MEET OUR YCA 2022 FELLOWS! [1]

Enviado por Carolina L Machado [2] el 1 agosto 2022 - 7:04pm

YCA is pleased to welcome 16 talented biomedical or health sciences PhD students from 16 different institutions as our new class of YCA Fellows!

The new cohort is incredibly rich in terms of scientific accomplishments, diversity of interests and backgrounds, and leadership experience.

Can't wait to see all they will grow and accomplish over the upcoming year.
Marcos A. Amalbert-Birriel (he/him) - UMass Amherst - Kinesiology Department

Marcos A. Amalbert-Birriel is a first-generation graduate student and Ph.D. candidate in the Kinesiology Department at UMass Amherst. He was born and raised in Puerto Rico, where he completed a baccalaureate in Biology and a Master’s in Exercise Sciences at the UPR, Rio Piedras Campus. During the final year of his master’s, he completed a year-round clinical exercise physiology internship at the Veterans Affairs Caribbean Healthcare System. In addition, he was a research assistant at the Puerto Rico AIDS Clinical Trial Unit at the UPR, Medical Sciences Campus. He is currently working with Dr. Sirard in the Physical Activity and Health Laboratory, involved in calibration and validation of algorithms used to assess device-determined physical behaviors in older adults in free-living environments. Marcos A. has experience in leadership positions and academic organizations and has been invited as a speaker at different events for undergraduate and graduate students. He is part of the Kinesiology Graduate Student Organization, where he serves as an elected student representative from the Physical Activity and Health area and student representative on the School of Public Health and Health Sciences (SPHHS) Research Committee. He is a former Co-Chair of the SPHHS Dean’s Student Advisory Board and member of the Western Massachusetts Health Equity Network. Lastly, he has been selected twice to participate in the American College of Sports Medicine Leadership and Diversity Training Program. Aside from academia and research, Marcos A. is a former athlete and track and field coach who enjoys cooking, baking, climbing, watching sports, travel, and outdoor activities.
Betsabé D. Castro Escobar (she/her) - University of California - Department of Integrative Biology Ph.D. candidate

Betsabé D. Castro Escobar is a Puerto Rican scientist, educator, science communicator, and activist. She is entering her last year as a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Integrative Biology at the University of California, Berkeley. She has explored the intersection of ethnobotany, ecology, and evolutionary biology, while studying plant responses to their interactions with people and their environments. Although broadly interested in the tropics' edible, medicinal, and psychoactive plants, she has studied calabash trees, or “higüeras,” a sacred plant for many cultures in the Americas. This work has taken her to conduct multi-sited and mixed methods research in diverse settings, the lab, the field, and natural history museums. Through her academic service and outreach impacts, she has been involved in conversations and actions surrounding the representation and retention of diverse talent within STEM fields. She has assumed leadership and mentorship roles throughout her career; one worth mentioning is being the co-founder of a Puerto Rican organization called Boricuas in Berkeley that serves undergraduate and graduate students. Before this, she received her bachelor’s degree in Integrative Biology from the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras campus (2007-2012). As an undergraduate, she was a passionate field scientist involved in URM research programs such as PRLSAMP, UMEB, and AKKA-SEEDS. Before arriving at Berkeley, she also completed master-level coursework in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Missouri, Columbia (2013-2015). Long-term, she aspires to be a leader in her disciplines, and be involved in research, innovation, entrepreneurship, and science communication initiatives.
José S. Enriquez (he/him) - UT MD Anderson UT Health Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences - Cancer Systems Imaging

