



Connecting with NeuroTechers

Sometimes you want to do cutting-edge research, and sometimes you just want to carve a pumpkin. That's where NeuroTechers comes in: the student-led group hosts monthly events including parties, game nights, a book club — and, yes, a pumpkin carving get-together. "It's easy at Caltech to just focus on your work — but people also need to take a break sometimes," explains NeuroTechers treasurer and event organizer Sarah Wandelt.

That's been especially important during the pandemic, adds NeuroTechers president Isabelle Rosenthal, since until recently many students hadn't had the chance to

meet face-to-face. NeuroTechers stepped up by organizing digital get-togethers and social events to help everyone feel welcome. "We really felt for the students who were starting during the

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NeuroTecher Kevin Mei organizes popular fireside chats — staged in front of a streaming video of a roaring

hearth — with Caltech professors, where students pepper them with questions about their research and their experience in academia. "The fireside chats have been a great way to get to know our professors," explains Kevin. "The discussions can range from personal anecdotes to scientific hypotheses, art or the role of science in society."

"It's about building community," Isabelle says. "Sometimes we just get together, and sit outside and talk — and those connections with people from other labs are really important, because they ultimately make us better scientists."

Supporting Women in Neuroscience

Globally, women make up half of neuroscience students, but only a third of faculty and less than 14% of tenured full professors. That's something Chen Institute Women in Neuroscience is determined to change by giving women a chance to connect and support one another. "We're trying to bring women from across campus together to share their experiences," says CWiN president Annie Erickson. "The female PIs, especially, have been very supportive — they're really good role models and mentors."

CWiN was founded by Chen Institute Diversity and Inclusion awardee Dawna Bagherian, who reached out to Viviana Gradinaru and Doris Tsao with the original

idea for the group. "They emailed back right away and said, absolutely — we're going to get you Chen Institute funding, and we'll support you 100%," Dawna recalls.

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Key successes for CWiN include the installation of a sexual health vending machine, the introduction of a childcare program at institutional retreats, and the introduction of free menstrual products in restrooms across campus. "Researchers were having to take an hour out of their

workday to walk to Walgreens," Dawna says. "This was a concrete change that makes our campus a better place to be a person who menstruates."

The group also holds regular social events, Q&As with Caltech faculty, and lunches with female academics who visit campus. The hope, Erickson says, is that CWiN will help to create a critical mass that will ensure that more women enter neuroscience and go on to successful careers in years to come. "We're making improvements, although there's still a lot of work to be done," she says. "But it's good to see that people in the field are recognizing that there's a problem, and working to create solutions."

