Faculty Mentors, Project Titles, and Descriptions Department of Biology

Fall Research Semester

Students: What to do?

1. Review the list of projects below
2. Identify at least 3 projects that you would be interested in participating in.
3. Fill out the Research Semester application form
4. Submit this application along with the required supplemental information by the end of March.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Faculty Mentor** | **Title of Project** | **Contact Information** | |  |
| **Ahn, Changwoo** Professor Department of Environmental Science and Policy | [**The Dirt Project**](#_bookmark0) | Changwoo Ahn [cahn@gmu.edu](mailto:cahn@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Ascoli, Giorgio** Professor, Molecular Neuroscience, Volgenau School of Engineering | [**Hippocampome**](#_bookmark1) [**NeuroMorpho.Org**](#_bookmark2) | Giorgio Ascoli [ascoli@gmu.edu](mailto:ascoli@gmu.edu)  [http://krasnow1.gmu.](http://krasnow1.gmu.edu/cn3/ascoli/) [edu/cn3/ascoli/](http://krasnow1.gmu.edu/cn3/ascoli/) | |  |
| **Baranova, Ancha**  Professor,  School of Systems Biology; Director, Study of Chronic Metabolic Diseases | [**Molecular Pathways Involved in the Pathogenesis of Non-Alcoholic**](#_bookmark3)[**Fatty Liver Disease and Other Obesity Related Pathologies**](#_bookmark3)  [**Clinical Data Analysis in Metabolic Disease**](#_bookmark4)[**Metabolomics of chronic diseases**](#_bookmark5) | Ancha Baranova [abaranov@gmu.edu](mailto:abaranov@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Blackwell, Kim L. (Avrama)** Professor, Molecular Neuroscience, Volgenau School of Engineering | [**Signaling Pathways Involved in Striatal Synaptic Plasticity**](#_bookmark6) | Avrama Blackwell [kblackw1@gmu.edu](mailto:kblackw1@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Chiari, Ylenia,** Assistant Professor, Department of Biology | Population genetics of the invasive turtle Trachemys scripta in its natural distribution range | Ylenia Chiari [ychairi@gmu.edu](mailto:ychairi@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Crerar, Lorelei** Assistant Professor, Department of Biology | [**Ancient DNA Analysis and Sirenian Phylogeny**](#_bookmark10) | Lorelei Crerar [lcrerar@gmu.edu](mailto:lcrerar@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Fowler, Amy**  Assistant Professor,  Environmental Science and Policy | [**Impacts of Salinity on invertebrate and vertebrate community**](#_bookmark14)[**composition in the Potomac River, VA**](#_bookmark14)  **The discovery of a new castrating isopod parasite in estuarine crabs of the Chesapeake Bay**  **Salinity tolerances of invasive Japanese mystery snails**  **Reproductive output of native and invasive populations of the mud crab Rhithropanopeus harrisii** | Amy Fowler [Afowler6@gmu.edu](mailto:Afowler8@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Frankenfeld, Cara** Assistant Professor,  Global & Community Health, College of Health & Human Services | [**Nutrition and Environmental Risk Factors for Human Health**](#_bookmark15)[**Conditions**](#_bookmark15) | Cara Frankenfeld [cfranken@gmu.edu](mailto:cfranken@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Freeman, Elizabeth Associate Professor**  **School of Integrative studies** | [**https://integrative.gmu.edu/people/efreeman**](https://integrative.gmu.edu/people/efreeman)  **Wildlife conservation, behavioral endocrinology, behavioral ecology** | Elizabeth Freeman [efreeman@gmu.edu](mailto:efreeman@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Dr. Brett Froelich**  **Assistant Professor Department of Biology** | TBD  <https://science.gmu.edu/directory/brett-froelich>  <https://www.froelichlab.com/> | Brett Froelich <bfroelic@gmu.edu> | |  |
| **Gillevet, Patrick** Professor, Department of Biology Director,  MicroBiome Analysis Center | [**Metabiome of Human Disease**](#_bookmark16)  [**Microbial Ecology of Environmental Disease**](#_bookmark17)  [**Phylogenomics and Population Genetics**](#_bookmark18) | Patrick Gillevet [pgilleve@gmu.edu](mailto:pgilleve@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Glaberman, Scott** Associate Professor, Environmental Science & Policy | **Host-Parasite Interactions in Galapagos Marine Iguanas** | Scott Glaberman [sglaberm@gmu.edu](mailto:sglaberm@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Grant, Geraldine M.** Associate Professor, Department of Biology | [**Mechanisms of Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis**](#_bookmark19) | Geraldine M Grant [ggrant1@gmu.edu](mailto:ggrant1@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Hakami, Ramin** Associate Professor, School of Systems Biology | [**Exosome-mediated intercellular communication during bacterial**](#_bookmark20)[**infections.**](#_bookmark20)  [**Host signaling during infection with biodefense bacterial agents.**](#_bookmark21)  **Host response to SARS-CoV-2 infection** | Ramin Hakami [rhakami@gmu.edu](mailto:rhakami@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Hanley, Daniel**  Assistant Professor of Biology, George Mason University | **Perceptual and cognitive processes governing egg recognition in wild birds**  **A holistic examination of visual signals** | | Daniel Hanley  dhanley2@gmu.edu | |
