Trainees Take the Stage at the 18th Annual NICHD Fellows Retreat

A Postbac Perspective

By Isabella Cisneros

On a warm October morning, I walked into the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center with fellow NICHD trainees for the 18th Annual Fellows Retreat, the first in-person iteration of the retreat since the pandemic. The venue was suffused with the excitement of the day ahead as presenters set up posters and attendees grabbed coffees on their way in.

The retreat kicked off with opening remarks from NICHD Scientific Director, Chris McBain, PhD, who highlighted the Division’s successes over the past year. Dr. McBain praised the diversity of science across the Division and encouraged attendees to learn about their colleagues’ work.

Following opening remarks, Guoyang Luo, MD, PhD, an obstetrics and gynecology physician-scientist with INOVA Healthcare, gave a keynote address on the nonlinearity of his career path and provided attendees with advice on how to approach their own careers based on his experiences.

The nonlinear nature of a career in science was a central theme of the retreat—and one I found frequently resurfaced in discussions with career speakers following the keynote address. As a postbac, I was grateful to have access to professionals across the spectrum of science careers and to hear about the wide-ranging experiences that others have had.

Following the career discussions, Program Officer Erika Barr, PhD, spoke on behalf of the NICHD Office of Health Equity. She discussed how trainees can contribute to equity, advocating for a bench to bedside to curbside approach. In the spirit of this approach, which aims to bring translational research into communities to help combat health disparities, Dr. Barr encouraged trainees...
Letter from the Editor

I was thrilled to meet so many fellows at the annual fellows’ retreat in October. I heard from several trainees that this was their first in-person retreat since joining NICHD! Three fellows have written beautiful reflections on the day—from the perspectives of a postbac, a graduate student, and a postdoctoral researcher. Their sentiments coalesce on a central theme: the non-linear nature of a career in science.

As the retreat highlighted, every year has the potential to bring something new. As this year ends, we celebrate the many accomplishments of NICHD fellows in our 2023 Year in Review, including a genuine thank you to the fellows who supported this newsletter with research achievements, career stories, and wonderful articles.

That said, the year isn’t quite over yet. Check out The Rep Report and the December announcements and events for several career-building opportunities and events still to come.

If you’re looking for something new—perhaps a fun writing opportunity—we always welcome new and returning voices, so please reach out if you’d like to contribute to this publication! I hope to meet many more of you in the new year.

Your Editor in Chief,
Shana R. Spindler, PhD

This newsletter is for NICHD fellows and by NICHD fellows. We want to hear from you! Please send your questions, comments, and ideas to our editor at shana.spindler@nih.gov.
Trainees Take the Stage

A Postbac Perspective

(continued from page 1)

to consider how we can maximize the impact of our research and shared an opportunity to join the Office of Health Equity Advisory Committee. I appreciated the opportunities that Dr. Barr and others highlighted throughout the retreat, and I hope to see trainees engage with them outside of their research.

One of the highlights of the retreat was the five-minute presentations given by the fellows. The diversity of research that Dr. McBain described at the start of the retreat was on full display during these talks, and it was incredibly exciting to hear about the work happening across the division. Three of these talks were given by postbacs—Avani Modak and Sean Lee from the Farrell lab and Allison Saul from the Rogers lab—which were impressive in their accessibility and research design.

I was particularly interested by the optogenetics tools being used by the Rogers lab to manipulate and investigate important signaling pathways during development, which Ms. Saul described in her talk. Outside of the talks, postbacs continued to shine in the poster session, which ran the gamut of models and research topics.

In reflecting on the day’s events, I found myself returning to something that Dr. McBain said during his remarks: “The science we do is incredible, [and] we can’t do that without you.” As a relatively new postbac, it was inspiring to see the research being done in NICHD and to know that I am contributing to it.

To all the new trainees who have joined NICHD throughout these last few months, I wish you all the luck and success, and I am so glad to be your colleague. Here’s to another year of remarkable science and fostering community!

