

UT Southwestern

Medical Center

Microbiology

Microbiology Department Community Spotlight Committee Newsletter

Microbiology Department



Kevin's Pun Corner

What do you call a nearly drunk Lepidopteran?

Scroll down
for answer



New faces in our department

In the spirit of fostering a welcoming community, we would like to introduce new members of our department.



Tiyler Adams

Research Assistant
D'Orso Lab

BS, Michigan State University

Tiyler enjoys camping and visiting state parks.

Alexander Puch

Postbac Student
D'Orso Lab

BS, BA, University of Chicago

Alexander can play piano, and also enjoys writing epic poetry.



Aidan Donnelly

MSTP Trainee
Forsberg Lab

BS, Pennsylvania State University

Aidan enjoys watching movies, art museums, traveling, and creative projects. Outside the lab, he can usually be found tinkering with watches, woodworking, or exploring some new craft.



Rahil Alhumaidi

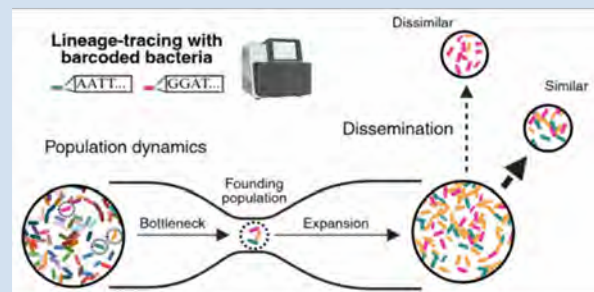
Research Associate
Gammon Lab

MA, University of North Texas

Outside of science, Rahil enjoys spontaneous road trips, ice skating, and baking.

New Faculty Arriving in October!!

Ian Campbell, PhD



Cambell et al, Science 2026

Congratulations!!



Sung-Yeon Hwang

Postdoc, Schoggins Lab

NIH K99/R00 Awardee



Emily Rex

PhD candidate, Gammon Lab

2026 Nominata Awardee

2026 GSO Peer Mentorship Awardee



Preeti Khan

Postdoc, D'Orso Lab

CPRIT Awardee



Emi Nakahara

PhD candidate, Schoggins Lab

NIH F31 Awardee



Courtney Santos

PhD candidate, Forsberg Lab



Alex Wells

Postdoc, Schoggins Lab

Best Poster Awardee
2026 Symposium on the Immune
Systems of Bacteria (SISB2026)

2026 Zara Weinberg Leading Edge
Fellow

2026 MMGP Travel Awardees

David Schad - Alto Lab
Emily Rex - Gammon Lab
Hrag Dilabazian - Alto Lab
Esther Olunoiki - Ni Lab
Amanda Dobbins - Hendrixson Lab
Emi Nakahara - Schoggins Lab
Sofia Rivera - Hancks Lab
Sean Siniscalco - Forsberg Lab
Aidan Drozdick - Pfeiffer Lab

2026 MMGP Research Impact Awardees

Luis Rodriguez-Rodriguez - Forsberg
Lab
Emily Rex - Gammon Lab
Aaron Embry - Gammon Lab
Amanda Dobbins - Hendrixson Lab

T32 Microbiology Training Grant Awardees

Graduate Students:
Alex Caron - Hendrixson Lab
Wil O'Shaughnessy - M. Reese Lab
Sanjana Prakash - Conrad Lab
Sean Siniscalco - Forsberg Lab
Jessica Alvarez - Hancks Lab

Postdocs:
Adam Fishburn Ph.D. - Gammon Lab, starting Oct
Binita Nepal Ph.D. - Wetzel Lab

The 3rd annual CSC sponsored bake off!

The Third Annual Great Micro Bake-Off is right around the corner! We're excited to see your delicious creations and share them with everyone. Here are some quick reminders and additional instructions for the event:

For Bakers:

- **Remember to sign-up** using the QR code in the flyer below to submit your baked goods in the competition.
- **Portion Size:** Please prepare bite-sized portions of your baked goods so everyone can have a taste.
- **Set-up:** Bakers, please arrive 15 minutes prior to the event (12:45 pm) to set-up your baked goods. Each entry will be assigned a number and a card to list potential allergens. Serving cups will also be provided.

