



2018 - 2019 Candidates

- **Vanessa Cerda**, Neurobiology
- **Alexa Proffitt**, Interdisciplinary Studies
- **Dawit Ghebreyesus**, Environmental Engineering
- **Rebecca Morris**, Anthropology
- **Sarah Kate Shore**, Anthropology
- **Li Ma**, Chemistry
- **Priya Jain**, Biomedical Engineering
- **Amandine Grenier**, Neurobiology
- **Ana Narro Laborin**, Chemistry
- **Shelby Samartino**, Anthropology
- **Anukriti Singh**, Cell and Molecular Biology
- **Anna Penna**, Anthropology
- **Nick Clanton**, Chemistry
- **Balaji Rengarajan**, Mechanical Engineering
- **Jacquelyn Messenger**, Cell and Molecular Biology
- **Aref Asghari**, Electrical Engineering
- **Brian Moy**, Cell and Molecular Biology
- **Muntasir Masum**, Applied Demography
- **Cameron Vance Thompson**, Chemistry



Vanessa Cerda

Coming from a small Texas border town, Vanessa was both nervous and excited as she left home to pursue her undergraduate studies in neurobiology at the University of Texas at Austin. After three years, she obtained her degree and decided to let her passion for research and science inspire her to work toward a master's degree at the University of Texas San Antonio. As a UTSA graduate student, she began working under Dr. Nicole Y. Y. Wicha in her Language and Cognition Laboratory. Under

Dr. Wicha's mentorship, Vanessa decided to apply to UTSA's neurobiology doctoral program. She is currently a first year doctoral student interested in investigating the effects of bilingualism on aspects of cognition using techniques such as electroencephelogram (EEG) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). UTSA will be her home for the next few years and the supportive faculty, mentors, and fellow students will continue to motivate her to be as impactful as possible in her field. After graduation, she plans to pursue a career in academia to continue investigating questions on cognition.



Alexa Proffitt

Alexa Proffitt attended the University of Virginia for her Bachelor of Arts in international affairs and gender studies. She also attended the University of Texas at San Antonio for her master's degree in Education. In Alexa's doctoral program in interdisciplinary learning and teaching with a cognate in curriculum and instruction, she focuses on critical curriculums, critical multicultural education, Latinx teacher identity, and critical race theory. Alexa hopes to continue in higher education as a professor in teacher education. She is deeply invested in the representation of Xicana scholars in the academy as well as in K-12 classrooms. Alexa chose to pursue her doctoral studies at UTSA because of the tremendous opportunity to work with critical educators and professors who are actively working towards social justice in education.



Dawit Ghebreyesus

Dawit Ghebreyesus is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Environmental Sciences and Engineering working under the supervision of Dr. Hatim Sharif. He received his master's degree in water and environmental engineering from the Masdar Institute of Science and Technology in the UAE and joined UTSA in fall 2017. He got his bachelor's degree in civil engineering from the University of Asmara, in Eritrea. His main research interests are water resource management, hydrologic modeling and flood assessment, and mitigation strategies using remote sensing. His publications include peer-reviewed journal articles and a book chapter, as well as pending submissions.



Rebecca Morris

Rebecca received her bachelor's degree in archaeology from Tufts University in 2016. Most recently, she has been excavating in northwestern and western Belize, where she will be conducting her dissertation field research investigating Maya commoner households. Rebecca is working with Dr. Jason Yaeger and Dr. Kathryn Brown on the Mopan Valley Archaeology Project/Mopan Valley Preclassic Project at the sites of Xunantunich and Buenavista del Cayo. In the future, Rebecca hopes to continue archaeological research, emphasizing public outreach and education. Anthropology at UTSA is dedicated to a holistic approach, integrating cultural and biological anthropology with archaeology, and providing a collaborative environment for students pursuing their studies.



Sarah Kate Shore

Sarah Kate Shore is a Ph.D. student in cultural anthropology focusing on methods of conservation and ideologies of environmentalism. She has a B.S. in marine biology from the Honors College of the College of Charleston, and is currently working under Dr. Patrick Gallagher at UTSA. She intends to do ethnographic research within environmental organizations in order to understand the value placed on non-human life by members of these organizations, and their relationship to government organizations and other institutions.



