NATIONAL HISPANIC SCIENCE NETWORK

NHSN's Quarterly Newsletter

¡BIENVENIDOS!

Welcome to *El Faro*, the quarterly newsletter of the National Hispanic Science Network (NHSN)!

For this issue, we asked: What career topics matter most to our community? That question shaped our theme, "careers".

Whether you're a graduate student, postdoctoral scholar, staff scientist, or faculty member, you may be thinking about your next steps. You might be exploring options beyond academia or feeling uncertain about how to navigate the job market.

To support you, we interviewed eight professionals across various fields, including both academic and non-academic sectors. In this issue, they share their journeys, insights, and advice for early career scientists in the NHSN community.

In This Newsletter:

Non - Academic Careers

Non-academic careers are those that fall outside of a traditional academic setting (i.e., teaching or research). These jobs cover a wide range of sectors, including federal, non-profit, industry, or consulting. Of course, there are multiple other careers outside of academia that are not included in this issue that we encourage you to explore if you are interested in a career outside of academia.

List of careers you can explore outside of academia:

Medical/Scientific Writing
Science Communication
User Experience (UX) Research
Data Science
Regulatory Affairs
Program Management
Science Policy
Medical Science Liaison (MSL)
Consulting
Intellectual Property / Patent Law
Research & Development (R&D) Scientist
Clinical Research Associate (CRA)
Product Development Scientist
Biotech/Pharma Research Scientist
Competitive Intelligence Analyst
Market Access & Medical Affairs
Scientific Project Manager
Health Economics & Outcomes Research (HEOR)
Venture Capital / Life Sciences Investment
Scientific Editing / Publishing

Advice from a Senior Manager

"That forward-thinking mindset, imagining the broader impact, is something that applies in industry too. You always have to be asking, "Where is this going? What will this mean in the long run?""

Annalee Estrellado
Senior Manager, Bioanalytical Sciences
Biogen

Did you always know that you were going to go straight to industry, not academia?
Kind of, and only because in San Diego, there was a huge boom of biotech at that time. We were actually called "Biotech Beach". So there was a lot of opportunities, and a lot of industry. And I did apply to a couple of academic positions and I had a few interviews with labs. But I think I was ready to move on to something that was a little bit more high tech. To be honest, I wasn't into writing grants to get money for my project, I wanted a little bit more backing. My professor, when I was in graduate school, she didn't have a lot of money. So I was scrimping around trying to get my projects done. And then I was like, "Oh, I don't know if I can do this for much longer". Luckily, in San Diego, there was a lot happening. A lot of new companies were popping up. So I did my research, and I was like, I'm in the perfect location for this. I was really targeting industry.

You mentioned briefly, but now we can get into it, that you've had roles at the bench, in project management, and in data analytics. How were you able to transition to these various roles effectively?
So many roles. Yeah, so like I had mentioned earlier, I had to make a pivot. It was around 2005 where my company went through a layoff. And actually, the very first layoff my company had, I survived. So I wasn't part of that one. They had laid off the whole lab. So everything we were doing in-house, we had to outsource. So I was taken off the bench and put into a position that I really didn't know how to navigate. I still had to conduct these clinical trials, but I didn't have a lab. I had to find one. And that actually allowed so many opportunities for me. I was able to do a lot of traveling. I gained experience in auditing that I hadn't done before. I had to find labs overseas that would test our clinical trials and be compliant. So I got pushed into the regulatory part of it, auditing labs in Hong Kong, China, and the Netherlands. It was unfortunate, but it was also pretty exciting. Then that turned into more of a Project Management role. That's where I got into looking at more data, clinical trials, and then just remained in this role overseeing biomarker testing and clinical trials.

Which academic skills translated well to industry, and which did you have to build?
That's a good question. I'd say one skill that translated really well was the ability to look at the big picture. In academia, when you're working on your project, at least for me, I was always thinking, "What could this do? What could this breakthrough lead to?" I'd be writing papers, aiming to publish, and excited about bringing a new discovery to the world. That forward-thinking mindset, imagining the broader impact, is something that applies in industry too. You always have to be asking, "Where is this going? What will this mean in the long run?" What I did have to build was the ability to work closely with other team members. In academia, it's easy to silo yourself, you're in the lab at odd hours, focused on your own project. But in industry, you're part of a team. You're constantly collaborating, sharing data, and communicating with other departments and scientists. That was a big shift for me, learning how to align with others toward a shared goal and figuring out who to go to for what. It opened up a whole new world.

What are one or two things early-career researchers could do today that you think would pay off long term, if they're interested in transitioning into industry?
First, I would say to research the specific company you're targeting. Really research them, and research what the new trends are out there. Research what the new business models are. For instance, first we had a lab in-house, and then we changed to outsourcing. That could be an opportunity. I had to learn regulatory stuff and audit labs. There are regulatory certificates you can get, and you can move into that niche as an auditor. Also, research the new therapies, like the high-value drugs out there. Right now, what is it, GLP-1? Everybody's looking at that. Weight loss drugs. During COVID, anybody with vaccine experience was really highly sought out. And another thing: look into clinical sites and clinical trials. All these biotech companies need clinical sites to run trials. If that's the industry you want to go into, that's a good transition. You can work for a clinical site at a hospital or a small clinic. There are sites all over the world that industry partners with.

Advice from a Digital Strategist & Multimedia Designer

"But at the end of the day, if you are driven by your values and you're true to that, you will end up being proud of the work that you do. Whether that is a nonprofit, whether that's in the private sector, whether that's in local government, or whether that's in philanthropy."

Edgar Ontiveros Medina
Digital Strategists & Multimedia Designer
The Conrad Prebys Foundation

What was your career path like, and what drew you to this kind of work?

