

4th Annual TrUE Undergraduate Research Symposium

Center for the Integration of STEM Education and Research (CISER)

2025 Alumni Scholar Career Talks

Luncheon Panelists



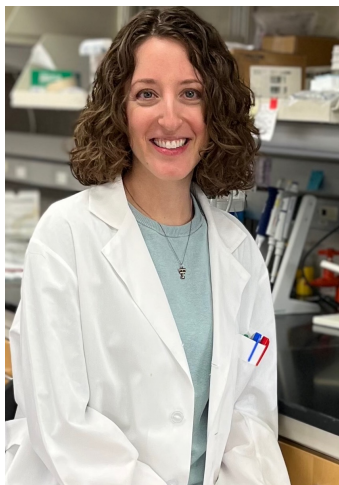
Saba Nafees is a dreamer, scientist, activist, and entrepreneur. Born in Pakistan, she moved to Fort Worth, TX, at age 11, and her family's immigration journey was featured in the award-winning PBS documentary *Dream With Me*. Passionate about movement building and increasing representation in STEM, she focuses on empowering undocumented youth and women from underrepresented backgrounds. Saba earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in Mathematics and a Ph.D. in Mathematical Biology from Texas Tech University. Now based in San Francisco, she works as a research data scientist and consultant with early-stage startups and biotech firms, developing analytical and computational methods—including machine learning tools—to study molecular mechanisms of disease. She also mentors undocumented and immigrant students, advocates within the immigrant rights movement, and serves on the boards of NAKASEC and CAPAW. A CISER Scholar for over a decade, Saba remains a dedicated and inspiring Texas Tech alumna.



Giuliana DiMarco graduated from Texas Tech University in 2018 with a Bachelor's degree in Biology, where she conducted research on memory, stress, and attention under the mentorship of Dr. Breanna Harris and Dr. Paul Soto. She went on to earn her Ph.D. in Neuroscience in 2024 from Rutgers University–Newark, where her research with Dr. Juan Mena-Segovia focused on the neuroanatomy of brain-spinal cord pathways before and after injury. Currently, Giuliana works in grants management as a Science Officer with Goldbelt Frontier, supporting the CDMRP Spinal Cord Injury Research Program. Outside of her professional work, she is passionate about advancing neuroscience research and bridging scientific inquiry with program development.

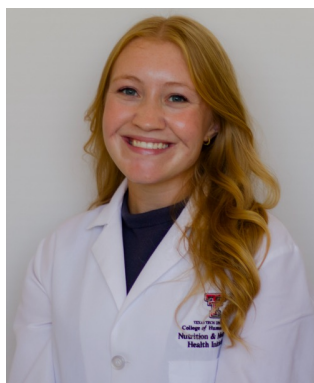


Belinda Johnson is a Staff Research Scientist at Los Alamos National Laboratory, where she studies the structure-property-performance relationships of materials under high temperature and pressure environments. She graduated from Texas Tech University in 2016 with a B.S. in Chemistry and earned her Ph.D. in Chemistry in 2021 from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign under the mentorship of Prof. Dana D. Dlott. While at UIUC, she was both a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow and an Alfred P. Sloan Minority Ph.D. Fellow. Belinda began her career at LANL as an undergraduate intern in 2013 and later returned full time in 2021 as an Agnew National Security Postdoctoral Fellow in the Shock and Detonation Physics Group. Her current work focuses on developing diagnostics to better understand the behavior of high explosives in shock compression experiments. A West Texas native, Belinda enjoys spending time with her family, hiking, gardening, and thrifting.



Rachel Babcock graduated in 2016 with a Bachelors in Cell and Molecular Biology with Highest Honors from Texas Tech University and in 2022 with a PhD in Immunology from The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center UTHealth Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences. During her undergraduate training, she conducted research in the lab of Dr. Jannette Dufour at the TTUHSC and served as CISER SSO Secretary and President. She is currently completing her postdoctoral training focused on breast cancer immunology research at the TTUHSC. She is pursuing a future career in academic research. She strives to establish her own lab to conduct basic molecular immunology research to improve human health and mentor the next generation of scientists. Outside of lab, she loves spending time with her family and taking photos of bugs.

