2025 SMDP Biotech Scholars

Shahad Abdulsahib, UT Health San Antonio

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Passionate about finding a cure for pediatric cancer, Shahad Abdulsahib is a fourth-year PhD candidate in the Integrated Biomedical Sciences program at UT Health San Antonio, specializing in cancer biology. She earned her BS in Biochemistry from Texas State University and now conducts her doctoral research at the Greehey Children's Cancer Research Institute, one of only three dedicated pediatric cancer research centers in the nation, where she studies the mechanisms of therapy resistance and tumor progression in medulloblastoma, a pediatric brain tumor.

A proud Muslim woman in STEM and recipient of the prestigious Presidential Ambassador Award, Shahad is recognized for her academic excellence, leadership, and commitment to community service. She has held leadership roles in nonprofit organizations such as Nucleate and Enventure, promoting biotech education and industry engagement. As a dedicated mentor, she supports high school and college students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds in STEM.

Shahad aspires to become a Medical Science Liaison with a focus on oncology clinical trials, using her scientific expertise to bridge the gap between research and patient care. Beyond the lab, she enjoys traveling, food vlogging, and exploring new coffee shops.

Phillip Abutu, University of Nebraska Medical Center

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Phillip Abutu is a PhD student in Health Promotion and Disease Prevention at the University of Nebraska Medical Center with a multidisciplinary background in public health, biomedical science, and community-based research. He holds an MPH in Health Promotion and an MSc in Cell Biology and Genetics, building on a Bachelor's degree in Medical Laboratory Sciences. Philip currently serves as a Graduate Research Assistant at the Center for Reducing Health Disparities at UNMC. He contributes to a range of public health initiatives including addressing chronic disease (eg Diabetes) and disparities (eg obesity, cancer) in underserved populations. Phillip also plays a key role in the Black Equity, Access and Treatment (BEAT) Cancer project, supporting colorectal cancer screening efforts in Black communities in Douglas County, Omaha, Nebraska. He is also one of the contributors to the development of a culturally tailored weight loss intervention, entitled Healthy At Home for residents in North Omaha and his passion for HIV research led him present scholarly work at the 2024 Mid-West Public Health Innovation Research (PHIRE) Conference where he shared findings on evaluating the integrated screening and treatment for HIV and syphilis in pregnant women. Currently, Phillip is working on HIV in an aging population. He has co-authored several peer-reviewed publications and contributed to public health efforts both in the United States and Nigeria.

His career reflects a deep commitment to service. He views this opportunity as a platform to deepen his expertise, expand his professional network, and gain mentorship that will support his long-term goal to design and lead scalable, evidence-based interventions that eliminate health disparities and improve access to care globally. Outside of his professional pursuits, Philip enjoys traveling, cooking, playing soccer, and making music with instruments like the keyboard and drums set.

Stephen Adepoju, Northeastern University

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Stephen Adepoju is a PhD candidate in chemical engineering at Northeastern University, Boston. He holds a Bachelor's degree in chemical engineering with a first-class honor from the University of Maiduguri, Nigeria. Stephen's research focuses on molecular modeling and simulation of lipid bilayers to create liposomes with tailored mechanical properties that advance drug delivery systems. With over six (6) years of experience spanning academia, materials engineering, pharmaceutical modeling, and corporate project management, Stephen brings a unique blend of technical expertise and strategic insight. He has acquired skills such as Python programming, data analysis and visualization, Bash scripting, project management, strategic planning and execution and leadership and team building.

Stephen aspires to become a senior scientist/R&D project leader managing innovation pipelines in drug delivery, nanotechnology, or materials design; nevertheless, he is open to learning and taking up other challenging roles. He is excited to join SMDP Biotech to learn directly from industry mentors, strengthen his professional development, and explore how to contribute meaningfully to the biotechnology sector.

Prior to his doctoral studies, he worked at Nestlé as a project supervisor, leading cross-functional engineering teams on multimillion-dollar projects to improve production efficiency and sustainability. He also served as a financial analyst at Guaranty

Trust Bank, where he analyzed corporate strategies and financial performance. Throughout his career, Stephen has earned multiple awards, including the Young Innovation Leaders Fellow, Nestlé Excellence Award, AIChE travel award, and several summer school participations in machine learning and innovation leadership. He is a passionate advocate for advancing equitable access to education and research opportunities, especially for underrepresented communities in STEM. He has led impactful initiatives as President of the African Graduate Student Association at Northeastern University, where he has expanded mentorship networks for over 250 African graduate students, and as a mentor with the Michael Taiwo Scholarships, where he helped dozens of underrepresented students secure graduate admissions globally. In his free time, Stephen enjoys playing PS5 (FIFA), reading the Bible, reading global business case studies, and exploring creative writing as a form of personal reflection.

Emmanuel Adusei, Oakland University

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Emmanuel B A Adusei is a fourth-year PhD candidate in Physical Organic Chemistry at Oakland University, specializing in the synthesis and characterization of photoactive small molecules for applications in organic electronics and biomedical technology. With a strong foundation in synthetic, medicinal, and analytical chemistry, he currently leads a team of undergraduate researchers working on the design and multi-step synthesis of thiophene-based functional materials. Originally from Ghana, Emmanuel earned a Bachelor of Science (BSc) in Herbal Medicine and a Master of Philosophy (MPhil) in Pharmaceutical Chemistry from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST). His research contributions have led to eight peer-reviewed publications and several conference presentations, including at the Gordon Research Conference in Physical Organic Chemistry, the National Organization for the Professional Advancement of Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers (NOBCChE), and American Chemical Society (ACS) regional meetings.

Emmanuel is passionate about leveraging synthetic chemistry to address global health and energy challenges. He has been recognized with several honors, including a German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) doctoral research grant and three Oakland University Provost Graduate Research Awards. Outside the lab, he enjoys mentoring students, traveling, listening to music, and playing soccer

Kween Agba, University of California San Diego

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Kween Agba is a 5th year PhD candidate in UC San Diego's Neurosciences Graduate Program. Her research focuses on the cellular and molecular mechanisms of astrogliosis in mouse models of spinal cord injury. Kween received her Bachelor of Science in Behavioral Neuroscience at Northeastern University in 2019. During college, Kween worked as an undergraduate research assistant in two labs at Harvard Medical School where she assisted in the development of a novel method to simplify rodent brain injections using silk proteins and, she later investigated the development of pre-synaptic inputs to cortical inhibitory interneurons. Her research experiences inspired her to go to graduate school to pursue her own interest in spinal cord injury and repair. Outside of research, Kween is passionate about serving her graduate community and advocating for the recruitment and retention of underrepresented students. She also enjoys playing beach volleyball with her friends and watching reality competition shows.

Olufemi Ajumobi MD PhD, US Food and Drug Administration

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Olufemi Ajumobi is a dedicated physician-epidemiologist and Postdoctoral Fellow at the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). He earned his Doctor of Medicine and Master of Public Health (Epidemiology) degrees from the University of Ibadan and Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria, respectively, and completed a PhD in Public Health at the University of Nevada, Reno. His doctoral research, published in JACEP Open, focused on access to medications for opioid use disorder, revealing a 96% treatment gap, with African Americans being 91% less likely to obtain these medications from pharmacies. At the FDA, Olufemi's postdoctoral work explores the integration of efficacy and safety outcomes into a novel single ordinal endpoint, enabling a more holistic assessment of patient experiences in clinical trials. He is skilled in epidemiological study design, real-world and clinical trial data analysis, risk-benefit assessment of anti-infective drugs, and regulatory guidance for new drug applications. He is also proficient in SAS and R programming and SQL, Tableau, Power BI, and JMP. He aspires to become a drug safety and real-world evidence scientist in the pharmaceutical industry. However, he remains flexible and eager to embrace the challenges and opportunities of new roles introduced by SMDP mentors.

Previously, Olufemi led multiple research initiatives at Nigeria's Federal Department of Public Health and various non-profits, mentored early-career epidemiologists in research and publishing in peer-reviewed journals, and supervised data analysts at the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. He has received prestigious awards for both his service and scholarly achievements, presented at conferences, and published ten first-author journal articles. Beyond his professional work, Olufemi is committed to mentoring the next generation of STEM scholars and, therefore, volunteers as a judge for the North Carolina Science and Engineering Fair, the North Carolina Science Olympiad, and the University of Nevada, Reno's Undergraduate Research Awards. He enjoys watching movies, swimming, and biking with his family in his free time. Driven by his passion for learning, research, service, and improving patients' outcomes, he is committed to making a positive impact both in the United States and globally.

Abdalla Ali, University of Illinois College of Pharmacy

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Abdalla Ali is a Doctor of Pharmacy candidate at the University of Illinois Chicago Retzky College of Pharmacy. Prior to pharmacy, Abdalla worked as an engineer in the biopharmaceutical industry where he became inspired by the applications of his to work to make a change. He aspires to improve patient health outcomes by interfacing advancement in medicine with patient-focused care. Abdalla aims to leverage his scientific and engineering expertise along with his project management and analytical skills to make an impact. Ultimately, he is passionate about leaving a legacy of innovation and saving lives.

Ekenedilichukwu Anekwe, Virginia Tech

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Ekenedilichukwu Anekwe is a PhD student in Biological Sciences at Virginia Tech, conducting research at the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute (FBRI) on the molecular drivers of cardiovascular dysfunction in diabetes. His work integrates molecular biology, genomics, and bioinformatics to investigate how insulin resistance and circadian disruption impair cardiac function. He employs advanced techniques including RNA sequencing, ChIP-Seq, gene knockout models, and echocardiography to identify key regulatory pathways with translational potential. Ekenedilichukwu previously earned a Master's degree in Molecular Biology from Bowling Green State University, Ohio and a Bachelor's degree in Microbiology from the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria, graduating with a First Class in the later.

Passionate about translational science, he is committed to bridging academic research with therapeutic innovation in the biotech and healthcare industries. His long-term goal is to become a senior scientist in disease biology and therapeutic development, though he remains open to taking on challenging roles across the life sciences sector. Ekenedilichukwu has mentored undergraduate researchers, taught university-level biology, and actively participates in scientific communication and outreach. Outside the lab, he enjoys playing soccer and table tennis, listening to music, volunteering in his community, and supporting initiatives that promote inclusion and collaboration among his peers.

Olivia Armendarez, Northeastern University

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Olivia Armendarez is an enthusiastic third year PhD candidate in Chemistry & Chemical Biology at Northeastern University whose research is focused on creating adaptive, light-sensing and color-changing materials inspired by nature. Prior to her PhD journey, Olivia graduated from High Point University with a BS in Biochemistry, where her research focused on polymer synthesis and microcontact printing for photovoltaic materials. Her goal is to translate her interdisciplinary skillset from academia to industry with hopes of developing wearable devices and/or consumer products. Outside of lab, she loves to paint with watercolors, host brunch with friends, and explore new spots around the city. Olivia is eager to build meaningful connections and gain new perspectives through SMDP Biotech.

Afolarin Arowora, University of Illinois at Chicago College of Pharmacy

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Fola Arowora is a 4th-year pharmacy student at UIC Retzky College of Pharmacy in Chicago, with a deep-rooted passion for science, global innovation, and patient advocacy. Originally from Nigeria, Fola moved to the United States at 13, bringing a strong sense of community responsibility and a lifelong commitment to being a "brother's and sister's keeper." His educational journey reflects resilience and growth, shaped by overcoming early challenges to arrive at a place of purpose and professional clarity. Fola is deeply committed to expanding access to healthcare, advocating for underserved populations, and contributing to developing innovative therapies that can transform lives and societies.

Beyond his academic achievements thus far and professional pursuits, Fola is an avid traveler who enjoys learning about different countries' histories and cultures. In his free time, he stays active through golfing, working out, and yoga, which are passions that reflect his emotional and mental dedication to personal growth and his overall well-being. Fola aims to combine his love for science, leadership, and advocacy to make a meaningful global impact in healthcare.