I grew up in San Diego but was born in Guadalajara, Mexico. I immigrated to the U.S. when I was five or six and later lived in Tijuana for five years, so I've experienced both sides of the border. Like many immigrants, I felt a strong need to give back, and at first, I thought health care was the path. I went to UC Santa Cruz to study molecular and cellular developmental biology, but along the way, I found myself drawn to politics, community organizing, and social justice. I changed my major to anthropology and Latin American studies, driven by the same values that led me to health care. While at UC Santa Cruz, I began writing for the *Third World and Native American Student Press* and picked up a camera. That's where my love for storytelling began. I covered topics like undocumented student activism and community gardens, stories rooted in systems and justice. After graduating, I worked at a nonprofit health center in Santa Cruz during the rollout of the Affordable Care Act, doing community outreach with farmworker populations. When I returned to San Diego, I joined Mid-City CAN as their communications lead, doing social media, websites, and civic engagement campaigns. From there, I worked in local government for three years, which prepared me for my current work in philanthropy. Throughout it all, the through line has been storytelling, advocacy, and values-based communication.

What advice would you give someone from a science or health background who's curious about philanthropy, policy, or nonprofit work but doesn't know where to start?

Yeah, I think this is a complex one because oftentimes you've got to start at the bottom, and that's just the reality with nonprofit work. I started at the front desk of a health center, the most entry-level job you can have. But because of my values and commitment to the community, I transitioned into outreach within three months. A lot of folks in nonprofit work start as interns or fellows. For those coming out of academia, it can feel like, "I spent all this time in school, and now I have to start over?" Unfortunately, that's often true, but the work is deeply rewarding. My advice: be patient, take every opportunity to connect and network, and lead with your values. If you're genuinely committed to access and equity, people see that. We need empathetic, caring people in nonprofit work because it's hard work. You often go from theory and systems in academia to working one-on-one with communities, and that can be transformative. Flexibility is key. If you went into health or science, chances are you're curious and want to solve problems. You can still do that in nonprofit and policy work. You don't need a lab coat to improve community health. Whether it's food access, transportation, or justice reform, that's health too. That work matters.

Are there any common mistakes you see people make when transitioning into community or equity-focused careers? And how can they avoid them?

I don't know if I'd call them mistakes, because when you're flexible and driven by your values, even an unexpected path can be meaningful. For example, I spent three years working in healthcare, even though I was meant to go into policy and philanthropy. Some might see that as a detour, but it was incredibly valuable and shaped the work I do now. The biggest mistake might be being too rigid thinking, "Now that I have this degree, I have to work in a hospital" or "I have to stay in a clinical setting." That mindset can keep you from finding a role that truly fulfills you. If you're open and let your values guide you, you might end up somewhere unexpected, but still deeply aligned with your purpose. Another challenge is impatience: wanting to earn a certain salary or land a high-level title right away because you've earned a degree. But real-world experience, meaningful relationships, and professional growth take time. What feels like a misstep may actually be a step forward, you just don't recognize it until later.

What do you wish someone had told you early in your career that would have helped you feel more prepared in your path?

I wish someone would have told me that imposter syndrome is always lurking under the surface. And you can't pay too much attention to it. I wish I would have known earlier on that people, regardless of their age, their title, their position, we all deal with a sense of being inadequate sometimes, or not being fully prepared. Because once you know that, that we're all kind of just figuring it out as we go, it kind of takes a lot of pressure off of you. If you lead by your values, if you connect with the right people, if you learn how to ask for support, we all need that. And it can be easy to measure yourself against what someone else is doing. Especially in the field where I'm at, where my work is very visual. Everyone can see the video that I've published, or everyone can see the graphic; anyone can criticize it. There is a level of vulnerability that you need to be used to. But that takes courage, right? It takes courage to say, I might not have all the answers. I might not be where I want to be. But so is everyone else. So is everyone else around me. And I just need to make sure that I take care of myself, that I polish up my skills, that I connect with the right people, that I ask for support. And again, just being flexible and patient with yourself. If you are really driven by your values, you will find your space because we need people in philanthropy, in government, and in nonprofit work that have a genuine care for community.

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Advice from a Principal Scientist

"In my experience, most people are really open and willing to help. Embrace the challenge; it's not always easy, but you don't have to do it alone."

David Sala Cano, Ph.D.
Principal Scientist
Avidity Biosciences

What led you to transition from academia to industry?
The main reason was that I wanted to be closer to patients and to feel that my work had a more direct impact. Even during my Ph.D. and postdoc, I always tried to find the therapeutic angle in my projects. That passion for translational science really drove me to consider industry. Another factor was exposure. During my Ph.D. in Spain, most of the mentorship and career paths were geared toward academia. I didn't know much about what a role in industry looked like. But when I moved to San Diego for my postdoc, I began reaching out to people, asking, "What do you do? What's your day-to-day like?" The more I learned, the more I realized that industry was probably a better fit for me.

How did you land your first position in industry?
First, I reached out to people to ask about their experience and let them know I was interested in transitioning. That helped keep me on their radar if something came up. I also put a lot of time into my resume by tailoring it to highlight the skills industry looks for, like leadership, decision-making, collaboration, and mentorship. I worked with Sanford Burnham's Office of Education, Training, and International Services to get feedback and revise it. Even then, I tailored it again for each position I applied to. For interviews, I prepared extensively. I'm someone who needs to feel well-prepared, so I created lists of potential questions and drafted answers in advance. The way I found my role at Avidity is kind of funny. I saw a posting for a position, but it was listed as a non-Ph.D. role. I asked someone I had previously connected with, who worked there, whether it might be flexible. At first, she said no, but later she reached out again to let me know they had reopened the position at the Ph.D. level. I applied, got an interview, and that's how it happened. So, even though I've never considered myself a strong networker, that connection made a real difference.

What helped you grow and advance so quickly at Avidity?
It was a combination of things. First, working hard, consistently delivering on time, doing rigorous science, and showing that I could help move projects forward. Second, I tried to proactively create opportunities for myself, especially in the areas where I wanted to grow. I took initiative and made sure I was visible when opportunities came up. And third, I think the timing and context of the company helped. When I joined, Avidity was still small, about 30 people. As the company grew, so did the opportunities. That environment made it easier for people to take on more responsibility and grow with the organization.

