BCM SOAR

RESEARCH NEWS

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Baylor College of Medicine

SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

STUDENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCEMENT IN RESEARCH (SOAR)



Art by Rachael Johnson

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LIFE AND ARTS

Welcome to Houston: A Student's Guide to the City

The start of a new semester can bring excitement, challenges and new experiences for many students. Whether you're new to Houston or have lived here your whole life, the city remains a cultural hub for music, food and history.

Study Spots

If you are looking for a new go-to study spot, Houston offers a variety of unique locations for each person's taste. Cafes like Common Bond, Empire Cafe, The Coffee House at West End, Campesino Coffee, Tenfold Coffee Company, DUO Houston and New Heights Coffee Roasters can be thrilling if you prefer an environment with chatter, coffee and ambiance.

For quieter spaces, the Academic Success Center study spaces on the second and fourth floors, the Student Lounge and the Prayer and Relaxation Space at BCM are convenient and easily accessible.



Art by Megan Benavides

In addition, try exploring the TMC Library and other Houston public libraries and museums like the Contemporary Arts Museum and Museum of Fine Arts for a change of scenery after long study sessions.

Downtown's Discovery Green Park is the place to be during Houston's winter and springtime. The park offers free outdoor Wi-Fi, luscious grass, shaded seating for work and study break activities like yoga, Zumba, kayaking or attending any of the other classes offered at the park.

Food Scene

A melting pot of culture, Houston's immigrants continue to diversify the city's food landscape. In fact, Food & Wine named Houston one of the best food and drink cities in the United States.

For Mexican and Tex-Mex cuisine, check out The Original Ninfa's on Navigation, Molina's Cantina and Tatemó. Di An Pho is known for its authentic Vietnamese food, while Crawfish & Noodles is famous for its Viet-Cajun crawfish.

Pondicheri and Himalaya are great for South Asian cuisine, and West African cuisine continues to grow with places like Afrikiko and Taste of Nigeria. Tiger Den, Seoul Garden and Arco Seafood are great if you are looking for East Asian food.

Lastly, for Mediterranean food, Kasra Persian Grill, Sayad, Nazif, Shawarma House, Golden Roastery and Chocolate Zeina are must-tries. Houston's food truck scene is continuously growing and offers a unique variety of cuisines. Popular options include El Manna Grill Pollo Asado, Bun Kabob & More, Waffle Bus, Abu Omar Halal, Gourmandize and SoulGood Food Truck.

For more food adventures, see Houstonia Magazine's more comprehensive list of international food in Houston.

Fun and Leisure

There are numerous opportunities and ways to have fun while saving money in Houston. For example, try visiting James Turrell's Twilight Epiphany installation, where you can witness the beautiful Texas sunrise and sunset for free.

Several museums in Houston also offer discounts and even free visits on certain days. The Contemporary Arts Museum, the Houston Center for Photography, the Jung Center and others offer free admission. Other museums like The Health Museum, the Holocaust Museum and the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum have free admission on Thursday.

If you are looking for a relaxing day, try strolling through the city's many graffiti galleries. Houston is home to a plethora of talented artists. Most of their work can be appreciated using the Houston Mural Map. For a natural getaway, the Houston Arboretum and Nature Center is a 155-acre green space that is free to the public every day of the week. With five miles of trails and colorful gardens to enjoy, the Arboretum is perfect for a bit of exercise or a relaxing picnic.

For students, the brand-new and remodeled Alley Theatre offers discounted tickets to spectacular shows and plays. Furthermore, students can purchase $15 rush tickets for select Houston Ballet performances when they buy tickets 90 minutes before showtime.

Lastly, for a summer evening, outdoor or drive-in movies are recommended. Theaters include the Showboat Drive-in Theater, the Rooftop Cinema Club and the Moonstruck Drive-In.

All in all, Houston is a hidden gem that has much to offer if you take the time to explore and discover the city. Make the most of your time here as a student and take advantage of all the opportunities and experiences around you.

