



BGSA NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2022



UPCOMING EVENTS

BGSA Happy Hour hosted by ISB (MARCH) -----TBD

BGSA Student headshots (APRIL) -----TBD

BGSA CV/Resumer Builder (MAY) -----TBD

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edition



Pitt BGSA



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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



ANU BALOGUN

OLB25@PITT.EDU

Dear School of Medicine,

A belated welcome back! I sincerely hope you are all carrying on in great spirits this semester!

This edition features an outstanding graduate student who also moonlights as a powerlifter as our student spotlight. Aaron Dean, a prolific neuroscientist, writes about his adventures as a competitive powerlifter, the art of balancing the sport with his outstanding academic career, and the rewards of both worlds. We also have the pleasure of featuring Zheqi (Vaciry) Li Ph.D., a fresh graduate of the pharmacology program. Vaciry writes a riveting story about his current position as a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard Medical School, managing the transition from graduate school to his current job and why he chose academia over the industry.

This spring, Sam Herron provides updates from the Diversity & Inclusion committee and their recent experiences during the past recruitment weekends. Lastly, our beautiful day in the neighborhood section highlights unique gyms and workout spots in the Pittsburgh area, inspired by recent Alum Becca Kristschil.

I wish you the best as the semester progresses.

Yours sincerely!

Anu Balogun



Aaron Dean powerlifting student spotlight!

TRAVEL AWARDS

CONGRATULATIONS TO DARIAN YANG & JASMINE LEAH HECT
WINNERS OF THE BGS A TRAVEL AWARD FOR JANUARY &
FEBRUARY.

PAST WINNERS

NOVEMBER: NICOLE MARTUCCI & JONATHAN KING

DECEMBER: ADEOLA FAGUNLOYE & JAMINE LEAH HECT

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION COMMITTEE



SAM HERRON

The Diversity and Inclusion Committee is excited to update the student body on some of our past initiatives and upcoming efforts for the Spring. Looking back over the past few months, the committee has been focusing on efforts to provide communal activities for the students. Highlights of this effort are the BGSA's End of Year Holiday event, where students were able to celebrate the different religious and cultural events that happen at the end of the year and to reflect on the successes of the Fall semester. Additionally, the Committee hosted an International Student-focused Discussion panel with students, post docs, alumni, faculty, and more where students were able to discuss international student issues and network with others in the international student space. In particular, the Committee would like to highlight two of our members, Joud Mulla and Sanjana Thosar, for their efforts in planning and guiding an excellent and thought-provoking event!

In addition to the events discussed above, the Committee has been actively involved in showcasing diversity and inclusion efforts at the SOM to applicants across the graduate student programs. Committee members spoke at several program applicant lunches and hosted two Applicant Mixers where applicants could learn about more about the D&I space at the University, ask questions, and meet current students to get a sense of the community that Pitt offers. Special thanks to Pan-African Graduate & Professional Student Union and Latin American Graduate Organization of Students for their support and highlighting the different student groups active across campus!

As always, the committee is committed to serving as a platform that any student can build from in any way they choose. The Committee serves as a place to bring ideas to fruition without placing the burden of planning, funding, or logistics on the If you want to get involved in any capacity, from passing along an idea to joining the committee itself, reach out to the co-chairs!

MARCH 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/GSHN5GNBMQDUGKCDA](https://forms.gle/GSHN5GNBMQDUGKCDA)

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT



AARON DEAN



I am a third year PhD. student in the Center for Neuroscience at the University of Pittsburgh (CNUP), working in Dr. Peter Strick's lab. My current work involves the use of multisynaptic viral tracing techniques to elucidate the circuitry involved in muscle learning. I'm specifically interested in the neural substrates of cerebellar dependent learning and the changes in circuitry when acquiring a new motor skill. In the past, the importance of cerebellum has been vastly overlooked, as scientists incorrectly assumed it only contributes to motor-error correction. Recently, lots of exciting research has shown the cerebellum contributes to aspects of cognition, emotional processing and decision making.

I developed a strong interest in the cerebellum during my undergraduate studies at the University of Vermont. I studied under Dr. John Green, examining the cellular mechanisms, a cerebellar dependent task. A great deal of our understanding of plasticity and motor learning in the brain comes from research in this circuit. My time in the Green Lab fostered my love for neuroscience and I knew I wanted to continue to learn about the brain in graduate school and beyond.