**What's something early career researchers can do today that will help in the long run?**
First, build relationships outside of academia. Reach out to people who have already transitioned into industry and ask them about their roles. That knowledge will help you better understand where you might fit and how to get there. Second, and something I didn't do but think could be helpful: attend conferences that have a mix of basic science and industry. It gives you exposure to how people in industry think, what they're working on, and who you might want to connect with. Those settings can be really valuable for learning and networking.

What advice or encouragement would you offer to early career researchers considering their next step?
Don't underestimate yourself. As scientists, we tend to focus on what we're missing or what we still need to learn. But chances are, you're more prepared for the next step than you think. Be confident. Ask questions. Reach out to mentors or professionals in your field of interest. In my experience, most people are really open and willing to help. Embrace the challenge; it's not always easy, but you don't have to do it alone.

Advice from a Medical Writer & Consultant

"Don't undersell yourself. I think that it's really easy, especially when you're looking at job postings, to feel like you're not qualified. You're qualified."
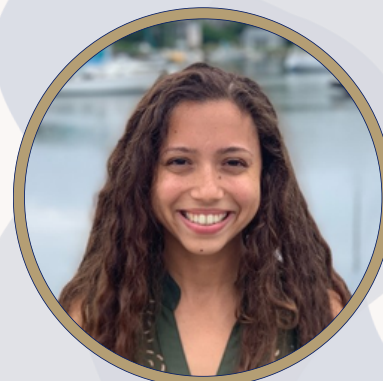
Andrea Silva-Gotay, Ph.D.
Medical Writer & Consultant
Whitsell Innovations, Inc.

How did you make the transition from a PhD to your first role in industry?
I did my Ph.D. in neuroscience and behavior, and as I was finishing, I initially only applied for postdocs. I had been thinking about industry, but only started seriously considering it toward the end. When one of my postdoc offers fell through, I had the option to take another, but I took it as an opportunity to pivot. I was already planning to move to Boston, where the postdoc would've been, so I tapped into my network. Networking can be hard, and it was for me at first, but I was lucky to know a few friends from grad school who had gone into industry. I'd been interested in medical writing, but it felt daunting, and I wasn't sure I was qualified. So instead, I started looking at scientist positions since I'd already been working at the bench in grad school. I contacted friends in those roles, and one of them had landed a full-time position right after grad school, but she'd been searching for a year. I hadn't done that because I thought I'd go the postdoc route. Still, I applied for scientist roles and got several interviews, though I didn't advance in many. The interview style was different from postdocs, and I had to build that skill. Eventually, I found a great fit, my neuroscience background matched the work at a biopharma company developing tool compounds to treat ALS. It was a contract role with benefits and a fixed term, but I was thrilled! It got my foot in the door, and that was my goal. And for the record, it is totally possible to land a full-time role right out of grad school. I know people who did.

What's one piece of encouragement or advice you'd offer early career researchers considering their next step?
Right. Don't undersell yourself. I think that it's really easy, especially when you're looking at job postings, to feel like you're not qualified. You're qualified. The only reason you might not be qualified is if they ask for two years of experience doing that exact job. And even then, if you can manage to convince the employer that you have the transferable skills that make you qualified and give examples, like, "This is why I think I'm a good project manager: because I did this and this in graduate school, etc.", then you can show them. For every job that you see where you think, "I'd be good at this, but I don't know if I should apply because I don't have this bullet point or these two bullet points", apply to it. You are qualified. You just have to convince yourself, and then convince your interviewer.

Which skills from your academic career translated well into industry, and which ones did you have to build or refine?
One of the first things I had to refine was my resume. I had a huge academic CV that I had to compress into a one- or two-page resume. It's tough, you have to leave out a lot, but that's what hiring managers want. I relied on friends in industry to help me figure that out. One of them even gave me feedback based on what she looks for when hiring. Another big shift was learning efficient time management. In grad school, I was doing a lot, but not always efficiently. In industry, especially if you're juggling multiple projects, time becomes more limited and you want to avoid long hours. So I had to learn how to manage time smarter, not harder. On the flip side, many academic skills translated really well. Benchwork, data analysis, presenting results, those carried over seamlessly. Grad students are fast learners, and that's something to emphasize when applying. We're essentially professional learners. That adaptability helped me jump into new experiments and pick up new skills quickly. Now, as a medical writer, I've been able to leverage the writing experience from my Ph.D., papers, grants, and presentations. I did have to learn the nuances of clinical regulatory documents, but for manuscripts and grants, I was already prepared.

What's one practical thing a grad student can start doing today to better prepare for the postdoc transition?
Network. It's all important, and it's a muscle you have to flex regularly, even if it feels uncomfortable at first. Practice talking to people, whether that's cold outreach or chatting with someone new at a conference. Get comfortable having a few go-to questions ready to start a conversation, both about science and in a personable way. Building your network now is key, especially in tough job markets when everyone's looking. It's about who you know. Early on, it might feel like you don't have much to contribute, but people who've been in the field a while understand that sometimes you give more, sometimes you take more. That's how networks work. You need to be visible, make connections, and have conversations with people across roles. It might seem old school, but it's often what determines whether you get in the door.

Non - Academic Careers

Summary of Advice

Don't underestimate yourself.
You likely have more transferable skills than you realize. You don't need to check every box to be qualified.

Start before you're ready.
Apply even if you're unsure. Interviewing and applying are skills you build through practice.

Be flexible.
You might not land your dream role first. Contract work, internships, or entry-level positions can be powerful entry points.

Lead with your values.
Whether in science, philanthropy, or policy, centering your work around community, empathy, and equity helps you stand out and stay grounded.

Be intentional with opportunities.
Learn to say yes selectively. Don't overload yourself, focus where you can contribute meaningfully and grow.

