

Note:

In support of Dr. Bhaskar Vundurthy's nomination for the prestigious university-wide [Andy Award](#) in the "*Commitment to Students*" category, the following testimonials are offered by a PhD candidate and two graduate students from the Robotics Institute at Carnegie Mellon University. The names of the students have been removed to protect their privacy.

PhD Candidate:

When we talk about someone having their “heart in the work,” at CMU, we are often describing a person who enthusiastically pursues their assigned role with unmatched excellence and passion. With Dr. Bhaskar Vundurthy, a Project Scientist in the Robotics Institute (RI), I’d argue that he flips this paradigm on its head: his heart is the foundation of the work. This distinction is important because it reflects the basis of his self-inspired outstanding contribution to both the RI and CMU that goes beyond his “assigned role”. Namely, Dr. Vundurthy’s responsibilities in conducting high-quality research is equally matched -if not surpassed- by his strong passion and dedication to aiding students. Mind you, these are not “*his*” students, but rather all students he may interact with in two of the largest labs in the RI (68 graduate students from the School of Computer Science and School of Engineering, alone!) on a day-to-day basis. *He has constructed a healthy supportive research environment in the RI that respects the students by prioritizing their mental health on equal measure with academic pursuits.* The mere existence of this nomination letter should speak testament to how unique this is amongst laboratories at CMU, and his impact on the quality of the student’s lives should not be trivialized.

Dr. Vundurthy has personally impacted my life by providing me with unique learning opportunities and collaborations inside of CMU that have had a distinct impact on the formation of my PhD committee and my research. When I was preparing to propose my thesis, I often found myself lost and overwhelmed. My academic courses had only provided a topical understanding of the foundations of robotics and engineering, and after only a few discussions Dr. Vundurthy realized the difficult position, I was in. His solution creatively combined his own academic connections and experiences with an unofficial “how-to-live-as-a-researcher” curriculum and resource. Specifically, *Dr. Vundurthy augmented our classical education with much needed vocational training that he conducted in order to build that sustainable research ecosystem.* These trainings included one-on-one thesis and paper editing sessions with him, multiple full rounds of dissertation and paper presentations (sometimes, spanning multiple hours), strategies and brainstorming sessions to help graduate students write grants on topics they were interested and passionate about, and job and interview training for companies he has personal connections with. Furthermore, Dr. Vundurthy showed extreme flexibility in order to be inclusive to as many students as possible in his research ecosystems; oftentimes meeting students (myself...) at 12:00 AM-4:00 AM just to make sure I was alright and making progress towards my goals. Of course, he also needs to get up at 6:00 AM in order to prepare for his full work day. He has never once denied me help when I needed it most, and it is this empathy and compassion that is unparalleled by most at CMU. In fact, I would have left CMU if it were not for Dr. Vundurthy’s continued motivation.

Whenever I meet a struggling graduate student in the RI, I send them to Dr. Vundurthy and tell them to mention my name. Namya Bagree, Albert Xu, Akshaya Srinivasan, Xinyue Lai, Abhimanyu, Joshua Spisak; there are too many to name. *I know that Dr. Vundurthy lives his life with integrity and charity, and I know he will help any student that needs it to the best of his abilities.* I know that even though I give him more work, he always is able to – somehow – create another minute in the day to resolve that work. I know that there is no load heavy enough that Dr. Vundurthy can't bear it for us graduate students. I know that Dr. Vundurthy is one-of-a-kind, and we at CMU are lucky to have him.

While he'll never admit it, I'm pretty sure his secret to getting everything done is that he has the biggest heart in the RI, and as I said earlier, Dr. Vundurthy's heart is the foundation of his work. It is the key lesson that Dr. Vundurthy shares with us all, and I can only hope to have as positive an impact on my future students as he has had on me.

Graduate Student 1:

For a new student, employee, or faculty to be successful in their new role, they require a mentor to learn from, an advisor to guide and grow their interests, a friend to encourage and support them, and to feel comfortable and welcome in their new environment. Dr. Vundurthy provides all of these, not just for his students but for anyone who seeks them. He is doggedly committed to the students and the work, providing mentorship, advisement, encouragement, and inclusivity that allows students and collaborators alike to flourish and achieve their highest potential. It is with this in mind that I have the distinct privilege to write this letter of support for Dr. Vundurthy's nomination in the 'Commitment to Students' category.

