

April 2016

NRMN STAR



NRMN STAR's first cohort of trainees began their train on June, 2015. Pictured top from left to right: Marc Elie, Olamide Ojo-Fati, Enyinnaya Merengwa, Brandy Pina-Watson, Eboneye Johnson, Erik Rodriguez, Gerald Griffin, Alle Rutebemberwa, Christianna Howard, Dawn Thurman. Alana Gunn not shown. Also pictured, NRMN STAR Directors, Jamboor Vishwanatha (left) and Harlan Jones (right)

NRMN STAR Kicks OFF!

Welcome to the
first issue!

NRMN STAR fellowship, as a formal mentoring program, has enhanced my productivity and is considered critical for the professional development and success of an under-represented minority researcher in academic medicine, like me. Through this fellowship, I have improved my skills in grantsmanship and trans-disciplinary research.

--Mexis Enyinnaya Merengwa,
MD, DrPHc, MPH

Enhancing the Diversity of the NIH-Funded Workforce

The National Research Mentoring Network (NRMN) is a nationwide consortium to enhance the training and career development of individuals from diverse backgrounds who are pursuing biomedical, behavioral, clinical, and social

science research careers (collectively termed biomedical research careers), through enhanced networking and mentorship experiences. The NRMN is developing a nationwide network of mentors and mentees spanning all disciplines relevant to the NIH

mission. NRMN is also developing best practices for mentoring, providing training opportunities for mentors, and providing networking and professional opportunities for mentees.

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NRMN STARs engage in an intense grant writing and professional development workshop at the UNT Health Science Center campus.

The NRMN STAR Program focuses on grantsmanship and professional development

Through an initiative funded by NIH, NRMN was established to provide opportunities for mentees across career stages to find culturally competent mentors and engage in productive, supportive mentoring relationships. NRMN STAR is one of four professional development-training programs offered through the NRMN professional development core network that is committed to increasing the number of underserved, including underrepresented populations, successfully obtaining NIH grants. Recognizing the difficulty for junior faculty to accept a summer-long fellowship which would require an extended absence from home and family, the NRMN STAR provides a year-long schedule. The program provides a unique approach that combines on-site professional development and education with distance learning techniques that include on-line digital meetings, and “store and forward” technology.

Anticipated program success is expected to increase the number and proportion of:

- a. Applications submitted by and awarded to URMs under various NIH grant mechanisms.
- b. Publications authored in peer-reviewed journals.
- c. Diverse populations promoted and tenured in research tracks.
- d. Underrepresented populations participating in the NIH grant review process.
- e. Underrepresented populations participating in the peer review process for scientific journals.
- f. Underrepresented populations serving in research leadership positions at their institutions or professional organizations.

Programs include:

- a. Workshops on principles of basic, clinical and translational research.
- b. Intensive grant writing workshops.
- c. Biostatistics refresher.
- d. Navigating NIH and other funding agencies.
- e. Professional and career development workshops.

At the conclusion of this initiative, a diverse cadre of early-stage faculty will have achieved greater success in securing external sponsorship of their research, in transitioning to independent research careers, and in turn mentoring their younger counterparts

Meet the STAR Fellows



Marc Elie, PhD

Dr. Elie graduated from Florida State University with a Bachelor's Degree in Chemistry and from the University of Central Florida with a PhD in Environmental Chemistry. His professional interests involve the use of metabolomics for toxicological and clinical research, LC/MS method development, LC/MS instrumentation, GC-MS based analyses and biomarker discoveries. He is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the UCD SOP Metabolomics Facility. His current research investigates the effects of airborne pollutants on the metabolome and the use of integrated omics (metabolomics, genomics and proteomics) in order to elucidate the mechanisms involved in pollutant-induced asthma susceptibility and exacerbations.