Career Talks



Anna Nelson is a Ph.D. student in Nutritional Sciences mentored by Dr. Marleigh Hefner. Her research focuses ranges between obesity management in adults and adolescents as well as nutritional needs regarding women's health. Anna is also involved in the development of the BSH (Balance, Smart Choices, Healthy Living) STEM Club with hopes to implement nutrition education in middle school-aged children. Anna is passionate not only about nutrition research but also mentorship and hopes to continue her nutrition career as a professor (and continuing researcher) in the nutrition realm. Beyond research, Anna loves to read and spend time with her two dogs, Bailey and Meeko, and her husband, John.



Alexander Nunnery graduated from Texas Tech University with a B.A. in Public Relations (2016) and later completed a post-baccalaureate in Biology (2023). During his gap years, he worked at UT Health San Antonio as a Research Area Specialist in Dr. DeLorenzo's Clinical and Translational Research Lab, contributing to studies on airway management, pediatric emergency care, vascular access, and suicide prevention. He gained experience in IRB submissions, clinical data collection, and regulatory compliance while collaborating on multidisciplinary research teams. Before medicine, Alex built a career in social and digital marketing, leading campaigns for national brands and non-profits, and continues to freelance as a creative strategist. He is now a medical student at UAG School of Medicine with interests in Emergency Medicine, Pediatrics, and Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery. Passionate about advancing medical innovation and access to care, he also enjoys traveling, writing, exploring new cultures, and mentoring underserved youth.



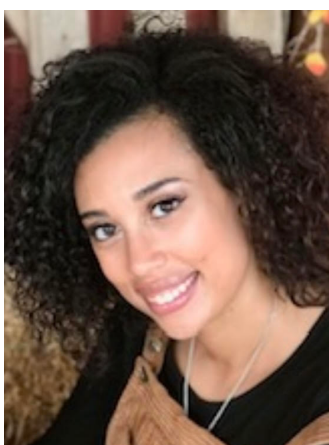
Aldo Hernandez graduated cum laude in May 2021 with a B.Sc. in Chemistry and a minor in Philosophy from Texas Tech University. In 2019, he joined CISER while working in Dr. Gerardo Gamez's lab, where he focused on spectroscopy and its application to nanomaterial analysis. Since graduation, he has worked in private industry as a research chemist and analytical instrument lead in the oil and gas sector. Aldo is passionate about bridging his interests in law and science, and he is currently pursuing Patent Bar registration to practice patent prosecution, with plans to potentially continue to law school to expand his impact at the intersection of science and innovation.



Adam Castillo is a Food Safety and Quality Assurance professional at Factor, a leading food manufacturer. With a strong academic foundation in Food Science and Chemical Engineering, he combines technical expertise with a passion for ensuring food safety, regulatory compliance, and product quality. His work centers on upholding industry standards, driving continuous improvement, and supporting the delivery of safe, high-quality food to consumers.



Bailee Alonzo graduated cum laude in Fall 2021 with her Bachelor's in Biology and minors in Chemistry, and Nutrition from the College of Arts and Sciences. As an undergraduate, she conducted research in the labs of Dr. Singh, Dr. Scolari, and Dr. Hegde. She also conducted research through several summer research programs: Genomics Summer Research Program for Minorities at the University of Utah, Clinical Genetics and Bioinformatics program at Keck Grad Institute, MSTP Summer Scholars Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and InVTRO program at the NIH. After graduation, she completed a two-year program at the Willmer Eye Institute at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine where she studied blood flow in the human retina. She is currently a second-year medical student at TTUHSC SOM. She is interested in ophthalmology and rheumatology and hopes to continue contributing to research and work in areas that lack these healthcare specialties.



Breanna Roberts earned her Bachelor's degree in Human Development and Family Studies from Texas Tech University in 2019. As an undergraduate, she conducted research in Dr. Breanna Harris' laboratory, focusing on stress- and anxiety-like behaviors and their effects on the HPA axis in an Alzheimer's disease mouse model, work that contributed to a publication in the Journal of General and Comparative Endocrinology. She went on to complete her Master of Social Work degree at Louisiana State University in 2024 and is now a Licensed Master Social Worker pursuing clinical licensure. Breanna currently works as a psychiatric social worker at Sunrise Canyon Hospital and as a hospice social worker with Amedisys, where she is dedicated to supporting individuals and families through critical stages of care. Outside her professional roles, she enjoys spending time with her fiancé and children and is an avid supporter of Texas Tech athletics.



