

2023 BSD Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Award in Recognition of Exceptional DEI Leadership and Service

Joshua McKeever, 4th Year PhD Candidate in Molecular Metabolism and Nutrition

Joshua is a teacher, mentor, and a gateway for scores of underrepresented students in STEM. For example, Joshua currently teaches and facilitates the course Data4All at the Data Science Institute under the mentorship of BSD Alumni Dr. Evelyn Campbell. Together they teach coding and data science to Chicago Public Schools students with a specific emphasis on Black and Hispanic students on the South and West sides. Joshua also served as a mentor and assistant for the NIH-funded Summer Graduate Research Program at the University of Chicago. Here he mentored the summer research students as they prepared their research talks for weekly program meetings, moderated a graduate student panel for program participants, and assisted program directors in preparing the curriculum. Josh also served as a Guest Lecturer for TARGET H.O.P.E., an organization committed to eradicating the high school attrition crisis in Chicago Public Schools. Josh also supported recruitment efforts to the BSD at ABRCMS and served as the President of the UChicago Black Graduate Coalition.

Veronica Locher, 4th Year PhD Candidate in Immunology

Veronica's approach to DEI is hallmarked by humility, service, and ingenuity. Veronica was an essential component of the DEIJ Retreat organizing team, as the head of logistics and operations. Veronica wasn't in the spotlight for that event, instead she tackled the difficult yet critical tasks of raising funds, finding space, and planning and organizing logistics. Veronica also served as a member of the organizing committee for the South Side Science Festival and became a liaison between the festival and the Committee on Immunology. She coordinated COI participation and consolidated their perspectives and stories into interactive games and activities to introduce children to the fundamental concepts of immunology and what it is like to be an immunologist. Veronica is also a leader within the committee on immunology's diversity committee. This year she created a new virtual mentorship program that met repeatedly with a cohort of underrepresented minority (URM) students applying to graduate school. Veronica assembled not only the prospective student cohort but also graduate student mentors to help the students refine their applications to the immunology program over the course of weeks. Veronica creates massive programs with big impacts through her project management and organizational skills.

Luke Dyer, 4th Year PhD Candidate in Cell and Molecular Biology

Luke began his advocacy work as a Department of Molecular Genetics & Cell Biology (MGCB) cluster representative where he guided admissions revisions in response to COVID-19 and continuously innovated the review and recruitment process in MGCB to better account for inequities. Luke has also made a name for himself as a community builder from reinstating GSS, to planning LGBT and URM community events through Graduate Recruitment Initiative Team (GRIT). He battled the devastating isolation effects of COVID-19 by building spaces and events for graduate students to build meaningful connections with one another. Beyond campus, Luke also serves as a volunteer with Modern Materials and Technology to bring advanced science topics to local high school students. Luke is responsible for creating their cell and molecular biology sessions. Luke is also the STEM Corps Coordinator with the Neighborhood Schools Program, teaching the teachers of a massive cohort of students on the South and West Sides. Finally, Luke was also the Marketing Manager of the South Side Science Festival and successfully recruited 4,500 attendees from the surrounding neighborhoods to partake in a day of STEM education on UChicago's campus. Luke builds human connections and community both within and well beyond UChicago and the BSD.

Alexis Thornburg, 4th Year PhD Candidate in Human Genetics

Alexis Thornburg demonstrates a lasting commitment to addressing disparities of access to STEM. Over the course of four years, she has risen to the role of Chair of Volunteers on the leadership committee of Expanding Your Horizons, an organization she's lead since she joined the BSD as a first year. Over that same time, Alexis has also become a lead organizer of her hometown's Northern Indiana Regional Science and Engineering Fair (NIRSEF), which gives students from underserved communities in Indiana a chance to be recognized for their scientific acumen. As the Community Service Co-Chair of Dean's Council, Alexis led the organization of the BSD Coat Drive to help newly arriving migrants on the South Side of Chicago. Much like in her previous roles, Alexis saw a need in one community and a pool of resources in another and chose to connect the two through communication and large-scale people organizing. Juggling these major leadership roles with her research is a challenge, and her consistent commitment to these positions over many years illustrates her commitment to diversifying STEM.

2023 BSD Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Commendation in Recognition of Meaningful DEI Leadership and Service

Selena Martinez, 2nd Year PhD Candidate in Evolutionary Biology

Selena served as a mentor for young scientists through the Women in Science Program at the Field Museum of Natural History. She helped create and facilitate a pop-up fossil museum for the South Side Science Festival with a team of paleontology students and the Field Museum. Selena also serves as a mentor for Native students in biology attending tribal colleges and public universities. She has also partnered with Ross Elementary in Topeka, Kansas, an underfunded institution that serves mostly Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students from low-income backgrounds, to teach about evolutionary science and other biological themes. Selena has also begun working with Dr. Jacqueline Lungmus to foster scientific relationships with Cherokee and other tribal communities in Oklahoma with the goal of further studying and protecting the fossil resources on her community's lands through capacity building. Selena approaches DEI by applying and distributing her scientific expertise and specializations to the Native American diaspora through university and institutional collaborations.

Renée Fonseca, 4th Year PhD Candidate in Human Genetics

Renée consistently prioritizes intersectional efforts. A clear example is her volunteering at Brave Space Alliance (2021-2023). She consistently mobilizes people with power and privilege to help those on the margins. An example of this is her founding of the virtual Genetics PhD Program Information Session for prospective applicants. In so doing, Renée created a detailed outreach database that the program now uses to court underrepresented students. She also organized and served as a Spanish language assistant at Bret Harte for migrant students arriving to Chicago from Spanish-speaking countries. She organized a group of these Spanish-language assistants through the BSD and the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures at UChicago. Uniquely, Renée's passion for DEI also shows up in her thesis research, as a part of her project is to develop novel statistical methods that improve equity in genetic predictions. Renée is the ultimate organizer, making people into power and problems into opportunities.

Office of Postdoctoral Affairs DEI Award

Yara Haridy, PhD, Postdoctoral Research in Genetics, Genomics, and Systems Biology

Yara is the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Outreach Representative of the Postdoctoral Fellow Steering Committee at the University of Chicago. She has also served as the postdoc representative on the BSD's Divisional faculty search, a Dean's Office initiative to recruit more diverse faculty. Yara's perspective helped the search committee pick better metrics of scientific and academic acumen and highlighted the unique contributions of the applicants. Yara has been instrumental in the ongoing work to decolonize paleontology. Historically, fossils found in non-Western countries have been excavated and removed by Western paleontologists and transported to Europe or the United States. Yara, in collaboration with other Middle Eastern scientists, has worked to maintain local museums and paleontology programs in Tunisia to undo these historical abuses.