Alana J. Gunn, PhD

Dr. Gunn received her PhD from the University of Chicago and she is currently an Assistant Professor at Binghamton University in the Department of Social Work. Before joining the faculty, Dr. Gunn was a National Institute of Drug Abuse-funded post-doctoral fellow at the National Development and Research Institutes in New York City. Dr. Gunn has extensive experience working with both incarcerated individuals in jails and under correctional community-based supervision, as well as with the agencies charged with supporting the re-entry process. Her program of research focuses on the ways in which multi-level experiences of stigmatization shape health disparities for women with histories of incarceration and substance use disorders. She is currently engaged in a number of projects, including a formative research study to develop a critical consciousness-informed intervention targeting women at high risk of HIV exposure. She is also engaged in a study investigating the barriers, such as stigma and medication adherence, to black women's use of oral pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).



Dr. Gerald D. Griffin, PhD

Dr. Griffin is a neurovirologist. His research interests focus on the reciprocal interactions between neurotropic viruses and neurons. He received the PhD degree in Neuroscience from the University of Pennsylvania (UPENN) in 2009 where he concentrated in neuroendocrinology. He completed postdoctoral training in the Department of Microbiology at UPENN where he focused on how Herpes Simplex Virus Type I alters neuronal gene expression. Presently, Dr. Griffin leads the neurovirology laboratory at Tuskegee. Here, he aims to dissect neural modifications induced by HSV-1 infection as well as to look at how neuropeptides regulate HSV-1 replication.



Christianna Howard, PhD

Dr. Howard, a current postdoc research fellow at the University of Kansas Medical Center in the lab of Dr Reena Rao. The lab works on the reduction of Polycystic Kidney Disease (PKD), and the effect of Renal Acute Kidney Injury (AKI) in relation to the protein Glycogen Synthase Kinase (GSK3). Our studies have currently shown in vivo and in vitro that with the inhibition of GSK3 α and β isoforms, there is a reduction in PKD cysts, as well as, fibrosis by inflammation due to AKI.



Eboneé Traneice Johnson, PhD

Dr. Johnson received a PhD in rehabilitation psychology with a specialization in educational psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in December 2012. Currently, she works as an assistant professor in the Department of Rehabilitation and Disability Studies at Southern University in the College of Nursing and Allied Health. She also spends a third of her time working as a research associate for the newly established Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Targeted Communities (VRTAC-TC) sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration. Dr. Johnson's research focuses on improving the quality of life of persons impacted by chronic illness and disability with an applied focus on African Americans diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. As an early career researcher, she has 7 journal articles, 7 book chapters, and 9 conference presentations in this area. Dr. Johnson specifically focuses on improving outcomes in the following subsets of the quality of life domain: health and longevity, vocation, and independent living. As an example, her work with the VRTAC-TC will address improving vocational services to African Americans diagnosed with HIV/AIDS to increase self-sufficiency. Dr. Johnson is currently engaged in projects investigating predictors such as stigma, spirituality, self-efficacy, outcome expectancy, etc. of the aforementioned outcomes to develop a more effective framework for future intervention studies.



Alle Rutebemberwa, PhD

Dr. Rutebemberwa received her PhD in Immunology from Imperial College London, UK. She has diverse training and extensive experience in cellular and molecular immunology. Her research focus has included describing the molecular epidemiology of HIV in an African setting and investigating correlates of immune protection in infectious diseases such as HIV and Viral Hepatitis C (HCV). Dr. Rutebemberwa has been instrumental in studies aimed at understanding mechanisms that infectious diseases, use to evade the human immune responses and establish a chronic infection, as well as understanding mechanisms in which the human immune response may be impaired resulting in the establishment of a chronic viral infection. She is currently a Research Associate at the University of Colorado Denver, Anschutz Medical Campus, where she collaborates on studies geared towards investigating the role of immune cells and the lymphatic system in pulmonary disease.