Written by Mawada Al Faisal
Edited by Matthew Darmadi

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RESEARCH

Expanding Research Opportunities at BCM: An Exclusive with Dr. Christian Cable



At Baylor College of Medicine, research isn't just an extracurricular; it is a core part of the institution's DNA. As students settle back into the rhythm of school this fall semester, those across both the Houston and Temple campuses continue to contribute to BCM's research activities in various ways.

Whether you are an MS1 looking to get started in research, an MS2 working on their inquiry project or an MS3/4 looking to add more research to your resume, Dr. Christian Cable, associate dean of students and admissions at Temple, offers insightful advice applicable to all.

Dr. Cable highlighted the deep-rooted culture of inquiry that defines BCM. "Baylor has been synonymous with research since it was one of the establishing institutions in the TMC," he said. This tradition is now expanding across a "one school, two campuses" model that encourages and supports diverse scholarly pursuits.

From Houston's frontier science in basic and translational research to Temple's strengths in health systems and implementation research, Dr. Cable emphasized that the goal is to cultivate a strengths-based approach where students can benefit from both.

For students wondering how to navigate these opportunities, the Student Opportunities for Advancement in Research (SOAR) database for Houston and the Medical INquiry DatabaSe (MINDS) database for Temple are excellent entry points.

Both platforms provide a curated list of projects designed to connect students with faculty mentors. Dr. Cable explained that with over 500 projects and 90% or more of them available for remote completion, the opportunity to contribute is more accessible than ever.

For those new to research at BCM, Dr. Cable's advice is simple: work together. "I think probably the secret sauce is to work in teams," he said. "Team scholarship is a force multiplier." By combining strengths, whether in ideation, data analysis or writing, student teams can accomplish far more than individuals.

Beyond the SOAR and MINDS databases, Dr. Cable recommended leveraging and tapping into built-in networks. He points to the PRN program, specialty-specific mentors and student interest groups as invaluable resources. He further noted that this collaborative spirit is a hallmark of the BCM student body, where peers often work together to identify projects and share guidance.

Ultimately, the goal is to develop a scholarly mindset. "You're a scholar when you critically think, you learn something and then you share what you learned," said Dr. Cable. Whether your path leads to a poster, a presentation or a publication, embracing this process will enrich your medical education and prepare you to be a lifelong learner and contributor to the field of medicine.

Written by Geoffrey Zhang
Edited by Maheen Kara

EVENTS

Finding Community at the BCM Student Organization Fair



Photo by Justin Hu

On Aug. 13, hundreds of BCM students gathered on the third floor of the DeBakey Building for the annual Student Organization Fair. With more than 85 active clubs represented, the event offered new and returning students the chance to explore interests, reconnect with familiar organizations and learn how to get involved.

Many organizations at the fair had a focused commitment to service. Moms to Moms, for example, educates and supports postpartum women through weekly volunteer sessions at the Ben Taub and LBJ hospitals.

"It is a really great way to get to know these patients on a one-on-one basis and to make a positive impact right in front of your eyes," said second-year medical student and member of the Moms to Moms leadership team Ananya Bansal.

A variety of cultural and identity groups were also present. Siempre Unidos hosts monthly medical Spanish workshops organized by organ system, helping the students quickly learn the vocabulary and gain experience connecting with patients in Spanish.

"Siempre Unidos is very accessible to anyone of any level and we want people to feel more empowered to learn medical Spanish, even if they're beginners," said Gracie Onyia, second-year medical student and executive board member.

Another example of a cultural group is the South Asian Medical Student Association (SAMSA), which serves as a social and educational hub, hosting events ranging from dance workshops to discussions on intergenerational trauma led by two invited South Asian writers.

Club leadership members Nithya Erabelli and Rishika Chidananda, both second-year medical students, said SAMSA plans to increase its focus on professional networking, such as collaborating with the Indian Doctors Association, to help members form new connections and grow through mentorship.

The specialty interest group organizations present highlighted opportunities to gain clinical exposure and explore the numerous options available. For example, the Internal Medicine Interest Group (IMIG) announced a new physician shadowing program alongside workshops on skills such as dialysis and microscopy.

