

NEWSLETTER

PARTNERSHIP FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF
CANCER RESEARCH



CHFE 2026 Student Arrival

From Left to Right: Yurida Leyva, Minh-Tam Pham, Larissa Aroche Gutierrez, Matthew Harder, Dr. Jean McDougall, Cithlaili Chavez Mendoza, and Maddie Eddiger

Directors Corner

This summer, the Partnership for the Advancement of Cancer Research (PACR) welcomed six graduate students: four from the University of Washington and two from New Mexico State University for the 2026 Community Health Field Experience (CHFE). This experience was held from July 20th through July 31st providing students with an immersive opportunity to explore health equity, cancer disparities, and the social and environmental factors that shape health in communities throughout southern New Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexico border region.

The experience began with a week of virtual learning focused on topics such as social determinants of health, cancer burden and screening, border health, Indigenous health, mental health, and community-engaged research. Students also had opportunities to learn from PACR funded researchers and others whose work addresses health disparities from multiple perspectives.

During the second week, students traveled to Las Cruces, New Mexico for hands-on, community-based learning. At NMSU, students were introduced to the Built Environment Assessment Tool and considered how features of the places where people live, learn, work, and gather can influence health and shape health behaviors. They then carried these lessons into visits throughout the region, including Deming and Columbus, New Mexico; Casa de Peregrinos in Las Cruces; and La Mujer Obrera in El Paso, Texas.

Complementing the learning about health disparities through statistics, students were encouraged to observe, ask questions, listen to community voices, and consider the strengths and resources that already exist within communities. Their experiences highlighted how factors such as geography, access to food and healthcare, the built environment, culture, and community relationships can influence health and opportunities for cancer prevention.

Throughout the two weeks, students were challenged to connect what they learned in the classroom with what they experienced in communities. The program concluded with student presentations and reflections on how the experience shaped their understanding of health equity and community-engaged research.

CHFE reflects PACR's commitment to developing the next generation of researchers and health professionals while strengthening connections between academic institutions and the communities they serve. By moving learning beyond the classroom and into communities, students gained a deeper understanding of an important lesson: addressing cancer disparities requires not only good science, but also listening, collaboration, and meaningful community partnership.

Merranda Marin and Jean McDougall

Faculty Spotlight

Dr. Patricia McGredgor-Mendoza

Languages and Linguistics

The U54 Cancer Partnership is proud to celebrate Dr. Patricia McGregor-Mendoza for two recent honors recognizing her contributions to faculty development and leadership at NMSU.

This spring, Dr. McGregor-Mendoza received the Best Workshop Award at the NMSU Teaching Academy for her presentation on Promotion and Tenure, as voted on by workshop attendees.

She is recognized for her contributions to mentoring and faculty development, including guiding faculty through promotion and tenure processes, conducting workshops, and providing individualized support. Her scholarly and service leadership is demonstrated through her expertise in sociolinguistics, heritage languages, bilingualism, and the education of linguistic minorities. She also exemplifies cross-disciplinary collaboration through her efforts to promote transparency, fairness, and recognition of scholarship, teaching, and service across departments. Throughout her career, she has demonstrated extraordinary service, consistently exceeding her formal responsibilities with warmth, patience, and collegiality.



New Projects

Pilot Project 6: *Dietary modulation of chemotherapeutic toxicity deciphered by a Drosophila model*

Dr. Jacob Jaszczak from the NMSU Department of Biology is launching a new research project through the U54 Cancer Partnership Grant in collaboration with researchers at the Fred Hutch Cancer Center.

The project will investigate whether dietary components can help reduce chemotherapy-induced peripheral neuropathy (CIPN)—a painful condition that can affect the peripheral nervous system during or after cancer treatment. While advances in cancer treatment have improved survival, side effects such as CIPN can significantly impact patients' quality of life and may limit how effectively chemotherapy can be used.