Chris Shanklin MD was born and raised in Lubbock. He went to Texas tech undergraduate and graduated with a degree in cell and molecular biology in 2001. During that time, he was fellow of the HHMI program doing research in the department of pharmacology with Dr Tina Machu. He went to the TTUHSCSOM and graduated in 2005 and went on to the TTUHSC family medicine residency. When he finished residency in 2008 he went to work for covenant health system and in 2017 he opened up his own clinic- Lubbock Primary Care. Now he is the CEO of this health system and actively practicing. He has 6 clinic in 3 cities and 11 providers.



Eleni Keith graduated from Texas Tech University in 2024 with a bachelor's degree in Kinesiology and minors in Biology and Chemistry. Throughout her undergraduate studies, she researched reaction time measurements in the Performance, Cognition, and Action lab, under Dr. Jarrod Blinch, and joined CISER in 2023. During her senior year, Eleni had the opportunity to work in Dr. Josh Lawrence's lab at TTUHSC, where she explored the relationship between Vitamin D levels and perceived general health ratings in individuals from rural West Texas. Eleni is pursuing a master's degree in Exercise Physiology in Dr. Kembra Albracht-Schulte's NExT Medicine lab. Her interests center on employing nutritional and exercise interventions to combat chronic diseases, particularly obesity and its novel manifestations.



Jackson Driskill is a fourth-year medical student in the MD/MBA dual degree program, originally from Hobbs, New Mexico. He earned his Bachelor of Science from Texas Tech University in 2022 and conducted research through CISER in Dr. Susan Burgeson's lab on alcohol use disorder (AUD), where he contributed to the development of novel minocycline analogs as potential treatments and helped create a porcine model of intoxication. His current research is clinically focused, and growing up in a rural community has fueled his commitment to improving healthcare access in underserved areas—a mission he continues to pursue through volunteering at the Free Clinic at Lubbock Impact and mentoring. Looking forward, Jackson hopes to combine clinical practice with advocacy for rural populations. Outside of medicine, he enjoys live concerts and is preparing for his wedding in April 2026.



Julia John graduated in August 2024 with a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and a minor in Health Professions, and she is currently continuing her studies to complete a Bachelor of Science in Psychology. During her undergraduate years, she worked as a research assistant for Dr. Volker Neugebauer, focusing on the activation and inhibition of microglia and astrocytes. After graduation, she gained clinical experience as a medical assistant at Texas Retina Associates. Julia is preparing to begin medical school in Spring 2026 at a Caribbean institution and is taking additional courses to strengthen her academic foundation as she prepares for the next step in her medical journey.



Jessica Kennedy graduated from Texas Tech University in May 2025 with a degree in Biochemistry. As a CISER scholar, she cultivated her passion for research through projects focused on Alzheimer's disease, where she explored strategies to slow disease progression by targeting neuroinflammation. Her undergraduate experiences, including presenting at conferences, collaborating with mentors, and serving as the Treasurer of CISER, helped shape her path towards a career in research. She is currently working as a research technician and hopes to pursue a PhD in the future. Jessica aims to continue building on her research experiences that leads to better treatments for those in need.



Jorge Franco is an Account Manager at Novogene, where he oversees genomics partnerships across Texas. He holds an M.S. in Food Science and a B.S. in Chemistry from Texas Tech University, where he also conducted research on lactic acid bacteria and molecular assays. Prior to joining Novogene, Jorge held research and molecular technologist roles in CLIA-certified labs, focusing on nucleic acid-based diagnostics and validation studies for rapid identification of infection. Beyond the lab and office, Jorge is a plant enthusiast, he cares for over 100 indoor plants and has a passion for science communication, learning, and mentoring. He shares his home with two beloved husky mixes adopted during his undergrad years at TTU. His mission is to bridge the gap between cutting-edge genomics and researchers tackling real-world challenges



Liane Vásquez-Weber is non-traditional in her academic and professional career. Her motto in life is “Transform our thoughts or let our thoughts transform us.” She earned her Bachelor of Science in Computer Science with a minor in Biology in May of 2022. Before completing her degree, she took two breaks, one to pursue volunteering, one to pursue mental health. In her second stint in undergrad, she leaned into her natural curiosity and joined CISER SSO in 2019 as a part of the microbiology lab of Dr. Amanda M.V. Brown, focusing on microbial communities. Her intuitive thought process is in data organization, and her ideal topics of interest are fuzzy mathematical models, biological noise and the grey box of the gut-brain-axis. Presently she works in Houston, TX as a Data & Branding Coordinator while looking forward to marriage with her fiancé Brandon Tran.