José S. Enriquez is a rising fourth-year doctoral candidate at the UT MD Anderson UT Health Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences (GSBS) in the Biochemistry and Cell Biology (BCB) program. Originally from El Paso, Texas, he received his B.S. in Biochemistry in 2015 from the University of Texas at El Paso where he conducted organometallic research with Dr. Keith Pannell. During his undergraduate career, Jose was awarded the NIH-RISE fellowship (2014-2015). In 2018, he received his M.A. in Chemistry from the University of Texas at Austin, where he conducted bioinorganic research under the supervision of Dr. Emily Que. He designed and synthesized 19F NMR/MRI probes to detect the redox environments in biological systems. In 2019 he started his PhD in the lab of Dr. Pratip Bhattacharya at MD Anderson Cancer Center in the department of Cancer Systems Imaging. His thesis research involves the early detection of pancreatic cancer using metabolic imaging and hyperpolarized MRI. Jose is also passionate about mentoring and actively involved in science communication/outreach activities. He has mentored many underrepresented students both in his lab and among the community. He has also served as the co-chair of the Houston area science communication conference where he organized series of events promoting science communication skills for graduate students. After his PhD, Jose aims to continue advocating for underrepresented students in science by mentoring them in an academic setting. Outside of academia, Jose enjoys traveling, hiking in the national parks, playing sports and finding a new place to eat.
Julia Jones (she/her) - The Scripps Research Institute - Molecular Medicine

Julia Jones is a fourth-year Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Molecular Medicine at The Scripps Research Institute. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Chemistry at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. After graduation, she worked in Dr. Kevin Saunders Lab at The Duke Human Vaccine Institute investigating the antibody response to HIV-1 vaccination strategies in animal models and human samples to better characterize the B-cell response. In her current thesis project under Dr. Xiang-Lei Yang, she studies the noncanonical functions of aminoacyl-tRNA synthetases in cell metabolism using a mouse model. Outside of her thesis work, she is heavily involved in the Scripps’ Scientific Diversity Association and Network for Women in Science community outreach programs and event planning to foster an inclusive environment. Her long-term goals include combining her love for research and mentorship to pursue an academic career with a lab that promotes URM participation and opportunity. She also loves playing sports or working out with friends in her free time!
Thaís Klevorn (she/her) - Weill Cornell Graduate School of Medical Sciences - Immunology and Microbial Pathogenesis

Thaís Klevorn is a fourth-year PhD student in Immunology and Microbial Pathogenesis and National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow at Weill Cornell Graduate School of Medical Sciences. Thaís is originally from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She completed her Bachelor’s in Biomedical Science at Bahiana School of Medicine and Public Health in Brazil with one year at Barnard College of Columbia University in NY as part of the Science Without Borders program. In Brazil, she did research on the immune response against Leishmania spp. at Oswaldo Cruz Foundation and Federal University of Sergipe. Before starting graduate school at Weill Cornell, she worked as a research technician at New York University, studying mechanisms of immune evasion by Mycobacterium tuberculosis. Her current research focuses on characterizing an intrinsic antibiotic resistance factor from M. tuberculosis and investigating host correlates of sterilization and relapse in M. tuberculosis infection. Thaís’ long-term goal is to run an academic laboratory as a principal investigator in the field of host-pathogen interactions while continuing to contribute to the advancement of groups underrepresented in STEM. She is passionate about providing first-generation, underrepresented minority students (like herself) early exposure to scientific research and personal connections with real life scientists, hoping to deconstruct stereotypes and fears in those who might not believe a career in STEM is possible. She loves cycling, hiking, camping, rock concerts and cooperative board games.
José L. Martínez (he, him) - University of Wisconsin - Madison - Cellular and Molecular Biology

José L. Martínez is a first generation Mexican-American, and earned his BS in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology from the University of California Santa Cruz in 2014, a Master’s in Public Affairs and a Master’s in Cellular and Molecular Biology (CMB) in 2021 and 2022 respectively from the University of Wisconsin Madison (UW). Currently a fourth-year doctoral candidate in the CMB Graduate Program at UW in Dr. Anita Bhattacharyya’s lab, Jose uses stem cell models of Down syndrome (DS, Trisomy 21) to study the susceptibility of a subset of neurons, basal forebrain cholinergic neurons, in DS that eventually leads to Alzheimer’s disease. Ultimately these results will provide foundational data for identifying therapeutic targets, as well as have an impact on our overall understanding of neurodegenerative diseases. His work has led to opportunities to present his research at national conferences, a publication, and has received awards; SciMed Graduate Fellowship, Biotechnology Training Program (NIH T32), RAND Corporation Graduate Summer Associate, and NIH R36 Dissertation Grant. Prior to this Jose was an NIH PREP fellow at the University of Michigan where he worked with Dr. Asim Beg on developing tools and c.elegans models of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis. His long-term goal is to run his own research lab working at the cross section of basic biology, disease, environmental exposures and policy. He is interested in working at a research university where he can identify novel scientific questions, develop innovative methods to answer said questions, and serve as a mentor to historically underrepresented students in STEM.
Hecmarie Meléndez-Fernández (she/hers) - West Virginia University - Neuroscience

