



BGSA NEWSLETTER

DECEMBER 2021



UPCOMING EVENTS

- BGSA End of Year Holiday Happy Hour.....December 13, 6PM!
- BGSA+4RS Joint Happy HourDecember 15, 6-9PM!

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

ANU BALOGUN

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Dear School of Medicine,

Happy Holidays! I commend you on your hard work throughout this semester and congratulate you on this well-deserved break. Please take some time off to enjoy the holidays with those close to your heart.

In this edition, and for the first time in our Newsletter history, we feature five incredible students as our spotlights. Last summer, during the height of protests against systemic racism, our featured spotlights proposed the formation of the Microbiology and Immunology Diversity Scholars (MIDS) program. The goal of the MIDS program is to mentor and support undergraduate URM students as they navigate entry into graduate programs and public health research. We also have the pleasure of featuring Uzo Uche, Ph.D., a graduate of the PMI program. Uche writes a compelling story detailing his journey from grad school into the biotech industry. He narrates the lessons learned, the transfer and adaptation of academic skills to the industry, and the magic of networking to get your dream job.

As the year comes to an end, Claire Weckerly recaps the successes of the BGSA Buddy Program, and Sam Herron provides updates from the Diversity & Inclusion committee. Lastly, our beautiful day in the neighborhood section details exciting holidays spots around the city, and some may surprise you. Take a look and enjoy!

I hope to see you all next year in great spirits!

Yours Sincerely,

Anu Balogun

TRAVEL AWARDS

CONGRATULATIONS TO ADEOLA FAGUNLOYE (MPGP) & JASMINE LEAH HECT (MSTP) WINNERS OF THE BGSA TRAVEL AWARD FOR NOVEMBER.

PAST WINNERS

SEPTEMBER: MITCHELL MEYER

MAY: DEVANSHI NAYAK (PMI) & KEIN TRAN (MGDB)



DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION COMMITTEE

SAM HERRON

The diversity and inclusion committee are excited update the student body on some of the activities we've undertaken this semester! In accordance with our goals and our ground up, grass roots approach that emphasizes student interactions, we have been focusing on activities that provide students with a chance to come together and get to know each other across programs. Highlights have been our welcome to the semester picnic, co-sponsorship of the Queer History Month drag show and bingo event, and our partnership rock climbing events with the local climbing gym ASCEND. Furthermore, we are looking forward to the BGSA's End of Year Holiday event, a change from BGSA's prior End of Semester Happy Hour, that seeks to celebrate the different religious and cultural events that happen at the end of the year in the months of December and January!

Additionally, as always, the committee is committed to serving as a platform that any student can build from in any way they choose. Be it a cultural holiday you want to celebrate, a certain topic you would like to discuss or tackle with the help of others, or an event opportunity that you would like to extend to other grad students, the committee intends to be a place to help bring these ideas to fruition without placing the burden of planning, funding, or logistics on the student (we're all here to get degrees as well after all). In addition to our own programming and initiatives, we encourage anyone who wants to get involved in any capacity, from passing along an idea to joining the committee itself, to reach out to the co-chairs.

DECEMBER 2021 RAFFLE

IN THIS ISSUE OF THE NEWSLETTER, THE BGSA IS RAFFLING OFF A \$15 GIFT CARD TO A LOCAL PITTSBURGH BUSINESS OF YOUR CHOICE!

RAFFLE: [HTTPS://FORMS.GLE/GSHN5GNBMDUGKCDA](https://forms.gle/GSHN5GNBMDUGKCDA)

STUDENT SPOTLIGHTS



AYANA RUFFIN



GRACE CARREÑO-FLOREZ



SIDNEY LANE



RONAL PERALTA



TRISTAN WHITE

We are 4th and 5th year PhD Candidates in the Program for Microbiology and Immunology (PMI) and founders of the Microbiology and Immunology Diversity Scholars (MIDS) Program, a fully funded undergraduate research initiative that aims to promote diversity in STEM.

The idea for MIDS came about in the early summer of 2020 at the height of the Social Justice movement. As we saw what was happening across the nation, we got together to discuss how we could make a difference to improve diversity in our corner of the science world. In talking, we realized that most of us, who all identify as POCs, were introduced to research through underrepresented minority outreach research programs at our undergraduate institutions and felt strongly that without those programs, we likely would not be sitting here in a PhD program at a top-ranked research institution. When we realized that Pitt did not have a similar program, we brought the idea to the PMI Administration and, much to their credit, they were extremely enthusiastic! With us students and faculty working together, we were able to secure funding from the School of Medicine, Department of Immunology, and Department of Microbiology and Molecular Genetics, allowing us to accept our first class of MID Scholars in the Fall of 2020.

A career in science is a very long road, so when we talk about improving diversity in STEM, specifically the biomedical sciences in our case, it's important to remember that faculty can only be as diverse as the post docs, who can only be as diverse as the graduate students, who can only be as diverse as the students applying to the graduate programs.