This led me to work at the NIMH as a post-baccalaureate Intramural Research Training Awardee (IRTA) in Dr. Betsy Murray's lab of Neuropsychology. Here, I was involved in several projects investigating the neural substrates of reward processing using fMRI techniques in non-human primates. While this was no doubt an extremely enriching experience, I was yearning to return to researching my favorite area of the brain, the cerebellum.

My current work in the Strick Lab brings a foundational anatomical understanding of the various regions of the brain that are involved in this circuit and will enrich our understanding of how the brain rewires itself when acquiring a new motor skill.

Outside of the lab, I spend most of my time training in the gym as a competitive powerlifter. I've been lifting on-and-off for about 6 years. I have taken my passion for lifting further by joining the USAPL powerlifting federation and competing in several meets. Powerlifting focuses on the three main lifts: squat, bench press, and deadlift; competing against other lifters to see who has the highest combined total for each lift. For me, lifting has been a great escape from the stresses of grad school, the pandemic, etc. by giving me a very different set of goals to reach, as I focus on strengthening my mind, my body, and my mind-body connection. At times, it can be difficult to manage my gym schedule in addition to grad school, but it is an extremely rewarding process that allows me to push the limits of what I thought was possible. Currently, I'm training for a meet this Spring while looking ahead to one day qualify for Nationals!

When I'm not lifting, I'm typically enjoying a beer and painting miniature figures for tabletop wargaming, specifically Warhammer 40K.



ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT



Zheqi (Vaciry) Li, PhD

Postdoctoral Research Fellow
Harvard Medical School

What was your program of study?

I joined Pitt Molecular Pharmacology and Chemical Biology Program (under Interdisciplinary Biomedical Graduate Program) in 2015 right after my undergraduate study majoring in Pharmacy at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China. Before the start of my PhD, I had already worked in a breast cancer research lab for years and was super inspired to further develop my career in breast cancer research field. I did my graduate work co-mentored by Drs. Steffi Oesterreich and Adrian Lee at UPMC Hillman Cancer Center/Magee Women's Research Institute, focusing on understanding the role of hotspot ESR1 mutations in breast cancer metastasis and endocrine resistance. I did my thesis defense in April 2020 and then a 10-months short-term postdoc at Pitt to complete several projects.

Current Position at DFCI/Harvard -

I started my postdoc research fellow position at Dr. Kornelia Polyak's lab at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Harvard Medical School in March 2021. Like the way I did at my PhD stage, I am driving multiple projects either independently or collaboratively to deepen the understanding of breast cancer lineage evolution and heterogeneity regarding to metabolome-epigenome-immunity crosstalks, novel functions of histone modifiers and impacts of whole genome doubling events. All of these are very exciting!! My long-term career goal is to become a principle investigator in translational cancer research-fulfilling my aspiration in making clinically impactful scientific findings, learning cutting-edge technologies, mentoring next-generation scientists and contributing to public science educations.

Transition from graduate school to a postdoc position -

Compared to the transition to an industry position, there were not so many dramatic changes. We have flexible working schedule and I keep at least 12 hours a day with either bench/animal experiments or computational programming.

Independency is very important for postdocs, this means you will have less hands-on supervision from your mentor but more freedom of the research directions and budget you can run. My current lab is mostly driven by postdocs, so we are all working quite independently but helping with each other very often. We also spend a great amount of time in improving and practicing grant writing skills.

Postdoc is a type of academic training towards junior faculty positions. I am also more actively seeking for other professional opportunities to improve myself out of the lab, including attending academic networking events (e.g. Harvard Postdoc Association), learning new skills and technologies by taking courses and seminars around Boston (e.g. Broad Institute Bootcamps), more frequently involving in scientific journal peer-reviews, facilitating Harvard Medical School classes as TA and participating in works on the clinical end.

Why I chose academia?

“Industry or Academia?” It is always the most frequently mentioned question during graduate study. The answers, of course, are expected to be “heterogenous” among different graduate students. Whatever the acronym, your fittest is the best. Below are a few reasons motivating myself to continue a career in academia.

1. Positive feedback built up my confidence - I am a very typical introvert person, but I can talk about science endlessly. I love to solve difficult and complicated questions. Every time I made a small progress (even a technique optimization works), I felt a sense of self-accomplishment and couldn't wait for the next challenge. The positive feedback came even stronger when my publications went out. At the end of my PhD stage, I had 17 papers with 7 first-authored including journals like Cancer Research and Nature Communications. At my spare time, I also frequently write and post popular science articles, and the supports received from general audience also build up my self-confidence. I still have a long way to go, but I am optimistic that working in academia fits my personality and enthusiasm the most. A successful scientist is the exact kind of job I dreamed of when I was a child.