For Voters/Tasters:

- **Donate to taste:** In order to sample the baked goods, you'll need to make a **minimum \$5 donation**. The more you donate, the more tickets you'll receive to vote for your favorite treat. Each dollar is one ticket/vote. Both cash and Venmo are accepted.
- **Prizes:** Prizes will be awarded to the top 3 bakers based on your votes! Winners will be announced at the end of the event.

It's going to be a fun event filled with delicious baked goods, so don't miss out! If you haven't signed up yet, there's still time. You can find details and the QR code to

sign-up in the flyer below.



UTD Academic Bridge

State of the Microbiology Department and Norgard Portrait Unveiling



Get to know our department support team!



Raina Smith

How long have you been with this department?

Eight and a half years.

What's something people might be surprised to learn from you?

Don't let my looks fool you, I'm the department's strong arm and resident furniture mover. But the furniture-moving skills aren't the only unexpected strength. In 2017, I headed into Olympic National Park

with my sister and a friend for a three-day backcountry backpacking trip, climbing an impressive 4,300 elevation gain along the way. Would I do it again? That remains to be seen. After all, there's one thing the backcountry can't provide: I like my showers.

How do you like to spend your time outside of work?

You'll find me out in my front yard starting in October because that's when the Christmas decorating season begins! For the past five years, I've been adding to my outdoor display and watching it evolve each year. It's pretty satisfying to look back and see how much the décor has changed from 2020 through 2025. I am a one-woman show, handling the decorating myself—with one notable exception: the roofline. I hire professionals for that and will occasionally recruit my husband to hold the ladder while I install other items that require me to reach high places. I am so obsessed that I even got a shed for my birthday specifically to store all my Christmas décor and I attended the 2026 Christmas Expo.



Advice Corner



Wes Buford

Former: PhD student in Neal Alto's Lab

Current: Postdoctoral Research Associate, Stanford University, Monack Lab

Did you always intend to pursue a postdoc, or did this decision evolve over time? If it evolved, what influenced the change?

The decision to postdoc has changed dramatically over my years in graduate school from emphatically no, to maybe, to this might be an idea. I was not sure about pursuing a postdoc when I started grad school, and after the pandemic I was thinking about joining the Navy or becoming a lawyer, so there was a dramatic change. I credit a mentee of mine who told me I might be a good PI in the long run, which made me seriously reconsider the prospect. After I published my paper, I began having conversations with my mentors and friends about what I wanted to do and what my strengths and weaknesses were. Through those discussions, and some introspection, I realized that a postdoc would be a great opportunity to develop my own scientific projects and move into new areas of research. The big shift happened when I finally found my own scientific confidence and realized I could do think of new scientific questions that excited me and needed new resources to work on them.

How did you identify the type of postdoc you were interested in (e.g., institution, lab, country, research focus)?

I mapped out a list of things that were important to me: research area (microbiology and immunology), places I wanted to live (coastal U.S. states or Europe), career prospects afterward (academia, but in an area where I could pivot to biotech if needed), and personal goals (publish, write grants, be involved in the community). From there, I generated a list of mentors who I thought fit those priorities. I shared both the requirements and the list of potential mentors with trusted colleagues and refined it several times. Importantly, I had already been networking at conferences and talking with people who were former postdocs in the labs I was considering. I showed my list to professors in the department to get their advice. If you want to stay in microbiology the UT Southwestern PI's probably know the people you are looking to research with and will have some great perspectives about your postdoc experience. Having trusted PIs who know you and the colleagues you might work with really helped me shape and narrow my list.

Did you reach out to potential advisors before applying? What approach worked best (email, conference interactions, referrals)?