Thus, it is crucial that the field invest in students, particularly those from underrepresented groups, early in their training. While many undergraduate research programs are offered for the summer or one semester, the MIDS Program is unique in that our Scholars are paired with a PI in the IMM or MMG Departments for 2 years to work on an independent research project. As prior research experience is often one of the most important factors in being accepted to graduate programs, the long-term lab experience offered by MIDS provides our Scholars with the time to truly gain an understanding of their project and also have the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the lab, with some of our Scholars even earning an authorship during their time in the program!

In addition to the extensive research experience, MIDS also provides funding for Scholars to attend national conferences, and we also emphasize career development, with Scholars attending monthly MID Seminars covering topics ranging from primary literature critiques, discussions with invited speakers, and graduate program application prep. By focusing our efforts on undergraduate students very early in their training, our hope is that through the research experience, mentorship, and career development provided through the MIDS Program, our Scholars will become highly qualified applicants for biomedical graduate programs immediately after bachelor degree completion; thus strengthening the STEM pipeline for underrepresented minorities and hopefully contribute to growing diversity in STEM in the long-term.

Since our founding last summer, we have enrolled 12 Scholars! It's been a lot of work not only getting the program established and then managing 12 undergraduates and their career goals, but the work has been very rewarding! It's a wonderful feeling watching a student reach their potential and we are hopeful that the MIDS Program will remain an integral part of the PMI, and perhaps one day expand to other departments within the School of Medicine.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT



Uzo Uche, PhD

Scientist II at Adaptive
Biotechnologies Corp

What was your program of study?

I came to Pitt after a stint at Regeneron Pharmaceuticals where I was a Research Associate in the Therapeutic Proteins group. I was inspired by the work at Regeneron to pursue a graduate degree. It was great to see how a wealth of knowledge in the medical sciences was being adapted and engineered into immune based solutions for medical issues. I graduated from the Pitt Immunology Grad program in 2018. I attained my PhD under the mentorship of Dr. Lawrence Kane. In Larry's lab, I studied how a novel protein (discovered by Pitt's own Marie DeFrances), Pik3ip1 (TrIP), regulated the activation of T cells.

Random advice: I came into the program wanting to study infectious diseases. I think this is one thing that most of us fall in love with – an area of study/interest. Instead, working with Larry, I discovered what I think is one of the most important lessons of a PhD. The PhD teaches you how to think about anything. You can learn how to ask multiple questions in various directions in order to paint a bigger picture of understanding.

What is your role at Adaptive?

I am presently a Scientist at Adaptive Biotechnologies. Adaptive as a company has developed an immunosequencing platform whereby the adaptive immune system can be translated into clinical solutions. My present work is focused on the identification and characterization of T cell receptors, as well as neo-antigen discovery for potential applications in therapeutics. In terms of what the role entails, I presently do not have to write a lot. But other skills picked up during my academic studies are used frequently. Here are a few things that come to mind:

1. Science! I get to do science in the lab.
2. Those budget sections in grant writing class have come in handy as I have had to write justifications for the purchase of equipment for our lab.
3. I also occasionally interview candidates for roles in various groups.
4. At any given time, I might have some people reporting to me for an aspect of a project.
5. Finally, I make presentations of findings, formally and informally on a frequent basis.

Random Advice: Like most grad students, I was sometimes tasked with supervising undergrads or rotating students. These are important learning moments. They teach you how to work well with others in order to get your best work done.

Like academia, you have projects. These projects are associated with the company's goals. However, different departments may be in charge of different aspects of this project. This is unlike academia where you can mostly be in charge of A-Z of your own project. Here, you rely on others to for example, produce stable RNA that you can use in your assays. The initial stages of a project can be really exciting. You and your team outline the best approaches to answer the question you are tasked with. You will find yourself reading papers, designing and carrying out experiments and optimizing protocols. For me, critical thinking skills I gained through exposure to forums like journal club, seminars, conferences and departmental retreats have come in handy here. Also, the importance of being well read but also being able to listen and learn is further emphasized in industry. People come to the table with different ideas and this drives science and innovation. With a well defined assay comes the hard part of R&D in industry, repeating the assays over and over and over again to get the best products. This can be rewarding when, after several months or even years, you are part of a team that has a product that is beating industrial benchmarks or helping to alleviate suffering in patients.

Overall, I would say that In Academia, we generally seek to understand the "Why", "What", "How", "Where" type of questions. Whereas, in Industry, the goal is to apply this understanding. It is important to note, that the two are interconnected. Collaborations and services are a big part of both scenes. In industry, we are all products of academia and we make products and services from academic studies.

How to network while in grad school?

