Career Speaker Highlights from the 16th Annual Fellows Retreat

NICHD fellows joined together virtually on May 25, 2021, to attend the 16th Annual Meeting for Postdoctoral, Clinical, and Visiting Fellows, Graduate Students and Postbacs. During a one-hour “Career Focus” break-out session, fellows had the opportunity to chat with 10 different career speakers in their virtual rooms. We followed up with our speakers to learn more about their favorite career features and the most frequently asked questions during the retreat!

COLIN ECHEVERRÍA AITKEN, PhD

What I do: I am an assistant professor of biology at Vassar College, a small liberal arts college. I split my time between teaching (introductory biology, biochemistry, RNA biology, etc.) and running a lab investigating the mechanisms of translation initiation in eukaryotes.

Fun fact about me: I am a proud Colombian-American who loves cycling, soccer, and cooking with my kids.

My favorite feature of my career: Working with motivated undergraduates and helping them discover and develop their own talents.

My most common question: How much teaching experience did I have before applying for my job?

Some, but not a ton. I had worked as a teaching assistant (TA) in one class during graduate school, taken a workshop on inclusive pedagogy (at NIH), and led/run a seminar course for postbaccalaureate students (at NIH). It is possible to get a faculty position at a liberal arts institution without a ton of teaching experience, as long as you make the most of the experience you have had (and sell it well) and demonstrate a genuine interest in (and potential for) teaching in your application, interviews, and teaching demonstrations.

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Seventeen years—that’s a long time. The very same week that Brood X cicadas emerged from their 17-year slumber in early May 2004, I received my undergraduate degree from the University of Colorado, Boulder. As I walked before friends and family, little did I know that on the other side of the country billions of cicadas were setting the stage for a spectacle I would later witness as a Washington, DC-area science writer, 17 years in the making.

A lot happened in my professional life between the Brood X arrivals. Like I said, 17 years is a long time. I received my doctoral degree from UCLA, did a brief postdoctoral fellowship in the Chitnis lab (NICHD), and then I began the juggling act of raising two children while pursuing a science writing career. These past 17 years have been challenging, no doubt, but the winding path from one contract to the next is an adventure that I love.

I feel fortunate to have found a career path in science that suits me, and according to the former trainees at this year’s fellows retreat, I’m not alone. In this issue, our 2021 career speakers share what they love about their professions and answer commonly asked questions during the retreat. And for our fellows interested in a clinical career, Dr. Chelsi Flippo recounts fond memories from her three-year pediatric endocrinology fellowship at NIH.

I have been so impressed by the exciting goals and career trajectories of our past and present NICHD fellows. I truly can’t wait to see what the next 17 years have in store, when we meet our little cicada friends once again.

Your Editor in Chief,
Shana R. Spindler, PhD

Do you have questions, comments, or ideas? Please contact our editor at shana.spindler@nih.gov.
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**STEPHANIE M. COLOGNA, PhD**

What I do: I am an assistant professor of chemistry at the University of Illinois at Chicago. I also have appointments in Biological Sciences and Neuroscience. I direct a research program and teach.

Fun fact about me: I recently went to Australia and got to hold a koala!

My favorite feature of my career: My favorite feature of my career is being able to strategize new ideas with my lab and seeing their ideas work!

My most common question: The question I get asked the most is “Did you know you wanted to be a PI?”
The answer is no! I came to realize I love research, learning, and mentoring.

**PATRICK McCARTER, MS, PhD**

What I do: I am a data scientist and machine-learning engineer.

Fun fact about me: My most exciting educational experience was spending one month in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, conducting geophysics research.

My favorite feature of my career: The thing I love most about my career is that I am able to communicate and provide actionable recommendations to anyone in the organization. My role allows me to be an active participant in all aspects of our organization, including the day-to-day workings of finance, marketing, logistics, and operations, to even being able to bring ideas and insights directly to our CEO.