(continued on page 4)
Lessons from the Roundtables: A Graduate Student Perspective

By Leah Pappalardo

“Science feels like I’m in love,” said Natalie Porat-Shilom, PhD, Stadtman Investigator in NCI’s Center for Cancer Research Thoracic and Gastrointestinal Malignancies Branch, as she shared her story with trainees during the roundtable portion of the NICHD fellows’ retreat. During roundtable discussions, professionals from research, industry, science administration, and teaching programs sat at tables where trainees could join them for a seated discussion. This segment of the retreat provided valuable insight for graduate students like me who want to have all the facts before committing to a career path.

Dr. Porat-Shilom described the excitement she felt while writing her K99 grant and explained how a good scientific question can carry you through the grueling process of the faculty job search. She embodied the archetype of the passion-fueled scientist.

From another perspective, Kyle O’Connell, PhD, a bioinformatics data scientist at Deloitte, may tell you that sometimes love for research is not enough. Dr. O’Connell left the underfunded field of reptile research for an American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) fellowship at the State Department. However, while he was waiting for his security clearance—with a baby on the way—an enticing opportunity arose in the private sector. Dr. O’Connell decided to forgo the fellowship to pursue industry. Based on his experiences, he confirmed that there’s a whole world of gratifying careers in science.

While Dr. O’Connell chose not to continue with the AAAS fellowship, Shilpy Dixit, PhD, a program officer (PO) in the National Center on Sleep Disorders Research at the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI), toted the fellowship as the premier steppingstone into government. The fellowship places PhDs into agencies where they use their expertise to inform areas such as policy. It can lead to permanent jobs, but it also grants you access to a tight networking community.

(continued on page 5)
Trainees Take the Stage

A Graduate Student Perspective

(continued from page 4)

Dr. Dixit’s fellowship at the NIH led to her current position, where she performs many roles, one of which is grant writing and review. Despite her previous resistance to grant writing, she found that she loves this part of her role. Dr. Dixit emphasized that POs want to help you write your grant at any stage. If you are a postdoc with a vague idea for your K99, contact the PO in that field.

Kate Monzo, PhD, an associate professor at Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland, represented career paths in teaching. At the career discussion session, she used a QR code that linked to a list of resources for attendees, reflecting the technology-friendly teaching style she adopted during her career. The classroom that Dr. Monzo described sounded radically different from those just a decade ago.

I learned that teachers today can effectively teach virtually and incorporate “active learning” and “structured remote” principles in their curricula. If you want to go into teaching, Dr. Monzo suggests pursuing one of the many mentorship programs where you can gain hands-on experience under a current professor. Dr. Monzo’s strategy as a teacher is full of constant problem-solving and adaptation, and requires a strong dedication to the craft, much like what is required in research.

Each of the representatives faced their own challenges and trade-offs before settling into a career. Importantly, each person landed in a position that they find rewarding enough to represent at a fellow’s retreat. As a current graduate student, it was encouraging to see that whether my next steps are fueled by passion or circumstances, the skills that I am learning can lead to a fulfilling career.

(continued on page 6)
As I reflect on the recent NICHD Fellows’ Retreat, the first in-person gathering since 2019, a vivid metaphor keeps coming to mind: life as a tangled ball of yarn. This imagery, evoked during Dr. Natalie Porat-Shilom’s career path introduction, beautifully encapsulates the non-linear, intricate, and personal nature of scientific careers, much like the unique paths we all tread at the NIH.

The significance of our return to an in-person retreat, especially outside the day-to-day familiarity of the NIH campus, cannot be understated. This change of scenery seemed to underscore the retreat’s theme—a departure from the conventional, a step toward broader horizons. For many young scientists, this retreat was more than a gathering; it was a rite of passage, a debut on a significant stage, marking a pivotal moment in their burgeoning careers.

The retreat focused on trainees. This spotlight on the new generation of scientists brought an energy of potential and promise, best encapsulated in the words of our scientific director, Chris McBain, PhD, who reminded us that “the work you do is momentous” and encouraged us to explore realms of science outside of our comfort zones.