Transferrable Skills

Critical thinking and scientific rigor

Project and time management

Data analysis and interpretation

Writing and communication: grants, papers, presentations

Fast, self-directed learning

Mentorship

Skills To Develop

High-level communication (not just data-heavy)

Resume writing (tailored, concise, 1–2 pages)

Cross-functional collaboration and stakeholder communication

Supervision and strategic thinking

Efficient time management and work-life balance

Academic Careers

Academic careers are those within a university or research institution that emphasize education and research. Other administrative roles can be considered academic careers as well. In this issue, we interviewed academics from various career stages - post doc to professor to gather a wide breadth of perspectives on the academic landscape and career path. There are various other academic careers! For the purpose of this issues, we focused on achieving tenure-track roles.

List of careers you can explore in academia:

Assistant / Associate / Full Professor
Lecturer / Teaching Faculty
Adjunct or Visiting Professor
Postdoctoral Researcher
Research Scientist / Research Faculty
Principal Investigator (PI)
Lab Manager / Research Coordinator
Department Chair / Dean / Provost
Academic Program Director
Academic Advisor / Student Affairs Officer
Graduate Program Coordinator
Diversity & Inclusion Officer
Career & Professional Development Specialist
Grant Writer / Research Development Officer
Sponsored Programs or Compliance Administrator
Institutional Research Analyst
University Librarian / Digital Scholarship Specialist

Advice from a Postdoctoral Scholar

"There is a very special thing that happens once you have your Ph.D., and that is that you feel like you have the freedom of choice. I feel much more secure in a postdoc position than I ever did as a student."

Montana Kay Lara, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Scholar
University of California San Diego

What motivated you to pursue a postdoc and not move directly into industry or another path?

I think everything I say is going to be tempered with the political climate currently. And it's hard to go back and not be influenced by my current feelings right now. When I think about how it happened for me to be in academia, I had a lot of self-reflection and just took a lot of time to understand what I truly value. I had a really difficult grad school experience and for a number of reasons, but it prompted me to really distill down what was most important to me. I think location, scope of work, and the people I wanted to work with were really, really important. To be honest, I worked really hard to be here. When I thought about what I truly valued, one of those things was being in public science. I had the opportunity, I got the postdoc position, and sometimes I think when we inch closer to our true dreams, even the ones we don't want to admit to ourselves, they feel more within reach. Getting the postdoc helped me admit that I really did want to be a PI. It's not that industry or other roles weren't on the table, my partner is in industry, and there's a long list of pros and cons for both, but I ended up pursuing my actual dream because I had the opportunity to do so.

What felt most different about being a postdoc compared to being a grad student?

The freedom. There is a very special thing that happens once you have your Ph.D., and that is that you feel like you have the freedom of choice. I feel much more secure in a postdoc position than I ever did as a student. And so, you know, there's a lot of doom and gloom, but I am much happier now than I was in grad school. A lot of factors contribute to that, but freedom is a big one. It's the feeling of not being trapped. Part of that freedom is being empowered to be a little bolder. You've already established that you are capable. You earned your Ph.D. and now you have that to back you up. You can say, "I do have the experience to make this comment or contribution." Also, there's a shift in how you see yourself. You go from being in that very clear power dynamic as a student to feeling like a peer. That's a really different experience. I think sometimes we forget how much we've grown. The person you are at the end of your Ph.D. is not the same as the person you were at the beginning. Starting a postdoc is when you begin to step out of that student identity.

What should candidates pay attention to in these conversations [when interviewing]?

These are the most important conversations because your success is directly tied to the lab's success. One thing I focused on was the track record of trainees: how many had gone through the lab, where they ended up, and how success was defined for postdocs. Success looks different for everyone, so I wanted to know how it was measured and supported. I also cared deeply about stability. Coming from a grad program that felt insecure at times, I knew I wanted a lab with an established track record and consistent funding. I looked into how long the lab had been around, what grants were currently supporting it, and what the long-term funding pipeline looked like. I asked about how many people would be in the lab and what was considered meaningful contribution from a postdoc. These questions helped me feel more confident that the lab was stable and so was my position. At UCSD, we also have a postdoc union, which offers some added protections. Still, you can't always predict the future, so knowing that my PI would advocate for me, financially and professionally, was really reassuring. Having that support structure has helped me manage stress during an already stressful time.

What advice would you give to current Ph.D. students who are unsure whether to pursue a postdoc?

Two things come to mind. First, take the time to reflect on your core values and let them guide your decisions. There's rarely a right or wrong answer in life, but if you can look back and know a decision aligned with what mattered to you at the time, that's a life without regret. Even if you think you know your values, it's worth mapping them out, write them down, revisit them. It might feel silly, but it helps clarify what you want and why. Second, especially in today's climate, I wouldn't encourage anyone to enter a postdoc blindly. There's a lot of uncertainty in academia, so it's essential to know the lab, the people, and the institution, and whether they'll have your back. A postdoc can be incredibly rewarding, especially if your goal is to become a PI, but you need a strong support system. If you already know that path is for you, great. If you're unsure but it's something you're considering, make sure you understand what you're stepping into. Stability, mentorship, and institutional support really matter right now. And again, let your values lead the way.

Advice from an Assistant Professor

"Negotiation is business. It's fast-paced and feels different from the friendly tone of the interview, but it's necessary. Even if they say no, at least you asked."

Sarah Jane Chavez, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
California State University, Fullerton

What motivated you to pursue a tenure track faculty position and how did you know it was the right path for you?
Since I was a master's student, I've been drawn to this path. I'm actually a Cal State product, I went to San Diego State and Northridge, and I had amazing mentors who were all tenure-track at various stages in their careers. I really liked how they balanced their research, teaching, and mentorship. They had labs, and it was inspiring to see different ways they fit their work into their lives and how passionate they were. I also had the opportunity to teach a couple of classes, once as a master's student, once during my doctoral program, and then a pre-college summer course as a postdoc. I enjoyed it all. I loved creating lectures and working with the next generation. Teaching became a reciprocal learning process, and that really solidified for me that this was the direction I wanted—balancing research, teaching, and mentorship in a tenure-track role.