My most common question: How do I transition into a bioinformatics or data scientist role if my background is non-quantitative/not computation?
I would say to never discount your scientific and technical expertise. Your technical expertise and your greater experience will be an asset to any role you take that requires rigorous scientific thinking. The second piece of advice that I give is to find a project or problem of interest and use it as a guide to hone your computational/quantitative skills. Read quantitative articles on that subject and work on recreating the methods that you see, starting with the simplest and most common, and then work your way up to the more difficult and exotic methods.

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BRIAN RAFFERTY, PhD

**What I do:** As a professor at a community college, my responsibilities include teaching four classes per year, mentoring students who are part of my research team, and various administrative duties (committees, meetings, tutor liaison, assessment coordinator, course coordinator, deputy chairperson).

**Fun fact about me:** I had no idea what I wanted to do for a career until after I completed my postdoc. Erin Walsh and I worked in the same lab while she was an undergrad and I was a grad student at Binghamton University.

**My favorite feature of my career:** I get to impact students doing the little things that normally would go unnoticed at large colleges/universities. Having small class sizes at our college allow us to get to know students at a deeper level and provide guidance/opportunities which are better aligned for them.

**My most common question:** *How much do I make, and how much do I teach?*

The salaries at CUNY range based on your rank, so I am at the top end of the assistant professor scale which is just over $86,000, but we can earn more through summer and overload courses. Our contractual teaching load is 24 contact hours an academic year, which for biology courses is four courses, each course having three hours of lecture and a three-hour lab per week. A benefit of our college is that we can condense our schedules to three teaching days a week, which frees up days for other responsibilities.

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JOE SANCHEZ, PhD

What I do: I am responsible for private-public biopharmaceutical ecosystem development and STEM educational programming for AstraZeneca, North America.

Fun fact about me: I’ve lived in a dozen different US cities and never attended the same school two years in a row until high school! I believe this is what led to my resilience and adaptability.

My favorite feature of my career: My current job is actually my passion, and what I have always done with my discretionary bandwidth no matter what job roles I’ve had.

My most common question: How do you know what career move to make?
You don’t. In the end, careers are supposed to resemble a biochemical pathways poster. You just have to trust that you have plenty of time to try many different things and that there is no such thing as a “right move” or a “wrong move,” only “right moves” and “left moves.” Everyone ends up right where they’re meant to be, eventually.

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ASHIM SUBEDEE, PhD

**What I do:** I lead the Academic Innovation team at the NIH Small business Education and Entrepreneurial Development (SEED) Office and oversee and coordinate programs at NIH to foster academic innovation and early-stage product development including the coordination of NIH's Proof-of-Concept Network that spans more than 100 universities and research institutions across 34 states and Puerto Rico.

**Fun fact about me:** Even though I grew up in Nepal (surrounded by the Himalayas), I touched snow for the first time in Washington, DC and, no, I haven't climbed Mount Everest; though I did hike up Kyanjin Ri (15655 ft).

**My favorite feature of my career:** I get to support researchers as they turn their discoveries into healthcare solutions and enable the development of innovative technologies from academics as well as startups to help patients and improve human health.

**My most common question:** *How did you make the transition from doing bench research to supporting healthcare product development?*

I started my career transition with a non-research policy/management fellowship right after my PhD, called the Presidential Management Fellowship. The fellowship allowed me to learn the ins and outs of the NIH and FDA, gain leadership and management skills, learn about science policy and management, and figure out the right role for me at the NIH. The transition didn't just happen overnight; I prepared for it over the years during graduate school by networking with tons of people, being involved in extracurricular activities, getting exposure to non-research/non-academic career paths, and invaluable support from many mentors.

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CANDACE TINGEN, PhD

What I do: I am a program official (program officer/program director) for the Gynecologic Health and Disease Branch, NICHD. My responsibilities include providing technical leadership, guidance, and management of a research grant portfolio that focuses on the physiology and pathophysiology of human female reproduction and benign gynecologic diseases, including uterine fibroids and menstrual disorders.

Fun fact about me: Twins run in my family: my mom and aunt both had a set of boy/girl twins, and so did I!

My favorite feature of my career: I love being able to interact with the science and the investigators. I hear about new ideas and breakthroughs before anyone else!

