



BGSA Zoom Whine Wednesday

Edited by Nicole Kaminski

# BGSA Newsletter



## May 2020

 Pitt BGSA  @PittBGSA  @bgsa\_at\_pitt

## Upcoming Events

- Every other Wednesday .....Zoom Whine Wednesday
- May 20th.....BGSA Zoom Trivia Night
- June.....Virtual Summer Career Seminars

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## Letter from the Editor

Hello School of Medicine,

I hope this newsletter finds everyone well! The past few months have been full of change and the BGSA has been working hard to take these changes in stride! We have transitioned to virtual events and have made efforts to have at least one event every week. Our events are aimed to lift the spirits of graduate students, as we understand that quarantine is not so easy at times. I'm excited to share this newsletter with you all because we have outstanding Student and Alumni Spotlights this month. Felix Aggor, a graduate student in the Gaffen Lab, received multiple nominations and is very deserved of the May Spotlight. Additionally, we are Spotlighting one of our own from the SOM graduate studies office, Meghan McCord, who is a great resource to all the SOM graduate students interested in career exploration. I hope everyone stays safe and enjoys this edition of the BGSA Newsletter!

For more information about what the is up to BGSA please visit our new website ([www.bgsa.pitt.edu](http://www.bgsa.pitt.edu)).



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VP of Communications,  
2019-2020

## Travel Grant Awardees

Congratulations to all the BGSA travel grant awardees!

**February 2020: Maria Beecher** (Mol Pharm) attended the DNA Repair/Replication Structures and Cancer Conference, and **Namrata Kumar** (MGDB) attended the DNA Repair/Replication Structures and Cancer Conference

**March 2020: Rebekah Dadey** (PMI) attended the Immunology - Translational Research Cancer Centers Consortium, and **Jessica Filderman** (PMI) attended the Translation Research Cancer Centers Consortium Annual Meeting

Unfortunately, due to travel restrictions there have been no travel grants awarded for the months of April and May. As soon as university travel is permitted the BGSA travel grant awards will resume.

## Student Spotlight



### Felix Aggor

I am humbled by this award and recognition. I am eternally grateful for the support of my mentor, Dr. Sarah Gaffen, my theses committee members; Drs. Robert Binder, Daniel Kaplan, John Alcorn, Tim Hand and Nathaniel Weathington, members of the Gaffen lab, members of the Division of Rheumatology and Clinical Immunology especially Drs. Partha Biswas and Mandy McGeachy and all my friends and colleagues in BGSA. I have been very lucky to be surrounded by great people who have constantly supported me in my scientific development and life outside of the lab. It's really been a testament of the support of the greater Pitt community.

My ambition was to become a physician scientist. Before joining Pitt, I dropped out of medical school in my home country because my family could no longer afford my tuition. Pursuing graduate studies at Pitt has therefore been the greatest opportunity of my life. I knew I needed to make the best of this lifetime opportunity and I applied myself to the task despite the odds. For me, knowing who I am, where I come from, where I wanted to see myself and the impact I wanted to have on human lives were the drivers that kept me going. These intrinsic factors and the support around me advanced my primary project which is focused on understanding the mechanisms of IL-22 mediated protection in oral antifungal immunity.

Our understanding of oral immunity lags behind those of other mucosae and the role of IL-22 in protection against oral thrush is less understood compared to IL-17. While IL-22 and IL-17 share similar cellular sources, they engage different receptors and activate quite distinct downstream signaling pathways. From my work, we found that IL-22 is non-redundant with IL-17 in protecting against oral thrush and acts in a spatially distinct manner from IL-17 in the oral mucosa. In simplistic terms, the actions IL-22 and IL-17 can be likened to a building which is supposed to protect its occupants against inclement weather. This building has two main parts; the foundation (which expresses the IL-22 receptor) and the overlaying structure (which expresses the IL-17 receptor). IL-22 acts to reinforce the integrity of the foundation and hence the entire building. In the absence of IL22/IL22R signaling, this building is analogous to an edifice mounted on a foundation of loose sand which will come crushing down during a heavy storm. These findings have expanded our understanding of oral antifungal immunity and given new research directions to understand the complexity of the oral mucosa in oral immunity.

## Alumni Spotlight

### Meghan McCord



I got my PhD from Pitt's Neuroscience Program in December, 2013. At that point, I wasn't sure I wanted to continue doing research, but I had never given much thought to what I would do otherwise. And so, like many people, I started a postdoc to buy myself a bit more time. My postdoc was a collaboration between Harvard and Amgen, which gave me the chance to see the industry side of scientific research, and also enabled me to determine if the private sector was a better fit for me than academia had been. Although I enjoyed my time at Amgen, it still felt like something was missing and that the job wasn't the best fit for me. After months of self-reflection, I realized what was missing: I wanted to be in a role where building relationships was a more central part of the job. Once I came to this conclusion, the decision to leave my postdoc was easy; however, determining what that next career would be, and actually making the transition was more difficult than I had anticipated. After my postdoc, I took some time off to travel and think more about what I wanted for myself in the future. I briefly considered a career in teaching, but eventually decided that I was more interested in a counseling role. Luckily for me, it was around this time that the Career Exploration Specialist position was developed at Pitt. Leading up to that point, I had been doing volunteer work related to career services and mentoring in order to better prepare myself for this type of work (I also had a brief stint working in academic publishing, because why not!). I was hired for the Career Exploration Specialist role and moved back to Pittsburgh in June, 2019. The primary function (and my favorite part) of this job is to meet one-on-one with students to discuss their experience in graduate school and future career plans. In addition to acting as a sounding board and neutral advisor, I can also provide information and resources to those students who aren't sure what they want to do and/or how to get to that next step. A secondary function of my job is to plan professional and career development activities for students (and I always welcome suggestions about what types of programming students are most interested in!). Although I don't use my neuroscience background in this role, having a PhD has nonetheless been very valuable, as it gives me first-hand knowledge of the graduate school process and experience. My previous work in industry and publishing has also come in handy when talking to students who do not want to go down the traditional academic path. In addition to career counseling, I am very interested in mental health counseling as well, and will be working (part-time) towards a master's degree in mental health counseling starting this fall. My long-term goal is to serve as both a career counselor and mental health counselor for SOM PhD students.

## BGSA Gift Card Raffle

In this issue of the newsletter, the BGSA is raffling off a \$15 gift card to a local Pittsburgh business of your choice.

**Ticket Raffle:** <https://forms.gle/GShn5GnbmQdUGKcDA>

## BGSA Newsletter Committee



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