Li Ma

Li Ma received his B.S. from Inner Mongolia University (Hohhot, China) in 2012. After suffering the loss of having three loved ones pass away in a row, he determined to be a scientist instead of a professional writer. He first worked for two years in the National Center for Nanoscience and Technology (Beijing, China), where he honed his expertise in nanomaterial-based drug delivery systems and microfluidics. Then, he moved to Peking University (Beijing, China), as a full-time research assistant, to continue his passion toward synthesis of bioactive targets, ranging from total synthesis of nature products to sequence-specific DNA-binding PIP conjugates to small molecules for chemically induced pluripotent stem cells (CiPSCs). Two and half years later, he came to UTSA to pursue his Ph.D. in chemistry under Dr. Aimin Liu and Dr. Stanton McHardy. His research interests include drug-discovery-driven synthesis, mechanistic enzymology, radical enzymology, cofactor biogenesis, transcriptional activation, and gene regulation mechanisms.



Priya Jain

Priya Jain is a Ph.D. student studying biomedical engineering with Dr. R. Lyle Hood. Prior to attending UTSA for graduate studies, Priya worked at Houston Methodist Research Institute in the Department of Nanomedicine. Her current research project focuses on biomaterials and drug delivery. She hopes to continue in academia to become a professor in the future.



Amandine Grenier

After earning an associate's degree in biological and biomedical engineering in France, Amandine decided to transfer to the University of Texas at San Antonio to continue her academic career. Her passion for the brain grew stronger as she started exploring all of its functions and mysteries. Amandine joined Dr. Nicole Wicha's lab to deepen her understanding of cognitive neuroscience and gain experience using electrophysiological techniques, such as electroencephalogram (EEG) and event-related potentials (ERP). As a bilingual, Amandine was also curious about the processes that modulate language functions in the brain. She earned her bachelor's degree in biology with a concentration in neurobiology and got accepted into the UTSA Neurobiology Ph.D. program in the fall of 2017. Amandine is excited to keep working under Dr. Wicha's mentorship and is determined to learn from other faculty members and students. She hopes to later find a job in the industry to make a difference in the cognition research field.



Ana Narro Laborin

Ana Narro Laborin received her Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry from St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas. As a first-year student at UTSA, Ana is currently doing rotations in various research labs of the chemistry department. She chose to pursue her doctoral studies at UTSA because it has a forward-thinking community that actively seeks and embraces innovation. It also fosters multi-disciplinary and collaborative research within the university and other institutions. After completing her graduate studies, Ana wants to pursue a career in industry, hoping to create purposeful knowledge that will benefit society and the environment.



Shelby Samartino

Shelby Samartino graduated from Elizabethtown College with her B.A. in psychology. From there, she's participated in various primatological field research, spanning many countries from Panama to South Africa, Congo to Malaysia. Her current interests are in human-wildlife conflict mitigation in developing countries, specifically the effects of human influence on great ape physiology. She hopes to someday work for the wildlife crime sector of the UN or in policy development for World Wildlife Fund. Shelby chose UTSA for its wide spans of both academic and professional resources within the anthropology department and the school as a whole.



Anukriti Singh

Anukriti Singh holds a Master of Science degree in biology from UTSA and a Bachelor of Technology degree in biotechnology from the National Institute of Technology (NIT), Warangal in Hanamkonda, India. Graduate school became an earnest consideration for Anukriti after undergraduate courses sparked her curiosity and laid the foundations for a career in bioinformatics and stem cell biology. As a master's student in 2015, Anukriti was motivated to join Dr. Brian Hermann's lab, where her research focused on the analysis of single-cell transcriptomes of cells highly enriched for spermatogonial stem cells (SSCs) in order to elucidate the identity of SSCs. Currently a first-year Ph.D. student of cell and molecular biology, Anukriti is now working in the Eppinger Lab. Upon completing her Ph.D. program, Anukriti aims to obtain a post-doctoral position specializing in stem cell biology and advance the extraordinary potential uses of spermatogonial stem cells in human fertility preservation and regeneration.



Anna Penna

Anna Penna is a first-year Ph.D. student in the Department of Anthropology based in the Molecular Anthropology Lab, under the supervision of Dr. Luca Pozzi. She received a B.Sc. in biology and a M.Sc. in genetics and evolutionary biology from the University of Sao Paulo in Brazil, her home country. Her Ph.D. research will investigate the processes of hybridization and speciation in African primates, particularly galagos and lemurs. For that, she will obtain genetic samples in the field and

museum collections and perform bioinformatic analyses. Anna decided to join UTSA because of its initiative in biological anthropology and due to UTSA's ranking among the best public universities in the U.S. After her Ph.D., she seeks to establish a research program focused on uncovering the factors that have led to high levels of primate diversity in the tropics, while promoting diversity in science through inclusive research and teaching opportunities.