"IMIG is not only for people who are interested in internal medicine," said fourth-year medical student and co-president Luay Boulahouache. "It's for anybody who wants to better understand what they are learning in lectures and how it relates to the clinical environment."

Covering a wide range of medical specialties, the Baylor Pediatric Student Association (BPSA) fosters interest in pediatrics with networking events, specialty panels and hands-on activities. "Being so close to Texas Children's Hospital in the Medical Center offers opportunities that are hard to find elsewhere, and BPSA helps you make the most of them," said Hafsah Khwaja, second-year medical student and executive board member.

The fair serves as a reminder that medical education at BCM extends far beyond lectures and clinicals. It highlights the many ways students engage with their passions, connect with peers and mentors, serve as leaders and give back to the community.

Written by Justin Hu
Edited by Maheen Kara

Q&A:

Away Rotations, Answered:

MS4 Jay Jaber answers questions on advice, challenges of away rotations

During the third year of medical school, many students decide to apply for "away rotations", electives in their desired specialty at another institution. To help answer common questions and demystify the process, we spoke to Jay Jaber, a fourth-year medical student applying to ophthalmology this fall, who completed four away rotations.

Q: What made you decide to pursue away rotations in your specialty, and how did you choose which programs to apply to?

Jaber: I'm applying to ophthalmology, and with the increasing competitiveness of the specialty, I opted to pursue away rotations. Additionally, I have geographic ties to the Midwest and Northeast, and aways are a great way to show programs in those areas that I'd be willing to train there. Ultimately, I chose where to apply based on these ties, where I could find free housing and programs that piqued my interest.

Q: How far in advance did you start preparing, and what does that prep actually look like? What resources did you find helpful in figuring out how to prepare your away rotation application?

Jaber: Visiting Student Learning Opportunities (VSLO) opens for applications around February or March, so I started preparations in October by checking titers and getting the vaccines required by my target programs. While it's program-specific, some programs also require letters of recommendation, personal statements and Step 1 scores (sometimes Step 2). Almost all programs require a curriculum vitae (CV). You can look up program requirements on VSLO. If I could give one tip, regardless of applying to aways, it's to keep your CV up to date. It makes the process a lot easier, helps you keep track of what you've completed and saves you a headache with VSLO and applications later on.

Q: How soon did you hear back from institutions?

Jaber: It depends on the institution and specialty. Some schools screen all applications before sending decisions; others are first-come, first-served. For my three aways, I heard back in about a month.

Q: How did you decide when to do your away rotations?

Jaber: Ophthalmology uses the San Francisco Match, which is due a month before the Electronic Residency Application Service. I wanted my aways to be completed before then. Additionally, interviews for ophthalmology start in October, so I gave myself a window of June to October for aways to maximize networking time before application deadlines and to avoid taking interview days off during an away.

Q: What were some challenges (housing, transportation) that students should consider when applying?

Jaber: Housing is No. 1. Plan where you'll stay, the cost to sublease and whether you'll sublease your own place. I balanced most of the costs of subleasing by renting out my own place and having a friend help deliver the keys. To find housing, I used Ohana, Rotating Room and lived with a family for my last rotation. Transportation depends on where you are. I rented a car for one away and used public transit for others.

Q: Did you feel like you had to "audition" for residency the whole time, and how did you manage that pressure?

Jaber: Like everything in medical school, aways can be exhausting. You're not in your own apartment and you're in a new city. I think going into any away and framing it as a month-long interview helps set expectations. Ultimately, you're there to show programs that you'd be a great resident.

At the same time, programs accepted you for a reason. Knowing there was mutual interest helped manage the pressure a bit. That being said, keep up with your routine from BCM. You're also on the away to see how you'd like living in the city, so live your life as you would to see whether your personal and professional goals align with the program and location.

Q: Did you come away with a stronger sense of which programs felt like a good fit, and if so, why?

Jaber: All electives can offer a great opportunity to see different training styles, sites and patient populations. You can definitely learn which program will offer you the best opportunity to thrive in and out of residency. My home electives and aways helped me identify what is important to me when looking at residencies.

Q: Do you think your away rotations helped your residency application, and if so, in what specific ways (letters, networking, interviews)?