My most common question: How can I, as an intramural fellow, gain experience that could help me get a PO position?
1. Go to USajobs.gov and search for “Health Scientist Administrator (Program Officer)” like this one: GS-12/13/14 Health Scientist Administrator (Program Officer/Scientific Review Officer). By going through the application process (you don’t need to actually submit!), you can see the qualifying questions that will be asked. Look at each question and try to think of experiences you can gain that will allow you to honestly say you have done them IN SOME FORM.
2. You can go ahead and take the NIH Core Curriculum and other PO training, which will be beneficial in showing your interest, initiative, and knowledge of the basics.
3. You work at NICHD already, so take advantage of that and look for opportunities (like a tiny detail for a couple hours a week) to crossover and work with the Division of Extramural Research (DER) in some capacity.

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\textbf{JOLIEN TYLER, PhD}

\textbf{What I do:} A little bit of everything. I manage the Nikon Instruments field service team and the Quality Control staff for advanced biosystems, which includes confocal and super-resolution.

\textbf{Fun fact about me:} I was born in the Netherlands and speak English, Dutch, and Spanish.

\textbf{My favorite feature of my career:} My position affords me the privilege of helping to improve and streamline our internal processes. Instead of being frustrated by issues, I am able to communicate these to our management and institute meaningful change for the better.

\textbf{My most common question:} Variations on “How did I get from PhD to where I am now?”
A bit of serendipity and a lot of networking. Events like this one and conferences are a great place to “meet and greet,” learn about career paths, and find out who is hiring. The skills you learn during your PhD training are applicable outside of the research realm—knowing how to process, analyze, and present data to a broad audience is very valuable!

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JEREMY WEAVER, PhD

What I do: I design and perform experiments to develop and improve products for use in protein biology.

Fun fact about me: Despite being two years out of my postdoc, I’m still the youngest employee in R&D at my site. Also, I’m growing a butterfly garden in my backyard.

My favorite feature of my career: I am encouraged to innovate—and not just around the product area that I work in. I’ve submitted new product ideas for instruments and consumables that are being developed in other states and countries.

My most common question: How do you make yourself stand out in a pool of applicants?
Everyone can pipette—for PhD level scientists, the putative employer is looking for someone with bonus skills. These skills can be obtained through many different avenues: formal training, serving on the PTO (Parent-Teacher Organization), or organizing the fellows retreat can all be communicated in ways that show leadership, collaboration, or business acumen. Your resume should be very blunt about having these skills.
Chelsi Flippo, MD, joined the NIH in 2018 as a clinical fellow in the Pediatric Endocrinology Inter-Institute Training Program. She received her medical degree from St. George’s University School of Medicine and then completed a pediatrics residency at Jersey Shore University Medical Center.

Dr. Flippo studies hypercortisolemic states, including Cushing’s disease and functional hypercortisolemia. In particular, she is interested in the utility of plasma copeptin as a potential marker for remission in Cushing’s disease.

We asked Dr. Flippo a few questions about her clinical interests and perspectives to learn more about the person behind the degree. Meet Dr. Flippo:

**What influenced you to go into pediatric endocrinology?**

Early in residency, I was fortunate to work with several wonderful pediatric endocrinologists, but Dr. Katherine Beckwith-Fickas was a new pediatric endocrinology faculty member who was full of enthusiasm and inspired me to consider endocrinology. I was intrigued by the variety of pathology in pediatric endocrinology and enjoyed the continuity that the specialty allowed, particularly with patients with diabetes mellitus. There was one patient who helped confirm that I should pursue my specialty—a teen female who presented overnight with acute onset lower extremity weakness. We ordered thyroid function tests after noting that her potassium was low, and she was ultimately found to have Graves’ disease resulting in thyrotoxic periodic paralysis. It was a fascinating case to me then and is still now.

**How has your perspective of clinical research evolved from the first year to the third year of your NIH fellowship?**

I began my fellowship with limited clinical research experience, so I was thrilled by the opportunities for research available at NIH. From first to third year, I’ve learned to appreciate the many team members required to successfully complete a well-designed study, analyze the data, and present the results. It has been an honor to be a part of the NICHD’s efforts to expand scientific knowledge in the field of pediatric endocrinology.