Nick Clanton

Nick completed his undergraduate degree with a double-major in chemistry and biochemistry from Samford University in 2016. After graduation, he worked for a year as a research technician in the Department of Radiology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham under Dr. Suzanne Lapi doing research in the synthesis of small molecule radiotracers. Currently, he is pursuing his Ph.D. in the Department of Chemistry at UTSA. Nick is working under Dr. Doug Frantz doing research in synthetic methodology. His projects focus on pharmaceutically relevant transformations. After obtaining his Ph.D., Nick wants to stay in academia and do research in drug development. He's interested in the development of cancer drugs, but mainly wants to explore new and exciting chemistry that has the chance to help people in any capacity. Nick chose to pursue his degree at UTSA because it offers the resources of a larger institution, but the community feeling of a smaller one.



Balaji Rengarajan

Balaji Rengarajan graduated with a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from Vellore Institute of Technology in Vellore, India and received his master's degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Pittsburgh. His research interests lie in the field of computational solid and fluid mechanics. He is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in mechanical engineering, under the guidance of Dr. Ended Finol, in the Vascular Biomechanics and Biofluids Laboratory. Upon graduation, Balaji aspires to be one of the leading researchers in the field of biomechanics. Balaji chose UTSA to work with Dr. Finol, whose research piqued his interest and matched his career goals.



Jacquelyn Messenger

Jacquelyn received her bachelor's degree in medical laboratory science from Austin Peay State University in 2009. In 2014, she received her master's degree in immunohematology from The George Washington University. She earned her American Society of Clinical Pathology (ASCP) board certification in Medical Laboratory Scientist (MLS) in 2009 and Specialist in Blood Banking (SBB) in 2013 while serving in the U.S. Army as a Clinical Laboratory Officer, specializing in transfusion and blood donor operations. Currently, Jacquelyn is completing a research rotation in Dr. Hanson's lab, analyzing antibiotic dose response for the treatment of late hepatic stage *Plasmodium* infections. Her professional goal is to conduct research at the Army's Institute of Surgical Research (ISR), focusing on the improvement of blood and blood products for the treatment of combat casualties. She selected UTSA to pursue a Ph.D. in cell and molecular biology based on their structured curriculum, diverse research opportunities and academic affiliation with the U.S. Army's ISR faculty and research programs.

Aref Asghari

Aref Asghari received his Bachelor of Science in materials science and engineering from University of Tehran in 2013. He then attended The University of Texas at San Antonio with a merit-based scholarship for a Master of Science degree in advanced materials engineering. He graduated with his M.Sc. degree in December 2015. He is currently seeking to find an application/applications of 2D materials in modern nano-devices. Under Prof. Ahn's guidance, he is exploring ways to develop 2D materials-based devices and memories. Aref is going to tap into the ever-growing curiosity in using nanomaterials and nano-devices in academic and industry environment after graduation. He is eager to find applications in real life for these new technologies to help more and more people enjoy the rapid advancement of device industry in the 21st century. UTSA has been his home for the past four years and he feels special gratitude toward UTSA for providing him the opportunity to grow and be able to help others as well. "UTSA is one of the most promising academic institutes in the world and I would love to be a part of this flourishing time in the history of this great institute," he added.



Brian Moy

Brian earned his B.S. in biology with university honors from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. He continued on to earn his M.S. in biology at UNCW under the guidance of Dr. Ryan Rhodes. His main research interest is bacterial pathogens, specifically the molecular mechanisms of pathogenesis and how those can serve as targets for novel therapeutics. For this reason, he was drawn to the South Texas Center for Emerging Infectious Diseases and its faculty, which are housed at UTSA.



Muntasir Masum

Muntasir completed his Bachelor's in Sociology from the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2008 and Master's in Sociology from McMaster University, Hamilton, ON, Canada in 2012. He has taught at the University of Dhaka as a Lecturer from 2014-2017. Currently, he is a First Year PhD Student (2017) at the Department of Demography at the UTSA. Muntasir is interested in investigating whether skills, high or low, play a role in employment and poverty status among the immigrants in the United States. He believes UTSA is the right place for him to study such issues as UTSA promotes diversity and minority students, and offers institutional support to succeed in the future. After his PhD, Muntasir wants to remain in the academia to continue his passion for teaching and conducting research.



Cameron Vance Thompson

Vance received his B.A. in chemistry from Texas Tech University in December of 2013. He is working toward his Ph.D. while working for Dr. Zachary Tonzetich as a Graduate Research Assistant focusing on organometallic catalysis, specifically Fe(II) compounds supported by a pyrrole-based pincer ligand. UTSA has provided a great platform to receive personalized mentorship from top chemists on the cutting edge of their fields, and he believes that his time spent at UTSA will only set him up for success in future endeavors.