Mariana Moncrief, PA-C works in the urology department at TTUHSC, specializing in urologic oncology. In her role, she serves as a first assistant in robotic surgery and independently performs MRI/US fusion prostate biopsies and ureteral stent placement/exchanges. Additionally, she performs clinic procedures including cystoscopy, TRUS prostate biopsy, vasectomy, bladder Botox injection, difficult foley placement, and more. One of her favorite roles is serving as an educator in the urology residency program and for PA students, helping to teach surgical and procedural skills. Mariana has recently begun serving as an adjunct faculty member for the TTUHSC PA program, teaching the urology course. As her practice expands, she hopes to take on more roles with the new UMC Cancer Center. Mariana and her husband, Blake, have two 5 year old boxers that keep them very active and entertained.



Neel Roy is currently a third-year law student at the University of Chicago, which he attends as a Rubenstein Scholar, and where he serves as the Ernst Freund Fellow in Law and Philosophy and the Brown Fellow in Health Administration and Policy. Prior to law school, Neel worked as a health economist at the Federal Reserve; worked as a consultant to the New Mexico Department of Health, Public Education Department, and Early Childhood Education & Care Department; earned an M.Sc. in econometrics from the University of Kent, which he attended as a Fulbright Scholar, graduating as class valedictorian; and worked as the policy aide to New Mexico's Chief Medical Officer.



Rose Marie S. Tijerina is a researcher, clinician, and aspiring physician dedicated to advancing medical understanding through both patient care and scientific inquiry. She earned her B.S. in Biology from Texas Tech University, where she worked with Dr. Lisa Limeri to create the first quantitative measure of Community Cultural Wealth, examining the cultural strengths that help diverse students succeed in higher education. She currently serves as a medical scribe and research assistant in the TTUHSC Dermatology Department under Dr. Michelle Tarbox, a Mohs histotechnician under Dr. Alba Posligua, and a neuroscience researcher with Dr. Josh Lawrence studying dysregulated all-trans-retinoic-acid pathways in Alzheimer's disease, with her first first-author publication in preparation. Beyond her academic and clinical work, Rose Marie volunteers in underserved schools, advocates for equity in healthcare, and enjoys learning new languages and instruments.



Roberto Mendoza is a senior medical student at the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center School of Medicine. As a first-generation American born to immigrant parents from Mexico, he was raised in rural West Texas up through high school. He began his post-secondary education at South Plains College, where he joined the Plains Bridges to the Baccalaureate Program and began conducting research at Texas Tech University. Upon transferring to Texas Tech, he joined CISER to continue his in vitro studies with Dr. Lauren Gollahon on cancer signaling and metastasis. After graduating Summa Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Science in Cell and Molecular Biology in 2021, he matriculated into medical school later that fall, where he began exploring phytochemicals and their effect on inflammatory sequelae with Dr. Chwan-Li Shen. Now, he is applying to internal medicine residency programs with a research interest in liver and digestive diseases and microbiome-mitochondrial physiology in the context of inflammatory sequelae



Rob Young graduated from Texas Tech in 2025 with a bachelor's degree in Mathematics and minors in Chemistry, Biology, and Health Professions. In his undergraduate career, he conducted research at both TTU and the TTUHSC with Dr. Travis Thompson and Dr. Komaraia Palle to investigate the molecular mechanisms driving chemoresistance and mathematical models of neurodegenerative disease. Currently, Robert is taking a gap year while applying to medical school.