Jaber: Networking, for sure. You're able to give a face and personality behind the paper application. If you perform well, you can set yourself apart, and if you make strong impressions on faculty and residents, you'll have people in your corner to vouch for you. In smaller specialties, everyone knows everyone. I've already had mentors reach out to me regarding people I met on aways. It's nice to feel part of the community.

Q: What advice do you have for third-years considering doing away rotations, especially if they're on the fence about it?

Jaber: It depends on the specialty, but if you want to live somewhere else, whether for personal or professional reasons, I say go for it. I'm always on the side of exploring more. Obviously, there are additional factors (cost, schedule, application timeline, letters, etc.), but I've had an amazing time on each of my aways for different reasons and would 100% do them again when looking back.

Q: As always, it's been great talking to you. Thank you for sharing your experience with us —I wish I had this before I did my away rotation!

Jaber: Anytime! I am always happy to help.

Written by Rebecca Berger
Edited by Mawada Al Faisal

This Q&A is part of an ongoing series where students share their experiences and advice. If you have a question, fill out this form.

OPINION

Volunteering with Purpose: How the SLP Shaped My Medical Path



Art by Megan Benavides

Starting medical school, I knew I enjoyed volunteering, but I also knew I would need to be held accountable to volunteer consistently. The Service Learning Program, or SLP, at BCM provided me with the accountability I needed, and in the process, it became one of the most rewarding parts of my medical education.

The SLP is a student-run, yearlong program that offers a longitudinal volunteering experience integrated with educational and reflective activities focused on increasing awareness and understanding of social determinants of health.

The program culminates in a symposium at the end of the academic year, where students present their experiences and what they have learned.

I initially joined as a first-year student at St. Dominic's Village, a senior care facility, and through the Draw YOUR Story program. Creating art with the residents on the weekends was a welcome break during pre-clinicals, but I did not expect how effective a learning experience it would be. Talking with the senior participants clearly illuminated their struggles with the healthcare system, developing disabilities and experiencing loss and change.

In my third year, I joined the Pursuit Center, a center providing healthcare, day programming, residential services and more to adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This experience showcased barriers to care faced by this population and made me a better clinician at the end of the day.

Both experiences helped reinforce the value of longitudinal engagement and consistent reflection in learning.

Fellow fourth-year student Aaron Nguyen, who currently serves as a site ambassador, participated in Draw YOUR Story in his first year and continued for two more years at St. Dominic's Village. For Nguyen, the SLP offered the opportunity to get involved in the community and gain some different perspectives on medicine beyond the classroom or the hospital/clinic.

"Leading St. Dominic's as a co-SLP ambassador last year was a great experience in helping other volunteers get exposure to interacting with and caring for older adults," he said. "I don't think we get much experience in caring for older patients in medical school, especially in community settings, so part of why I wanted to lead this site was to help others get more comfortable with considering aspects of geriatric care that they might not consider in the hospital, from safe ambulation to effective communication with patients with dementia."

Nguyen also emphasized that students can make the SLP experience their own. "I would really advocate for students to consider taking advantage of the longitudinal aspect of the SLP," he said. "I've really enjoyed volunteering at the same site throughout medical school, and I think that I've gained a lot from expanding my role through that time as well."

The SLP is a valuable learning opportunity, and you will get the most out of the experience if you are thoughtful about your site choice, watch for things that illustrate social determinants of health and actively engage in the experience and your work.

Written by Adrian Boehnke
Edited by Laasya Achanta

Research Opportunities
in the SOAR Database

Defining Nutritional Requirements in children and pregnant and lactating women
Pediatrics
Basic Research
Dr. David Allison
Tiffany.Jacobo@bcm.edu

Microbiota and Immune Predictors of Treatment Response in Lung Cancer
Medicine
Translational Research
Dr. Yanhong Liu
yl10@bcm.edu

Multi-omics Characterization of MBD5-Associated Neurodevelopmental Disorder
Molecular & Human Genetics
Clinical Research
Dr. Sarah Elsea
Sarah.Elsea@bcm.edu