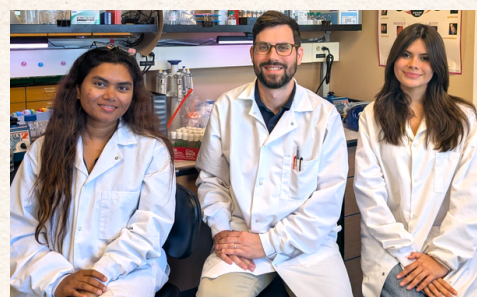
Dr. Jaszczak's lab will use fruit flies (*Drosophila*) as a model system to explore whether changes in diet can reduce chemotherapy-related toxicity while maintaining the treatment's ability to target cancer cells. The research could provide valuable insight into potential strategies for making chemotherapy more effective and accessible for patients.

The project will also provide valuable hands-on research

opportunities for NMSU students. Undergraduate researcher Carmen Gemoets and Ph.D. student Jannatul Mahmuda will be involved in the project, gaining experience in laboratory techniques, toxicology, and neurobiology.

Dr. Jaszczak is especially excited about the collaboration between NMSU and the Fred Hutch and sees this project as the beginning of a long-term research partnership.

Through innovative research and student involvement, this project highlights the U54 Partnership's commitment to connecting basic science, cancer research, education, and community impact.



Left to Right: Jannatul Mahmuda, Dr. Jacob Jaszczak, and Carmen Gemoets

Pilot Project 7: *Defining IGFBP-3 mechanisms of breast cancer progression*

A new research project is bringing together Kevin D. Houston, Ph.D., at NMSU, and Christina Termini, Ph.D., at Fred Hutch to better understand what contributes to aggressive breast cancer.

The project began when Dr. Termini reached out to Dr. Houston to explore connections between their areas of expertise. Through their conversations, the researchers identified a potential relationship between syndecan-2, a protein associated with cancer aggressiveness, and insulin-like growth factor-binding proteins studied by Dr. Houston in breast cancer. Their pilot project will investigate whether these proteins work together to promote aggressive breast cancer.

Understanding what contributes to aggressive breast cancers could have an important impact on communities across New Mexico, particularly underserved populations where breast cancer may sometimes be diagnosed at a more advanced stage. By learning more about what drives aggressive breast cancers, the researchers hope to contribute to better strategies for combating the disease.

The project will also provide valuable hands-on research opportunities for NMSU undergraduate and graduate students, giving them experience in molecular cancer research and laboratory science. Students may also have opportunities to visit Fred Hutch, conduct research, or present their findings.



Dr. Kevin Houston, Chem and BioChem

For Dr. Houston, the project is also an opportunity to expand cancer research at NMSU and give students interested in cancer research new opportunities to explore the field.

Through collaboration between NMSU and Fred Hutch, this U54 project is helping advance breast cancer research while creating valuable opportunities for the next generation of scientists.

Full Project 8: *Discovery of Novel Strategies for Reproductive Plasticity in Bat Species*

A new U54 research project at New Mexico State University is taking an unexpected approach to understanding human health: studying bats.

The project explores how bats regulate their immune systems and reproductive biology, with the goal of gaining insight into processes that may be relevant to cancer and maternal health. Bats are especially interesting to researchers because, despite their long lifespans, unique diets, and ability to carry certain viruses without becoming seriously ill, they appear to have remarkable biological innovations to achieve these feats.

The research will focus on the placenta and the differences between two types of pregnancies in bats. Researchers will examine how genes are regulated during these pregnancies and how the maternal immune system changes throughout pregnancy. Using advanced sequencing techniques, the team hopes to better understand the relationship between the mother, placenta, and developing fetus.

While the project is foundational research, understanding placental health could have broader implications for maternal and long-term health. Conditions such as preeclampsia remain important health concerns, particularly in underserved communities. Studying the unique biology of bats may help researchers identify biological processes that could eventually inform future human health research.

A major component of the project is student involvement. NMSU undergraduate and graduate students will gain hands-on experience caring for bats, conducting breeding experiments, working with biological samples, and developing their own research questions. Many students in the lab are pursuing careers in medicine and healthcare, providing them with valuable research experience as they prepare for the future.



