Welcome YCA 2021 Fellows!
**Lanazha Belfield** is a fourth-year doctoral candidate in the Molecular and Cellular Biosciences PhD program with a concentration in Molecular Medicine and Translational Science at Wake Forest School of Medicine. Her passions include research, academia, and mentorship. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Biology with a minor in Physics from Winston-Salem State University as a Chancellor's Scholar (full academic scholarship). While there she participated in various research programs like MARC U*STAR, SRIP Ram Scholars and IBS-REU providing her with the tools and research experience to matriculate directly into her PhD program. During her time at WSSU, she presented at numerous conferences to improve scientific communication and scientific exposure. To provide scientific exposure, she coordinated graduate/professional school panels for WSSU students and provided elementary and middle school students the opportunity to perform scientific experiments. She continues to provide exposure during her graduate school career. She serves on her departmental executive and School Honors Grievance Committee. Her thesis work focuses on the glucocorticoid response during muscle wasting and recovery to improve the long-term functional outcomes of critically ill patients. Her long-term career goal is to become a professor at a predominantly undergraduate institution and provide minority students with the tools and opportunities to directly matriculate into graduate education while increasing scientific literacy and education in the minority community. In essence, she is committed to the improvement of student learning, the enhancement of student creativity, and the cultivation of great leaders beyond the classroom setting.

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**Cristhian Calo** is a fourth-year PhD candidate in the Department of Physiology at the University of Puerto Rico, Medical Sciences Campus. He obtained his bachelor's degree in Biotechnology from the Universidad del Este in Puerto Rico. As an undergraduate, he worked elucidating hypothalamic cells' proteomic changes after exposure to anabolic steroids. Furthermore, he participated in the Summer Research Opportunity Program (SROP) at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign studying inflammatory processes after a mild Traumatic Brain Injury. He is interested in the nervous system, especially neuronal physiology, and behavior. For this reason, in 2018, he joined the laboratory of Dr. Carlos Jiménez Rivera, in which he works on substance dependence from an electrophysiological level. Specifically, he works on substance dependence from an electrophysiological level in which he works on substance dependence from an electrophysiological level. In this research, he also looks to elucidate if these changes in intrinsic properties and excitability of VTA's dopaminergic neurons are due to associative processes, which may be related to the pathological learning process of dependence. His ultimate career goal is to work at an academic institution as a professor conducting research in pathophysiology of degenerative diseases that involve
Marjorine Castillo is a sixth-year Developmental Psychology doctoral student at The Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY). She is also a Diversity Supplement Research Fellow at The New York State Psychiatric Institute through the Environmental influences on Child Health Outcomes (ECHO) Program NIH. She received her Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts in Psychology from Hunter College, CUNY. She was born in New York City and raised in Washington Heights, NY (in Little Dominican Republic). Her own experiences as the daughter of Dominican immigrants cultivated a strong desire to pursue a research career focused on how cultural experiences shape the mental and psychological health of racially and ethnically diverse youth and their families in the US. Current work includes her dissertation, under Dr. Erika Y. Niwa’s guidance, which explores acculturation from childhood to young adulthood and psychological stress among Puerto Rican youth in the US and Puerto Rico. Another project, under Dr. Cristiane S. Duarte’s leadership, examines the intergenerational relationship between parental acculturation and their child’s neurodevelopment and well-being among the racially and socioeconomically diverse ECHO cohorts. She enjoys teaching and mentoring to develop critical thinking skills and empower them to achieve their academic aspirations. Her long-term career goal at the moment is to become a tenure track university professor who utilizes an interdisciplinary, social justice framework in her teaching, mentoring, and research. Marjorine likes to cook, bake, and do arts and craft with her husband, family, and friends.