The best way to make an impression is by presenting talks and/or posters at conferences during your graduate program. I also recommend interacting with potential mentors in person at meetings. My current mentor remembered me from chatting with her at a conference, and several of the other PIs I applied to also remembered me from those interactions. If you aren't going to conferences a lot then be sure to volunteer to join lunches with visiting faculty at UT Southwestern as much as you can. Volunteering with grad student organizations to help facilitate invited speakers also works. In the end, it is about getting as much exposure to other potential mentors as possible. I did not have any

formal position offers before I started applying, so I put together a tailored cover letter for each PI and attached my CV. Some people never responded, but I still received a decent number of replies.

What were the key factors that influenced your final decision on where to accept a postdoc position?

I had the opportunity to get to know a former postdoc in the Monack Lab very well. When I talked with this former trainee about the research, the environment, and the long-term commitment the Monack lab has toward trainees at all levels, I became excited about joining. The most important factors were clear communication during my discussions/interview with my PI and the people I would be working with, a strong and consistent publication track record, and the outcomes of her former trainees. Compiling that information takes time if you have a long list of potential PIs, but it is absolutely worth the effort.

What were the biggest differences between being a PhD student and a postdoc?

Sometimes being a postdoc feels like PhD 2.0 with higher expectations, a more accelerated timeline, and no commencement at the end. The biggest differences really center on the expectation that you will find your own questions that are interesting and that you can hopefully get funded. There is also an expectation that you are an expert in something, so people trust your judgment, which comes with the responsibility to answer up to the limits of your knowledge.

As a postdoc, people look to you as a resource in the topic you know, and there is an expectation that you will outperform your graduate-school self. I think that is the most exciting part of being a postdoc, the you get ownership of your science, and you get to hone the skills you developed in graduate school. There is no “degree at the end of all this” goal anymore, so the world feels wide open and the science is there to explore, not just to graduate.

What skills or habits from your PhD have been most useful in your postdoc?

Networking, meeting people, and asking questions without fear of looking silly have been some of the most useful skills I carried from my PhD into my postdoc. Along with always taking notes at talks. I developed those habits during graduate school, and they have been incredibly helpful now. Continually asking questions and learning new things from other experts, while also sharing your own knowledge, is essential in a postdoc. Additionally, reading papers efficiently and retaining what you read is another skill that has been valuable. Julie Pfeiffer taught a very efficient and neat way to read papers in one of my first micro classes and I still use it today (calling it the Pfeiffer method). Working with graduate school groups was also helpful, because in this new chapter you are expected to take on more of a leadership role in research rather than just doing experiments someone else suggested.

If you could go back to your PhD years, what would you do differently to better prepare for this role?

I would focus on going to conferences much earlier in my career and trying to scientifically network as much as possible whenever I had the chance. I would also volunteer for more science outreach events. I focused too much on the day-to-day in my early graduate years, and while I was working hard to develop technical skills, I should have been developing networking skills from the very beginning. I would also tell my younger self that a lot of things that feel like the end of the world really are not. Building relationships and keeping the bigger picture in mind should have been a bigger priority earlier on, but I like to think I finally learned that by the end of my time in grad school. I'll try to answer these questions again in a few years and see how I succeeded.

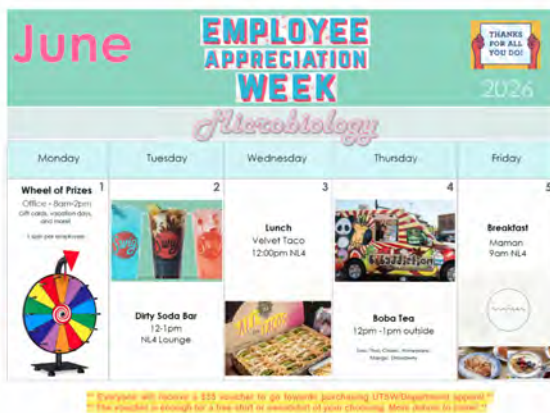
Girls in STEM Conference

Courtney Santos, Alex Wells, and Marley Van Dyke from the department as well as members of the UTSW biotech club led two workshops at the