The reminder from Erin Walsh, PhD, Director of the NICHD Office of Education, that the NIH and NICHD are dedicated to supporting trainees set a tone of empowerment and support. This message was further echoed in the keynote by Guoyang Luo, MD, PhD, of INOVA Healthcare, who emphasized the non-linear nature of scientific careers and the balance between personal life and professional advancement. This emphasis on non-linearity and balance reflects the Office of Education’s commitment to fostering an environment that acknowledges and supports the diverse needs and aspirations of each individual scientist.

(continued on page 7)
The array of NICHD alumni sharing their diverse career trajectories, from academia to industry and government, not only reinforced the non-linear nature of scientific careers but also stressed the importance of equity in scientific career development. Each story highlighted that just as every career path is distinct, so are the backgrounds, needs, and aspirations of each individual scientist. This diversity demands a broader, more inclusive approach to career support and development that acknowledges and nurtures these unique journeys.

Building on this foundation, Erika Barr, PhD, a program officer within NICHD, discussed the formation of an NICHD Innovative Culture Advisory Committee. This initiative reflects NICHD’s commitment to promoting equity and inclusion within the scientific community and supports the creation of a nurturing and equitable environment.

As we delved into standards, metrics, and tools to track and share progress in pursuing equity, it became evident that this pursuit extends beyond simple demographic representation. Equity is about fostering an environment where each scientist can thrive, where the tangled yarn of each career can be unraveled and appreciated for its unique pattern and contribution to the scientific world.

The NICHD scientific retreat was more than a gathering of minds; it was a celebration of individual paths and a call to action for equity in science. It was a reminder that while our journeys are diverse and non-linear, they are all threaded together in the grand tapestry of scientific endeavor. As we forge ahead in our respective paths, let’s remember the power of individuality in our collective pursuit of knowledge and progress.
Life Outside Lab

Halloween

DIR fellows enjoying a little costume fun during Halloween, with Dr. Philip Adams, who heads the Group on Gene Regulation in Bacterial Pathogens
THE FELLOWS’ ANNUAL MEETING
The NICHD Office of Education hosted a fully IN-PERSON 18th Annual Meeting for Postdoctoral, Clinical & Visiting Fellows, Graduate Students & Postbacs on October 27, 2023. The day included:
» A keynote lecture on the twists and turns of a scientific and clinical career by Guoyang Luo, MD, PhD, a maternal-fetal medicine physician at INOVA Health System and Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of Virginia School of Medicine
» Ten career-focused Q&A tables with representatives from research programs in academia and government, jobs in industry, science administration, and teaching programs
» An NICHD Office of Health Equity presentation
» Featured five-minute scientific talks by NICHD fellows

Check out a full recap of the day’s events according to three different training level perspectives in this issue.

NIH-WIDE RECOGNITION
Congratulations to the 11 NICHD fellows who received a 2024 Fellows Award for Research Excellence (FARE), an NIH-wide competition that recognizes the important research of intramural fellows. NICHD had the 4th highest number of applicants and awardees! See a complete list of NICHD winners in the September 2023 issue.

Congratulations to the 16 NICHD postbacs who received an Outstanding Poster Award for scoring within the top 20% of all posters at the 2023 Virtual Postbac Poster Day, held April 19–20, 2023. See a complete list of NICHD winners in the June 2023 issue.

NICHD had five new K99 recipients this year:
» Shu Yang, PhD (Lilly lab)
» Jarred Whitlock, PhD (Chernomordik lab)
» Leah Greenspan, PhD (Weinstein lab)
» Joyce Thompson, PhD (Rocha lab)
» Diana Elizondo, PhD (Yanovski lab)

(continued on page 13)
NIH-WIDE RECOGNITION, CONTINUED

Velencia Witherspoon, PhD (Basser lab) departs for the R00 phase of the K99 grant this year.

Julian Rey, PhD (Basser lab) and Jong Park, PhD (Weinstein lab) began their NIGMS Postdoctoral Research Associate Training (PRAT) Fellowship in September 2023.