Montserrat Arreguin, University of Pennsylvania

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Originally from Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico, Montse graduated from the University of Texas at El Paso with a BS in Cellular and Molecular Biochemistry in 2019. During her undergraduate training, she received the BUILDing SCHOLARS fellowship, which allowed her to conduct research during her summers at various institutions, including the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center, Baylor College of Medicine, and the University of Rochester. Montse is currently a 5th-year PhD Candidate in the Immunology Graduate Group at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine. Her research is focused on improving understanding of fetal brain

immune development. After her defense, Montse would like to conduct discovery research in industry, utilizing cutting-edge science to improve maternal and fetal long-term health outcomes. Outside the lab, Montse enjoys reading, cooking, caring for her 30+ plants, attending concerts, and spending time with her black lab pup, Bruno.

Tiffany Bamfo, Delaware State University

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Tiffany has always been fascinated by how the human brain functions and its influence on our behaviors—including those related to mental disorders. These interests led her to obtain her BS in Neuroscience with a minor in Psychology from Penn State University, as a member of the Millennium Scholars Program. Currently, Tiffany is a PhD candidate in the neuroscience program at Delaware State University. Her dissertation work focuses on assessing the role and function of cortical astrocytes in the SMN Delta 7 mouse model for spinal muscular atrophy. Driven by a passion to illuminate mental illness within minority communities globally and locally, Tiffany aspires to contribute to the development of safe treatment options for individuals and their families.

Her other passions include watching and discussing tv shows with others, spending time with family and friends, fitness, dancing, and reading. Tiffany is extremely grateful for the opportunity to participate in SMDP and polish her communication and networking skills, while forming meaningful connections with her peers and biotech industry leaders. She is eager to expand her skills and gain insight into patient-centered outcomes and clinical development through the program's mentorship.

Paula Banuelos PhD, Cornell University

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Paula Bañuelos, PhD, is microbiologist with a strong foundation in host-microbe interactions, microbial metabolism, and mammalian cell culture. She earned her doctorate in Biomedical and Biological Sciences from Cornell University, where she investigated how the gut microbiome metabolizes dietary choline and the downstream effects on host health. Her research leveraged bioorthogonal labeling, flow cytometry, shotgun metagenomic sequencing, and in vitro models, and was shaped by cross-disciplinary collaboration. In addition to her academic training, Paula gained industry experience at Corning Inc, where she contributed to projects involving advanced mammalian cell culture technologies.

Driven by a passion for translating microbiome research into real-world health solutions, Paula is excited to bring her scientific expertise and collaborative mindset to the biotechnology and life sciences industry. As a first-generation Latina scientist, she is also committed to mentorship and fostering diversity in STEM. Outside of science, she enjoys hiking and spending time with her family and her dog, Molly.

Arturo Barahona, University of Georgia

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Arturo J Barahona is a first-generation, PhD student in the Brain, Behavior, and Environment program at Florida International University (FIU). He is currently finishing out his research studies at the University of Georgia. Arturo obtained a Bachelor in Biomedical Sciences from the University of South Florida, and a Master of Public Health from FIU. His research explores the gene-environment interactions in Alzheimer's disease. Specifically, he is combining his laboratory experience with a multi-omics bioinformatic approach to understand the mechanisms through which the organochlorine pesticide, DDT, and its metabolite, DDE, accelerate the progression of Alzheimer's Disease. In his free time, Arturo is an avid runner (participating in 2025 NYC Marathon), likes to read sci-fi books, and enjoys going to concerts.

Kimberly Bennett, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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Kimberly Rose Bennett is a PhD candidate in Medical Engineering and Medical Physics at the Harvard-MIT Health Sciences and Technology Program. She is co-advised by a MIT Vice Provost for Faculty, and a pediatric neuro-oncologist at Seattle Children's Research Institute. Her research focuses on developing ex vivo vascular tissue engineering platforms to model the blood-brain-tumor barrier of pediatric brain tumors, particularly diffuse midline glioma (DMG), a rare and lethal cancer with limited treatment options. Kimberly is also investigating the use of layer-by-layer nanoparticles to overcome the blood-brain-tumor barrier, aiming to improve drug delivery and therapeutic outcomes for DMG patients. Before her graduate studies, she earned a Bachelor's degree with honors in Bioengineering from the University of California – Riverside. In recognition of her exceptional research and commitment to advancing equity and inclusion in science, Bennett was awarded the Howard Hughes Medical Institute Gilliam Fellowship, as well as the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship, Ford Foundation Predoctoral Fellowship, and the Alfred P Sloan UCEM Scholarship. Outside of research, Bennett is also the co-founder and co-president of MIT's Graduate First-Generation and/or Low-Income Student Organization (GFLI@MIT), where she strategizes with upper MIT leadership to provide resources, community, and support for first-generation and low-income graduate students.

Todd Blakely Jr, Vanderbilt University

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Todd Blakely Jr is a PhD candidate in the Biochemistry Department at Vanderbilt University, where he studies how microtubule-associated proteins regulate cytoskeletal stability. He also collaborates on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives across campus and the broader Nashville community. Born and raised in Oakland, California, he was shaped by a vibrant but underserved community. His early exposure to music, sports, and science inspired a lifelong commitment to education and mentorship.

Todd earned his BS in Biochemistry from the University of Puget Sound in 2019. As a nationally ranked NCAA football player, he brings both rigor and leadership to his work. Before beginning his graduate studies, Todd was a PREP Scholar at Northwestern University, where he contributed to developmental neuroscience research and co-authored a publication in the Journal of Neuroscience.

In addition to his scientific pursuits, Todd is deeply committed to mentoring and community engagement. He volunteers in local schools, advocates for underrepresented students in STEM, and currently serves as vice president of the Nashville chapter of NOBCChE (National Organization for the Professional Advancement of Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers). Outside of science, Todd enjoys carpentry and woodworking, finding creativity and focus through hands-on craftsmanship. He also finds joy in music, athletics, and giving back to the communities that shaped him.

Carmen Camarena, Virginia Commonwealth University

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Carmen is a dedicated graduate student with a background in asthma and allergy immunology. She is a PhD candidate in the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Carmen participates in educational initiatives such as the VCU Community High School Engagement & Learning (CHiSEL) as a program mentor. She is an active member of the Massey Comprehensive Cancer Center (MCCC) Student and Trainee Advancing Research (MSTAR) council and is also an Initiative for Maximizing Student Development (IMSD) scholar, Latino Graduate Student Association (LGSA) member and Women in Science (WiS) member.

Carmen holds a Bachelor's degree in biological sciences from California State University San Marcos and is a VCU Postbaccalaureate Research Education Program (PREP) scholar alumnus. Throughout her academic career, Carmen has worked with multiple investigators, contributing to projects that aim to bring forth novel therapeutic options. She brings a strong commitment to excellence, collaboration, and innovation in every endeavor. She is also passionate about nature preservation and wildlife. Outside of work, Carmen enjoys hiking and camping, as well as visiting wineries and vineyards with friends and family. She enjoys connecting with others who share a passion for clinical research and looks forward to engaging with program participants through shared learning and meaningful collaboration.

Esteban Castro, University of Texas Health & Science Center, San Antonio

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Esteban Castro is a PhD candidate at the University of Texas Health and Science Center in San Antonio, Texas. He is interested in infectious disease and specifically those caused by viral pathogens. His research experience is based around creating and/or characterizing reporter gene expressing SARS-CoV-2 (causative agent of COVID-19), MPXV (formally named monkeypox virus), or H5N1 (Bird Flu) for the identification of prophylactics and/or therapeutics. His long-term career goal is to be a senior investigator at a company producing prophylactics and/or therapeutics combating viral pathogens. He keeps an open mind in terms of research career interests for fields that use biotechnology derived from viruses or viral systems and/or utilize high throughout platforms to combat human disease. Esteban is also currently a member of the San Antonio leadership team and is part of the Texas chapter of the student led non-profit organization Nucleate. To destress from all these wonderful experiences as a PhD candidate, he makes music, DJs as a hobby, rock climbs, weight lifts, enjoys the outdoors and the cold, and cooking.

Lennice Castro, University of California San Diego

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Lennice K Castro received her Bachelor's in science at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) majoring in Microbiology, Immunology and Molecular Genetics. At UCLA, she was an undergraduate researcher and contributed to a project studying how fish gut microbiomes are impacted by anthropogenic stress. During undergrad, Lennice was selected as a Howard Hughes Medical Institute Exceptional Research Opportunities (HHMI ExROP) scholar, which gave her the opportunity to do research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology during summer 2018 and 2019 where she worked on characterizing the efficiency of CRISPR interference (CRISPRi) in Caulobacter crescentus, and then applying CRISPRi as a genetic tool to answer further questions about the mechanisms behind C. crescentus cell cycle and cell division. While her interest started in marine science, as Lennice did molecular biology research and completed her undergrad coursework, including classes such as virology and parasitology, she garnered curiosity about unraveling the molecular mechanisms that govern host-pathogen interactions and immune response.

Thus, Lennice joined UC San Diego (UCSD) as doctoral student in 2020, and was awarded the NASEM Ford Predoctoral Fellowship and HHMI Gilliam Fellowship in 2022 to pursue her interest in infectious disease. Her thesis work focuses on understanding the evolutionary 'arms race' between virally-encoded proteases and innate immune sensors to discover novel mechanisms of effector-triggered immunity.

Lennice's passion for science was first ignited by trips to the Aquarium of the Pacific (AOP), where she later volunteered as a mentor to teenage volunteers and worked as a marine science educator. Thus, early on she was committed to pursuing scientific research with the intent of providing similar opportunities and an inclusive environment within STEM to the next generation of scientists. She continues this goal by mentoring students and advising PATHways to STEM scholars as a graduate advocate at UCSD. Lennice is eager to engage with the training provided by SMDP Biotech to grow her ability to navigate a career in industry, and work towards a position that allows her to be at the forefront of scientific advancement and burgeon ongoing efforts to transform the biotech industry to be one that welcomes, accepts, and celebrates all scientists.

Soumilee Chaudhuri, Indiana University School of Medicine

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Soumilee Chaudhuri is a 4th year PhD candidate in Medical Neuroscience and Bioinformatics at the Indiana University School of Medicine, researching Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementia (ADRD). Soumilee was raised in Kolkata, India and graduated with double degrees in Neuroscience & Biochemistry from Montana State University, Bozeman as an International Merit Scholar. She works at the intersection of multi-omics, plasma-biomarkers and neuroimaging to understand cardiovascular risk factors in AD that affect the elderly population. Her interests and experiences range from neurodegenerative diseases, neuroinformatics, to science communication and public health policy in academia & research spaces. Outside of Science, Soumilee mostly likes to spend her time outside. Her free time is spent hiking, running, skiing, climbing, and backpacking the Rocky mountains, Alps, or the Appalachians.

Freddy Cisneros, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

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Freddy Cisneros is a sixth-year PhD candidate in Applied Physics at the University of Michigan, specializing in theoretical and computational biophysics, and a first-generation college student. He began his academic journey at El Camino College before earning a BS in Physics from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and an MS in Physics from the University of Maryland, College Park. His research focuses on understanding the physics and mathematics of living systems through modeling and simulation. Freddy is actively exploring career paths beyond academia, with a strong interest in the biotech and pharmaceutical industries. Outside of his research, he enjoys traveling, running, and participating in spontaneous events that broaden his perspective and bring joy.

Precious Craig, University of Arizona

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Precious Craig is a third-year PharmD/MPH student at the University of Arizona, where she also earned her BS in Public Health with a minor in Biochemistry. She co-founded and served as President of the university's SNPhA chapter and now serves as the SNPhA National President-Elect. Previously, she was the SNPhA National Region V Facilitator and served on the National Nominations Committee. Through her leadership, she helped launch a Black Health Fair in Tucson and facilitated clinical collaborations with MexZona to serve underserved communities in Mexico.

Precious was selected as one of Tucson's 40 Under 40 and completed the Greater Tucson Leadership Program, earning the Gen Ronald L Kurth Award. She is passionate about advancing health equity and plans to pursue a fellowship in medical affairs within the pharmaceutical industry. In her free time, she enjoys coaching track, boxing, Olympic weightlifting, cooking, and photography.

