of unruly women. Unlike in imperial times, the shrew in modern China stands untamed as an inspiration for the new woman. The book is scheduled for release on July 15, 2023.

Yang is an assistant professor and advisor of Chinese in the Department of World Languages and Literatures. Her research interests include modern and contemporary Chinese literature, cinema, theater, cultural history and gender studies.
I’ve reached the age when I can finally admit I’m getting older,” he jokes. “It was time to figure out what kind of legacy I wanted to leave,” he continues, “and supporting students striving to help sustain natural and wilderness areas just made sense.”

In addition to hiking and bicycling, Sluyter and his wife, Jill, are devoted kayakers. During the summer months, the couple often paddles out on Coldwater Lake in Michigan, where they have a cottage.

“We try to get out early so we can watch the sunrise,” says Sluyter, MA ’69, EdD ’80. “We never tire of seeing the wildlife.”

This passion for nature and vast open water began at an early age. Sluyter’s parents had a place on Lake Michigan and his father was an avid fisherman. Later, the realtor who sold Sluyter his own home convinced him to go on a canoe trip through old fur trader routes in the Canadian wilderness for three and a half weeks. Finally, upon graduating from WMU with his doctorate in counseling psychology and subsequent work for community mental health organizations, he fell hook, line and sinker for the great outdoors.

The decision to give back to Western Michigan just came naturally for alumnus David Sluyter. “I didn’t like my job at the time, so I left and lived on a sailboat in the Caribbean,” Sluyter says. “We didn’t have any money, so we just caught and ate fish. It was a terrible career decision but a great life choice.”

After about a year at sea, he returned to his career in the mental health field, where Sluyter focused on developing programs for individuals with mental illnesses and disabilities. From 1981-91, he was the executive director for the Center for Developmentally Disabled Adults at WMU, now the Center for Disability Services. He then went on to serve as program officer, vice president, president and CEO, and senior advisor at the Fetzer Institute. Notable themes that ran through his work there included the role of social and emotional learning in K-12 education and the role of relationships in health care.

While at the Fetzer Institute, Sluyter was also part of the original design team and faculty of the First Movers Fellowship, which is a program of the Aspen Institute, an international nonprofit organization with a goal of realizing “a free, just and equitable society” through seminars, policy programs, conferences and leadership development initiatives.

“The fellowship brings together leaders from large multinational corporations who aspire to use the power of the corporation to do social and environmental good,” he says. Today, Sluyter is collaborating with faculty and staff at Western to create a similar fellowship program at the Haworth College of Business. He is working with Dr. Timothy Pelma, professor of management and director of Haworth’s Center for Sustainable Business Practices, and Joanne Roehm, senior director of strategy and operations for WMUx and director of WMU-Grand Rapids, to help more business Broncos graduate with the skills and values needed to lead organizations sustainably.

By leaving a legacy at WMU, Sluyter hopes to nurture this goal. His planned gift, split between the Haworth College of Business and the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability, will fund scholarships for students interested in becoming sustainability leaders in business.

“I wanted to encourage students at WMU to contribute to protecting the environment and transform the way business is carried out in the future.”

Supporting the University is also important to Sluyter because of his love for Kalamazoo. “It’s a small town but with many of the activities available in much larger cities, partly because of the University,” he says. “Miller Auditorium brings us theatrical, musical and intellectual events, and the music and theater departments are an ongoing source of joy. In addition, the faculty and staff contribute to a well-educated and engaged place to live.”

It’s a community Sluyter’s gift will not only help strengthen today but also preserve for years to come.

WHY I GIVE: David Sluyter

The decision to give back to Western Michigan just came naturally for alumnus David Sluyter.
In Memoriam

Sharan Nuhussen, BS ’76, a 20-year-strong member of the board of trustees of the University of Michigan Alumni Association and an experienced nonprofit executive. Andrew Robinson, M ’89, VD ’90, a West African architects, appointed by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer to the Black Leadership Advisory Group, was named interim dean of the College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan for an interim term. John Cakmakci, BS ’82, elected president of the alumni association of Michigan State University’s College of Agriculture and Natural Resources. People are elected to the board of trustees of the University of Michigan Alumni Association and are responsible for working with the governor’s office and cabinet to create the new Equity and Opportunity Office and support stakeholders to achieve equity and opportunity across the state.