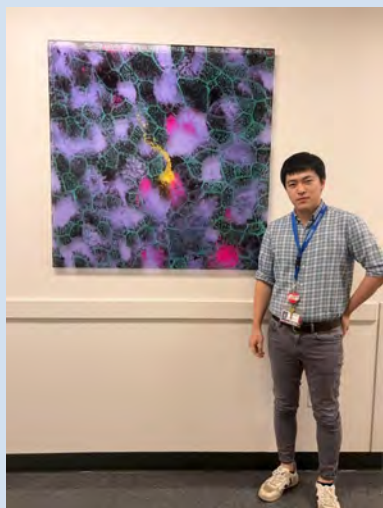
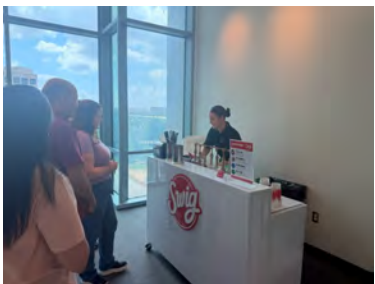
They led biology-related activities with elementary students including strawberry DNA extraction, viewing brain histology under a microscope, and discussion about careers in science.



Employee Appreciation Week June 2026



During employee appreciation week the department had daily events - Spin the wheel, a dirty soda bar, lunch from Velvet Taco, breakfast from Maman, and a boba truck. Thank you to Sarah, Maribel, and the rest of admin team for organizing this amazing week for us!



The department halls are getting a make over!

Check out new art work around the halls from our very own members. Our first installation is an image from Chien-Ting Wu of influenza-infected nasal epithelial cells.

Be on the lookout for more!



Transformational awards for talented scientists across career stages



Investigator Program	Freeman Hrabowski Scholars Program	Hanna H. Gray Fellows Program	Gilliam Fellows Program	Cech Fellows Program
Mid-Career & Senior Faculty	Early Faculty	Postdocs	Graduate Students	Undergraduate Students
Who's Eligible: Tenured or tenure-track (or equivalent) faculty with 7+ years of lab head experience	Who's Eligible: Early career faculty with less than 7 years of lab head experience, or postdocs with an accepted faculty offer	Who's Eligible: Postdocs with no more than 7 years of postdoc experience	Who's Eligible: 2nd- and 3rd-year PhD or MD/PhD students	Who's Eligible: Rising juniors and rising seniors enrolled full-time at an accredited US institution
Core Program Benefits: Investigators become HHMI employees while maintaining academic appointments and labs at their host institutions, and receive full salary, benefits, research support, and more – up to \$10 million in the first 7-year term	Core Program Benefits: Scholars become HHMI employees at their host institutions and receive full salary, benefits, research support, and more – up to \$10 million over 10 years	Core Program Benefits: Fellows receive generous salary or stipend support, \$50K in research support , and become Freeman Hrabowski Scholars upon securing a qualifying faculty appointment within 2 years	Core Program Benefits: Fellows receive a \$50K stipend , discretionary allowance, professional development, and join a thriving scientific community that spans career stages	Core Program Benefits: Fellows conduct full-time, hands-on research in an HHMI lab, engage in professional development seminars, present their research at an end-of-summer symposium, and receive stipend support of up to \$15K
Duration: 7-year renewable term	Duration: Scholars are appointed for a 5-year term, renewable once for a total of 10 years of support	Duration: Fellows receive up to 2 years of support before becoming Scholars	Duration: Up to 3 years of PhD support, with the opportunity to apply for 4 years of additional postdoc support after completing graduate work	Duration: 9 weeks during the summer
Opens September 28, 2027	Orie Competition Opens November 3, 2026		Opens September 1, 2026	Opens November 10, 2025

Do you have feedback for the department?
Let Sarah know using the QR code below.



Pun Answer

A Topsy Moth

A new pun
every
newsletter!

Want to join?

**E-mail Kevin to become a part of the Microbiology Department
Community Spotlight Committee!**

UT Southwestern Medical Center | 6000 Harry Hines Blvd | Dallas, TX 75235 US

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Update Profile](#) | [Constant Contact Data Notice](#)



Try email marketing for free today!