Ivana Daniels, Indiana University School of Medicine

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Ivana Daniels is a fifth-year PhD candidate at the Indiana University School of Medicine (IUSM) in the Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology. She earned her Bachelor's degree in biology from the University of Virginia, where she was named a NASA-Virginia Space Grant Consortium Undergraduate Fellow. At IUSM, Ivana conducts her doctoral research in the Gaston Translational Research Group, focusing on developing novel therapeutic strategies for pediatric respiratory viral infections, particularly respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and human metapneumovirus (hMPV).

In addition to her research, Ivana is deeply engaged in the academic community. She serves as the Pharmacology and Toxicology Student Representative, the IUSM Delegate to the Graduate Professional and Student Government, and a Peer-to-Peer Wellness Coach for IUSM. She is also a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., where she contributes to community service initiatives and youth mentoring. Ivana's leadership and academic excellence have been recognized through several honors, including the NIH IU-T32 Fellowship in Molecular Physiology and Clinical Mechanisms of Lung Disease, the NASA-Indiana Space Grant Consortium

Doctoral Fellowship, and the Student Mentor of the Year award. Beyond her academic pursuits, Ivana is a Pilates instructor and enjoys cooking, playing the flute, and watching movies.

Ryan Davis Jr, PhD, Texas A&M University

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Ryan Davis, Jr is a recent PhD graduate in biomedical engineering from Texas A&M University. His research focuses on the development of engineered hydrogel systems for therapeutic delivery, wound healing, and tissue regeneration. He has led multiple interdisciplinary projects, authored peer-reviewed publications, and presented his work at national conferences. Ryan's scientific approach emphasizes translational impact, with extensive experience using both in vitro and in vivo models as well as advanced material characterization techniques. Outside of the lab, Ryan is passionate about mentorship and outreach. He has trained numerous undergraduate and early graduate researchers and is committed to advancing diversity in STEM through educational and professional development initiatives. In his free time, he enjoys cooking, attending concerts and sporting events, and spending time outdoors.

Elijah Davis PhD, The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine

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Elijah H Davis is a passionately driven neuroimmunologist and postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Neurology at Johns Hopkins Medicine. His research explores the underlying mechanisms of HIV-associated neurocognitive disorders, with a focus on how inflammation, host-specific factors, and antiretroviral therapy contribute to the onset of HIV-associated comorbidities. Ultimately, Elijah aims to advance the development of efficient therapeutic strategies by applying core concepts within immunopathology.

Born in Bowie, MD, Elijah earned his Bachelor's degree in Biological Science from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, along with a minor in psychology to support a growing interest in neurobiology. After his undergraduate studies, Elijah trained in immunology as a post-baccalaureate fellow at Virgina Commonwealth University, investigating how intestinal parasites protected their hosts from allergic diseases. In 2024, Elijah earned his PhD in Microbiology and Immunology at Drexel University College of Medicine. His thesis research explored the brain's innate immune response during coronavirus infection, which deepened the public's understanding of the CoVID-19 pandemic. Throughout his career, Elijah has remained committed to fostering a collaborative and inclusive environment within the scientific community. Outside of the lab, he enjoys rowing on the water, biking, reading, and tending to his houseplants.

David Duncan, University of South Carolina

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David Duncan is a graduate researcher with a passion for bioinformatics and immunology. During his Master's program at Delaware State University, he employed computational techniques such as whole genome sequencing and RNA sequencing (RNA-seq) to understand bacterial genome evolution and biopharmaceutical development. Currently, David Duncan is a PhD student at the University of South Carolina. His research explores the link between diet-induced obesity and chronic inflammation, specifically observing increased immune responses in Drosophila exposed to an obesogenic diet. He plans to use RNA sequencing (RNA-seq) to analyze changes in immune response genes in these flies.

David aspires to contribute to a pharmaceutical research and development team, working to advance therapies for chronic inflammation and related diseases. Outside the laboratory, David enjoys playing basketball and traveling.

Destiny Durante, PhD, University of Illinois Chicago

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Destiny Durante is an enthusiastic scientist passionate about beauty, diversifying STEM, and equipping the next generation with the tools needed to excel in their desired field. She received her BS degree in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at Pennsylvania State University and recently received her PhD at the University of Illinois Chicago in Pharmaceutical Sciences with a concentration in Chemistry and Drug Discovery.

Her research involves the design and synthesis of small molecule therapeutics for Ebola virus and SARS-CoV-2. Combining her training in medicinal chemistry and passion for beauty, Destiny aims to become a cosmetic chemist to develop desirable and effective personal care products, while educating consumers on the science behind beauty.

Taiwo Esan PhD, Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine & Science

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Taiwo Esan, PhD is an accomplished organic chemist with extensive experience in drug formulation, small molecule synthesis, and analytical development. He currently serves as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science, where he advances preclinical drug development by designing and optimizing novel compounds. Taiwo holds a PhD in Organic Chemistry from Northern Illinois University and a Master's degree in Organic Chemistry from Western Illinois University.

In addition to his laboratory research, Taiwo integrates computational modeling into his drug discovery efforts. He uses platforms such as Maestro and AutoDock to screen lead compounds from libraries like the ZINC database and then synthesizes the most promising candidates in the laboratory for further evaluation. To deepen his expertise in computational drug discovery, Taiwo is pursuing a second Master's degree in data science at Eastern State University, where he is learning to apply artificial intelligence and machine learning techniques to accelerate pharmaceutical innovation. Outside of his professional work, Taiwo enjoys traveling, playing soccer, and exploring new culinary traditions.

Mfonabasi Ette, University of Buffalo

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Mfonabasi Ette, PharmD, RPh, is a PhD candidate at the University at Buffalo. She earned her Bachelor's and Doctor of Pharmacy from Northeastern University, where she was first introduced to pharmacometrics during a summer internship as a part of the cooperative education program. Upon graduating, she began her PhD at the University at Buffalo. She researches the application of pharmacometrics approaches, such as machine learning algorithms and stochastic differential equations, in conjunction with traditional pharmacokinetic and systems modeling for the enhanced understanding and prediction of drug PK/PD and improved parameter estimation efficiency. Mfonabasi aspires to be a clinical pharmacologist and pharmacometrician, developing drugs that help to bridge the health equity gap for low and middle-income countries.

Maria Feliz Norberto, Albert Einstein College of Medicine

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María Alejandra Feliz Norberto is a PhD candidate at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, where she studies stem cell biology, inflammation, and the cancer microenvironment. She holds an MS in Biomedical Sciences from Einstein (2022). Her doctoral research explores how inherited mutations drive inflammation and impair blood stem cell function in myelodysplastic syndromes (MDS), as well as how high-cholesterol diets induce systemic inflammation that alters neutrophil fate and function. A bilingual (Spanish and English) hematology researcher, María Alejandra excels at building collaborative teams, solving complex problems, and driving innovation across academic and industry settings. She currently serves as a Brand Ambassador for Proteintech Group, where she connects scientists with quality reagents and resources.

Passionate about science communication, María Alejandra has earned awards for her oral and poster presentations at national and international meetings including the American Society of Hematology (ASH) and the Neutrophil International Symposium. She has also served as a keynote speaker for students at her alma mater, International Community High School, and Columbia University's S-PREP program. Her long-term goal is to translate scientific discovery into impactful innovation in the biotech industry, particularly in R&D, science communication, and marketing. Outside the lab, she enjoys reflective writing, long city walks, and exploring new cultures through food.

Synphane Gibbs Shelton, University of Virginia

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Synphane Gibbs-Shelton is a PhD candidate in Pharmacology at the University of Virginia, where she studies the role of microglia in seizure development and epilepsy. Alongside her research, she completed a technology transfer internship at the UVA Licensing & Ventures Group, gaining hands-on experience in intellectual property management, commercialization, and startup evaluation. Synphane's career interests include biotechnology, consulting, and intellectual property, with a long-term goal of facilitating the translation of scientific discoveries into impactful real-world applications. She also served as a Science Policy Fellow with the Virginia Academy of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, where she worked on improving addiction treatment programs for pregnant and postpartum women.

Outside of her professional pursuits, Synphane enjoys traveling, indoor cycling, and spending time with her family, friends, and her cat. She is passionate about science communication and innovation, mentorship, and building inclusive communities within STEM and the biotech industry.

Destiny Gomez, University of California, Davis

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Destiny Gomez is a graduate candidate in the Molecular, Cellular, and Integrative Physiology Graduate Group at the University of California Davis, conducting her research in the Department of Internal Medicine. Her work focuses on investigating the effects of Glucagon-Like Peptide-1 (GLP-1) receptor agonists in the lung, a topic she has presented at both national and international scientific conferences. In addition to her research, Destiny plays an active leadership role in her academic community, serving as both the Executive Committee Representative and Social Committee Chair for her graduate group.

Before graduate school, Destiny earned her Bachelor's degree in Molecular, Cellular, and Developmental Biology from the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she gained four years of undergraduate research experience across two laboratories. Her contributions led to the publication of two peer-reviewed research papers. With a strong foundation in both academic and applied research. Destiny's career goal is to work in Research and Development within the biotech or pharma industries.

Yarelis Gonzalez Vargas PhD, Georgia Tech

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Yarelis Gonzalez-Vargas, PhD is a biomedical engineer and postdoctoral fellow in the Georgia Clinical and Translational Science Training Program at Georgia Tech and Emory University. She earned dual Bachelor's degrees in biology and industrial microbiology from the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez. She completed her PhD in Biomedical Engineering in 2024 through the joint Georgia Tech and Emory University program. Her doctoral work and current research focus on developing patient-derived in vitro models using biomaterials and single-cell genomics to advance precision medicine strategies for pediatric lymphatic malformations. Her work also advances ethical innovation by providing alternatives to traditional animal testing models.

Yarelis has secured competitive independent research funding from federal organizations, non-profit organizations, and private foundations and led translational collaborations with engineers, clinicians, and industry partners. She is a passionate mentor, guiding high school and undergraduate students through independent research projects and contributing to scientific publications. Outside the lab, she enjoys yoga, roller skating, traveling, and spending time with her partner and their dog.

Kristen Gregory, University of Arizona

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Kristen Gregory is a PhD candidate in the Health and Pharmaceutical Outcomes program at the University of Arizona R Ken Coit College of Pharmacy. Her academic training bridges public health and outcomes research, with a focus on opioid-related hospital discharges and disparities in healthcare access and treatment. Kristen has worked across academic, clinical, and industry settings, contributing to data-driven research on health policy and real-world evidence generation. She has extensive experience working with large administrative datasets. Kristen is set to defend her dissertation in August 2025. After her defense, she hopes to work for a pharmaceutical or biotechnology company on a Health Economics and Outcomes Research (HEOR) team.

Before attending the University of Arizona, she attended Meharry Medical College, where she earned her Master of Science in Public Health, and the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Chemistry and a Bachelor of Science in Biology. Kristen's professional interests include health equity, real-world evidence, and the intersection of payer policy and patient outcomes. She is also involved with Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc, the ISPOR Student Network Event Planning Committee, and the Black Graduate and Professional Student Association. Outside of her academic work, she enjoys watching reality TV, community organizing, and exploring new cities.

Fatima Hamid, University of Minnesota

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Fatima Hamid is a PhD candidate in the Molecular Pharmacology and Therapeutics program at the University of Minnesota, currently in her final year and preparing to graduate. Originally from Sudan, she holds a Bachelor's degree in Pharmacy from the University of Khartoum and a Master's degree in Toxicology and Risk Assessment from the Università degli Studi di Milano in Italy. She also brings over four years of pharmacy practice experience in Sudan and Dubai.

Three years ago, Fatima relocated to Seattle to complete her dissertation research at the University of Washington. Her current work focuses on enhancing the clinical efficacy of anti-opioid vaccines through nanoparticle-based delivery systems and novel adjuvants. Her research integrates immunological, pharmacological, and behavioral approaches to support rational vaccine design. Outside of her academic pursuits, Fatima enjoys spending time with family and friends, traveling, exploring the outdoors, cooking, and trying new things.