Adam Caccavano, PhD (McBain lab) received a Seed Grant from the Center on Compulsive Behaviors (CCB) in collaboration with Katherine Savell, PhD, postdoctoral fellow in the Neuronal Ensembles in Drug Addiction Section of the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Eastman Lewis, PhD (Buonanno lab) received a Brain and Behavior Research Foundation Young Investigator Grant.

Jong Park, PhD (Weinstein lab) placed first place overall at annual NIH-wide 2023 Three-minute Talks (TmT) Competition, held June 22, 2023. Check out the I am Intramural blog post for a recap of the event.

Wei-Lun Huang (Gandjbakhche lab) received an Elevator Pitch Competition award at the 19th Annual NIH Graduate Student Research Symposium on February 15, 2023.

NICHD AWARD PROGRAMS

Mor Alkaslasi (Le Pichon lab) and Ryan Dale, PhD (Bioinformatics and Scientific Programming Core) received the 2023 Mentor of the Year Awards for Fellow and Investigator, respectively.

Regina Stasser de Ganzalez (Banerjee lab) and Sarah Alsuleiman (Machner lab) joined NICHD as Developing Talent Scholars awardees. Samra Beyene (Petros lab) continued her second year in the program.

Sarah Sheppard, MD, PhD, MS, received the 2023 FRIA award for her support of postdoc Luciana Daniela Garlisi Torales, MD.

Four fellows received an Intramural Research Fellowship for fiscal year 2024:

» Aurora Kraus, PhD (Weinstein lab)
» Sanjana Sundararajan, PhD (Dasso lab)
» Tanmay Mondal, PhD (Banerjee lab)
» Matthew Manion, PhD (Petros lab)
PROGRAM SPECIFIC AWARDS

Shreeta Chakraborty, PhD (Rocha lab) received the best platform presentation award by a trainee at the 44th annual David W. Smith Workshop on Malformations and Morphogenesis at the end of August.

Leah Greenspan, PhD (Weinstein lab) was featured as a Pathway to Independence Fellow in the September 2023 issue of Development.

Lingyu Bao, PhD (Shi lab), and Zhaoyi Peng, PhD (Shi lab), received an Outstanding Trainee Poster award at the American Thyroid Association Annual Meeting, September 27–October 1, in Washington, D.C.

Yuta Tanizaki, PhD (Shi lab) was one of two recipients of the 2023 Incentive Award from the Japanese Society of Comparative Endocrinology.

Elena Evans (Marini lab) was selected as a Reviewer’s Choice Abstract Awardee at the 2023 American Society of Human Genetics (ASHG) annual meeting in Washington, D.C., held November 1–5.

A BIG THANK YOU TO OUR 2023 NEWSLETTER CONTRIBUTORS:
Hyo Won Ahn, Libby Barksdale, Julie Bocetti, Katherine Lamb Brooks, Mick Craig, Ryan Dale, Julia Grafstein, April Johnston, Nita Kanney, Peyton Lee, Leah Meuter, Thien Nguyen, Raghib Nihal, Jeremie Oliver, Leah Pappalardo, Jong Park, Ashley Pratt, Julian A. Rey, Mallory Smith, Shana Spindler, Nichole Swan, Joyce Thompson, Erin Walsh, Jarred M. Whitlock, Zélia Worman, Shu Yan

Please submit your accomplishments for publication in the newsletter throughout the year to shana.spindler@nih.gov.
The Rep Report

By Hyo Won Ahn, PhD

As the current NICHD Basic Sciences Institutes and Centers (IC) Representative, I represent NICHD postdoctoral fellows at the NIH 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, Hyo Won Ahn, at hyowon.ahn@nih.gov.

The Office of Intramural Training and Education (OITE) reports that the 2024 Summer Internship Program (SIP) application cycle has begun, and OITE will be sending out notifications about the Summer Mentor Award. Watch out for the announcement and apply if you are interested in mentoring a summer intern!

The National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) hosts the 2024 NPA Annual Conference on March 15–16, 2024, in Seattle, Washington. Join NPA for their largest national conference and networking event dedicated to the postdoctoral community.