Left to Right: Alana Kamaka-Pederson, Aimee Coletti, Alexis Ortiz, Dr. Teri Orr, Dr. Thomas Eiting (Burrell College of Osteopathic Medicine), Jessica Pulgarin, Vaibhav Chhaya (U. Washington: Santana Lab)

The project also strengthens collaboration between NMSU and Fred Hutch, bringing together researchers with complementary expertise. The team hopes the collaboration will create additional opportunities for students to conduct research and potentially visit Fred Hutch during the project.

By studying what makes bats biologically unique, this U54 project is opening new avenues for discovery while giving NMSU students the opportunity to participate in innovative research that could one day contribute to advances in human health.

Full Project 9: *Origin licensing defects and replication stress responses as therapeutic vulnerabilities in cancer*

Dr. Amanda Ashley from the NMSU Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry will begin a new research project supported by the U54 Cancer Partnership Grant, focusing on developing new therapeutic approaches for triple-negative breast cancer (TNBC).

TNBC is an aggressive form of breast cancer that disproportionately affects women of African American and Latina descent, making this research especially important to communities in New Mexico and beyond. Dr. Ashley's research will investigate molecular differences in TNBC that could reveal new targets for treatment and, ultimately, improve outcomes for patients.

A key part of the project will be involving NMSU students in hands-on cancer research. Undergraduate students will gain experience with new laboratory techniques while working alongside researchers at the forefront of breastcancer research. Students will also have opportunities to present their findings and learn how their research can make a meaningful impact on their families and communities.



Dr. Amanda Ashley, Chem and BioChem

As a New Mexico native, Dr. Ashley is particularly passionate about connecting scientific research with the communities it can benefit. Through this project, she hopes to contribute to the U54 Partnership's tradition of innovative cancer research while helping prepare the next generation of scientists.

Stay tuned for updates on Dr. Ashley's research and the students involved as this exciting new U54 project gets underway!

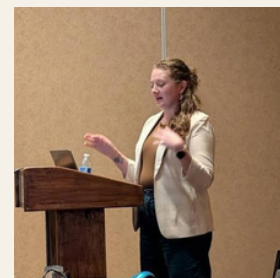
Upcoming Events

- Month of October
 - Breast Cancer Awareness Month
- October 4th-8th
 - Translational Cancer Research for Basic Scientists (AACR Workshop)
- October 10th
 - Aggie Experience Resource Fair
- October 17th - 23rd
 - Male Breast Cancer Awareness Week
 - 17th Walking for Men's Health-Inn of the Mountain Gods
- October 18th - 21st
 - 19th AACR Conference on The Science of Cancer Health Disparities
- October 20th
 - National Mammogram Day
- October 23rd
 - U54 Fall Symposium 3:00PM-5:00PM
- October 29th - 30th
 - 32nd Annual Cancer Research Symposium

Student Spotlight

Project Manager Recognized for Outstanding Internship Work

We are proud to celebrate Amy Sena, M.A. Anthropology, who was selected as the recipient of the 2025–2026 Department Award for her internship report, *Cooking for Your Health in Southern New Mexico Internship*.



Amy Sena, M.A.

Amy served as the Program Manager for the Cooking for Your Health classes from Fall 2024 through Spring 2026 as part of the U54 project, *Increasing Phytonutrients in New Mexican Diets: A Kitchen to Lab to Table Model*, led by co-PIs Ivette Guzman and Heather Greenlees.

Through her work with the program, Amy helped support cooking education and community engagement focused on increasing the use of nutrient-rich foods in New Mexican diets. Her contributions helped connect research with practical, community-based approaches to health and nutrition.

Congratulations to Amy on this well-deserved recognition, and thank you for your dedication to the U54 Partnership and the communities we serve!

From Research to Discovery: SURP Experiences at Fred Hutch

Insight from Eliha

For NMSU student Eliha Hernandez, a summer internship at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center provided an opportunity to explore microbiome research, develop new laboratory skills, and gain a better understanding of the many career paths available in science.

Eliha worked in Dr. Jared Mayers' laboratory, where they studied the lung microbiome. Having specifically hoped to gain experience in microbiome research, the internship provided an opportunity to learn new techniques and work with bacteria in ways they had not experienced at NMSU.

One of the most memorable moments was constructing a plasmid—a small piece of DNA used in research—which the lab named after Eliha using their initials.