When did you start preparing for the job market and what were some of the first steps you took?
I started preparing in my first year of the postdoc, which I learned later is a bit uncommon. Most people begin in their second year. I treated that first year as a soft launch: I prepared all my materials, sent out a few applications, and saw it as a trial run knowing I'd probably have to redo everything the following year. It was tough to juggle with postdoc responsibilities, but it paid off. By the time I officially hit the job market in year two, I already had a solid base to work from and could focus on improving and scaling up my materials and strategy. That year, I applied to 27 universities and got an offer. The first year, I only applied to three schools. I was very regionally focused and didn't make it to the Zoom interview round. So I knew I needed to apply more broadly and treat it as a numbers game.

What advice do you have for preparing a strong job talk or chalk talk?
Practice with a mentor who can help you revise, and also practice with someone outside your area of expertise. Have them ask questions. That will show you where your talk might be too jargon heavy or missing key information. It also helps you figure out what you can cut or expand on. You may realize you need to describe your methods in more detail or simplify the theory. Practicing with different audiences helped me shape a clearer, more effective talk and anticipate the kinds of questions I might get during the real on-campus interview.

How did you approach negotiating your offer (salary, start-up funds, teaching load), and do you have any advice for others?
Once you get an offer, don't accept it over the phone. Everything should be in writing and handled via email, which actually makes it easier to navigate. As soon as I got my offer, I forwarded it to three mentors, two at Cal State Universities and one at Brown University, and asked for their feedback. They emphasized trying to increase the salary, even if it's outside the posted range, because sometimes it pushes the offer closer to the top of that range. I also negotiated start-up funds by being very explicit: I laid out my background, collaborations, and the kinds of grants I was working on, and showed them a budget from my proposed grant to illustrate that the funds they initially offered wouldn't be enough for the research I wanted to do. I didn't get everything I asked for, but I did get more than what was initially offered, so that felt like a win. I also couldn't negotiate the teaching load, two courses per semester for two years, but I did request to teach the same two courses for the first year to minimize prep. This will help a lot with balancing as I start.

How did you assess whether a department or institution was the right fit for you during the interviews?
That was actually really interesting. I paid close attention to their demeanor, not just how excited they were about my research, but how welcoming they seemed overall. What stood out most were the departments that had me meet with their students. Having a full hour to talk with them said a lot about the department's values and mission. I also looked at how faculty responded to my research, were they genuinely excited, or just neutral? You can tell when people are truly interested in having you join their team. And the informal meals, lunch or dinner with potential colleagues, were great for observing department culture. Were they supportive of one another? Did they speak positively about their colleagues? Those moments told me a lot. Ultimately, culture is something you can't change once you're there. So I paid attention to how comfortable I felt and whether I could see myself thriving in that environment.

Advice from a Professor

"If I could go back, I would tell myself, 'Sergio, please value your unique background. It's a strength, not a limitation.' That's what I would tell myself."
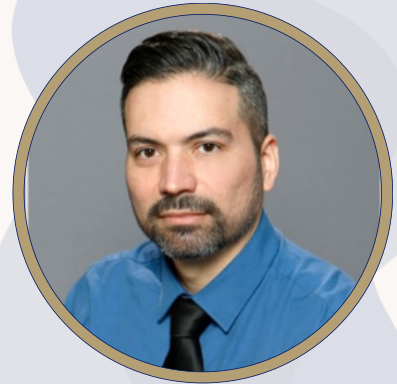
Sergio Iñiguez, Ph.D.
Professor
University of Texas, El Paso

What advice would you give to postdocs or grad students who hope to build a long-term career in academia?
I think what I would say is: you need to be honest with yourself. You need to be sincere with yourself in the sense of, do you truly know whether a research-related career is for you? Because you have to face the challenge of acquiring external funds to run your own research program. And of course, this varies depending on your field, but at some level, it's all the same. Be practical and realistic about the challenges we face nowadays, especially if you rely on institutions like the NIH for funding. It's not the only source, but for many of us, it's the primary one. So if you're honest with yourself and still willing to take that challenge, you just need to accept that you must be persistent, show grit, and go all in. Otherwise, maybe it's best to be realistic and explore other options. But it comes down to that honesty, what do you want to do? I think being realistic is the most important when making this decision.

What do you think makes a strong academic leader, and how can early career scholars begin developing those skills now?
Since I'm a PI and run my own lab, I'll tell you what I strive to do. I'm not saying I'm perfect at it, but this is my framework. I think a strong leader listens, is transparent, empathetic, and has a clear vision. Especially in our roles, mentoring undergrads, grad students, postdocs, it's important to be aware that every person has a unique background. I think that empathy, that ability to relate and adapt, makes you a better mentor and a better leader. Transparency is critical too, being clear about your expectations and direction, so no one's guessing what you want from them. That would've made a big difference for me when I was early in my training. And while things like organization and time management are important, those are skills you develop over time. Leadership starts with how you treat people.

How did you navigate the transition from early career faculty to achieving tenure and eventually becoming a full professor?
So I've had a somewhat non-traditional path. My first job was as a tenure-track faculty member at a teaching institution. Then I moved to a tenure-track position at a research institution, which is where I'm at now, UTEP. What I realized is that each institution has its own culture. But at a broad level, both places prioritize research, teaching, and service. At my first job, even though it was a teaching-focused school, I naturally prioritized research. I'm really glad I did, because that helped me earn tenure there and it set me up for success at UTEP. At UTEP, I did the same. I placed research as my top priority, followed by teaching and then service. It's not that teaching and service weren't important, but I had to choose what to give the most energy to. I focused on building research projects that had both scientific merit and were translational or had community relevance. Since I work with animal models, it was important to me that my research could eventually benefit people too. That's the strategy that's guided me through both promotions.