Fasilat Hassan, University of Tennessee Health Science Center, Memphis

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Fasilat Oluwakemi Hassan is a PhD candidate in Biomedical Sciences with a concentration in Molecular and Translational Physiology at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center. With a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree and a Master's in Veterinary Biochemistry from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, her research spans cardiac fibrosis, immuno-metabolism, and the genetic mechanisms of cardiovascular diseases. She currently works as a Graduate Research Assistant, focusing on fibroblast-specific gene regulation in cardiac remodeling. She has acquired several skills ranging from animal physiological studies (Injections, Electrocardiography, Echocardiography, blood pressure measurement) to survival surgeries (LAD ligation, TAC), molecular studies, histological studies, fluorescence and confocal microscopy and invitro studies (calcium imaging, primary cell isolation and culture).

Fasilat is a published author in peer-reviewed journals and a recipient of multiple honors, including the Martin Frank Diversity Award and the Paul Quigley Fellowship. She is also active in scientific leadership and mentoring through FASEB LEADS, SHIFT program and UTHSC organizations. Beyond the lab, she enjoys volunteering, swimming, public speaking, and exploring cultures through culinary experiences. Fasilat aims to pursue a career in research and development, and she is open to learning opportunities and taking up challenges as she aims to translate her research skills to improve health outcomes.

Kelia Human, Columbia University

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Kelia Human is a 5th-year PhD student at Columbia University studying biomedical engineering. The focus of her research has been on developing technologies that can translate laboratory diagnostic tests to the field or other decentralized locations. Kelia is passionate about making healthcare more accessible by conducting research on barriers that prevent diagnostic tests from moving outside of centralized laboratory locations. Kelia's research experience began with her time at Northwestern University as an undergraduate student, where she worked on wearable devices. Kelia was the primary undergraduate student on a project to develop a wearable device for cerebral hemodynamic monitoring in pediatric patients. Additionally, Kelia studied abroad in Stellenbosch, South Africa, for her senior design class. There, she worked on exploring saliva as a potential alternative to testing pediatric patients for tuberculosis.

After undergrad, Kelia worked in a post-baccalaureate position in a computer science and learning science lab that focused on STEM education in underserved communities. Kelia took this time to broaden her skill set and work with key community partners to support research in the lab. Then Kelia worked at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) to support development of electrochemical sensors to monitor the tumor microenvironment for engineered tissue systems to mimic the microenvironment found in vivo. Finally, Kelia transitioned to Columbia University, where her thesis work has focused on developing technologies to perform sample preparation and detection on complex samples. This objective was demonstrated by the work on developing a point-of-use system for processing wastewater at the building level for monitoring of infectious disease and developing a point-of-care liquid biopsy for testing of single-point polymorphisms in cancer patients that affect treatment management.

Opeoluwa Iwaloye, University of Florida

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Opeoluwa ("Ope") is a fourth-year doctoral candidate in Biomedical Sciences at the University of Florida College of Medicine, specializing in Immunology and Microbiology. She studies genetic variants linked to Type 1 Diabetes using CRISPR/Cas9 and human induced pluripotent stem cell (iPSCs) models. She graduated with first-class honors in Microbiology and later earned a Master's in Molecular Biology from Bowling Green State University, focusing on microbial diversity and bioinformatics. She has developed strong technical skills in gene editing, iPSC culture and differentiation, confocal microscopy, flow cytometry, immunology, microbiology, and molecular biology.

Outside the lab, Opeoluwa is active in science communication, innovation, and mentorship. As a UF Innovate intern, she helps translate research into market-ready products through investor-focused marketing and technology transfer. She has served as Diversity Co-Chair of the Medical Graduate Student Organization, contributed to the UF Diversity Research Symposium, and mentors students through UF's precollegiate STEM programs. She also writes for the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology to make science more accessible to broad audiences.

Opeoluwa is passionate about translational science and aims to move research discoveries toward real-world impact. She hopes to work as a senior scientist in genomics, gene editing, immunology, or therapeutic development, particularly in areas that integrate discovery research, and clinical application; though she remains open to other roles across the biotechnology industry.

In her free time, she enjoys cooking, spending time with family, and catching up with loved ones abroad over FaceTime.

Adewale James, University of South Florida

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Adewale James is a biomedical scientist and emerging leader in microbiome and neurodegeneration research. Currently pursuing a PhD in Medical Sciences at the University of South Florida, he focuses on understanding how gut microbial and viral ecosystems shape brain health and metabolic resilience. With expertise spanning microbiome analysis, molecular biology, and translational research, Adewale is passionate about uncovering new therapeutic strategies that bridge fundamental science and clinical innovation in diseases like Alzheimer's and cardiometabolic disorders.

Driven by a commitment to advancing personalized medicine, Adewale is focused on developing microbiome-based interventions that address the growing global burden of aging and metabolic diseases. He brings a multidisciplinary mindset, a collaborative spirit, and a strong dedication to impactful research. Through the SMDP Biotech mentoring program, Adewale looks forward to deepening his leadership skills, building strategic industry connections, and contributing to the next generation of biomedical innovation.

Jessica Jones, University of Washington-Seattle Campus

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Jessica Jones earned her Bachelor of Science in Molecular, Cell, and Developmental Biology from the University of California, Santa Cruz in 2018. She also served as a Research Specialist at the University of Pennsylvania, where she helped develop novel behavioral assays and computational tools to objectively assess acute and chronic pain states in rodent models.

Currently a PhD candidate at the University of Washington and an HHMI Gilliam Fellow, Jessica's research focuses on mapping the neural circuits downstream of Drosophila nociceptors that mediate escape behaviors. Her work integrates targeted genetic manipulations, single-cell transcriptomics, and electron microscopy-based circuit reconstruction to uncover how sensory information is transformed into aversive motor responses. Outside the lab, she enjoys reading mystery and true crime novels by authors such as Michael Connelly, Michael Crichton, and Agatha Christie, and spending time with family and friends.

Dennisha King, University of Rochester

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Dennisha is a fifth-year PhD candidate in Neuroscience at the University of Rochester. She earned her BS in Neuroscience and Public Health from Agnes Scott College in 2019 and completed an MS in Neuroscience at the University of Rochester in 2023. Her doctoral research explores how early life stress shapes the developmental trajectory of brain regions involved in social and emotional functioning, with a focus on microglial-neuronal interactions in the amygdala. Dennisha is passionate about bridging basic neuroscience research with clinical applications and is committed to translational research that informs therapeutic strategies for neuropsychiatric and neurodevelopmental disorders.

A first-generation Caribbean-American, Dennisha is also a dedicated advocate for increasing visible diversity in the STEM fields. She has held several leadership roles in organizations such as Científico Latino and the Alliance for Diversity in Science and Engineering, where she supports the professional development of underrepresented scientists through outreach, programming, and mentorship. Outside of academia, Dennisha enjoys brunch and a juicy book.

Tracy Knight, University of California San Francisco

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Tracy Knight is a fourth-year cell biology PhD candidate at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). Originally from Atlanta, GA, Tracy attended Brown University for her undergraduate degree where she studied the effects of BMP signaling in Drosophila neuromuscular junction development. Upon graduating with honors with a BS in cell and molecular biology, she moved on to become a postgraduate researcher and lab manager at Yale University where she studied the connection between primary cilium disassembly and cell cycle exit in mammalian cells. She then began her graduate studies in 2021 at UCSF. Her thesis work is currently centered on the inner nuclear membrane protein emerin and its role in human skeletal muscle differentiation. In her free time, Tracy enjoys reading, going to the gym, and playing Dungeons & Dragons.

Crystal Lara Santos, University of Pittsburgh

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Crystal Lara Santos is a fourth-year PhD candidate at the University of Pittsburgh, supported by the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP) and the HHMI Gilliam Fellows Program. She earned her BS in Industrial Microbiology from the University of Puerto Rico in 2020. Her dissertation research investigates how lipids regulate the Ca^{2+}-activated Cl^- channel TMEM16A, with a particular focus on the effects of polyunsaturated fatty acid (PUFA) interactions.

Crystal has built valuable expertise in molecular pharmacology through her internship at Eli Lilly and her work in quality control at Abbott Diagnostics. She is committed to actively mentoring and participating in outreach efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in STEM fields. Outside of her academic work, she enjoys salsa dancing, a passion that keeps her energized and connected to her cultural roots.

Tomiwa Lawal, Florida State University

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Tomiwa Lawal is a fourth-year PhD candidate at the Florida State University College of Medicine, where his research focuses on protein science and its applications in drug discovery. With a strong foundation in protein biochemistry, he is passionate about understanding molecular mechanisms and translating those insights into therapeutic innovations. In 2024, he completed an internship at Eli Lilly within the Discovery Chemistry and Technologies group, gaining hands-on experience in early-stage drug development.

He aspires to transition into the biotechnology industry, where he can apply his expertise to the development of life-changing therapeutics that improve patient outcomes. Outside of the lab, he enjoys playing soccer and has recently developed a growing interest in photography.

Jorge Ledesma PhD, Kaiser Permanente Northern California

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Jorge Ledesma, PhD, MPH, is a postdoctoral fellow at the Kaiser Permanente Northern California (KPNC) Division of Research, an innovative research center embedded within a large, integrated health care system. He is an epidemiologist specializing in the use of real-world data to investigate gaps and variability in drug access and effectiveness among patients with complex comorbidities. His current work at KPNC focuses on uncovering misalignments between treatment access and effectiveness for respiratory conditions.

Prior to his postdoctoral fellowship, Jorge earned his PhD in Epidemiology at the Brown University School of Public Health where he received rigorous training in modern causal inference approaches. He also holds a Master of Public Health from the University of Washington (UW). Outside of work, Jorge is currently learning Japanese with the goal of traveling across Japan.

Francheska Lopez Rivera PhD, Howard Hughes Medical Institute

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Francheska López Rivera is a Postdoctoral Research Scientist in the DePace Lab at Howard Hughes Medical Institute, based in Boston, where she studies developmental neuroscience in fly embryos. She obtained her PhD in Biological and Biomedical Sciences from Harvard University, studying the essential function of chromatin-associated proteins in yeast. Francheska is originally from Puerto Rico, where she completed undergraduate studies in architecture and biology at the University of Puerto Rico-Río Piedras. Francheska has interests in project management, science communication, and clinical research roles in industry. She likes to exercise and spend time outdoors with her husband and her 2.5-year-old daughter.

Sierra Love, University of Wisconsin-Madison

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Sierra Love received her PhD in Genetics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where her research focuses on uncovering the mechanisms of pre-mRNA splicing and developing novel strategies to modulate this process for therapeutic benefit. Her dissertation explores chemical modulation of pre-mRNA splicing through small-molecule discovery, antifungal applications, and structure-function studies. Sierra brings extensive experience in experimental design, RNA biology, and next-generation sequencing (NGS) analysis, along with a strong passion for interdisciplinary collaboration. She has authored multiple peer-reviewed publications and presented her work at national scientific conferences.

Beyond the lab, Sierra is deeply committed to outreach and mentorship. She has led science education initiatives for K-12 students across Wisconsin and mentored students ranging from high school to graduate levels. She is also active in her church, where she sings in the choir and engages in community service. In her free time, Sierra enjoys paddleboarding on Madison's lakes, networking with fellow scientists, and spending time with friends. She aspires to apply her scientific training in a biotech or pharmaceutical setting focused on RNA-targeted therapeutics and translational research. Sierra is excited to join the SMDP Biotech program to continue growing as a leader in the life sciences and to help build a more diverse and inclusive biotech community.

Annette Machado, UTHealth MD Anderson Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences

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Annette Machado is a PhD candidate in the Genetics and Epigenetics program at UT MD Anderson UTHealth Houston Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences where she is conducting her thesis research. Originally from El Paso, TX, she earned her undergraduate degree with honors in forensic science, with a minor in chemistry, from Chaminade University of Honolulu. After graduating, she built a strong foundation in preclinical virology at Baylor College of Medicine before transitioning to translational oncology at MD Anderson TRACTION, where she co-led small molecule projects. As part of a cross-functional team, she advanced novel oncology compounds into the clinic, validated new technologies to support biomarker development, and established multiplex immunofluorescence panels to quantify protein and RNA expression at the single-cell level. These assays informed spatial phenotyping in the tumor microenvironment and supported programs in small molecules, biologics, and cell therapies.