Are you Ready? Transition from Pediatric to Adult Health Care
Molecular & Human Genetics
Health Services Research
Dr. Sarah Elsea
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Electrophysiology
Medicine
Clinical Research
Dr. Kavya Sinha
kavya.sinha@bcm.edu

Using RADAR and other Localization Tools to Simulate Fluoroscopic Guided Procedures
Translational Research
Radiology
Dr. Soham Banerjee
Soham.Banerjee@bcm.edu

Management of frontal sinus in complications of acute rhinosinusitis
Otolaryngology
Clinical Research
Dr. Matthew Sitton
msitton@bcm.edu

Personalized genetic diagnosis by large scale mapping variants of unknown significance
Basic Research
Molecular & Human Genetics
Dr. Steven Boeynaems
steven.boeynaems@bcm.edu

The contact may not be the same as the faculty mentor but is the one to reach out to for project information.

Cerebral venous sinus thrombosis with three patients with Iron Deficiency Anemia

Pediatrics
Clinical Research
Dr. Bryan Greenfield
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Epilepsy epidemiology

Neurology
Quality Improvement/Patient Safety
Dr. Zulfi Haneef
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Solid Organ Transplanation-Outcomes Research

Surgery
Health Services Research
Dr. Abbas Rana
abbas.rana@bcm.edu

Biomarkers of Experimental Medicine Studies

Psychiatry & Behavioral Science
Translational Research
Dr. Nicholas Murphy
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The Funny Bone



"Is it just me or do the MS1s seem younger this year?"

Art by Megan Benavides

Designed by: Ayisat Adegbindin, Hafsah Khwaja, Zuena Karim

Upcoming Events

Research Introduction in Medical School at BCM Identifying Projects and Connecting with Mentors
Drs. Perez-Oquendo, Hegefeld, and McClung discussed the importance of research during medical school, how to navigate the SOAR and MINDS research databases, and best practices for connecting with project mentors.

September 9, 10:00 AM – 11:00 AM
Tackling the TB Epidemic: From Epidemiology to Epigenetics
Drs. Madalakas and DiNardo will discuss the global burden of tuberculosis and research that could reshape its future.
Register here for the Teams link.

September 12, 1:30 PM – 2:30 PM
SlicerDicer Tutorial Session
Information and tutorial sessions on the SlicerDicer data analytic tool will be held via Teams.
Register here for the Teams link.

September 25, 12:00 PM – 1:30 PM
Interactive training on Rapid Qualitative Analysis (RQA)
Dr. Emma Burke will provide guidance on a method designed to streamline qualitative data analysis to support rapid cycle quality improvement.
Register here for the Teams link.

Research Tool Spotlight

Conferences Catalog for BCM Medical Students
The SOAR Conferences Catalog is a searchable resource listing local, regional, national and international conference opportunities suitable for medical students. BCM members can search this conference catalog by specialty areas or project types.

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Travel Award Opportunity: Ophthalmology

Medical students with accepted abstracts for the ARVO Annual Meeting may apply for travel grants that cover registration fees and provide a partial stipend. These grants recognize research of high interest in vision and ophthalmology and give students the opportunity to share their work with leading experts in the field. For full details about the award and application process, please visit the ARVO website.

- Abstract Submission Deadline: December 5, 2025
- Application for Travel Award: October 17 – December 5, 2025
- Award: Travel grants cover Annual Meeting registration fees and a stipend to help cover travel expenses.
- Notification: Travel grant recipients are notified by the first week of March 2026.

Local Conferences

Interprofessional Education Collaborative (IPEC)
- **Conference Date:** November 13, 2025
- **Submission Deadline:** September 12, 2025
- **Location:** Virtual
- **Main Topics:** Interprofessional education in times of change, competency-based education for collaborative practice, and building resilient learning environments

Fall 2025 Showcase of Educational Scholarship
- **Conference Date:** October 29, 2025
- **Submission Deadline:** September 22, 2025
- **Location:** Duncan Neurological Research Institute
- **Main Topics:** Educational scholarship and innovations across the BCM community



SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

STUDENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCEMENT IN RESEARCH (SOAR)

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