On my first day as a staff researcher at Carnegie Mellon, Dr. Vundurthy was the first person to welcome me, doing so with genuine excitement and care. He went out of his way every day to greet me and make sure that I had all the necessary tools, information, and support to flourish in my new role. *He constantly served as a voice for the students and staff on his projects, encouraging us to work diligently while pushing back against unreasonable expectations or demands by the sponsors and program managers.* He would always take time to fully understand problems or difficulties we were facing, both professionally and personally, and be happy to lend his advice or provide encouragement. He ensured that each and every contributor to the project was recognized for their contributions and celebrated for their achievements, going above and beyond what could ever possibly be expected of a project scientist. This level of care extended beyond just those at Carnegie Mellon, as he similarly mentored undergraduate research volunteers on the project from my Alma Mater, The University of Pittsburgh.

When I expressed interest in switching to another project managed by Dr. Vundurthy, he worked tirelessly to ensure that it happened. While he knew it meant the current project would take a loss, he understood it would be best for my technical development and personal goals. After transitioning to this larger project, I had the pleasure of seeing firsthand that Dr. Vundurthy's care, advice, encouragement, and mentorship was not only extended to me, but to any student he interacted with. *I would say his focus was entirely on making sure our group was consistently supported, but to do so would be a complete disservice to his incredible abilities as a researcher.* It almost felt as if *both* aspects received his full attention and devotion, something I didn't think possible prior to my interactions with him.

As our project began the insurmountable challenge of re-architecting our autonomy stack, Dr. Vundurthy began introducing several innovative systems that made the task tractable. Through careful planning, he compartmentalized each person's contributions while still ensuring we were aiming towards a common goal. He ensured that each student felt they

were a “part of the team”, something larger than themselves striving to push the boundary of science while still celebrating each student’s individual successes along the way. I’ve never felt more appreciated than when working with Dr. Vundurthy, and his infectious enthusiasm for research made each student excited to tackle difficult problems. *I often tell my friends and family that I would “go to war” for Dr. Vundurthy if need be because I’ve seen him time and time again “go to war” for us.*

I can say with absolute certainty and without an ounce of reservation that Dr. Vundurthy has had the single greatest impact on my life during my time at Carnegie Mellon University. He exudes every quality of a good manager, mentor, teacher, and friend. His commitment to the students at Carnegie Mellon is only paralleled by his enthusiasm and acumen for research. *He provides equal opportunity for contribution to his projects, regardless of experience or grade, and offers a working environment that not only allows students to feel comfortable but also excited about conducting research.* His generosity with his time makes every student feel as if they are the most important thing he is focused on and allows students to benefit from his incredible wealth of knowledge and experience.

I cannot overstate my admiration and respect for Dr. Vundurthy, and there simply aren’t enough words to describe what he means to myself and the students who interact with him. He embodies everything that is “right” with academia, and is absolutely deserving of being awarded the Carnegie Mellon Andy Award.

Graduate Student 2:

I am honored to write a letter of support for Dr. Vundurthy's nomination for the Andy Awards in the 'Commitment to Students' category. His passion for student success and his talent for creating a vibrant and welcoming learning environment make him an ideal candidate for this award. Dr. Vundurthy has consistently demonstrated exemplary initiative in offering personal, technical, and professional support to all the students he interacts with.

As a student, I was able to grasp the theoretical underpinnings in class, but when it came to applying them to advanced research, I faced significant challenges. This is where Dr. Vundurthy's expertise became invaluable. *Our weekly meetings not only deepened my understanding of control algorithms, optimization techniques, and robot dynamics, but also played a pivotal role in my research on ergodic search with real robots, a groundbreaking endeavor in our field.* The ambitious nature of the project necessitated Dr. Vundurthy's guidance at every step, and his unwavering support and expertise were instrumental in our successful submission to the esteemed International Conference on Intelligent Robots and Systems (IROS) 2024 in Abu Dhabi.

Beyond the technical aspects of research, Dr. Vundurthy fosters a strong sense of ethical conduct among his students. He champions fair attribution of contributions, ensuring recognition goes to those who deserve it. *This commitment to equity was evident when a senior student attempted to take authorship from a junior, especially a minority. Dr. Vundurthy intervened, emphasizing that authorship is based solely on the intellectual merit of the work, not seniority or other external factors.* Through this action, he demonstrated his unwavering commitment to both equality and fairness for all the students involved.

Dr. Vundurthy goes beyond academics, creating a supportive environment that fosters both student success and well-being. He recognizes that mentorship extends to personal development, and his thoughtful approach considers each student's individual needs. This commitment is evident in the success of his students' academic pursuits, but also in their overall well-being. *By cultivating a strong community and addressing individual challenges, Dr. Vundurthy promotes holistic student development, making his dedication truly commendable.*

In essence, Dr. Vundurthy exemplifies the ideal educator and mentor. His passion for teaching, commitment to fostering student engagement, and innovative approach to nurturing both academic and personal growth make him an exceptional candidate for this award focused on 'Commitment to Students'.