Her current research focuses on identifying epigenetic drivers of transcriptional dysregulation in diffuse hemispheric gliomas (DHG), intending to uncover key regulators of tumor progression that may be therapeutically targeted. Outside the lab, Annette is an active student leader, serving as President of the First-Gen Student Group and co-chair of the Genetics & Epigenetics Data Science Workgroup, where she promotes collaboration and data literacy among graduate students. She enjoys gardening and caring for her 10+ indoor plants in her free time.

Lanesa Mahon, University of Cincinnati

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Lanesa Mahon is a third-year PhD student in Pharmaceutical Sciences at the University of Cincinnati. A native of Columbia, South Carolina, she earned her Bachelor's degree in chemistry from Vanderbilt University in 2020. Driven by her passion for dermatological sciences and cosmetic chemistry, she went on to pursue a Master of Business and Science in Cosmetic Science at Rutgers University, graduating in 2022. During her Master's program, Lanesa volunteered with the New York Society of Cosmetic Chemists (NYSCC), where she created educational and promotional content while serving on both their Social Media and Diversity and Inclusion committees. Her current doctoral research explores the relationship between skin aging and fibroblast senescence, with the goal of uncovering new insights into the mechanisms of cellular aging, its effects on skin health, and therapeutic strategies to slow or reverse senescence in dermal tissues. Beyond her research, Lanesa is committed to leadership and advocacy. She currently serves as student body president for her graduate program and as vice president of UC Black Biomedical Graduates.

Daniela Maltais, Mayo Clinic

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Daniela Maltais is originally from Colombia but grew up most of her life in northern Minnesota. While studying biology and psychology at Bemidji State University (BSU) she joined the Honors Program and the McNair program, the latter of which first exposed her to what a PhD even was. During her junior year she joined a Translational Neuroscience lab at Mayo Clinic as a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) scholar, where she gained experience in preclinical and early clinical trial research involving treatment resistant depression. After graduation, Daniela returned to Mayo Clinic and completed two years of post-baccalaureate training (PREP). During this time, she studied how to improve the sensitivity and specificity of neuroimaging tools, such as PET/CT, in Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia.

Currently, she is a 4th year in the Regenerative Sciences PhD program at Mayo Clinic's Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences. Daniela is in a Bioelectronics Neurophysiology and Engineering Lab which seeks to improve the diagnosis and treatments of epilepsy and seizure disorders. Her thesis project involves examining the interplay between sleep and neuromodulation, within the context of mesial temporal lobe epilepsy. Here, she aims to improve therapeutic efficacy of deep brain stimulation, while also lessening the cognitive and sleep dysfunction that can occur. Her experience thus far has sparked her interest in translating and commercializing novel therapeutics for neurological disorders, particularly through neurotechnology's. Her hobbies include playing pickleball, making flower arrangements, and trying new cuisine.

Dylan Manu, Temple University School of Pharmacy

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A University of Hartford alum and current 4th year PharmD/MS candidate at Temple University School of Pharmacy, Dylan Manu aims to make a difference in the pharmaceutical industry. Born in Marlboro, NJ, Dylan was 1 of 5 black students in high school and had to make an impact to be seen outside of the color of his skin. While attending Marlboro High School, Dylan was President of the African-Latino Student Organization, a legacy he continued in succession of his older brother and sister. Co-founder and President of the Minority Association of Pre-Medical Students at the University of Hartford, Dylan aimed to assist minority students interested in the healthcare industry by bridging the gap between students and professionals to create a sense of belonging. Now at Temple University School of Pharmacy, Dylan held the position of Regent of Kappa Psi Pharmaceutical Fraternity Beta Omega Chapter, the largest pharmaceutical fraternity in the world.

Outside of school, Dylan is an avid fan of the New York Knicks, Pittsburgh Steelers, Liverpool Football Club, and most recently, Formula One. When he is not studying or screaming at his TV, Dylan spends his days with his family as they provide encouragement and unwavering support to keep moving forward no matter how many times life knocks him down.

Christine Mazzi, University of California, Berkeley

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Christine Mazzi, PMP is a recent graduate of The University of California, Berkeley. At UC Berkeley she studied public health, with concentrations in epidemiology, data science, and design thinking. Due to her passion for the work being done at the intersection of innovation and health, Christine has ample internship experience with various biotech/med tech start-up and midsized companies. Her skills span from business development and project management to data analytics. This year she is a full time Product Development Intern at Genentech. In her free time, Christine likes to travel, run, and try new foods.

Molly McQuillian, Brown University

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Molly grew up in New York City and pursued her undergraduate degree in Biology at Bard College. For her senior thesis, she studied how tadpoles can be used as models for understanding sensory processing mechanisms and neurodevelopmental disorders. After graduating, she joined the Marine Biological Laboratory and investigated the mechanisms of how the protein a-synuclein, which is neuropathologically linked to Parkinson's Disease, causes defects at synapses. She is now currently a 6th year PhD Candidate in Brown University's Neuroscience Department, where she studies oligodendrocytes and myelin in the context of neurodegeneration and neuroprotection. Outside of the lab, she enjoys baking pies, drawing, and spending time with her cat.

Trisha Mendoza, University of California, Irvine

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Trisha Mendoza is a first-generation graduate student pursuing a degree in Biomedical Engineering. Her research focuses on computational neuroscience, where she collaborates with CHOC Hospital to acquire neural data from patients diagnosed with refractory epilepsy. Her work aims to develop algorithms that help clinicians more accurately identify the regions of the brain responsible for seizures, ultimately striving to enable more patients to achieve seizure freedom. Beyond epilepsy, her research experience extends to identifying biomarkers related to sleep and memory and developing brain-computer interfaces for individuals with severe motor impairments. Trisha is currently preparing to transition into industry, where she aims to continue identifying markers of severe neurological disorders through statistical, machine learning, and signal processing methods.

Born and raised in Santa Ana, California, Trisha is a proud Latina passionate about creating inclusive learning environments. She has been actively involved in supporting the development of organizations at UCI such as Graduate SWE and Latino Engine, both of which focus on providing minority students in STEM with professional workshops and community-building activities during their graduate careers. In her free time, Trisha enjoys spending time with her family, making floral arrangements, and attending live music events.

Laura Menocal, Weill Cornell Graduate School of Medical Sciences

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Laura Menocal received her Bachelor's degree in Biology in 2013 and is completing her PhD in Immunology at Weill Cornell Graduate School of Medical Sciences in the summer of 2025. Her doctoral research focuses on CD8 T cell dysfunction in solid tumors and the mechanisms that govern this dysfunction. She is passionate about translational immunology and bridging fundamental research with clinical impact. Outside of the lab, she is an avid fitness enthusiast and is currently training to run the NYC Marathon in November.

Mohamed Mire PhD, U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

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Mohamed M Mire PhD, is a postdoctoral ORISE Fellow at the US Food and Drug Administration's Office of Vaccine Research and Review, where he advances public health through innovative research in immunology, virology, and computational biology. He holds a PhD in Molecular and Cellular Pathology and an MS in Bioinformatics from the University of Michigan Medical School, where his dissertation explored immune and metabolic changes during respiratory viral infections. At the FDA, Mohamed develops and implements high-throughput assays and computational tools to evaluate antibody responses to viruses such as Influenza, RSV, and SARS-CoV-2.

His technical expertise includes in vivo and ex vivo preclinical modeling, multiplexed immunoassays, and the integration of bioinformatics solutions-skills that are relevant to immunology research and innovative vaccine development in biotechnology.

Mohamed has authored multiple peer-reviewed publications and presented at regional and international conferences, where he has received recognition for his research excellence. Beyond the lab, he is dedicated to mentorship and advancing diversity in STEM, with experience leading outreach and mentoring programs. He aims to drive innovation in immunology and vaccine development within the biotech industry.

Ariana Moorer, University of Houston College of Pharmacy

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Ariana Moorer is a Doctor of Pharmacy candidate at the University of Houston College of Pharmacy, with a Bachelor of Science in Cellular and Molecular Biology from Stephen F Austin State University. She has extensive experience across clinical practice, pharmaceutical research, and industry-focused patient engagement. Ariana currently serves as a Clinical Pharmacist Specialist Intern at Legacy Community Health, the largest Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) in Texas, where she leads quality improvement initiatives targeting chronic disease management and value-based care outcomes.

Her previous experience includes investigational drug services at Memorial Hermann Hospital and patient engagement strategy at M&B Sciences, a biotechnology consulting firm. Ariana is passionate about advancing healthcare innovation through pharmacy, biotech, and clinical research, with interests spanning medical affairs, regulatory strategy, and patient-centered initiatives. In her free time, she enjoys traveling, trying new recipes, and spending time with her loved ones.

Mariam Mutiu Adebayo, Northern Illinois University

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Mariam is a PhD candidate in Chemistry, driven by a strong desire to make meaningful contributions to the ever-evolving pharmaceutical industry. Her academic journey has provided a solid foundation in organic chemistry, complemented by hands-on experience across diverse research areas. In parallel, she has developed a deep interest in sustainable process development, gaining valuable expertise in synthetic strategies, reaction optimization, molecular characterization, and purification techniques. These experiences have strengthened her understanding of the pivotal role chemistry plays in pharmaceutical innovation. Mariam is passionate about advancing sustainable science in drug discovery and development and remains committed to continuous learning and impactful research.

Sunday Negedu PhD, Louisiana State University

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Sunday Negedu is a passionate scientist. He has a PhD in Biochemistry from Louisiana State University (LSU) where he investigated the regulation of gene expression by chromatin domain insulators. At LSU, he taught traditional biology laboratory courses, as well as course-based undergraduate research experience courses (CUREs) which focused on protein interactions in the fruit fly genome. He developed a curriculum in a way that freshman could understand and participate in.

Prior to his PhD, Sunday Negedu worked to develop an in-house method for detecting micro-RNAs as biomarkers for breast cancer. Before that, he studied the ability of plant extracts to modulate the expression of tumor suppressors in human breast cancer MCF7 cell line. He is interested in biomedical research pivoted towards the development of innovative and safe therapeutic strategies against disease and he enjoys volunteering and reading. Sunday Negedu also holds a MS in Biochemistry and a BS in Biochemistry from the University of Lagos in Nigeria.

Carlos Ng Pitti, University of California Berkeley

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Carlos is from Panama City, Panama, and he is currently a PhD candidate in the UCSF-UC Berkeley Joint PhD Program in Bioengineering. Carlos received his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Bioengineering from the University of Illinois at Chicago where he worked at developing microfluidic systems for the isolation of circulating tumor cells and characterizing bubble removal systems. Following graduation, Carlos worked at the Wyss Institute for Biologically Inspired Engineering at Harvard University where he developed a scalable fabrication method for microfluidic organ-on-chips and contributed identifying mechanisms to chemically induce a state of biostasis.

At UC Berkeley, Carlos current research involves developing CRISPR-based diagnostics platforms for the detection of infectious diseases such as SARS-CoV-2, HIV, and lymphatic filariasis. In his free time, Carlos enjoys riding his road bike through the hills in the Bay Area, playing soccer, rock climbing, and going out for salsa dancing.

Kyndall Nicholas, University of Pennsylvania

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Kyndall Nicholas, born and raised in Maryland, received her Bachelor's degree in biochemistry with a minor in psychology from Hampton University. During that time, she was a Division I volleyball player, in which her interests were piqued around the impact of lifestyle choices on medical outcomes of sports-related injuries. After graduating, she completed a year of NIH-PREP at Johns Hopkins, at The Lieber Institute, where she first experienced therapy-driven research. This led her to pursue her doctoral thesis at the University of Pennsylvania, which investigates nutrition and traumatic brain injury damage, specifically lipid-based prophylactics. Inspired by her work, Kyndall yearns for a career in biotechnology that explores the potential of lipids in therapeutics and pushes beyond the boundaries of protein-based therapies. Outside of spending long periods of time researching the health benefits of food in grocery aisles, she likes to explore different cuisines, read, and play anything that is competitive.