Crystal Colón Ortiz was born and raised in Puerto Rico and presently is a fourth-year doctoral candidate in the Department of Pathology and Cell Biology at Columbia University Irving Medical Center. She earned her Bachelor of Science degree in general biology from the University of Puerto Rico at Cayey, where she conducted studies in neuroscience. Afterward, she participated in the Postbaccalaureate Research Education Program (PREP) at Case Western Reserve University, where she worked in the laboratory of Dr. Johannes vonLintig, studying the biochemical basis of vitamin A production. Crystal’s thesis work, in the lab of Dr. Carol Troy, is focused on understanding the role of caspases in a retinal model of neurovascular injury. During her graduate trajectory, she has been awarded the NSF-Graduate Research Fellowship Program, the Association for the American Advancement of Science (AAAS) Program for Excellence in Science, and the Society for Neuroscience (SfN) Trainee Professional Development Award. To support the graduate journey of underrepresented minorities and to create a space for all graduate students to learn about social injustices, Crystal co-founded and co-directs the Graduate Initiative for Diversity (GID) at Columbia. In the future, she aspires to be an established principal investigator and an academic institution. She also looks forward to mentoring underrepresented minorities and working towards a more inclusive environment in STEM.
Bianca Espinosa is a fifth-year Chemistry PhD candidate at the University of Southern California, a National Science Foundation GRFP fellow, and a National Institutes of Health T32 trainee. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry in 2016 from California State University, Fullerton, where she worked as a medicinal chemistry undergraduate researcher. Now as a graduate student with a focus in chemical biology, her research centers on developing covalent, small molecule probes to target proteins pertaining to diverse pathologies from cancer to COVID-19. Beyond her research interests, Bianca demonstrates her commitment to increasing college retention of underrepresented students through mentorship and the establishment of a scholarship for minorities in STEM. In her personal life, Bianca enjoys climbing, painting, and fostering rescue dogs.

Jose J. Gorbea Colón is a fifth-year biochemistry and molecular biophysics PhD candidate at the University of Pennsylvania. He earned his bachelor’s degree in Biology at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras campus. During his undergraduate career, Jose was awarded an NIH-RISE fellowship (2013-2015), an NIH BP-ENDURE fellowship (2015-2017), and now, as a graduate student, he was awarded an NSF Graduate Research Fellowship in 2019. As an NSF fellow, his current research at the Murakami Lab focuses on elucidating the structural and mechanistic bases underlying transcription initiation in eukaryotes. Jose is also passionate about diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in academia, and has worked closely with the Office for Research in Diversity Training at Penn and student organizations including the Penn SACNAS Chapter, which he Co-Chaired in 2019-2020. Outside of academia, Jose enjoys cooking, gardening, martial arts, scientific illustration, and photography.

Casey Imperio is a sixth-year PhD candidate in the Psychology: Behavioral and Cognitive Neuroscience Program at CUNY The Graduate Center. She earned both her undergraduate and master’s degrees in Psychology at James Madison University, where her research focus was on false memory formation in older and younger adults. She also spent time in an animal research lab working with ADHD models of rats. Her current research focuses on the neural basis of metamemory processes in episodic and semantic tasks. Specifically, she uses a form of non-invasive brain stimulation, called transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS), in attempts to elucidate the role of the prefrontal cortex in these processes. Her hope is that this research will lay the foundation for treatments using tDCS in people with metamemory and memory issues. Casey loves mentoring undergraduate and graduate students, and teaching them how to become researchers in the fields of cognitive psychology and neuroscience. In her free time, Casey is an avid cook and likes to play video games with her husband and dachshund, Roscoe.
Amanda Christine Maldonado is a fourth-year doctoral candidate at the University of Illinois, Chicago (UIC) in the Medicinal Chemistry Program. She is originally from Miami, Florida, where she obtained her Associates of Arts (Chemistry) from Miami Dade College. She received her Bachelor of Science in Chemistry, with a focus in organic synthesis, as a Ronald E. McNair Scholar from Florida International University. Recently, she was awarded the T32 NIH Fellowship to aid in her research interests in Natural Products and Women’s Health. Her doctoral dissertation will focus on elucidating the mechanism of action of a fungal metabolite in high-grade serous ovarian cancer. This work will help to identify novel therapeutics approved for use in high-grade serous ovarian cancer. Her other projects include investigating the role of metabolites produced from cyanobacteria in decreasing metastasis in high-grade serous ovarian cancer and screening novel Natural Products that may have bioactivity in cancer cell lines. Outside of her research, Amanda serves as the President for the Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS) Graduate Chapter at UIC and volunteers with the ChickTech Organization to engage middle and high school girls in technology and science. Amanda’s long-term interests lie in women’s health, community engagement, and mentoring to increase minority participation in STEM fields. She loves to work out and go hiking in the National Parks and is an enthusiastic foodie.