Ryan Marshall, PE graduated from TTU where he earned his bachelor's degree in biology and master's degree in civil engineering and is a Professional Engineer in Texas. He joined Permian Resources in 2024 as a Senior Water Resources Engineering Advisor. His projects focus on produced water recycling in the Permian Basin for Oil & Gas operations. He began his engineering career as an environmental engineer where he was involved in large scale public works projects in Arkansas and Texas. His Oil & Gas water projects have recycled 1 billion barrels of produced water which has offset the same amount of freshwater in arid West Texas. He graduated from Idalou High School where he was awarded the inaugural Julie Isom Outstanding Student in Laboratory Excellence award which propelled his science & engineering studies at TTU. He lives in Midland, TX where most weekends you can find him cheering on the Red Raiders and slow-smoking delicious meats



Abel Cortinas graduated from Texas Tech University in 2012 with a Bachelor's in Chemical Engineering. Abel joined CISER as a sophomore and worked in the labs of Drs. Siva Vanapalli and Micah Green (now at Texas A&M University). Abel received his Master of Science in Chemical Engineering Practice (2014) and Ph.D. in Chemical Engineering (2018) from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and worked in the labs of Drs. Daniel Anderson and Robert Langer, where his thesis work focused on translational life science research, specifically the engineering of novel "smart" insulin biotherapies for diabetes treatment (Koch Institute Public Galleries). After graduating, Abel has pursued a career in life science strategy consulting where he has worked with the management consulting firm, L.E.K., as a Life Science Specialist, and now with Axiom Healthcare Strategies, a think tank consulting firm specializing in oncology and rare diseases.



Jocelyn Medina graduated in 2025 with a Bachelor's in Kinesiology and a minor in Chemistry, Biology, and Health Professions from Texas Tech University. During her undergraduate training, she conducted research in the lab of Dr. Josh Lawrence at the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, studying vitamin A deficiency in relation to Alzheimer's disease, the connection between parvalbumin cells and retinoic acid signaling, and the general health ratings of rural underserved West Texans in relation to healthcare access and health perception. She also served as the Vice President of the CISER Student Organization. Jocelyn is currently working at a family medicine clinic in Lubbock, where she is gaining valuable clinical experience and patient interaction skills. She is applying to medical school this cycle and aspires to pursue a career in family medicine, dedicated to serving the underserved populations of West Texas. Outside of academics, she enjoys taking her golden retriever, Nala, to the park, capturing photos, and participating in recreational sports.



Sebastian Salinas is a member of the Texas Tech University Class of 2025 and a recipient of the prestigious Tech10 award, recognizing academic excellence and leadership. He joined the Center for the Integration of STEM Education and Research (CISER) in 2022 after collaborating with former president Rilee Keane on a project in the Keyel Lab. With support from CISER and the Honors College, his work has been presented at international conferences and local symposia, with two manuscripts forthcoming. In 2023, Sebastian founded Raider Recycling, a student-led group that has collected nearly a ton of recyclables and inspired campus-wide sustainability efforts. Passionate about collaborative, curiosity-driven science, he now works as a medical research technologist and microscopy specialist in the Lawrence Lab at the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, aspiring to pursue an M.D./Ph.D.



Xochitl Anderton earned her Bachelor of Science Degree in 1999. She was an HHMI fellow as an undergraduate student, helping with research in the Physiology department at TTUHSC with mentor Alan Neely, Ph.D as well as in the Biology department with mentor Lauren Gollahon, Ph.D. She went on to attend and graduate from Baylor College of Dentistry in downtown Dallas. After graduation in 2003, she hurried back to Lubbock where she has dedicated her time to the underserved populations of our community. She served as the Dental Director of the Community Health Center of Lubbock. Most recently, she transitioned into her own private practice office serving the rural community of Post and surrounding counties. Dr. Anderton enjoys traveling with her daughters and is an avid TTU research supporter.

Special Thanks



Julie Isom has helped lead Texas Tech's efforts to support STEM education and undergraduate research since 1992, starting with the TTU/HHMI Undergraduate Research Program (now CISER). She has continued to work diligently with CISER as the Associate Director for Undergraduate Research. Both her Bachelor's degree in composite science education and her Master's degree in the Department of Biological Sciences have supported her goals to maintain and enhance stellar undergraduate research support for students at Texas Tech. Her enthusiasm and genuine joy for STEM education and research is truly unmatched, and CISER would not be the same organization without her leadership. The members, officers, alumni, and all friends of CISER are truly grateful for Julie's undying support.

"The true power of research lies not just in discovering new knowledge, but in actively sharing those insights to illuminate the path for others."