Enyinnaya Merengwa, MD, MPH, DrPh(c), CPH

Dr. Merengwa is a Physician-Scientist and currently serves as a Post-Doctoral fellow in an NCI-funded Cancer-Related Health Disparities Program. He has more than 10 years of practice experience as a Clinician, a Public Health Physician and as a full-time University Faculty. His current research is geared towards: a) addressing the disparities in HIV/AIDS-associated cancers among African-Americans and b) Understanding the effects of prostate cancer in gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men. He is an Epidemiologist in the area of cancer health disparities.



Dawn Thurman, PhD

Dr. Dawn Thurman earned a Ph.D. in Social Work from Howard University. For the past 10 years she has worked as an Independent Clinical Social Worker in various community based organizations, school systems, and private practice settings. Dr. Thurman currently serves as an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at Morgan State University. Her primary research focuses on African American children with depressive symptoms. Specifically, Dr. Thurman's research explores risk and protective factors, which include exposure to violence, self-esteem, bullying and religiosity. Dr. Thurman has also begun preliminary exploration of the psychological impact and health outcomes of African American children who witness community violence.



Olamide Ojo-Fati, MD

Dr. Ojo-Fati is a post-doctoral associate on the Diversity Research Supplement based on an active R01 (3R01HL081522-07S1; Okuyemi, PI) whose goal is to enhance smoking cessation in homeless populations. He is an NIH fellow in the National Research Mentoring Network Steps Towards Academic Research (NRMN STAR). His background and training are in medicine and community health. His ongoing NIH-funded project is titled psychosocial predictors of Adherence in a Homeless population. Dr. Ojo-Fati's research focuses on psychosocial factors, including depression, perceived stress, and generalized anxiety disorder in relation to adherence to medication and behavioral therapy for smoking cessation in low-income groups. He is currently pursuing an MPH with a focus in data analysis at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health.



Brandy Piña-Watson, PhD

Dr. Piña-Watson received her Ph.D. in counseling psychology at Texas A&M University. She is currently an Assistant Professor in the Counseling Psychology program within the Department of Psychological Sciences at Texas Tech University. Dr. Piña-Watson's research focuses on developing an understanding of how individual factors, family dynamics, culture, and society impact Latina/o adolescent and emerging adult depression, suicidality, well-being, and health risk taking behaviors with a particular focus on the Mexican American population. Her research takes a holistic and resiliency approach acknowledging the complexity and intersection of various identities and contexts that may contribute to mental health disparities.



Erik J. Rodriguez, PhD, MPH

Dr. Rodriguez has substantial experience in conducting epidemiologic research among minority populations, including research on unhealthy behaviors (e.g. tobacco use, alcohol use, and poor diet and physical inactivity), mental health, aging, occupational exposures, respiratory health, and hospital-acquired infections. Up to this point in my professional training I have studied and worked in minority health and health disparities for over 10 years. My research objectives have focused on the role of individual unhealthy behaviors in the relationship between chronic stress and depressive symptoms among African American, Latino, and White middle and older aged adults as well as the sociodemographic and acculturation-related factors that influence patterns of cigarette smoking among Latino national background groups. My long term career goal is to pursue a position in health disparities research that focuses on understanding health behaviors over the life course among minority groups for the purposes of developing effective interventions and health policies.

The professional development course through NRMN has provided me the attention and support I need to design a career development proposal. The NRMN faculty mentors are genuinely interested in seeing minority academic succeed by investing their time and sharing words of encouragement.

--Erik J. Rodriguez, Ph.D., M.P.H.

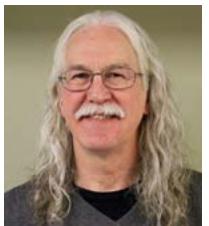
Meet the Coaches



Avery August, PhD

Professor and Chair, Microbiology and Immunology
Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine
Ithaca, New York

Dr. August assumed his position as Professor and Chair of the Department of Microbiology and Immunology in July 2010. His previous position was as Distinguished Professor of Immunology in the Department of Veterinary & Biomedical Sciences, and Director of the Center for Molecular Immunology & Infectious Disease, at The Pennsylvania State University at University Park, where he started as an Assistant Professor in 1999. He received a B.S. degree in Medical Technology from the California State University at Los Angeles, and a Ph.D. degree in Immunology from the Weill Cornell Graduate School of Medical Sciences. He was a Postdoctoral fellow at The Rockefeller University with the late Hidesaburo Hanafusa.