Jose Ortiz is a sixth-year doctoral candidate in Biology at the Irell & Manella Graduate School of Biological Sciences at the Beckman Research Institute within the City of Hope National Medical Center. He is a DACA recipient and originally from Tijuana, Mexico. Jose obtained his undergraduate degree in Molecular, Cell, and Developmental Biology (MCDB) at the University of California – Los Angeles in 2015. While at UCLA, Jose completed his thesis work studying latent HIV establishment and virus evolution during acute infection in patients undergoing antiretroviral treatment. He then won a pre-doctoral Ford Fellowship award in 2016. At the Beckman Research Institute, Jose joined the laboratory of Dr. Hsun Teresa Ku to study pancreas organ development and regeneration following injury. Specifically, Jose studies the role of Trefoil factor 2 (Tff2) during mammalian pancreas organ development to uncover new mechanisms regulating the production of insulin-producing beta cells. Due to his promising work Jose was admitted into the Future Leaders Advancing Research in Endocrinology (FLARE) program in 2020. After completing his PhD, Jose plans to pursue post-doctoral training in the field of regenerative medicine. His career goal is to work at an academic institution as a Professor and mentor diverse students in STEM. Outside the lab Jose enjoys painting, running, and exploring bars and restaurants with family and friends.
Jailenne I. Quiñones-Rodriguez earned her Bachelor of Science in Biomedical Sciences from University of Puerto Rico – Ponce. In 2015, she joined the Biomedical Sciences Graduate Program at Universidad Central del Caribe – School of Medicine, where she is currently a PhD candidate in Anatomy and Cell Biology. Due to her research interest and background, Jailenne was awarded a Junior Research Associate from Puerto Rico IDeA Network Biomedical Research Excellence. In 2019, during her PhD, she graduated with honors from a master’s degree in Anatomy and Biomedical Sciences. Her evident interest in human anatomy and neuroanatomy has led her to coordinate, instruct, and mentor medical students with interest in surgical field through a project called “Mastering Anatomical Techniques,” which promotes an integration of clinical anatomy research and teaching to peers. Jailenne is currently working on transferring modern fixation technology to electron microscopy. Her goal is to visualize cellular structure at the highest magnification while localizing proteins with the utmost accuracy by using immunocytochemistry. These advances are applicable and of interest for all areas of cell biology involving electron microscopy and immunogold localization of proteins. One of her long-term career goals is to become an academic scientist to conduct research in reverse translational human anatomy where clinical and surgical problems are identified and focused on anatomical studies. As a science advocate, she has been actively involved in several outreach initiatives with the goal to communicate science and, being a first-generation scientist herself, raise her voice for underrepresented minorities in STEM.

Jelissa Reynoso García is a fourth-year PhD candidate in Microbiology at the University of Puerto Rico – Rio Piedras Campus (UPR-RP). Jelissa is a first-generation college student very passionate about science. She earned a bachelor’s degree in Interdisciplinary Sciences with honors at the UPR-RP. During her undergraduate studies, she completed an undergraduate thesis under the mentorship of Dr. Jorge Ortiz, studying the rainfall chemistry in San Juan, Puerto Rico. She also served as a research assistant at the University of Vermont, collaborating in the project “Total Phosphorus and Total Suspended Solids Removal by Bioretention Systems.” These experiences reinforced her interest in scientific research and inspired her to pursue a PhD degree. Since her doctoral admission under the guidance of Dr. Gary Toranzos, she investigates fungi in paleomicrobiological samples as a mean to inferring the flora and diets of ancient Caribbean cultures. Her work in this project led her to be a recipient of the Outstanding Abstract Award from the American Society for Microbiology (2018). Currently, she is a doctoral trainee of the NIH G-RISE fellowship. In addition to her doctoral dissertation, she has worked as a research assistant in other projects studying the high levels of fungi, spores, and pro-inflammatory dust after Hurricane Maria. In addition to her investigations, she serves as the President of the Microbiology Student Chapter. Jelissa’s career goal is to become a scientist and educator that promote women and underrepresented minorities in pursuing sciences careers. Jelissa also enjoys books, arts, museums, travel, and playing the piano.
Isabel Rojas-Ferrer was born and raised in Puerto Rico and possesses a doctoral degree in Biology specializing in cognitive and behavioral ecology. She has a BSc in industrial microbiology from the University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez, where she studied the rhythmic meter of bird songs under the guidance of Dr. David Logue. During her undergraduate years, she interned at the Study of Animal Behavior (CISAB) at the University of Indiana-Bloomington with Dr. Emilia Martins. She then completed her MSc in ecology, evolution, and behavior at the University of Missouri-Saint Louis where she focused her thesis on bee memory modelling under the advisership of Dr. Aimee Dunlap. Isabel has recently completed her PhD at the University of Ottawa, Canada, where she worked with Dr. Julie Morand-Ferron to understand the causes of individual variation in animal decision-making. Currently, Isabel has accepted a position to work as a research assistant at the Caribbean Primate Research Center with Dr. Lauren Brent. Additionally, Isabel has collaborated with Soapbox Science, the Journal of Animal Ecology, and Voices in Academia in order to bring awareness to mental health, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Isabel is typically accompanied by her Belgian Shepherd mix dog, Vito.