2. My mentors are the role of models - I was very lucky to have Steffi and Adrian as my PhD mentors. They established a super motivating and inspiring working environment for all the trainees. Working with them in the past 5 years, not only have I learned advanced and rigorous experimental and computational biology skills, but also gained rich experience in scientific presentation, writing, and mentoring.

Their successful and respectful careers are one of the important driving forces inspiring me to continue this journey.

3. The value of my work matters - Science is fun but the ultimate goal beyond it is to leverage the new knowledge to help people in need (in my field, these are breast cancer patients). Either at Pitt or Harvard, I felt very proud every time when I witnessed laboratory scientific findings turned into actual clinical trials. The translational projects I work on very frequently involves patient specimens, and digging out the hidden information behind these real-world samples and big data is of my utmost enthusiasm, as every small detail could lead to findings of new disease vulnerabilities. In addition, frequent exposure to patient advocacies made me realize how much these patients are relying on scientific progress that we can make. The potential impact of my work to the society matters a lot to me, and thinking of all this makes me never want to compromise even after hundreds and thousands time of failures.

Advice to graduate students on choosing academia career:

As I mentioned above, your fittest is the best. Both academia and industry are attractive in different ways, but you should choose the career filled with your passion and proud. If you are interested in academia, try to dedicate some time to deepen and broaden your research skills, develop academic network earlier and make good publication records.



A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Unique Gyms Edition

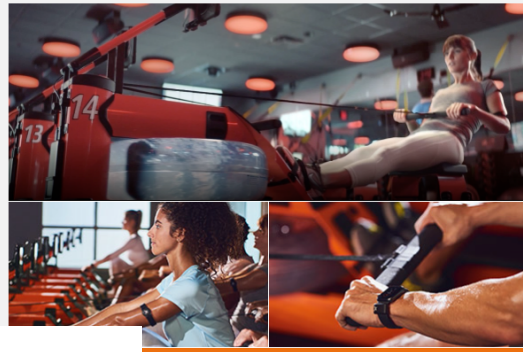
Welcome! Glad to have you here. Are you looking for some new hobbies to do in Pittsburgh? Have a date but not sure where to take them? Or just looking for a good hangout spot with your friends this holiday? You're in the right place! This is a new column to the newsletter that focuses on this great city 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:

ORANGE THEORY

So, what in the heavens in orange theory? According to [orange theory fitness](#) it is a total-body group workout that combines science, coaching, and technology to guarantee maximum results from the inside out. It's designed to charge your metabolism for MORE caloric afterburn, MORE results, and MORE confidence to deliver you MORE LIFE.

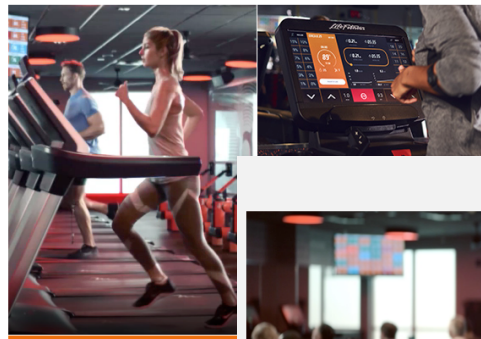
YOUR FIRST CLASS IS FREE!

What Happens in Class.



01 Rowing

Every stroke on the rower activates 8 muscles to help you improve endurance.



02 Cardio

Whether you walk, jog or run, you'll go at your own pace based on your fitness level. We also have bikes and striders available as alternates to the treadmill.



03 Strength Training

Our weight and floor exercises change daily so you can focus on different muscles. Your coach can provide options for any movement if you have injuries or limitations.



EAST END, PITTSBURGH

ZENERGY CYCLING

Zenergy_cycling calls itself a community with one-of-a-kind instructors to help create an experience through music, movement, and spirituality. Zenergy boasts a front-of-house team that makes the cleanest and most welcoming environment possible. It's an actual cardio party on a bike!