What has kept you motivated and fulfilled throughout your academic journey?
What has kept me moving forward and being persistent is believing that my work can improve health outcomes in a way that translates across all populations, especially those like the one I came from. I work with rodents, but my research focuses on understanding the long-term side effects of antidepressant medications. These are medications millions of people take, so the implications are broad and meaningful. Knowing that my work might one day help improve someone's life is what keeps me motivated. I also love mentoring students. Sometimes, just being who you are is enough to inspire someone. I know that was true for me. Even if a mentor didn't look like me, they reminded me of where I came from, and that was enough for me to say, "Maybe I can do this too." That's what keeps me going.

If you could give one piece of advice to your younger academic self, what would it be?
If I could go back, I would tell myself: "Sergio, please value your unique background. It's a strength, not a limitation." So I grew up in a rural area in a very small village in Mexico. Some of my core values have always centered around hard work. My values were about contributing to my family. It was about collectivism rather than individualism, helping the unit, not just yourself. I think, early in my academic path, I saw that background as something to downplay. But now, I know those experiences are what gave me the persistence, focus, and motivation I needed to thrive in academia. I would tell myself to embrace that fully.

Advice from a Professor

"It's powerful to remind yourself: you didn't know then what you know now. That kind of self-compassion goes a long way."

María Luisa Zúñiga, Ph.D.
Professor
San Diego State University

Were there any pivotal moments or mentors early in your career that helped shape your trajectory?

Yes. During my training in epidemiology, which was joint program between UC San Diego and San Diego State University, I had the opportunity to shadow a wonderful family physician, Dr. Ellen Beck, who started the UCSD Student-Run Free Clinic. I became her mentee, and she influenced my entire perspective on science: bringing humanity into science. She really shaped my thinking. After I got my doctorate, I was hired into the UCSD Department of Pediatrics. That's where I began working in community pediatrics and delving into community-based participatory research, which became the cornerstone of my work.

What advice would you give to graduate students or postdocs who hope to build a long-term career in academia?

In addition to not being afraid to ask, obviously, you'll want to establish rapport with a colleague who's senior. I would also recommend finding mentors that fill different needs for you, and building a trusting relationship with a mentor. And that kind of trusting relationship means that me, as an early-stage investigator, if I feel that I'm in a period of uncertainty, or I'm making a decision, I have somebody that I can call and bounce that idea off of. And that means that my mentors, they have been available and they're willing to do that for me, and I'm willing to do that for my mentees. So I think mentorship is key, and not being afraid to try. Sometimes a certain mentor won't be what you thought they would be. So you look for somebody else, and that comes back to the alignment of our communities with people who have similar approaches and how we see things, that we align with those that nurture us, that have similar values.

Given the current climate around higher education and research, what guidance would you offer to early career faculty who may feel uncertain about the future of academia?

One of the most important things is to build a community you can lean on, people who elevate you. It's easy to get caught in negativity, but being surrounded by like-minded, resilient colleagues can help you stay creative and solution-oriented. For example, I work in HIV, and HIV funding has been severely cut. I had to reframe my work to align with current NIH priorities, like chronic disease prevention, without losing the heart of what I do. Think creatively about how your science can be translated or expanded. It's also helpful to recognize our privilege; many of our colleagues in countries with fewer resources have faced this kind of instability for a long time and figured out how to adapt. We're not the first to deal with it, and we won't be the last. Find ways to be resistant and creative. Don't let anyone take away your words or your identity.

How did you balance service, research, and teaching, particularly at a public institution that values community engagement?

This is definitely a challenge. Two things have helped me. First, open communication with my family, I would let them know if I was working on a grant proposal and needed time and space to meet a deadline. That communication made a big difference. Second, I've tried to weave the thread of what excites me, my passion, through all parts of my work: research, teaching, and service. In the classroom, I draw directly from my research, and that really engages students. In my service, I focus on community and empowerment, which aligns with my research philosophy. So when everything is rooted in the same values, the "balance" feels more cohesive and meaningful.

If you could give one piece of advice to your younger academic self, what would it be?

One thing I've learned, especially through the lens of self-compassion, is the importance of being kind to yourself when you make mistakes or miss opportunities. Maybe you didn't ask for a higher salary, or you didn't speak up when you could have. It's powerful to remind yourself: you didn't know then what you know now. That kind of self-compassion goes a long way. Another thing we don't talk about enough is negotiation. We just don't teach people how to negotiate, especially women and colleagues from minoritized communities. It's something that often feels hidden, but it shouldn't be. As mentors, it's something we absolutely need to pass on to our mentees at every level.

Academic Careers

Summary of Advice

◇ **Ground yourself in your values.**
Your values are your compass. Whether it's public impact, mentorship, or equity, understanding what drives you will help clarify whether to pursue a postdoctoral position, seek a tenure-track role, or pivot elsewhere.

◇ **Build your people.**
Mentorship and community are essential. No one mentor can do it all! Cultivate a network that reflects the support and feedback you need at different stages.

◇ **Think strategically, not reactively.**
Academia demands intention. Whether it's selecting service roles, applying for jobs, or navigating funding, step back and ask: Does this move align with my goals?

◇ **You are your best advocate.**
Negotiate early and often. Keep an evolving CV, track application materials, and don't be afraid to ask for support or for more.

◇ **Resilience matters.**
Academia can be uncertain and isolating. Persistence, grit, and staying grounded in your purpose are key to weathering rejections, revisions, and shifting landscapes.

Advice for Transitioning to a Postdoc or Assistant Professorship

Map your professional development needs

Look at lab/institution outcomes

Consider funding stability

Do your values align with the department's mission

Explore the local academic culture

Seek feedback on the application

Build a strong teaching portfolio

Practice job interviewing early

Keep a running "expanded" CV

Don't overlook smaller institutions

Advice for Navigating the Tenure Process

Understand institutional culture

Prioritize research

Create a cohesive academic story

Collect successful application examples

Document everything early

Build relationships and trust

Seek consistent mentorship

Know when and how to negotiate

Applying for an Assistant Professor Role Resources

The job search and applying for positions can be daunting. To help make this process easier, Dr. Sarah Jane Chavez provided documents she curated while navigating the application process to help NHSN early career scientists.