Postdocs, grad students, administrators, faculty, and those from associations, corporations, and government are invited to join for two days of sessions, networking, and professional development opportunities. Harmit Malik, PhD, a professor in the Basic Sciences Division at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center, will deliver a keynote speech at the event. NPA members must log in before registering to receive a member discount on registration fees. Early-bird registration ends Friday, December 15, so register now!

All NIH postdocs/fellows get NPA affiliate individual memberships for FREE. Join now!

The Training Directors Committee reported that the Beyond Sciences Initiative will have their annual conference (online) on March 2, 3, and 30, 2024. Conference topics include infectious diseases, cancer, chronic diseases, global health, biotechnology, and bioinformatics. This is targeted for young scientists (at no cost), and participants can join the live conference via the Zoom link provided following registration.

The NIH Federal Credit Union has a new initiative to support fellow banking—more details can be found at the NIH Fellows Advantage Program website.

Did you know that there are several ways to stay informed on postdoc activities and events?

» Fellows listserv is the main source of FelCom event advertisements, so don’t forget to sign up.

» Visiting fellows can also sign up for the Visiting Fellows listserv.

» There is an NIH postdoc Slack channel to connect with other postdocs and join social events (sign up with a non-NIH email).
December Announcements

POSTBAC ELENA EVANS RECEIVES REVIEWER’S CHOICE ABSTRACT AWARD AT AMERICAN SOCIETY OF HUMAN GENETICS ANNUAL MEETING

Elena Evans, postbac fellow in the laboratory of Joan Marini, MD, PhD, Section on Heritable Disorders of Bone and Extracellular Matrix, was selected as a Reviewer’s Choice Abstract Awardee at the 2023 American Society of Human Genetics (ASHG) annual meeting in Washington D.C. During the event, which was held during the first week of November, Ms. Evans presented a poster titled “Breeding scheme affects mouse model for atypical type VI osteogenesis imperfecta with Ifitm5/BRIL p.S42L.”

INTRAMURAL RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP WINNERS ANNOUNCED

The Intramural Research Fellowship (IRF) is a competitive research funding opportunity for NICHD postdoctoral, visiting, and clinical fellows. Its main objective is to promote grant writing among intramural trainees, while enhancing awareness of the various components of an NIH grant application.

Congratulations to the FOUR awardees for Fiscal Year 2024:

- Aurora Kraus, PhD (Weinstein Lab)
- Sanjana Sundararajan, PhD (Dasso Lab)
- Tanmay Mondal, PhD (Banerjee Lab)
- Matthew Manion, PhD (Petros Lab)

Check back in a future issue for more information about their work!

(continued on page 17)
December Announcements

(continued from page 16)

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS FOR CCB FELLOWSHIPS 2024

The Center on Compulsive Behavior (CCB) will fund outstanding candidates, both clinical or basic science researchers, who are interested in studying topics aligned with the mission of the CCB and with a strong desire for interactions and collaboration with the labs in the IRP. Applications are open for postdoctoral fellows in the IRP within their first 2 years, or incoming postdoctoral fellows joining an IRP laboratory before September 30, 2024.

Additional information and the call for applications can be downloaded from the CCB Fellowship Program website. Application submission closes by 6 p.m. on Monday, January 15, 2024.

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE (AAAS) MASS MEDIA SCIENCE & ENGINEERING SUMMER FELLOWSHIP

Applications due January 1!

From the AAAS Mass Media Fellowship website:

“This highly competitive program strengthens the connections between scientists and journalists by placing advanced undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate level scientists, engineers, and mathematicians at media organizations nationwide. Fellows work as journalists at media organizations such as National Public Radio, Los Angeles Times, WIRED, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, and NOVA...

...For 10 weeks during the summer, the AAAS Mass Media Science & Engineering Fellows collaborate with media professionals at radio and television stations, newspapers, and magazines. As part of their job, the scientists and their journalist-hosts strive to make science news easy for the public to understand.”

For additional information about the program visit aaas.org/mmfellowship.