Hecmarie Meléndez-Fernández is a 3rd year PhD candidate in the Department of Neuroscience at West Virginia University. She obtained her bachelor's degree in Integrative Biology from the University of Puerto Rico at Río Piedras, and then went on to complete a postbaccalaureate research year at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. In her current position, she works in the lab of Dr. Randy J. Nelson, studying how disrupted circadian rhythms by exposure to artificial light, at night, impair vascular endothelial function. Hecmarie is passionate about science communication and outreach, and is focused on the inclusion, education, and retention of underrepresented minorities and Latinx populations in science. She is involved in all recruitment efforts at her university, and recently helped develop her department's first summer undergraduate research program. Some of her long-term goals include working in higher education administration and developing and implementing a curriculum of professional development support for graduate students which includes rigorous education about non-academic careers in science and how to prepare for these. In her (rare) spare time, Hecmarie enjoys spending time outdoors hiking, kayaking and camping, or creating art - YouTube step-by-step painting videos are her favorite!
Amanda N. Nili is a fifth-year clinical psychology PhD student at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, with dual emphases in pediatric treatment and neuropsychology. Prior to beginning her PhD, Amanda completed bachelor degrees in English Literature and Psychology and Social Behavior alongside a minor in Linguistics at the University of California, Irvine (UCI). She then worked at UCI as a project manager in Education Sciences, during which time she expanded her research lens on early childhood neurodiversity. As a first-generation college student and individual with a visible disability, she has dedicated the past decade to mentoring underrepresented college students, and currently serves as a mentor in the Next-Gen Psych Scholars Program (NPSP). Her research includes approaches to modeling neurodevelopmental risk (specifically for ADHD and co-occurring mood disorder) during the first two years of life, as well as elucidating early biobehavioral indicators (e.g., MRI, eye-tracking, behavioral coding) of such risk. Her work includes a translational emphasis on improving measurement and outcomes for otherwise “invisible” disabilities. During her recent T37 fellowship, Amanda expanded her research focus to include mental health disparities affecting black boys, specifically refining clinical assessments to improve accuracy of ADHD diagnosis for this population at the earliest possible point in the lifespan. She is pursuing an independent science career within an academic medical center, studying biobehavioral expression of early dysregulation that portends mental health outcomes at school age, alongside a life-long goal of increasing access to clinical care for underserved populations in her community.
Amelia Noor-Oshiro (She / they) - Johns Hopkins University - Health, Behavior, & Society

Amelia Noor-Oshiro, MPH identifies as a brown Muslim woman, scholar-activist, and proud survivor of suicide attempts. Trained as a social and behavioral scientist, Amelia's expertise spans mental health inequities in minoritized populations. It is her honor to be the first Principal Investigator identifying as Muslim American to be conducting Muslim mental health research funded by the NIH, specifically the National Institute for Minority Health & Health Disparities (NIMHD). Amelia’s F31 grant explores novel insights to minority suicide prevention through partnerships with the Muslim American community, and aims to apply findings across similarly stigmatized racial/ethnic and immigrant groups. A key distinction of her academic scholarship is her philosophical approach to implementing social justice praxis inspired by decolonial community-based participatory research approaches, critical race theory, and intersectionality theory. Amelia is an alumna of UCLA and Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health and she holds certifications in Social Determinants of Health and Public Mental Health Research. Amelia is also an alumna of the predoctoral T32 Fellowship in trauma and violence research from the NIH. Since 2017, Amelia has pioneered and instructed several novel courses to undergraduate students, including “Islamophobia & Muslim Mental Health” as well as “Linking Oppression & Minority Mental Health.” Amelia’s aim is to dismantle white supremacy through scientific research, and being a suicide disparities researcher embodies her social justice activism. Amelia is currently a fifth-year PhD candidate at Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health and on social media as “The Muslim Suicide Researcher.” Learn more at: [www.amelianooroshiro.com](http://www.amelianooroshiro.com) [3].
Gabriela Rodríguez Morales (she/her) - Boston University - Graduate Program for Neuroscience