Sarah Jane Chavez, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
California State University, Fullerton

Building a Personal Brand

A personal brand is a cohesive narrative that reflects your personal and professional experiences, highlighting what you've done, who you are, and the unique perspectives you bring. It weaves together your story, including triumphs and challenges, and helps you communicate your value through clear, authentic storytelling.

Click here to reference how to build your personal brand!

Interview Questions

Interview questions help employers assess a candidate's skills, experience, and fit for a role. They reveal how someone thinks, communicates, and aligns with the organization through a mix of technical, behavioral, and situational prompts.

Click here to reference a list of potential interview questions!

Navigating the Job Market

Navigating the job market can be both exciting and overwhelming. It requires clarity, strategy, and resilience. By refining your personal brand, building strong networks, and staying adaptable, you can confidently chart a path toward meaningful opportunities.

Click here to reference Dr. Chavez'a presentation on "Navigating the Job Market"!

Recommended Professional Development Resources

Professional Development Offices at Your Institution:

- Use university-based offices for workshops, resume help, job talks, and alumni connections.

Internships & Programs:

- Whitsell Innovations Internship – 10+ hrs/week, remote, great for transitioning to medical writing. 🔗 Click here!
- SMDP Academia → Industry Mentoring Program - 1-year career mentoring program that pairs high-achieving students and early career researchers from disadvantaged backgrounds with industry mentors in medical technology, biotechnology, and consumer healthcare. 🔗 Click here!

Certifications & Conferences:

- PMP (Project Management) or Regulatory Certifications – helpful but not always required. 🔗 Click here!
- AMWA (American Medical Writers Association) – conferences and courses for writing careers.
- 🔗 Click here!
- Repower – digital organizing boot camps (nonprofit sector). 🔗 Click here!

Application & Portfolio Materials:

- Create a job application tracker (e.g., Excel) to stay organized.
- Collect successful application files as templates.
- Expand your CV with mentoring, service, and teaching examples. Personally reference when applying to positions.

Mentorship & Peer Support:

- Build a team of mentors, each can offer guidance in different areas (research, teaching, strategy).
- Maintain peer mentors who are slightly ahead of you career-wise.
- Look for trust-based mentorships where you can share uncertainty and get honest input.

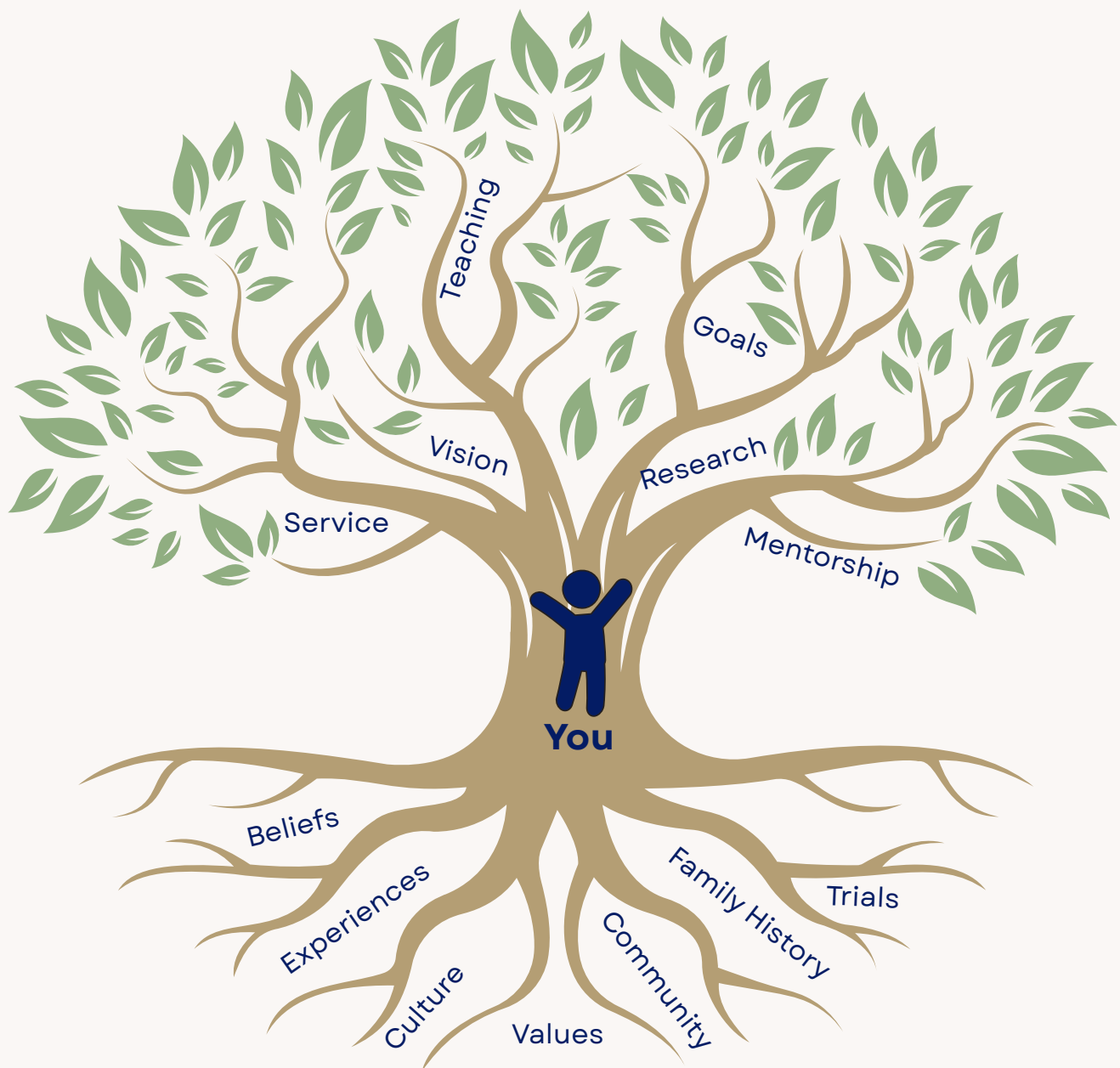**Professional Societies & Communities:**

- National Hispanic Science Network (NHSN)
- Society for the Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS) .
- The Lancet, NEJM, and other journals – spaces for scholarly advocacy and discourse.