Howard Nicholson III, Columbia University

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Howard Nicholson III is a fourth-year PhD candidate at Columbia University and a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow, specializing in tissue engineering and regenerative medicine. His research focuses on understanding how bleeding within the knee joint affects ligament healing, with the broader goal of optimizing treatments to reduce long-term joint damage following trauma. Howard holds a Master of Philosophy and Master of Science in Biomedical Engineering, and a Bachelor of Science in Chemical Engineering from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County where he was a Meyerhoff, HHMI and MARC U*STAR Scholar.

Beyond the lab, Howard is deeply committed to advancing health equity and increasing representation in biotech. He supports early-stage life science ventures as part of the Nucleate leadership team and previously served as the DEI chair for the Engineering Graduate Student Council. In his free time, Howard enjoys training for the NYC Marathon with his goldendoodle, spending time with friends, traveling, surfing, reading, and attending concerts.

Francine Nihozeko Haswell, UT Health Science Center at San Antonio

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Francine Nihozeko-Haswell is a fourth-year PhD student in the Cancer Biology discipline at UT Health San Antonio. Her dissertation research focuses on investigating the epigenetic mechanisms underlying leukemia development. Prior to graduate school, Francine spent two years working in a stem cell research laboratory at Yale University, which sparked and deepened her passion for biomedical research and scientific discovery. Francine earned her undergraduate degree from St. Lawrence University, a small liberal arts college in upstate New York, where she majored in Biophysics and minored in Mathematics. During her time there, Francine studied abroad in Australia, where she developed a strong appreciation for the country's rich culture and history. Outside the lab, Francine is actively involved in student organizations that allow her to give back to the student community. At home, she enjoys spending time with her husband, Henry Haswell IV. Together, they love playing board games, cooking, traveling, exercising, and taking ballroom dance lessons.

Joseph Ogbede PhD, Harvard University

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Joseph Uche Ogbede is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Boston Children's Hospital and Harvard Medical School. His current work is on developing mRNA and peptide therapeutics for multiple myeloma and retinal vascular diseases. He earned his PhD in Genome Science and Technology from the University of British Columbia, Canada, where he applied chemical genomics tools to reveal cellular responses to small molecule drugs and toxins. Joseph also holds an MSc in Medical Genetics and Genomics from the University of Glasgow UK, and a BTech in Biochemistry from the Federal University of Technology Owerri, Nigeria. His research interest includes signaling pathways and using molecular and cellular tools to identify targets and drug candidates. In his free time, he enjoys science outreach, mentoring, and outdoor activities.

Emmanuel Ojo, Southern Illinois University, School of Medicine

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Emmanuel Ojo is a dedicated scientist specializing in Neuroimmunology, Neurodegeneration, and therapeutic discovery. He holds a First-Class Bachelor's and a Master's degree in Pharmacology from the University of Lagos, Nigeria, and is currently completing his PhD in Pharmacology and Neuroscience at Southern Illinois University School of Medicine. His research focuses on the molecular mechanisms of neuroinflammation and brain aging, with a strong emphasis on identifying therapeutic targets for Alzheimer's disease and investigating the CNS-metabolic axis. Emmanuel has hands-on expertise in both in vivo and in vitro methodologies, including protein and nucleic acid assays, flow cytometry, high-content imaging, and cell culture.

Beyond academic excellence, Emmanuel demonstrates a strong commitment to scientific innovation and community engagement. He has presented his research at multiple symposia, earning top honors for his scientific communication. With a passion for translational science, he brings a results-driven mindset and a collaborative approach to multidisciplinary teams. He aspires to become a senior scientist in discovery or translational biology; however, he is curious to learn from the SMDP program and open to learning and taking up challenges in new roles. His broader mission is to contribute meaningfully to advancing innovations in biomedical research and fostering collaboration across scientific disciplines. Outside of his academic and professional pursuits, he enjoys watching football, cooking and exploring new cuisines.

Mary Pearl Ojukwu, University of Florida College of Pharmacy

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Mary-Pearl Ojukwu is a third-year PharmD candidate at the University of Florida College of Pharmacy with a strong interest in clinical research, oncology, cardiometabolic disease and personalized medicine. She earned her Bachelor's of Science in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology with a minor in Bioinformatics from Lincoln University of Pennsylvania. Her diverse pharmacy experiences span hospital, retail and industry settings, including a recent internship as an Oncology Clinical Scientist at Johnson and Johnson. She is a proud inductee of the National Pharmacy Honors Society (Rho Chi) and National Pharmacy Leadership Society (Phi Lambda Sigma) recognizing her commitment to academic excellence and leadership in pharmacy.

Driven by a desire to contribute meaningfully to the industry, Mary-Pearl is eager to explore cross-functional opportunities that merge science, strategy and patient impact. She is passionate about translating complex science into meaningful insights and supporting informed decision-making with innovative medicines that improve lives worldwide. In her free time, she enjoys trying new recipes, biking outdoors and exploring new trails.

Chudi Okafor, University of Southern California

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Chudi Okafor is a third-year PharmD candidate at the USC Mann School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences with a strong background in oncology clinical research, pharmacovigilance, and healthcare innovation. He recently interned at Johnson & Johnson Innovative Medicine, where he supported early-phase clinical trials in prostate and solid tumor cancers, focusing on trial management and safety evaluation. He currently serves as an Innovation Intern at the USC Stevens Center for Innovation, analyzing patentability and commercial potential of novel technologies.

Chudi holds an MBA in Healthcare Administration from the University of Riverside and a Bachelor's degree in Parasitology and Entomology from Nnamdi Azikiwe University. His diverse experiences across clinical and business domains reflect a global and strategic approach to advancing patient-centered care. Outside of his professional pursuits, Chudi enjoys mentoring students and exploring applications of generative AI in healthcare.

Pelumi Oladipo, Wayne State University

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Pelumi Oladipo is a PhD candidate in Immunology and Microbiology at Wayne State University. She hails from Nigeria and earned a Bachelor's degree in Microbiology from the University of Lagos. Before beginning her graduate studies, Pelumi worked as a microbiologist for over 3 years, contributing to environmental and public health.

At Wayne State, her research focuses on improving the detection of bacterial and viral pathogens and studying mechanisms of bacterial pathogenesis. She serves as the American Society for Microbiology (ASM) Young Ambassador to Michigan and as a Graduate Ambassador of Wayne State University. Outside the lab, she enjoys cooking.

Tasnim Olatoke, University of Cincinnati College of Medicine

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Tasnim Olatoke is a Pharmacology and Physiology PhD candidate at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine. She has extensive experience in molecular biology, oncology, immunology, and drug discovery. Her dissertation research focuses on identifying and validating drug targets for mTORC1-associated tumors. Tasnim is passionate about translating research findings to real-world treatments. Her long-term goal is to develop transformative therapies that will improve patient care.

Tasnim's research has led to published papers in reputable journals, featured news articles, presentations at international biomedical conferences and several research recognition awards. She is committed to serving her community through volunteering, leadership, and mentoring. When not focused on bench-to-bedside research, Tasnim enjoys painting, watching soccer and exploring new places.

Teslim Olayiwola, Louisiana State University

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Teslim Olayiwola is a PhD candidate in Chemical Engineering at Louisiana State University with a minor in Computer Science. His research focuses on developing computational frameworks that integrate physics-based modeling, machine learning, and molecular simulations to advance electrochemical separations and material design. He has held data science internships at Dow Chemical and Corteva Agriscience, where he developed and deployed AI/ML frameworks for surfactant formulation and process optimization. His recent interests bridge AI/ML, computational chemistry and biotechnology, inspired by personal encounters with health challenges and a desire to improve therapeutic development through in-silico modeling.

Teslim holds a Master's degree in Petroleum Engineering from the African University of Science & Technology and a Bachelor's in Chemical Engineering from Ladoke Akintola University of Technology. He has also worked in industry roles in Nigeria and Saudi Arabia. Outside of research, Teslim is deeply committed to mentorship, community engagement, and science outreach. He has organized STEM programs for K–12 students, held multiple leadership roles at LSU, and founded LSU's first African Research Conference. He enjoys mentoring underrepresented students and exploring how technology can drive sustainability and equity in science.

Samuel Oyedele, Vanderbilt University

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Abiodun Samuel Oyedele is a dedicated PhD candidate in Chemistry at Vanderbilt University, specializing in microbial genome mining for bioactive secondary metabolites with a focus on antibiotic discovery. His research integrates chemistry, chemical biology, and machine learning to identify novel natural products, contributing to the fight against antibiotic resistance. With hands-on experience in aseptic cell culture/fermentation, bioactivity assays, and advanced analytical techniques like LC-MS/MS and NMR, Samuel (Sam) has a strong foundation in both experimental and bioinformatics approaches. His career aspirations include transitioning to an R&D role in the biotechnology industry, where he aims to drive innovation in drug discovery and development.

In his free time, Samuel, with his wife, enjoys immersing himself in Nashville & other cities within the US states, exploring local hiking trails, biking, and finding inspiration in both creativity and nature.

Isabela Ramirez Velez, The University of Texas at Austin

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Isabela Ramirez-Velez is a PhD candidate in Chemical Engineering at the University of Texas at Austin, where her research focuses on nanoparticle-based drug delivery systems for the oral delivery of protein therapeutics. She holds a dual Bachelor's degree in Chemical Engineering and Neuroscience from Syracuse University. Throughout her academic career, Isabela has spearheaded cross-functional collaborations, built her graduate laboratory and led the training of new students. Her work is grounded in translational research with the goal of advancing therapies that improve patient health outcomes.

Passionate about the intersection of innovation and patient-centered care, she is eager to contribute to impactful, collaborative work in the biopharmaceutical industry. She is also a dedicated advocate for broadening participation in STEM, having championed the creation of affinity communities to support underrepresented minorities and promote interdisciplinary collaboration. Outside the lab, she enjoys cooking, cycling, and spending time outdoors.

Gustavo Rios Delgado, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

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Gustavo Rios-Delgado grew up in Puerto Rico, where he obtained a Bachelor's degree in industrial biotechnology at the University of Puerto Rico in Mayaguez. He is currently a graduate student at Rutgers University. His research studies how the bacterial pathogen Staphylococcus aureus responds to iron limitation, a common stress encountered in the mammalian host. He has industry experience in a process development laboratory at the Eli Lilly PR05 plant in Puerto Rico. Additionally, he has obtained training in research commercialization and worked in the Rutgers technology transfer office.

Gustavo is dedicated to community outreach, which is showcased by his time as a Boy Scout, where he organized multiple service projects and achieved the highest rank of Eagle Scout. During his graduate studies, he has taken different leadership roles in the Society for the Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS) graduate organization. At SACNAS, he has organized outreach events for high school and undergraduate students to inform them about research careers and graduate school. During his free time, he enjoys watching sports and making fancy cocktails.

Yesenia Rivera Escobales, Ponce Health Sciences University

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Yesenia Rivera-Escobales was born and raised in Ponce, Puerto Rico. She has a Bachelor's degree from the University of Puerto Rico-Ponce Campus, a Master's in medical sciences, and currently is completing her PhD in Biomedical Sciences at Ponce Health Sciences University with a research focus on Neuroscience. Over the past 6 years, she has been devoted to the design, conduction and analysis of experiments that will aid in the understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder and the neurobiology of stress.

Yesenia has also been involved in outreach activities promoting scientific knowledge and sharing her journey towards a PhD. She has had the opportunity to mentor high school, undergraduate, graduate and MD students. Yesenia collaborated as a mentor and evaluator with the Sagrado-MIT Neuroscience Program from 2020 to 2022 and the García Rinaldi Foundation. Currently, she is the outreach coordinator of the non-profit organization STEAM 100X35 which aims to highlight Puerto Rican women in STEAM by increasing their visibility using social media. In addition, she has been involved in science communication with a series.

Carlos Rivera Lopez, Harvard University

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Carlos Rivera-López is a fifth-year PhD candidate in Molecular and Cellular Biology at Harvard University, where he studies stem cell biology and regeneration. His research focuses on how adult pluripotent stem cells contribute to whole-body regeneration, combining molecular biology, imaging, and large-scale genomic approaches. Through collaborations across institutions, Carlos has co-authored multiple peer-reviewed publications and is currently leading a project that will result in his first-author paper.