EAST LIBERTY

LEVEL RED BOXING

Red level boxing wants to help you achieve your fitness goals. As one of the top-rated boxing gyms in the burgh area, they ensure new and old boxers have fun while shedding the calories. You don't even have to bring any equipment; they provide complimentary gloves, protective hand wraps, towels, and even a heart rate monitor.



THE WORKOUT

[LIGHTWEIGHT]



30 min

5 minute cardio
5 - 3 minute rounds of boxing
5 minute cooldown

[PRIZEFIGHTER]



BAUM BOULEVARD

FITNESS WITH A TWIST - POLE DANCING CLASSES

Fitness with a twist offers both beginner and advanced pole dancing classes. These are usually 4-Week Pole Level 1 through 5 courses: floor work, chair dance, hip hop, barre fitness, and even Zumba. If you think this is easy, I will urge you to think again; pole dancing will give your regular gym a run for your money. New students are eligible for a newbie 5-class pass for half-off. I've had an eye on this one for a while.



EAST CARSON STREET

A calendar interface for pole dancing classes. The calendar shows the days of the week from Sunday to Saturday. The date Sunday, February 27, 2022, is highlighted in green. A "Today" button is visible in the bottom right corner. The background of the calendar is a black and white photograph of a woman with curly hair performing a pole dance move.

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
Feb 27	Feb 28	Mar 1	Mar 2	Mar 3	Mar 4	Mar 5

Sunday, February 27, 2022

Today

PITT CAMPUS RECREATION

Our very own campus recreation offers ONE FREE consultation from a certified personal trainer to assess your health and fitness habits and create personalized goals for you. Personal training is also provided to all students, whether your goal is to get fit, tone up, drop weight or change your routine.



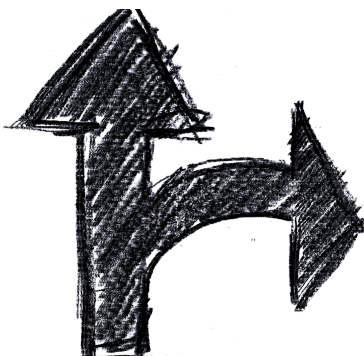
Pitt campus recreation also offers weekly group fitness classes FREE to all students. Types include; Cardio Kickboxing, Grounding Yoga, Pilates, PITT HITT, Swimming, Cycling, and Zumba. You'll have to book these classes in advance, so hop to it!



SPECIAL FEATURE!

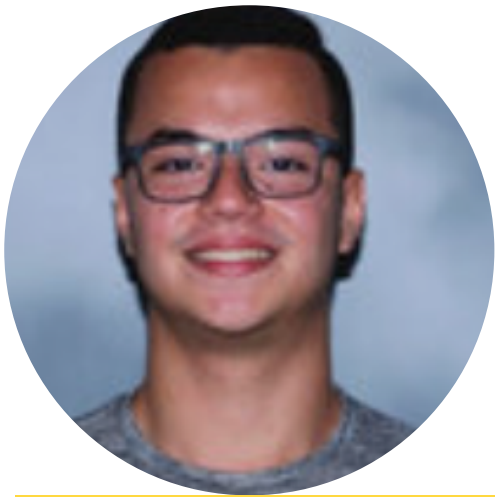


ROHAN



The best ice cream with phenomenal Belgian waffles. Also, they have really great prices and an adorable couple that run the store.

HAPPY ACCIDENTS



EMMANUEL LEON

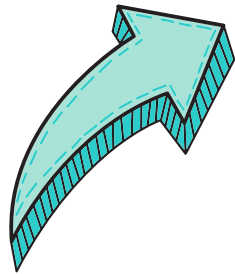
*"We don't make mistakes, just happy accidents."
- Bob Ross*

During my second rotation, I was performing an ELISA to take a look at the antibody profile of mice in autoimmune model of myositis. My PI had a limited stock of the samples since they were from some time ago and the assay had not been performed. The day I performed this ELISA, I had not slept well and was not in my right state of mind.

As soon as I finished adding the substrate, I went to get the plate readings. As I turned the machine on, it went through its startup procedure that involves checking the plate tray is functional (it opens and then closes rather quickly) and I accidentally started placing the plate in the tray and it closed on me, spilling all my samples on the table. LOL. It was NOT a good way to end the day. This is all to remind ourselves that we need the necessary rest and overworking ourselves can bring some bad consequences. Remember to always rest well! *I unfortunately don't have a photo!*



KIRA GRISWOLD



Accidentally added too much buffer to my wells and... made cats in each lane?

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