Networking Tips:

- Use alumni networks to find people in your target role.
- Ask for coffee chats (even virtually); curiosity and respect go a long way.
- Stay connected to peers and colleagues who elevate your values and work.

You, like a tree, are not defined by one part alone. You are intricate, expansive, and alive in ways you may have forgotten. Your roots will always help shape and guide the various branches of your career.

Teaching

Goals

Vision

Research

Service

Mentorship

You

Beliefs

Experiences

Family History

Trials

Culture

Community

Values

Co-created by Drs. María Luisa Zúñiga & Elizabeth Sneddon-Yepez

Announcements

NHSN Annual Conference

October 23rd – 25th

Miami, Florida

Meet the 2025 Conference CoChairs!

Flavia Barbano, Ph.D.
National Institute on
Drug Abuse
Staff Scientist

Alyssa Lozano, Ph.D.
University of Miami
Research Assistant
Professor

Kathryn Nowotny, Ph.D.
University of Miami
Associate Professor

Laura Ornelas, Ph.D.
University of New
Mexico
Assistant Professor

Accomplishments

"The only closed doors are the ones you are willing to acknowledge". - Carlos I. Noriego

Symposium

Drs. Tara Bautista and **Miguel Pinedo** organized a mini-symposium for The College on Problems of Drug Dependence (CPDD). Their symposium was entitled, *"Responsive alcohol and substance use interventions that consider cultural risk and protective factors".*

Here, three NHSN members gave talks on the topics below:

1. **Dr. Miguel Pinedo**: *Socio-political and cultural considerations for improving substance use treatment services for Latino adults*
2. **Alexandra Manriquez**: *Co-Creating a Mindfulness-Based Intervention with Latina Mothers as Community Partners to Reduce Drinking to Cope Behaviors*
3. Jefferson Pires Dos Santos & **Amanda Acevedo Morales**: *Culturally responsive primary care integration in a rural-serving behavioral health center*

Drs. Miguel Pinedo and **Tara Bautista** were Interdisciplinary Research Training Institute (IRTI; NIDA R25) fellows together in 2016 and now we can see their growth chairing the symposium together! Also, two of the student presenters, **Amanda Acevedo** and Jeffersson Pires Dos Santos, are R25 fellows for a different NIDA R25 that **Tara Bautista** is the Co-I for at Northern Arizona University.

Accomplishments

Publications

Levitt, DE, Wohlgemuth, KJ, Burnham, EF, Conner, MJ, Collier, JJ, and Mota, JA. (2025). Hazardous alcohol use and cardiometabolic risk among firefighters. Alcohol: Clinical and Experimental Research. 49:392-406. PMID: 39746845. PMCID: PMC11831616.

Ferguson, TF*****, **Levitt, DE***, Simon, L, **Molina, PE**, and Primeaux, SD. (2025). Alcohol misuse and health-related behaviors among people with HIV during the COVID-19 stay-at-home directive: An ALIVE-Ex sub-study. Alcohol & Alcoholism. 60(3):agaf019. PMID: 40267314. PMCID: forthcoming. *****Equal contributions; co-first authors.

Themann, A, **Rodriguez, M**, **Calvo, D E**, **Vargas, P**, & **Iñiguez, S D** (2025). Prozac exposure during adolescence increases pain sensitivity in adulthood. Journal of Psychiatric Research, 186, 200–204.
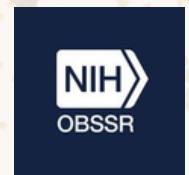
Accomplishments

Awards & Honors

Marybel Gonzalez, PhD - selected as a faculty scholar to the Inaugural Cohort for the Engaged Scholars Academy at The Ohio State University

Click here to see the news release!

Tara Bautista, PhD - NIH Office of Behavioral & Social Science Research (OBSSR) Matilda While Riley Paper Award

Click here to see the award winning research article that was written with Dr. Bautista's NHSN mentor, Dr. Hortensia Amaro!

Thank you all for sharing your accomplishments and for continuing to open doors for yourself and others.

Want your accomplishment to be highlighted in our next issue?

Email Elizabeth Sneddon-Yepez, Ph.D.
easneddon@health.ucsd.edu

A note from the editor:

Hi everyone,

This issue we wanted to focus on, "how can we provide career-seeking resources to early career scientists?" After much discussion with the Early Career Leadership Committee, we felt that going straight to the source would be the best way to gather different perspectives and to understand the different career paths available to us.

This issue is an example of "it takes a village." Here, I had to rely on my network to connect me with folks who would be willing provide advice. Whether that included a personal mentor, a previous conference roommate, or even my friends dad, I was able to experience how powerful your network really is and how they can connect you with folks who are willing to help, advise, and provide mentorship despite never meeting you.

To all of our interviewees, thank you for providing invaluable insights on your career journeys. I appreciate your vulnerability, honesty, and thoughtful responses to the questions we had. To the NHSN community and my personal network, thank you for helping us make this issue great! It is a perfect example of what we can accomplish when we all work together to achieve a common goal.

If you're interested in being featured in the next issue or if you have any topics you wish to see covered, I'd love to hear from you! You can email me by clicking this link!

Warmly,
Elizabeth Sneddon-Yepez, Ph.D.

Thank you to our funding sources!

NIH> National Institute on Drug Abuse