Carlos is passionate about using his research background to drive innovation in the biotechnology industry - especially in developing regenerative therapies that improve patient outcomes. He's excited to be part of the SMDP-Biotech program to gain mentorship, learn about translational science, and better understand how to bring discoveries from the lab into real-world applications. Outside the lab, Carlos enjoys reading fiction books, running along the Charles River, and working to uplift Latinx voices in STEM through mentorship and outreach.

Mya Rodriguez, McGovern Medical School (UTHealth Houston GSBS)

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Mya Rodriguez is a third-year PhD Candidate in Neuroscience at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center UTHealth Houston Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences (GSBS). Her research focuses on investigating how neuronal autophagy differentially functions in distinct neuron types during aging. She studies this using the model organism C elegans and primary murine neuronal culture.

Mya grew up in the Rio Grande Valley, Texas and earned her BA in Psychology with a minor in Philosophy from Texas A&M International University in 2020. She then received her MS from Angelo State University in Experimental Psychology with a focus in Behavioral Neuroscience in the Spring of 2022. She joined the GSBS in the Fall of 2022 and is set to graduate in December of 2027. After graduating, Mya would like to transition into industry at a biotechnology company working on therapeutics for neurodegenerative diseases.

Mya's hobbies and interests include playing indoor and sand volleyball, cooking, watching sitcoms, and spending quality time with her friends and family.

Ingrid Rodriguez Aragon, University of Minnesota Twin Cities

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Ingrid R Aragon is a 5th year PhD candidate at the University of Minnesota in the Integrative Biology and Physiology program. Her research focuses on integrating molecular biology and computational approaches to study the cell fate decision making process in response to DNA damage in human breast cancer cell models. Prior to her PhD, Ingrid completed her undergraduate studies in human physiology and later pursued a Master's degree in bioinformatics and computational biology at the University of Minnesota. During this time, she worked in a computational chemistry lab, applying computer aided drug design techniques to develop a protein model and explore protein–ligand interactions for drug discovery. Beyond her research, Ingrid is passionate about giving back to the community and actively engages in leadership initiatives on her campus.

In her free time, Ingrid loves spending time with family and friends, watching K-dramas and comedy skits, and taking long walks through parks along the Mississippi River.

Luis Rodriguez Rodriguez, Univ of Texas Southwestern Medical Center

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Luis Rodríguez-Rodríguez is a PhD student originally from Toa Alta, Puerto Rico. Most of his upbringing was spent in Puerto Rico, where he studied microbiology at the University of Puerto Rico, Arecibo Campus. Upon finishing his undergraduate degree, he moved to Athens, Georgia, to study Influenza A virus-host interactions as an NIH-PREP scholar in the lab of Perez-Rajao at the University of Georgia. Currently, he is a 4th year PhD student in the Molecular Microbiology Program at UT Southwestern Medical Center. His research focuses on performing functional metagenomic selections to uncover and characterize new defense systems in bacteria to protect themselves against phage attack.

Luis has many passions that he likes to pursue outside of the lab. He loves running during the summer, going out with friends, and dancing to Latin music. He is a big fan of going to house-tech DJ sets around the US. He has two dogs, Harvey and Coquito, who have been some of his biggest supporters while pursuing his PhD.

Jennifer Rubio PhD, University of Southern California

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Jennifer Rubio is a biomedical scientist with nearly 10 years' experience infectious diseases and translational research. After earning her Master of Science in Biological Sciences at Cal Poly Pomona, she completed her PhD at the University of Southern California in Infectious Diseases, Immunology, and Pathogenesis. Jennifer has extensive communication, teaching, and training experience. She approaches every situation with patience, creativity, and a positive attitude.

As a first-generation Latina in science who has benefited from diversity-promoting mentorship programs, Jennifer developed a passion for outreach and mentoring. She has been committed to promoting diversity in higher education and STEM, as well as mentoring and empowering students as they navigate the challenges of academia. Over the last 8 years, she has mentored more than 25 junior research scientists with a primary focus on empowering and guiding professional development of individuals from underrepresented minority groups or minority-serving institutions. Her mission to promote diversity has been driven by the philosophy that once you become empowered, it is then your duty to empower someone else. A Los Angeles native, Jennifer enjoys baking, crafts, and all things cat-related.

Kevin Ruiz Marquez, Vanderbilt University

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Kevin J Ruiz-Márquez is a fourth-year PhD candidate in Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering at Vanderbilt University. His research focuses on metabolic engineering and biomanufacturing strategies to enhance therapeutic protein production in Chinese hamster ovary (CHO) cells. In collaboration with industry leaders such as Merck & Co, Johnson & Johnson Innovative Medicine, and Asimov, Kevin investigates the role of key mitochondrial regulators in rewiring cellular metabolism to improve bioproduction performance. He brings expertise in both wet-lab and computational approaches, has co-authored peer-reviewed publications, and has contributed to training scientists in advanced metabolomics techniques.

Kevin earned a Bachelor of Science in Chemical Engineering with honors from the University of Puerto Rico–Mayagüez, where he also completed a minor in Pharmaceutical Engineering. Before graduate school, he gained valuable research experience through a summer REU at Miami University, where he studied protein remodeling mechanisms of molecular chaperones. He also completed a year-long undergraduate Co-Op with Amgen in Process Development for Drug Substance, further solidifying his passion for innovation in the biopharmaceutical industry. He is a recipient of several prestigious fellowships, including the Hispanic Scholarship Fund (HSF) Scholarship and the Vanderbilt University Provost Graduate Fellowship. Committed to mentorship in STEM, Kevin has mentored four undergraduate students and one high school student, helping to guide the next generation of scientists. Outside the lab, Kevin enjoys exploring new restaurants with his wife, spending time with their two dogs, and watching sports - particularly baseball.

Lindsey Russ, Georgetown University

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Lindsey Russ, native to Raleigh, North Carolina, is a third-year doctoral candidate in Georgetown's Pharmacology and Physiology program. Lindsey graduated from North Carolina State University in 2022 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Biological Sciences and a minor in Biomanufacturing. Previous to her graduate studies, Lindsey worked as an undergraduate researcher in the Marsden Lab where the goal of her project was to understand the molecular pathways and proteins that are affected by increased toxicity as it pertains to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). The work was critical for investigating how cyanotoxin mixtures interact in vivo to affect protein dysregulation and therefore should be included when assessing the role of cyanotoxins in ALS and neurodegeneration. Additionally, Lindsey contributed to a general genotyping pipeline to identify zebrafish carrying cyfip2 mutations to identify how cyfip2 regulates the innate startle threshold which is critical to understanding how startle dysfunction likely manifests in mental health disorders in

humans. Lindsey also became a STAR U Fellow at Columbia University and developed an independent project that focused on the effect of anti-VEGF treatments on caspase-9 expression in post-mortem human retinas.

Currently, Lindsey is investigating the local circuitry between subpopulations in the pedunculopontine nucleus (PPN), a heterogenous brainstem structure involved in an array of functions including learning, arousal, motivation, and locomotion. Using whole-cell patch clamp electrophysiology–recording the electrical activity of neurons - Lindsey aims to dissect the local connectivity that exists between the cell types in the PPN with the hopes of getting closer to finding a reliable target to treat movement disorders.

Lindsey is passionate about science communication and wants to help break down the barrier of misinformation and mistrust harbored by underrepresented groups. In Lindsey's free time, she enjoys exploring the DMV's food scene, spending quality time with friends, playing basketball, all alongside her identical twin sister!

Cristian Saez Gonzalez, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine

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Cristian J Sáez-González is a PhD candidate in the Biochemistry, Cellular, and Molecular Biology (BCMB) program at Johns Hopkins University, specializing in Cell Biology. Born and raised in Puerto Rico, Cristian earned his Bachelor's degree in Industrial Biotechnology from the University of Puerto Rico - Mayaguez, where he also gained industry experience working on diagnostic tools and antibody validation at CDI Labs. He currently uses synthetic biology to explore the intricate world of signaling networks and biological processes, with his research focusing on how microtubule post-translational modifications regulate directed cell migration. His work has led to multiple publications and presentations at national and international conferences, contributing to the broader understanding of cell motility in health and disease. Additionally, he has collaborated internationally through the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) program.

Beyond research, Cristian is deeply committed to promoting diversity and inclusion in STEM. He has held leadership roles on the BCMB Policy Committee and the IDEA Team at Johns Hopkins and has mentored students from diverse backgrounds. He has also applied his problem-solving skills in healthcare strategy competitions, tackling real-world challenges. Outside the lab, Cristian stays active through fitness and enjoys playing sports, especially baseball, tennis, and volleyball. These activities help him stay balanced and energized while continuing to grow as a scientist and mentor.

Alison Salinas, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai

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Alison Salinas is a second-year PhD student in the Neuroscience program at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. She earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Biology with a minor in Psychology from the University of Hartford. She graduated summa cum laude with University Honors, completing both a thesis and an oral defense. Following graduation, she completed a Post-Baccalaureate Research Education Program (PREP), where she expanded her research experience in a molecular biology lab in the Neuroscience Department at UMass Chan Medical School.

Alison worked as a certified nursing assistant, where she developed a deep interest in neuroscience. This experience inspired her to pursue a PhD in Neuroscience in order to better understand neurodegenerative diseases. She began her research journey during her sophomore year in college in a neurodevelopmental lab. She has continued to evolve, culminating in her current thesis work investigating the role of the Alzheimer's disease risk gene APOE4 on neural stem cell development and behavior. Outside the lab, Alison enjoys spending her free time cooking and baking, exercising, and spending time with family.

Leeza Santiago Millan, Harvard Medical School

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Leeza Santiago Millán is a PhD candidate in the Biological and Biomedical Sciences program at Harvard Medical School, conducting her research at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. Her work focuses on the "dark genome," particularly long non-coding RNAs, and their roles in regulating stem cell identity and disease pathology, including cancer and bone marrow failure. Originally from Fajardo, Puerto Rico, Leeza is a first-generation college graduate with an undergraduate degree in Biology from the University of Puerto Rico at Humacao. Throughout her academic journey, Leeza has been recognized for her commitment to scientific excellence and inclusion, earning awards such as the HHMI Gilliam Fellowship and the Hope Scholarship from Harvard University. She was also named one of the Ten Outstanding Young People of Puerto Rico. In addition to her academic work, Leeza served as an analyst for MassBio Drive's startup accelerator, where she evaluated the scientific and commercial potential of early-stage biotech companies.

Outside of her research, Leeza is passionate about bridging science and community through accessibility. She has served as Director of Admissions for the Health Professions Recruitment & Exposure Program at Harvard Medical School, is a co-founder of the New England Latinx Symposium, and has been a long-standing member of the planning committee for the New England Science Symposium, which supports over 300 trainees each year. As a Puerto Rican, you can get on Leeza's good side through singing, dancing, and yapping, especially when coffee is involved.

Fatemeh Seilani, University of Kentucky

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Fatemeh Seilani is a 4th year PhD candidate in Toxicology and Cancer Biology at the University of Kentucky, where she conducts translational cancer research. Her primary research focuses on the role of Plk1-mediated BRN2 phosphorylation in promoting neuroendocrine differentiation and metastasis in prostate cancer. Fatemeh has also investigated the CXCL16/CXCR6 axis as a mechanism of Enzalutamide resistance in castration resistance prostate cancer patients. On another project, she is exploring the contribution of WNT signaling to prostate tumor progression and invasion using genetically engineered mouse models.

Prior to her PhD, Fatemeh earned her MSc in Food Safety and Hygiene from Tehran University of Medical Sciences, where she studied environmental carcinogen exposure. Her scientific foundation spans molecular biology, in vivo models, and analytical chemistry. She aspires to advance personalized medicine through innovative research that bridges academic discovery and clinical application. Outside of the lab, she enjoys doing yoga, playing with her cat, and exploring different cuisines.