Gabriela Rodríguez Morales is a fourth-year computational neuroscience PhD candidate at Boston University. She earned her bachelor’s degree with honors in Biomathematics from Universidad Metropolitana in Puerto Rico. During this time Gabriela focused her research on cellular neuroscience and neurophotonics throughout multiple REU/NIH programs at institutions like Brandeis University and Boston University. During her junior year, Gabriela joined the Neuroscience Research Opportunity to Increase Diversity (NeuroID) program at University of Puerto Rico Rio Piedras Campus where she worked in characterizing the presence and expression of the GlyCl channel in H. glaberrima during intestinal regeneration under the mentorship of Dr. Garcia-Arraras.

Gabriela’s research interests include learning, decision making, and behavioral flexibility. Currently, her dissertation work uses two-photon microscopy and multi-fiber photometry to study how simultaneous activity of the two main pathways of the striatum support the acquisition and performance of operant behaviors. Her long-term career goal is to make significant headway in understanding the systems-level circuitry that allows for adaptive decision making based on changing environments and apply this knowledge to understand basal ganglia pathologies that affect our ability to adapt our actions (eg. OCD, addiction). During her free time, Gabriela enjoys long road trips, hiking, trying out new restaurants, and going on walks with her dog Mina.
Xaimara Santiago Maldonado is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Chemistry at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus, where she also obtained her Bachelors of Science in Chemistry. As an undergraduate researcher, she gained experience in analytical and organic chemistry, participated in the Chemistry REU Program at the University of Michigan and received the NIH Research Initiative for Scientific Enhancement (RISE) fellowship. Her doctoral research focuses on the selection of single-strand DNA aptamers to serve as biorecognition molecules for water pollutants and their applications for bioanalytical devices. As a Ph.D. student, she has served as the student representative of the chemistry graduate program, participated as a fellow of the NSF Center for Innovation, Research and Education in Environmental Nanotechnology (CIRE2N) and was awarded the NIH-RISE graduate fellowship. Recently, she was chosen to participate in the Material Research Society (MRS) Student Science Writing Program. This has resulted in various publications in the MRS Bulletin, including news articles and other creative pieces, and she continues to collaborate with them as a volunteer writer. Her long-term career goals include leading a research group in academia or a private company, and serving as a science communicator. Importantly, as a Latina scientist, she aims to contribute to making science more accessible to minority students regardless of their socio-economic background.
Maria Smith (she/hers) - St. Jude Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences - Infectious Diseases

Maria Smith was born and raised in the Commonwealth of Dominica, located in the Caribbean. Immediately after high school, she moved to Rochester, New York to major in Biotechnology and Molecular Bioscience at the Rochester Institute of Technology. As an undergraduate, Maria worked in the lab of Dr. Robert Osgood in the Department of Biomedical Sciences. There, she investigated the biofilm dispersion potential of Dispersin B against various oral pathobionts. Due to her interest in exploring a new field of research, Maria then worked in the lab of Dr. Feng Cui in the Department of Bioinformatics where her studies investigated the binding of tumor suppressor p53 in the promoter of DNA regulatory genes, p21 and PUMA. These different research experiences allowed her to pinpoint host-pathogen interactions as her preferred field of research for her graduate studies.