Those emails you sometimes get for free breakfast and lunch meetings with visiting speakers are actually great opportunities for networking. Not only do you get to talk to established people in the field but they also sometimes drop little nuggets about how they got started, where their proteges are, etc. I met both Academic and Industrial heavy weights during these meal times. I also took advantage of conferences to talk to people at various stages of their careers in both industry and academia. I learnt about new companies, the layout of established companies, great postdoc opportunities (in industry and academia) and other science related opportunities too (e.g. Consulting firms). Within the area, Pitt and Penn State have career days. These are typically held twice or three times a year (Spring, Summer and Fall). Both schools attract various types of companies who are looking for scientists. You just have to attend these functions and ask questions. Also, yes, I crashed the Penn State career day. In some cases, there are allowances for non-affiliated students/persons to attend career day at another school.

Your graduate school cohorts are also a great network to cultivate. Life takes people on various journeys. I have learnt about a host of opportunities I otherwise would not have learnt about from classmates. In fact, while Adaptive was already on a list of companies I was applying to, I got a referral from a classmate. A good referral goes a long way!

Final thoughts: There are a host of opportunities out there for PhD graduates. Be it as an editor in a scientific journal, an analyst in the CIA, a consultant at McKinsey, a tenure track professor, a scientist in biotech, or a Medical Doctor. The possibilities are endless!



THE BGSA BUDDY PROGRAM

CLAIRE WECKERLY

The BGSA Buddy Program had an eventful fall semester. Throughout the semester, the big buddies brought donuts and coffee to each of the classes after they finished their first exams. It was a nice way for the students to celebrate their first milestone of grad school, de-stress after the exam, and discuss how they thought the test went. Additionally, the big buddies met up with the first-years over Zoom to help plan the upcoming Spring semester, discuss which classes are recommended, and advise the students on how to start planning out their graduate careers.



**BIG AND LITTLE BUDDIES ENJOYING SOME MUCH NEEDED
CAFFEINE BOOST**

Our October social event was a trip to Soergel Orchards. Students were able to pick apples or pumpkins, go on hayrides, and enjoy a nice October day outside. Then in December, we went to the Winter Flower show at Phipps. The students explored all the different decorated rooms, walked through the outside lights areas, and then enjoyed cozy drinks at Urban Tap afterward.

Overall, the fall semester was a great success for the Buddy Program, and we can't wait for an equally as exciting spring semester. On behalf of the Buddy Program, we wish the first-years, and all BGSA students, a happy, safe, and peaceful holiday break. We will see you next year!







A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Holiday Edition

Welcome! Glad to have you here. Are you looking for some new hobbies to do in Pittsburgh? Have a date but not sure where to take them? Or just looking for a good hangout spot with your friends this holiday? You're in the right place! This is a new column to the newsletter that focuses on this great city we are in and why we love it- or at least some things we love about it- if you aren't quite sold on this Yinzer nation! Maybe checking out a few of these spots will help change your mind. At the very least you'll have a fun time! Let's get exploring:

DOWNTOWN PITTSBURGH CHRISTMAS DISPLAYS

Everything Christmas-related happens downtown during the holidays. You can visit the Pittsburgh Christmas Market, the Ice-skating rink at PPC Place, and the collection of international Santas. Visiting the Unity Tree and Point State Park's massive Christmas tree made of lights is also one of the best sights you'll set your eyes on in Pittsburgh.



WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA MODEL RAILROAD MUSEUM

While this railroad museum isn't necessarily holiday-themed, sources have revealed it is only open to visitors during the holiday season. Enjoy a fast-paced journey through the 1950s via train from Pittsburgh to Cumberland, MD. All while relishing rare sights like the Ohiopyle and Pittsburgh's incline.



GIBSONIA, PENNSYLVANIA



PHIPPS CONSERVATORY'S WINTER FLOWER SHOW

Enjoy a breathtakingly beautiful and seasonal transformation of Phipps into a winter wonderland. Did you know that there's a unique holiday theme each year that is almost always better than the last? This is a personal favorite of mine. As a plus, Phipps converts its outdoor garden into a beautiful display of lights.



SCHENLEY PARK

CHRISTMAS AT THE NATIONALITY ROOMS

Did you know that our very own nationality rooms here at Pitt's cathedral of learning get decorated every holiday season? Each nationality room is fitted with native decorations. And if you happen to make it there on the first Sunday of December, you can catch an event with live music, readings, food, and much more that brings the cultures of the nationality rooms together in the spirit of the holiday.



FIFTH AVENUE

SOURCES INCLUDE: 10 MUST SEE ATTRACTIONS DURING CHRISTMAS IN PITTSBURGH LAST UPDATED ON NOVEMBER 30, 2021 BY JEREMY. [HTTPS://WWW.CANVA.COM/DESIGN/DAEJPVADHRA/KC2G-YLX9DYACD_NGYPNG/EDIT](https://www.canva.com/design/DAEJPVADHRA/KC2G-YLX9DYACD_NGYPNG/EDIT)

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