John Folks, BS ’82, was named to a new role at the University of Michigan’s Office of Corporate Relations and Enteral Nutrition. Hana Beloglavec, BS ’15, joined an assistant professor of music at the University of Alabama. Adam Horos, MA ’15, of East Grand Rapids High School, was named 2022 Outstanding Teacher. John Houdek, emeritus of history, was named president of the University of Michigan Alumni Association. John Calvin, MA ’88, BBA ’92, MSLS ’95, was named president of the Alumni Board of Governors.

Hans E. Sanders, BS ’72, MBA ’75, was named a nonexecutive director. Retha Theeuwes Doan, BS ’79, MA ’89, was named interim dean of the School of Education. John David Lee, BS ’80, Dec. 27, 2022, Kalamazoo, MI.

Alumnus and longtime Western Michigan University baseball coach Fred Decker, BS ’64, MA 85, was inducted into the Michigan Baseball Hall of Fame this summer, the university announced. Decker was a two-time All-American outfielder for Western as well as assistant baseball coach from 1968-75 and head coach from 1976-2004. Prior to joining the Bronco staff, he coached two seasons at Portage Central High School.

With his induction into the Michigan Baseball Hall of Fame on June 18, Decker will join other state Hall of Famers including former New York Yankees great Don Young and former Northwestern Tigers outfielder Kirk Gibson and longtime Tigers announcer Ernie Harwell.

As head coach, Decker recorded 791 wins and produced 87 major league draft picks, 35 All- MAC First Team performers and 10 All-American selections.

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With such success, honors have been numerous for Decker. In 1993, he was inducted into the WMU Athletic Hall of Fame and named to the University of Michigan All-Century Team. In 1994, he was also named MAC Coach of the Year and Midwest Regional Coach of the Year in 1999.

Alumnus and Lansing State Journal sports reporter Jim Berhow, BS ’92, MA ’99, was named to the Michigan Boxing Hall of Fame.

In Memoriam

Joseph R. Chang, dean of educational leadership, Jan. 16, 2023, Portage, MI.

Sudhoffs, former chief of the government and nonproﬁ t printing service and retired, was named 2022 Kalamazoo County Volunteer of the Year. The University of Miami Libraries, March 5, 2023, Coral Gables, FL. Raymond James Carlisle, BS ’56, PhD ’64, was named a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Raymond James Carlisle, BS ’56, PhD ’64, was named a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

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Thomas Edward Guns, BS ’70, MA ’73, March 3, 2023, Kalamazoo, MI.

Sue Ann Davidson, BS ’78, Feb. 20, 2023, Kalamazoo, MI.

Mary Ellen Franklin, RN, BS ’78, Jan. 18, 2023, Traverse City, MI.

Sharon A. Folks, BS ’82, was named the new chair of the board of trustees of the University of Michigan Alumni Association. The University of Michigan Alumni Association and is responsible for working with the governor’s office and cabinet to create the new Equity and Opportunity Office and support stakeholders to achieve equity and opportunity across the state.

John Folks, BS ’82, was named to a new role at the University of Michigan’s Office of Corporate Relations and Enteral Nutrition. Hana Beloglavec, BS ’15, joined an assistant professor of music at the University of Alabama. Adam Horos, MA ’15, of East Grand Rapids High School, was named 2022 Outstanding Teacher. John Houdek, emeritus of history, was named president of the University of Michigan Alumni Association. John Calvin, MA ’88, BBA ’92, MSLS ’95, was named president of the Alumni Board of Governors.

Hans E. Sanders, BS ’72, MBA ’75, was named a nonexecutive director. Retha Theeuwes Doan, BS ’79, MA ’89, was named interim dean of the School of Education. John David Lee, BS ’80, Dec. 27, 2022, Kalamazoo, MI.

Alumnus and longtime Western Michigan University baseball coach Fred Decker, BS ’64, MA 85, was inducted into the Michigan Baseball Hall of Fame this summer, the university announced. Decker was a two-time All-American outfielder for Western as well as assistant baseball coach from 1968-75 and head coach from 1976-2004. Prior to joining the Bronco staff, he coached two seasons at Portage Central High School.

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Raise the roof

Finch Greenhouse is making room for its 50-year-old Agave americana plant, affectionately named Alice, to bloom this spring. The plant has grown so large, greenhouse specialist Chris Jackson had to remove a glass panel on the roof to accommodate its height. Soon, Alice will be adorned with flowers as it reaches the end of its life cycle.