Hi everyone,

It gives me great pleasure to be here today, at the SPARC symposium 2022. SPARC is an initiative that grew out of the realization that students needed and wanted an opportunity to apply the skills they are learning in MCIT Online to real-world scenarios in order to showcase the application of their technical learning to future employers.

But there is another reason for SPARC.

SPARC provides the opportunity for students to work together in teams, and tinker on open-ended projects outside of normal school curriculum, under the mentorship of experienced industry mentors. I remember as a kid growing up, I would spend hours taking apart computers and putting them back. I would borrow books from the library to learn programming on my own, so that I can reverse engineer and program games that I have played in. It was early days for computer science. There was no Internet, most computers still boot off floppy drives, and few (if any) schools were teaching computer science. It was purely a hobby for the not-so-cool kids in school. Whether the projects succeeded or not, I learnt a lot in the process. What I realized the most is that engineers and scientists need the time and space to explore open-ended problems, to learn from failures and experiment outside of textbooks. As an instructor, I always tell students if you are stuck on a bug for days and feeling frustrated, you are actually making progress. You may not realize it, but you are growing and learning more than you think.

It is with this in mind that we started the SPARC last year, as a way for students to work on side projects outside of the classroom.

This year’s SPARC is very special. We were so happy when Penn alum and Amazon tech executive Nancy Wang reached out wanting to support this initiative through AWS. Nancy is a force of nature. Under her leadership at AWS and AWIT (Advancing Women in Tech), we formed the Executive in Residence program, assembling a world-class team of tech executives to serve as advisers and mentors for our students. Through our collaboration with AWS, we were able to provide students with industry specific problems to solve in a team while gaining access to cutting edge technology. On top of that, our students received one-on-one mentoring from AWS software engineering managers, making this experience even more meaningful to our students.

We want to thank our Executive in Residence judges, Pranava Adduri, Neetika Bansal, and Cherie Wong for reviewing all of the student submissions and scoring their hard work. Special thanks to Cherie who joined us in Seattle and got to meet with some of our students in person! That Seattle trip, where our students visited the Amazon headquarters, would not have been possible without the advocacy of Nancy Wang.

I would also like to express my most sincere thanks to our SPARC mentors-- Dashk Taparia who is here today, for guiding our students through their projects, together with Ian Oo and Ivan Velikovic.
Our staff worked tirelessly behind the scenes. A special shoutout to Emily Parry, Jeanne McFadden, Olivia Roth, and their teams under the able leadership of Rebecca Hayward for pulling off yet another successful SPARC symposium.

Finally, thank you students for participating. I know many of you have busy lives. You juggle family and work commitments, coursework in MCIT Online, and working as TAs in our courses. Despite all your busy schedules, you found time to take part in SPARC. We hope that you learned a lot technically and were able to take advantage of the professional relationships made available through this competition. Most of all, I hope you made new friends, or cemented existing friendships along the way.

If you are a new student to this program, please join our student break out sessions to start to imagine your own SPARC project work next year! Now I would like to invite Daksh to share a few words about their experience mentoring the students through their projects this summer.