Ed Krug, PhD

Departmental Mentoring Champion
Associate Dean, Postdoctoral Affairs
Medical University of South Carolina

Dr. Krug has spent the last 30+ years studying early developmental events from the perspective of a biochemist. That journey has taken him down a variety of paths, including teaching cytoskeletal dynamics and the responsible conduct of research. These experiences have served him well in his additional duties as Associate Dean for Postdoctoral Affairs, and recently as the university Research Integrity Officer. For the past 10 years he has had a special interest in promoting the biomedical trainees from underrepresented groups.



Lisa Barnes, PhD

Professor, Neurological Sciences and Behavioral Sciences
Rush University Medical Center

Dr. Barnes is a professor in the departments of Neurological Sciences and Behavioral Sciences at Rush University Medical Center, and a cognitive neuropsychologist in the Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center. She earned her PhD in biopsychology from the University of Michigan and completed postdoctoral training in cognitive neuroscience from the University of California, Davis. Her research focus is on racial disparities in chronic diseases of aging. She is the Principal Investigator of several community-based, epidemiologic cohort studies of older African Americans, and the Director of the Rush Center of Excellence on Disparities in HIV and Aging.



Laszlo Prokai, PhD, DSc

Professor and Robert A. Welch Chair in Biochemistry
Center for Neuroscience Discovery
UNT Health Science Center - Fort Worth, Texas

Dr. Prokai is the first Chair in Biochemistry endowed by the Houston-based Welch Foundation, one of the United States' oldest and largest private funding sources for basic research, at the UNT Health Science Center. He started his academic career as an Assistant Professor at the Department of Pharmaceutics and the Center for Drug Discovery of the College of Pharmacy at the University of Florida in 1991. During his tenure there, he rose in rank to Professor in the Department of Medicinal Chemistry, held an Affiliate Professorship at the Department of

Chemistry, was a Joint Professor of the Department of Anesthesiology, Scientific Advisor of the Biotechnology Program, and Member of the McKnight Brain Institute. Dr. Prokai joined the University of North Texas Health Science Center in 2005. Dr. Prokai also is Courtesy Professor at the Department of Medicinal Chemistry, University of Florida, and Adjunct Professor at the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry, University of Texas at Arlington and at the Department of Chemistry of the Texas Christian University. He has been invited to be one of the "SuperProfessors" on Faculty Row, which is now a leading network of experts for academics globally. Dr. Prokai has maintained an actively funded research program supported by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and is recognized nationally and internationally for his work on discovery, bioorganic and medicinal chemistry of central nervous system agents, as well as on neuropeptides, proteomics and mass spectrometry. Dr. Prokai has been an invited speaker on numerous national and international scientific meetings, received a Pro Renovanda Cultura Hungariae Visiting Professorship at the Department of Medical Chemistry, University of Szeged (Hungary) in 2002, and has been an active collaborator with pharmaceutical and chemical companies. He currently serves on the Editorial Boards of numerous scientific journals including Current Medicinal Chemistry, Central Nervous System Agents in Medicinal Chemistry, Current Drug Delivery, Medicinal Chemistry Reviews-Online, Medicinal Chemistry, Journal of Data Mining in Genomics & Proteomics, and the Journal of Integrated Omics.