Adenike Shittu, University of Cincinnati and Cincinnati Children's Hospital

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Adenike Shittu is a PhD candidate in the Molecular and Developmental Biology program jointly offered by the University of Cincinnati and Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. Her research utilizes novel genomic assays and next-generation sequencing (NGS) technologies to investigate how key transcription factors drive epigenetic modifications and transcriptional control in rapid immune responses in human memory T cells. Originally from Nigeria, Adenike earned her B.Sc in Microbiology from Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria and her MSc in Molecular Biology and Biochemistry from Bowling Green State University. Alongside her academic training, she contributed to therapeutic development as a Drug Development Intern at Eli Lilly and Company, where she applied her scientific and technical expertise to real-world challenges in drug discovery.

Adenike's skills span molecular biology, genomics, drug discovery and development, and science communication, to which she actively contributes through professional scientific organizations. She is currently expanding her expertise in regulatory affairs through the Global Regulatory Affairs graduate certificate program at the James L. Winkle College of Pharmacy, University of Cincinnati. She aspires to leverage her scientific background and growing expertise in regulatory affairs to help bring new therapies to market and facilitate the drug approval process. In her free time, Adenike enjoys photography, sewing, and hiking.

Nicolas Silva, University of Texas at El Paso

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Nicolas Daniel Silva, also known as "Nico" is an Interdisciplinary researcher, practitioner, artist, musician, and policy worker. He earned a Bachelor of Science with a focus in Neuroscience, a Master of Social Work on Full Scholarship, a Master of Science in Biology and Gender Studies, and has completed the coursework of two PhD programs, Interdisciplinary Health Sciences (Public Health, Social Work, Neuroengineering) and Biosciences (Neurosciences). His next goal is to apply to MD, PhD and DO, PhD programs. He is a New York University Faculty First Look Scholar and Visiting Affiliate at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. He also is proud to be a University College London Global Arts in Medicine Fellow, and Society for Neuroscience "NSP" Scholar.

Nicolas is excited to soon publish two book chapters in Palgrave Macmillan and Springer Nature. Outside of academia, Nico is a promoter and supporter of local museums, artists, musicians, and non-profits such as La Nube, El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso Pro Musica, and El Paso Symphony Orchestra. He believes that art gives us ideas and vision while science can help us understand how to change the world for the better, for all.

Tayler Smith, Indiana University Indianapolis

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Tayler B Smith is a predoctoral student in Medical and Molecular Genetics at the Indiana University School of Medicine (IUSM) studying how genetic variations influence drug response. She has gained an expertise in pharmacogenomics, bioinformatics, and clinical informatics through her work in determining patients' pharmacogenomics and identifying genetic variants that are associated with drug toxicity. She is dedicated to improving patient outcomes by advancing personalized medicine. Upon completing her doctorate, Tayler plans to apply her expertise in pharmacogenomics and clinical informatics in a real-world evidence team.

Outside of the laboratory, Tayler enjoys adventure and serving her fellow graduate students, Indiana University Indianapolis, and the Indianapolis community at large. Her dedication to improving the graduate student experience earned her the 2024-2025 Spratt Leadership Award for her work leading the Graduate and Professional Student Government Stipends Committee. Additionally, she loves spinning to her favorite tunes while indoor cycling.

Judith Sokei, Washington University School of Medicine

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Judith Sokei is a trained Pharmacist from Nigeria with a Master of Science in Molecular Biology and Biotechnology from the Pan African University, Kenya. She is currently a 5th-year PhD candidate in the Cancer Biology program at Washington University in St. Louis, where her research focuses on understanding metabolic dependencies in Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML) and identifying novel therapeutic targets. Judith has extensive international and multi-sector experience spanning hospital practice, biomedical research, biotech consulting, and market intelligence. Her academic and professional journey has equipped her with strong scientific expertise, strategic thinking, data analysis skills (R, Python), science communication, and project management capabilities. She looks forward to applying these strengths to help organizations drive innovation, accelerate therapeutic development, and achieve meaningful impact in healthcare.

Judith aspires to bridge her scientific knowledge with business strategy to ensure that innovative treatments not only emerge from research but also reach the patients who need them most. She is interested in roles that combine her passion for scientific research and business management - such as clinical development, medical affairs, business development, and commercial strategy - but remains eager to learn about and explore new opportunities through the SMDP program. Judith has a proven track record of excellence and has received multiple academic and leadership awards, including a 2-year grant from the American Society of Hematology (ASH). Outside of her research, Judith is deeply committed to mentorship and has facilitated several local and international educational initiatives. She enjoys public speaking, traveling, event planning, theater arts, and supporting efforts that empower the next generation of scientists.

Yanilka Soto Muniz, University of California, San Francisco

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Yanilka Y. Soto-Muñiz earned her Bachelor's degree in Cellular and Molecular Biology from the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras, where she was also a fellow in the NIH-ENDURE program. Through this program, she gained early research experience studying the biology of drug addiction and completed internships at Princeton University and the University of California, San Diego. These experiences shaped her interest in the molecular mechanisms underlying neurological diseases and led her to pursue a PhD in Neuroscience at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) in 2020. She is a PhD candidate focusing on how neuronal energy metabolism is regulated and how its disruption may contribute to neurodegeneration, using a combination of cellular models and bioinformatics approaches.

Beyond her research, Yanilka is passionate about mentorship and science outreach. At UCSF, she has served in a variety of leadership roles, including as director of Brain Camp, a program that introduces Bay Area high school students to neuroscience. As she approaches the end of her PhD, she is interested in applying her scientific training to industry settings. Outside the lab, she enjoys running, exploring new restaurants, and traveling.

Camille Stevenson, University of Cincinnati

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Camille Stevenson is currently a 5th year Cancer & Cell Biology PhD candidate at the University of Cincinnati. She received her Bachelor of Science in Biology with a concentration in Cell and Molecular Biology and Chemistry minor from Tennessee State University in 2020. Her research is on elucidating the mechanisms underlying the progression of metabolic dysfunction-associated steatohepatitis (MASH), specifically focusing on liver cell metabolism, mitochondrial function, and cell death. She is looking forward to obtaining a translational research career in the biotech industry.

As a first-generation college student, Camille is passionate about the success of underrepresented students and promoting diversity in science. She has served on the E-board for the UC Black Biomedical Graduates organization for three years and has mentored minority students from the Society for the Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS), Postbaccalaureate Research Education Program (PREP), and her graduate program. Outside of her work, Camille enjoys running, cooking, and serving with her church.

Ishana Syed, UT Health San Antonio

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Ishana Syed is a PhD candidate in Biomedical Science at UT Health San Antonio, where her research focuses on the role of RNA-binding proteins in neurodevelopment and Alzheimer's disease. She holds a BS in Neuroscience from UT Austin and has completed post-baccalaureate training at the University of Michigan. In addition to her academic work, Ishana serves in a leadership role at Enventure, a student-led life science consulting and business development organization, and has worked as a licensed mortgage broker, applying her analytical and business acumen across diverse fields.

Passionate about innovation at the intersection of science and business, Ishana is currently developing an AI-driven multi-omic data integration platform to accelerate therapeutic discovery. In her free time, she enjoys painting, exploring new cities, and hosting friends for home-cooked meals.

Morgan Thomas, Brown University

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Morgan Thomas is a PhD Candidate in the Neuroscience Graduate Program at Brown University. Her research focuses on developing a novel split-luciferase-based Drosophila model to study huntingtin aggregation in Huntington's disease. Morgan earned her BS in Neuroscience from Oberlin College in 2019, where she investigated gene-toxicant interactions involving Huntington's disease and cadmium exposure. She has previously received support from the University of Texas Health San Antonio Neuroscience T32 training grant and is deeply committed to advancing translational research in neurodegenerative disorders.

In addition to her research, Morgan is passionate about mentoring students and engaging others in science through conversation and outreach. She also enjoys reading, cooking, and baking - especially experimenting with new creations in the kitchen.

Jeury Veloz, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai

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Jeury (He/Him/His) is a PhD candidate at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, where he studies the innate immune response to arthritogenic mosquito-borne viruses like Chikungunya virus and Mayaro virus in a primary human macrophage model. In addition to his thesis work, Jeury has led multiple projects in industry and collaborative academic research consortiums, which has increased his interest in developing antivirals and vaccines against emerging and reemerging viral threats. After his PhD, he hopes to continue pursuing these research interests in the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries.

Jeury grew up in Brooklyn, NYC and graduated with a Bachelor's degree in biology from the City College of New York (CUNY). He has a passion for mentoring and is an active participant in BioBus, a community education lab that provides science education to NYC K-12 and college students. Outside of the lab, Jeury enjoys travel and plays shortstop for the New York Groove, an amateur baseball team part of NYC's growing sandlot baseball community.

Courtney Wallace, Drexel University College of Medicine

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Courtney Wallace is a 4th year PhD candidate in Biomedical Sciences at Drexel University College of Medicine. Her research focuses on investigating epigenetic mechanisms that participate in HIV control within the myeloid population. Additionally, she is interested in the potential role for Benzodiazepines to drive viral reactivation via epigenetic reprogramming within this system.

Prior to her current role as a doctoral student, Courtney completed a Bachelor of Science in Molecular and Cell Biology at the University of Connecticut in 2018 as well as a Master of Science in Biology at Saint Joseph's University in 2021. Through her many years of research training, Courtney has developed a strong interest in translational science and is eager to begin her career in the biotechnology industry, where she hopes to apply her technical expertise in epigenetics and infectious disease to early-stage therapeutic development. Her long-term career goals include roles that involve client engagement and communication within the biotechnology and pharmaceutical spaces, where she can translate complex scientific information into clear, accessible insights for diverse audiences.

During her free time, Courtney enjoys cooking, reading, and visiting with friends and family.

Kory Wells, Emory University

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Kory is a first-generation college graduate with a Chemistry/Pre-Med major and a Biology minor and as a DNIMAS scholar from Norfolk State University. After graduating from a HBCU, Kory matriculated into Emory's Cancer Biology PhD Program where he wanted to combine his previous knowledge of materials research with biomedicine. As a PhD candidate in the Cancer Biology program at Emory University, Kory joined a surgical nanomedicine lab that focuses on the development of novel nanoparticles for cancer therapy. His work focuses on the intersection of nanotechnology and immunotherapy, specifically developing nanoparticle-based strategies to enhance CAR-T cell function and improve therapeutic outcomes in solid tumors.

Kory is working to become a translational-scientist, hoping to bridge laboratory research with diagnosis and treatment of patients with a goal of improving therapeutic efficacy in cancer while also looking to improve the patient's quality of life. As a first-generation college graduate, Kory is deeply committed to exploring diverse career pathways, maximizing the breadth of his academic and research training, and ultimately contributing to the development of future scientists by sharing the knowledge and insights he has acquired through his own journey. Outside the lab, he enjoys mentoring, dancing, exploring new cities, and spending time with family and friends.

Roger White, Rochester University

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Roger is a sixth-year graduate student at the University of Rochester. His research focuses on early germline development utilizing Drosophila melanogaster as a model. He received his BS in Biology at Bridgewater College, where he was also an All-Conference defensive lineman for their football team. Roger enjoys powerlifting and baking in his free time, particularly sourdough bread and cinnamon rolls.

Sydney Wimberley, Georgia Institute of Technology

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Sydney Wimberley earned her Bachelor's in Chemical Engineering from the University of Connecticut and her Master's in Bioengineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology. Currently, she is a Bioengineering PhD candidate at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Her research specialty encompasses drug delivery using protein-based vehicles for targeting applications. More specifically, she is working on the design of self-assembled protein nanoparticles for vaccine applications.

In her downtime, Sydney enjoys traveling, collecting, and brewing various varieties of coffee.

Cydney Wong, Georgia Institute of Technology & Emory University

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Cydney Wong earned her BS in Biological Engineering with a minor in Women and Gender Studies from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2020. She is currently pursuing her PhD in Biomedical Engineering at the Georgia Institute of Technology and Emory University, where she studies ocular biomechanics and gene expression. Her research focuses on the structural and molecular changes in eye tissues implicated in glaucoma - the leading cause of irreversible blindness worldwide.

In addition to her thesis work, Cydney is passionate about science communication and addressing health disparities. Her internship at Genentech in Ophthalmology Biomarker Development inspired her to pursue a career in industry, where she hopes to help translate scientific discovery into real-world solutions.

In her free time, Cydney enjoys practicing yoga and spending time with her dog, Nutmeg.