Sofia Romero is a fourth-year PhD candidate in the Microbiology Doctoral Training Program with a focus on molecular virology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She earned her Bachelor of Science from the University of California, Santa Cruz majoring in Molecular, Cell, and Developmental Biology. Currently, Sofia’s dissertation focuses on understanding the subcellular trafficking dynamics of hepatitis B virus (HBV) Core protein during replication and packaging of viral genome by single-molecule and live cell techniques. In addition to research, Sofia works to advocate for a more accessible and equitable science academy for students from diverse backgrounds and was recently recognized as a 2021 Edward Alexander Bouchet Graduate Honor Society member. Recently, Sofia participated as a virology coach for her local Science Olympiad competition where she taught high school students on the principles of virology. After her PhD, Sofia aims to continue advocating for underrepresented students in science and to improve science-to-public engagement.

Mitchell R. Sanchez Rosado is a third-year doctoral candidate at the University of Puerto Rico-Medical Sciences Campus. He earned his undergraduate degree in biology with a minor in Microbiology from the University of Puerto Rico-Rio Piedras. As an undergraduate, his research work was focused on investigating the efficiency of antimicrobial products against different strains of bacteria, as well as air quality assessment after Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. His current research focuses on the effects that both age and social adversity can have on immune function and response to pathogens. Outside of academia, Mitchell enjoys trips to the beach, cooking, and talking about sports.
Ana Vazquez-Pagan is a rising-third-year PhD candidate at the St. Jude Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital. After moving from her hometown of San Juan, Puerto Rico, Ana earned her Bachelor of Science in Biology with a minor in French from Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. During her time at Northeastern, Ana participated in the cooperative education (co-op) program where she worked with Drs. Jens Boch and Thomas Reinard at the Institute of Plant Biotechnology in Germany. There, she studied the production of recombinant proteins using the duckweed Wolflia Australiana, which has high potential as a bioreactor. For her second co-op, Ana worked in Dana Farber Cancer Institute under the mentorship of Dr. Wilfred Ngwa and Dr. Ross Berbeco where she explored the combined radiosensitizing effect of gold nanoparticles with the DNA-repair inhibiting ability of Nano Talazoparib, a liposomal formulation of the PARP inhibitor, Talazoparib, in a model of lung cancer. As Ana prepared to embark towards a PhD, she felt called to explore other scientific disciplines. Her current research focuses on better understanding how influenza virus infection can cause more severe disease in high-risk populations and why that happens. More specifically, she wants to develop new knowledge on why pregnant women are at an increased risk of developing severe influenza infection results in adverse fetal outcomes. Outside of academia, Ana enjoys hiking with her dog Buddy.

Kirsten Verster is a fifth-year doctoral candidate in the Department of Integrative Biology at University of California – Berkeley. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Zoology at University of Florida. She was always intrigued and excited by the diversity and abundance of insects in her hometown of Miami, Florida, and went to graduate school to learn more about how they evolved. For her dissertation research, Kirsten is working in the lab of Dr. Noah Whiteman studying how horizontal transfer of toxin genes affects the fitness and evolution of insects. Kirsten and collaborators discovered that toxin-encoding genes were transferred from bacteria or viruses into the genomes of fly and aphid species. Interestingly, these genes may play a role in protecting these insects from deadly parasitoid wasps. Kirsten is a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow and recently won the Extraordinary Teaching in Extraordinary Times award for her approach to remote pedagogy during the COVID-19 crisis. Her overall career goal is to build a research and education program that incorporates her passion for animal evolution and functional genomics. Outside of lab, Kirsten is enthusiastic about Latin dance and training her dog.