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Clinical Corner: Meet Dr. Chelsi Flippo
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What is your most memorable experience while at the NIH?
Last fall I saw a young boy in clinic with Dr. Deborah Merke and Dr. Ashwini Mallappa for evaluation of precocious puberty. The patient had been evaluated at multiple pediatric endocrinology centers with no definitive cause determined. His primary pediatric endocrinologist, our team at NICHD, and several other centers who had evaluated him worked in a collaborative fashion to brainstorm possible causes, further evaluations, and management. In addition to pediatric endocrinology, his multi-center team involved specialists in urology and pathology. We now believe we have determined the cause of precocious puberty in this young boy’s case, and we look forward to publishing the results soon. The experience of working with all of these team members to provide answers for him and his family has been deeply rewarding.

What are your future goals following your fellowship?
I am thrilled to be starting a clinical position with the Pediatric Subspecialists of Virginia (Inova Fairfax) in August to practice the specialty that continues to challenge and excite me every day.

Do you have any hobbies outside of your research and medical work?
In regard to my life outside of fellowship, my interests are painting, running, and traveling. My most recent travel adventure was to Alaska to visit my sister, where we went camping, kayaking, and hiking on glaciers. My fiancé Luis and I adopted a dog named JoJo several months ago, and last month we bought and moved into our new home. Therefore, our dog and an ongoing list of home improvement projects have kept me quite busy in my spare time recently!
The Rep Report
By Lauren Walling, PhD

As the current NICHD Basic Sciences Institutes and Centers (IC) Representative, I represent NICHD postdoctoral fellows at the Fellows Committee (FelCom) meeting every month and share the latest news with you here. Do you have a concern or question that you want brought up at the next meeting? Contact me at lauren.walling@nih.gov!

The Visiting Fellows Committee is looking for new members to join their social subcommittee. Please contact Vrushali Agashe (vrushali.agashe@nih.gov) or Zeni Wu (zeni.wu@nih.gov) if you are interested!

The Committee on Scientific Conduct and Ethics has decided to add a new survey for fellows following the annual discussion of ethics cases. These case study discussions are part of our mandatory Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) training and are organized and run at the affinity group level. The survey is being added to allow fellows an opportunity to provide feedback on the moderator and on how the session went overall. You can find more information about the ethics cases at https://oir.nih.gov/sourcebook/ethical-conduct/responsible-conduct-research-training/annual-review-ethics-case-studies.

Thank you to the FARE Committee for their hard work organizing the FARE award this year and thank you to everyone who applied. There were 193 awardees this year, representing the top 25% of applications reviewed. The committee is also discussing flexibilities with using the 2021 awards due to COVID-related travel restrictions, so keep an eye out for updates on this in the future. You can find more information about the FARE award or the committee at https://www.training.nih.gov/felcom/fare.

The National Postdoctoral Association recently issued formal comments to the US Department of Homeland Security calling for them to make the immigration process simpler, smoother, and faster for postdoctoral fellows. They asked for them to allow postdocs to apply for premium processing and allow more exemptions to the H-1B visa cap. For more information regarding visas and immigration, check out the Visiting Fellows page at https://ors.od.nih.gov/pes/dis/VisitingScientists/Pages/default.aspx.

FelCom will not meet in July, so the next Rep Report column will be in September. I hope everyone enjoys the rest of their summer!
July Announcements

CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR 2021 TmT PROGRAM AWARDEES

We are excited to announce that Dr. Susanna Mitro, DIPHRI postdoctoral fellow in the Grantz Laboratory, placed 2nd overall in the NIH-wide 2021 TmT Competition with her talk “Healthy pregnancies: Do uterine fibroids change over gestation?” Congratulations, Dr. Mitro!

Dr. Mitro joined our second NICHD finalist, Dr. Jennifer Panlilio (Burgess Laboratory, DIR) in the TmT competition on June 25, 2021 alongside fellows from NHGRI, NIDCR, NEI, NIAMS, NCATS, NIDCD, NINR, NIAID, and NIDDK. Congratulations to both of our NICHD finalists in this year’s competition.