(continued on page 18)
December Announcements
(continued from page 17)

SAVE THE DATE FOR MEDIA 101: DEFINING THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE
Thursday, January 18, 2024

The NICHD Office of Communications has developed a new media training course, for anyone interested in an introduction to media relations at NIH. Media 101 will be offered for the first time on Thursday, January 18, 2024, 10–11 a.m., via Zoom.

Participants will get an introduction into the current media landscape, such as: defining newsworthiness, learning the structure and priorities of a newsroom, understanding reporters’ deadlines, knowing what to do when contacted by the media, and communicating complex scientific findings to the public. The course includes speaker presentations and individual/group exercises that will enable participants to practice explaining study findings in lay-friendly language.

This is a basic introduction on the importance of communicating science to the public and what that looks like in practice at NIH. You’ll also learn tips on how to explain study findings in a lay-friendly manner.

Sign up information has been distributed via email. Please contact Dr. Linda Huynh (linda.huynh@nih.gov) if you have questions.

NIH UNITE: ENDING STRUCTURAL RACISM (ESR) ACTIVITIES
The NIH UNITE initiative was established to identify and address structural racism within the NIH-supported and the greater scientific community.

The ESR Intranet includes various resources like the Toolkit, Newsletter, FAQs, and other information.

UNITE Milestones and Progress and the Co-Chairs Corner (public ESR webpages) are other avenues to stay informed on UNITE efforts.
December Events

DECEMBER 6 AND 8: THE SciPhD WORKSHOP SERIES
This series is for those who are interested in industry or academia and provides all fellows with the foundation to select an exciting career path, a strategy to pursue that path, and a means to become successful. Human Workflows, LLC, has offered the SciPhD content to over 120 institutions over the past 8–10 years, preparing thousands of academic scientists to successfully transition to professional careers.

Registration information was circulated via email. Please contact Ms. Veronica Harker (veronica.harker@nih.gov) to obtain the link.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6, 10 AM–NOON & 1–3 PM
The Business of Science: Landing Your First Job
Building 45 (Natcher), Balcony A
Registration required
This workshop will help you plan for your next positions on several levels. We will help prepare you for finding jobs and analyzing job ads such that you can determine your skill matches and qualifications.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8, 10 AM–NOON & 1–4 PM
The Essentials of Managing a Team and Running a Project Successfully
Building 45 (Natcher), Balcony A
Registration required
You will gain an understanding of the critical skills necessary for managing and working in teams and meeting goals and deadlines within a budget.

(continued on page 20)
December Events
(continued from page 19)

MONDAY, DECEMBER 18, 1–3 PM
How to Write a Resume: Inside Tips You Need to Hear From a STEM-Education Hiring Manager
Josh Henkin, PhD, Career Coach and STEM Hiring Manager
Natcher, Room E1/E2
Registration required*

What does a hiring manager look for in a resume? What is the best way for you to communicate your technical and transferable skills to a mixed audience in a manner that conveys you have what it takes to do the job?

This workshop will provide tips and best practices for creating an effective resume that will help you get noticed by employers.

*Registration information was distributed via email. Please contact Ms. Veronica Harker (veronica.harker@nih.gov) to obtain the registration link.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 1–2 PM
General Overview of Career Opportunities for Biomedical Scientists
Lauren Celano, CEO and co-founder of Propel Careers
Registration Required*

This comprehensive seminar is appropriate for NIH trainees at all levels and will provide an overview of career opportunities for graduate trained students with emphasis on the various skills, aptitudes, competencies, and personalities that thrive in sectors including academia, industry, government and non-profit. For each sector, the following will be explored:

» Research and non-research career paths
» The importance of transferable skills and how to highlight these for specific roles
» Advice on networking to identify career opportunities
» Ways to utilize informational interviewing
» Tips to effectively tailor resumes and cover letters

*Registration information was distributed via email. Please contact Ms. Veronica Harker (veronica.harker@nih.gov) for the registration link.

ONGOING EVENTS AROUND CAMPUS
NIH-Wide Office of Intramural Training and Education 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.