Currently, Maria is a fourth-year PhD candidate in the St. Jude Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, working in the Department of Infectious Diseases of St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital. Her research focuses on how the lung epithelium modulates host antiviral responses during influenza A virus infection. She hopes to better understand how these mechanisms suppress innate immunity and contribute to the development of therapies to protect against influenza. She is passionate about advancing global health initiatives for underrepresented populations. Aside from academia, Maria enjoys arts and crafts as well as exploring local coffee shops and restaurants.
Victoria Stephens earned her Bachelor of Science in Forensic Science with a minor in Chemistry from Albany State University. During her undergraduate training, her desire to become a biomedical scientist deepened through her exposure to scientific careers through programs including the Florida-Georgia Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (FG-LSAMP) and Maximizing Access to Research Careers (MARC) in addition to her research experiences at her home institution, Kennesaw State University, and University of California, Los Angeles. Upon graduation, she completed a post-baccalaureate research program at the University of Iowa before joining the Interdisciplinary Graduate Program at Vanderbilt University. Victoria is currently a fourth-year doctoral candidate in the department of Pathology, Microbiology, and Immunology. Victoria’s predoctoral research focuses on examining how toxicant exposure alters immune function and contributes to disease processes of endometriosis. In line with her current thesis work and as a result of Victoria’s longstanding interest in this under researched topic—which disproportionately affects minority women—her long-term goal is to conduct translationally relevant studies that provide preclinical insights. Ultimately, she wishes to advance the diagnosis and treatment efficacy and efficiency of gynecologic diseases and the prevention of adverse reproductive outcomes. In addition to becoming an independent scientist, Victoria aspires to mentor emerging researchers, engage public audiences through her science, and provide exposure to scientific careers to students from underfunded and underserved communities.
Dominique Tanner (she/her) - University of Cincinnati - Biomedical Engineering PhD Candidate

Dominique Tanner is a fifth-year Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Biomedical Engineering at University of Cincinnati. She earned her bachelor’s degree in Biology from Grambling State University, and later earned her master’s degree in Bioengineering from North Carolina A&T State University. Dominique’s current research focuses on optimizing seizure diaries and machine learning techniques to build seizure prediction models for patients living with epilepsy. She is a University of Cincinnati Institute for Research in Sensing (IRiS) Fellow and is a recipient of awards within the realm of research, academic and professional achievement, leadership, and diversity. Dominique’s future career goals are to establish her own research lab and continue her work of creating non-invasive seizure intervention/prevention tools, precision medicine, and more reliable healthcare treatments for patients with epilepsy. Additionally, she seeks to use her science communication skills and outreach initiatives to educate and mentor students interested in STEM related research, with hopes of providing them with an in-depth understanding about science and its applications and benefits.

Angélica Valdés Valderrama (she/her) - Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy - Food and Nutrition Policy and Programs

Angélica Valdés Valderrama is a fourth-year doctoral candidate specializing in equity in nutrition programs at the Gerald J. and Dorothy R. Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Her current research focuses on assessing innovations and emerging technologies for federal nutrition programs through a health equity lens. She also collaborates with the ChildObesity 180 research team and the Center for Clinical Evidence Synthesis at Tufts Medical Center. Current notable awards include the Tufts-USDA Fellowship in Childhood Obesity Prevention and HER-NOPREN Healthy Food Retail Early Career Scholar grant. She earned her M.S. degree in Agricultural Economics from the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez (UPRM) where she studied the effect of the Puerto Rico Nutrition Assistance Program on employment as well as barriers to healthy eating among early adolescents in PR. Prior to that, Angélica received a B.A. in Economics and a B.A. in Political Science, also from UPRM. Angélica is passionate about centering equity in food systems and nutrition and is hoping to engage in decolonial, anti-racist, and community-centered research and advocacy. Beyond academia, Angélica enjoys taking care of her plants, trying new foods, and adventuring outdoors.
Víctor R. Vázquez Marrero is a rising fourth-year Immunology Ph.D. student at the University of Pennsylvania. He earned his B.S. in Cellular and Molecular Biology at the University of Puerto Rico – Río Piedras (UPR-RP) where he conducted infectious disease research as an NIH-RISE fellow and through the Leadership Alliance program. As a PhD student, Víctor was awarded the 2020 National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship, and his thesis work currently focuses on uncovering basic scientific knowledge about the immune response to pathogenic bacteria that infect the lungs. As a first-generation Latino and a member of the LGBT+ community, he has participated in numerous outreach activities such as Skype a Scientist, Upward Bound Program, Científico Latino GSMI and a mentorship program for LGBT+ students to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion within science. After completion of his studies, Víctor aims to become a tenure-track Professor who will conduct research on the immune response to infections, provide opportunities for students to explore science, and educate the public. Outside of the lab, Víctor enjoys playing volleyball, tennis, ping pong, and video games.