We also want to congratulate all NICHD TmT semi-finalists this year on a job well done. Our semi-finalists include:
» Mor Alkaslasi (Le Pichon Laboratory, DIR)
» Dr. Aoshu Zhong (Storz Laboratory, DIR)
» Dr. Jessica Gleason (Grantz Laboratory, DIPHRI)
» Dr. Thien Nguyen (Gandjbakhche Laboratory, DIR)
» Dr. Abhinav Sur (Farrell Laboratory, DIR)
» Dr. Svetlana Semenova (Burgess Laboratory, DIR)
» John Millerhagen (Gandjbakhche Laboratory, DIR)

THE NICHD VIRTUAL SUMMER INTERNSHIP PROGRAM IS IN FULL SWING

We are happy to welcome our summer trainees to the NICHD intramural research program. If you have any questions, please reach out to the NICHD Office of Education via the Summer Mailbox (NICHDINTERNSHIPS@nih.gov).

SCIENCE WRITING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL FELLOWS

Have you always wanted to try science writing? If you would like to write an article or suggest a topic for this newsletter, please contact our editor, Dr. Shana Spindler (shana.spindler@nih.gov). Have a great summer all!

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July Announcements
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NEXT MONTH: VIRTUAL SUMMER PRESENTATION WEEK, AUGUST 3–5
If you are a summer intern, Summer Research Presentation Week is your
time to share the research and creative projects you have been conducting
at the NIH with the broader NIH community and your family and friends! At
the same time, you will develop your communication and networking skills.

Registration will close Wednesday, July 7th. Please visit the OITE Virtual
Summer Presentation Week website for more information.

NEXT MONTH: JOB INTERVIEWING WORKSHOP
Monday, August 9, 1–2:30 p.m.
Led by Public Speaking Coach Scott Morgan

If you are actively looking for a job this year, we strongly recommend
you attend this informative and dynamic workshop. During this session
you will learn tips for perfecting the broad interviewing skills needed to
secure scientific positions (job talks, chalk talks, and the interview itself)
and increasing your comfort level and confidence. You will have the
opportunity to analyze expected questions, themes, and dilemmas through
interactive exercises and peer review.

Participants can also schedule an individual one-hour coaching session
with Scott prior to a scheduled job interview. To register for this virtual
workshop, please email Ms. Katherine Lamb (katherine.lamb@nih.gov).
July Events

WEDNESDAY, JULY 14, 13 PM

Informational Session for 2021 PRAT applicants (Virtual)

Led by Erin Walsh, PhD

The NIGMS Postdoctoral Research Associate (PRAT) Program supports postdoctoral fellowships within the NIH Intramural Research Program. Applicants must be citizens or permanent residents of the United States with no more than two years of postdoctoral experience at NIH by the time of appointment to the PRAT program. The deadline is October 4. More information about the program can be found at [http://www.nigms.nih.gov/Training/Pages/PRAT.aspx](http://www.nigms.nih.gov/Training/Pages/PRAT.aspx).

Postdoc applicants must apply with the NIH Fi2 funding mechanism, and all applications must be submitted via [grants.gov](http://grants.gov). If you are planning to apply, the Office of Education is offering this session to discuss in detail how to prepare for the application submission, and more importantly, provide you with some valuable documents.

Please email Ms. Veronica Harker (veronica.harker@nih.gov) if you plan to attend.

MONDAY–THURSDAY, JULY 19–22, ALL DAY

2021 Virtual Graduate & Professional School Fair

This year the Graduate and Professional School fair is virtual, with live workshops on the 19th and online exhibitor sessions on the 20th, 21st, and 22nd. More than 270 institutions have registered to participate! For more information and registration, please visit: [The 2021 Virtual Graduate & Professional School Fair](#).

ONGOING EVENTS AROUND CAMPUS

NIH-Wide Office of Intramural Training and Education (OITE) Events

For more information and registration, please visit [Upcoming OITE Events](#).

NIH Library Training and Events

For more information and registration, please visit the [NIH Library Calendar](#).