"It was something that impacted me," Eliha shared. "I got to learn a lot of different things in the microbiology lab."

The internship also provided professional development opportunities, including workshops and one-on-one meetings focused on CVs, personal statements, and graduate school planning. These experiences helped Eliha think more carefully about their next steps and consider options beyond the traditional academic path.

Working alongside scientists at Fred Hutch also expanded Eliha's perspective on careers in research. Seeing researchers in their day-to-day work demonstrated that earning a Ph.D. can lead to many opportunities both inside and outside of academia.

For other NMSU students considering the Fred Hutch internship, Eliha's advice is simple: "Just do it." They encourage students to take advantage of the partnership and the opportunities it provides.

"Fred Hutch is a really good opportunity and experience," Eliha said. "You build very good resources and connections with them that are going to be beneficial in the long run."

In addition to the research and professional development, the internship gave Eliha the opportunity to experience life in Seattle—adding another memorable chapter to an already valuable summer experience.



*Eliha Hernandez
at Fred Hutch*



Makayla Grinnin at Fred Hutch

Insight from Makayla

This summer, NMSU student Makayla Grinnan gained valuable hands-on research experience through an internship at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center in Seattle, Washington. Working in the laboratory of Neelendu Dey, MD, Makayla contributed to research exploring the gut microbiome and its role in colorectal cancer.

The internship provided Makayla with her first major opportunity to conduct independent research and helped her discover what she enjoys about working in science.

"Being able to kind of find my place in research and finding what I enjoy doing was a really big highlight," Makayla shared. One of the most memorable parts of the experience was presenting her research at the program's final poster session. The experience strengthened her ability to communicate scientific findings and gave her the opportunity to learn about research projects from students across the country.

Beyond the research, the internship introduced Makayla to mentors, researchers, and fellow students who helped her explore different career paths in science. She said the experience changed her perspective on graduate school and showed her that there are many different paths to a career in research.

For students considering the Fred Hutch internship, Makayla's advice is simple: "I'd say to do it." She encourages future applicants to carefully research potential mentors and projects and take advantage of the opportunity to build professional connections.

The experience gave Makayla greater confidence in pursuing a future in research and left her with lasting friendships, professional connections, and a clearer vision of her academic goals.

From Research to Discovery: SURP Experiences at Fred Hutch (Continued)

Insight from Daniel

For NMSU student Daniel Mejia, a summer internship at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center became a transformative experience that helped clarify his future in research. Entering the internship unsure whether to pursue an MD, PhD, or MPH, Daniel left with a much stronger interest in pursuing a PhD and a career focused on research.

Working with Dr. Matthew Triplett in the Public Health Sciences Division, Daniel contributed to the Sacred Lungs project, which focuses on adapting and implementing a lung cancer screening patient-navigation intervention for tribal healthcare settings in Washington State.

One of the most valuable aspects of the experience was working as part of a large, multidisciplinary research team. For the first time, Daniel joined a project that was already underway and was trusted with a significant role in one of the study's aims.

The internship also provided opportunities to connect with researchers and clinicians across different specialties. Through mentors Dr. Triplett and staff scientist Casey Walsh, Daniel was able to speak with PhD scientists, clinicians, and other professionals about their careers and day-to-day work. These conversations helped him better understand what he wanted his own career to look like.

The experience also changed how Daniel viewed research teams. He learned that successful research is not only about the data and the people being studied, but also about the researchers themselves and the relationships they build with one another.

"I learned that research is not 100% research," Daniel shared, describing the importance of building relationships, checking in with colleagues, and creating a supportive team environment.

The internship also helped Daniel recognize how his background in biology and education could be combined in a future career, particularly through community-focused research.

For other NMSU students considering the Fred Hutch internship, Daniel's advice is simple: don't let the idea of moving to Seattle hold you back. He emphasized that the program provides exceptional support and creates opportunities to build lasting friendships and professional connections with students and researchers from across the country.

By the end of the internship, Daniel had not only gained valuable research experience but also a clearer vision of how he wants to contribute to science and his community.