Jamboor Vishwanatha, PhD

Professor, Molecular and Medical Genetics,
Special Assistant to Provost Minority Affairs
UNT Health Science Center - Fort Worth, Texas

Dr. Vishwanathais a Special Assistant to the Provost for the Center for Diversity and International Programs, Professor of Molecular and Medical Genetics, Director of the Texas Center for Health Disparities, and Director of the Institute for Cancer Research at UNT Health Science Center. He serves as director of the Texas Center for Minority Health, Education, Research and Outreach (Texas Center for Health Disparities), a Center of Excellence funded by the National institutes of Health. In this role, Dr. Vishwanatha has directed health disparity research, education and community outreach programs. For the past nine years, he has organized the annual Texas Conference on Health Disparities. His laboratory is investigating genetic markers that predict development of aggressive prostate and breast cancers. Dr. Vishwanatha is developing nanotechnology-based therapies for breast and prostate cancer metastases. Actively involved in programs to diversify the biomedical research workforce, Dr. Vishwanatha serves on the external advisory committees for St. Mary's University, San Antonio, Texas; Alabama State University, Montgomery, Ala.; and Savannah State University, Savannah, Ga. He has been an active member of the GREAT Group, SACNAS and ABRCMS.



Johnny He, PhD

Professor, Department of Cell Biology & Immunology
Associate Dean, Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences
UNT Health Science Center - Fort Worth, Texas

Dr. He received his Ph.D. in Molecular Biology from New York University, New York, NY in 1994 and postdoctoral training in Molecular Virology at the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center of Rockefeller University in 1994-1995 and Dana Farber Cancer Institute of Harvard Medical School in 1995-1997. Dr. He was then recruited to join the Department of Microbiology and Immunology at Indiana University School of Medicine in 1997. He was promoted to Associate Professor with tenure in 2003 and Full Professor in 2007. Dr. He served as Director of the Indiana University Center for AIDS Research in 2007-2011. Dr. He's research focuses on the molecular biology of host-virus interactions. His long-term goal is to understand how human cells interact with HIV/HCV viruses and to develop therapeutic strategies specifically targeted at these interactions. Dr.

He is interested in determining what cells are infected by HIV/HCV, how these cells are infected by HIV/HCV, what host factors are needed to support virus replication, and how these infections alone or in combination ultimately lead to diseases. On translational studies, Dr. He is interested in development of therapeutics that is able to attack the viruses and/or prevent the diseases. Dr. He has been collaborating with investigators in countries such as China with limited resources but rapidly increased HIV infected population to determine how viral, host and socio-economical factors affect the nature and prevalence of HIV/HCV-associated diseases and their treatment. He has made several extremely novel observations including identification of the human nannose receptor as the HIV receptor for infection of CD4 negative astrocytes and elucidation of the mechanisms by which HIV-1 Tat protein leads to neurotoxicity. His development of an HIV Tat transgenic mouse model has allowed numerous research laboratories across the world to make advances in HIV neuropathogenesis research.



Emily Spence-Almaguer, MSW, PhD

Associate Professor, Behavioral & Community Health
UNT Health Science Center - Fort Worth, Texas

Research interests include: program evaluation, community assessment, solution-focused practice methods, homelessness/poverty, service learning, inter-personal violence, participatory research, risk and resiliency



Harlan Jones, PhD

Assistant Professor, Molecular and Medical Genetics,
Director, Center for Institutional Diversity
and International Programs
UNT Health Science Center - Fort Worth, Texas

Dr. Jones earned his Ph.D. in 2001 from UNTHSC. Since 2001, Dr. Jones continues to serve as mentor and advocate of diversity in the biomedical and health professions through his research and outreach programs. In 2004 he joined the UNTHSC as Assistant Professor in the Department of Molecular Biology and Immunology. Dr. Jones has over 15 years of teaching and mentoring students including: K-12, undergraduate and graduate education levels with particular focus on Underrepresented populations. Dr. Jones' is currently the Director of the UNTHSC Center for Diversity and International Programs (CDIP). In this capacity, Dr. Jones is actively involved in directing several mentoring and professional development programs including Summer Research Internship Undergraduate Programs, Short-term Training for Minority Health Professional Students, Academic Partnerships and Specialized Programs. His most recent contribution to diversifying the biomedical workforce is through and National Research Mentoring Network (NRMN).



Questions?

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