Left to Right: Daniel Mejia, and Dr. Matthew Triplett

Insight from the Hutch

For more than 20 years, the Partnership for the Advancement of Cancer Research (PACR) has supported NMSU students by providing opportunities to gain hands-on experience in cancer research at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center through the Cancer Research Internship for NMSU Undergraduate (CRI-U) and Graduate (CRI-G) programs.

During the summer of 2026, three NMSU undergraduate students—Makayla Grinnan, Eliha Hernandez, and Daniel Mejia—participated in the nine-week Fred Hutch Summer Undergraduate Research Program (SURP) alongside a national cohort of 22 students. The students conducted independent research in areas spanning translational science, human biology, microbiome research, and public health while participating in professional development workshops, scientific seminars, and networking events. The program concluded with a competitive poster session where students presented their research.

Makayla Grinnan, mentored by Neelendu Dey, MD, conducted research in Translational Science and Therapeutics, strengthening her interest in cancer biology and helping her clarify her goals for graduate school.

"My summer at Fred Hutch gave me a much clearer sense of where I want to take my career and what I am looking for in PhD programs."

Eliha Hernandez, mentored by Dr. Jared Mayers in Human Biology, gained hands-on experience in microbiome research and learned new laboratory techniques.

"I had the opportunity to contribute to microbiome research, learning a ton of new and cool laboratory techniques, and had a lot of fun exploring Seattle! I would definitely recommend the program to other students as it's a great opportunity."

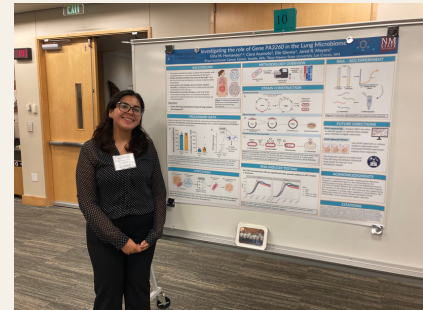
From Research to Discovery: SURP Experiences at Fred Hutch (Continued)

Daniel Mejia, mentored by Dr. Matthew Triplett in Public Health Sciences, contributed to the Sacred Lungs project, which focuses on lung cancer screening and patient navigation in tribal healthcare settings. The experience helped Daniel gain a clearer understanding of his future in research and strengthened his interest in pursuing a PhD. “The internship was very transformative. I went into the internship on the fence between a PhD and an MD, and I was able to come out leaning much more heavily toward the PhD route.”

Together, the three students gained valuable research experience, professional connections, and greater insight into their future careers in science. Their experiences highlight the impact of PACR’s partnership with Fred Hutch in creating meaningful opportunities for NMSU students to learn, grow, and contribute to cancer research.

2027 Applications

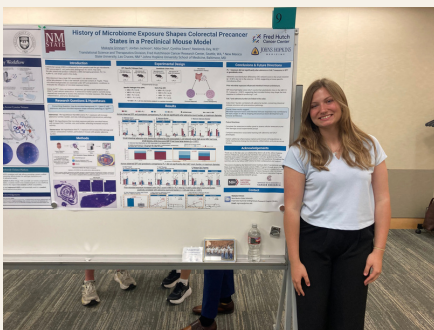
Applications for the 2027 CRI-U and CRI-G programs will be available on the PACR Education webpage in early November 2026. Students with questions about the program or application process can contact Dr. Graciela Unguez at gunguez@nmsu.edu or Dr. Julian Simon at jsimon@fredhutch.org.



Eliha Hernandez



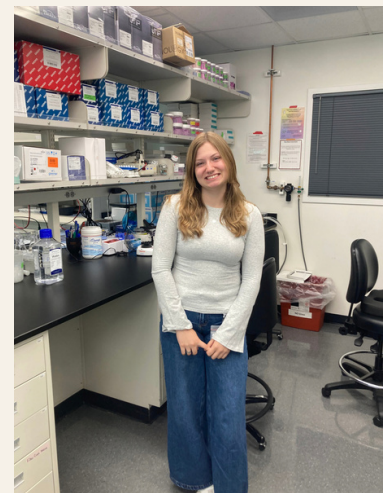
Eliha Hernandez



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Daniel Mejia



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