| **Hoemann, Caroline** Professor Bioengineering | [**https://bioengineering.gmu.edu/profile/view/443811**](https://bioengineering.gmu.edu/profile/view/443811) | Caroline Hoemann [choemann@gmu.edu](mailto:choemann@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Hunt, Kathleen**  Assistant Professor, Department of Biology and Smithsonian-Mason School of Conservation". | **Baleen, horn and tusk: Reconstructing patterns in stress and eproduction from hormone patterns in whale baleen, antelope horns and narwhal tusks** | Kathleen E. Hunt  [kehunt@gmu.edu](mailto:kehunt@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Kabbani, Nadine** Associate Professor, School of Systems Biology | [**Axon Growth and Regeneration in the Brain**](#_bookmark23)  **Calcium signaling in xenopus fertilization** | Nadine Kabbani [nkabbani@gmu.edu](mailto:nkabbani@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Lim, HC**  Assistant Professor Department of Biology | **Quantification of resource use of pollinators through DNA sequencing and color space characterization of pollen pellets**. | Haw Chuan Lim [hlim22@gmu.edu](mailto:hlim22@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Luther, David** Associate Professor, Department of Biology | [**The Evolution of Acoustic Competition in Songbirds**](#_bookmark26)  [**Assessing the effectiveness of conservation actions for endangered**](#_bookmark27)[**species**](#_bookmark27) | David Luther [dluther@gmu.edu](mailto:dluther@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Dr Claudius Mueller** Research Assistant Professor  SSB | [**Deciphering the communication between tumor cells and sub-**](#_bookmark30)[**populations**](#_bookmark30) | Claudius Mueller [cmuelle1@gmu.edu](mailto:cmuelle1@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Olmo, Valerie** Assistant Professor, Department of Biology | [**Environmental factors and vertebrate development**](#_bookmark31) | Valerie Olmo [volmo@gmu.edu](mailto:volmo@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Paige, Mikell** Associate Professor, Department of Chemistry & Biochemistry | **Leukotriene A4 hydrolase enzyme as a potential target for pulmonary inflammation**  **The FK506-binding proteins as potential targets for pulmonary fibrosis**  **Capsid and importin proteins in Venezuelan equine encephalitis virus infection** | Mikell Paige [mpaige3@gmu.edu](mailto:mpaige3@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Peters, Esther** Associate Professor, Department of Environmental Science and Policy | [**Using Histology to Understand Interactions between Organisms and**](#_bookmark35)[**the Environment**](#_bookmark35) | Esther Peters [epeters2@gmu.edu](mailto:epeters2@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Pollack, Anna** Assistant Professor, Global & Community Health | [**Environmental Chemical Exposure and Women’s Health**](#_bookmark36)  **(Not accepting students in 2021)** | Anna Pollack [apollac2@gmu.edu](mailto:apollac2@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **van Hoek, Monique**  Professor,  School of Systems Biology | [**Antimicrobial Peptides**](#_bookmark38)[**Novel Antibiotics**](#_bookmark39) | Monique Van Hoek [mvanhoek@gmu.edu](mailto:mvanhoek@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Von Fricken, Michael** Assistant Professor Department of Global and Community Health | [**Collect and analyze Ixodes scapularis ticks for Lyme disease in low**](#_bookmark41)[**elevation settings along the Appalachian Trail in Virginia**](#_bookmark41) | Michael Von Fricken [mvonfric@gmu.edu](mailto:mvonfric@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Wu, Yuntao**  Professor,  School of Systems Biology | [**Screening for anti-HIV activity using an HIV-Rev dependent reporter**](#_bookmark42)[**cell**](#_bookmark42)  [**Screening anti-HIV activity from small-molecule inhibitors targeting**](#_bookmark43)[**cellular signaling pathways.**](#_bookmark43) | Yuntao Wu [ywu8@gmu.edu](mailto:ywu8@gmu.edu) | |  |
| **Weeks, Andrea**  **Associate Professor and Director of the Ted R. Bradley Herbarium (GMUF)** | Evolution of Madagascar myrrh trees: species discovery | Andrea Weeks  [aweeks3@gmu.edu](mailto:aweeks3@gmu.edu) | |  |
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Faculty Projects

Research Semester

Department of Biology

# Dr Changwoo Ahn

Professor

Department of Environmental Science and Policy

## The Dirt Project

The goal of the project is to collect, research, and thus create a suite of bibliography of literature and media resources for an interdisciplinary education on “**soil (dirt)**”, focusing on urban soil ecology, combined with scientific investigation of soil color changes that would visually signify and trace the impacts of hydrologic, ecological, and cultural processes as affected by urbanization and climate change.

# Dr Giorgio Ascoli

Professor

Molecular Neuroscience, Volgenau School of Engineering

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## The Hippocampome Project

In the same vein as a genome, the Hippocampome is envisioned as the ultimate knowledge base describing the structure, activity, and function of the hippocampus, the brain region responsible for processing conscious autobiographic memories and plans. The foundation of this project is a catalogue of the many classes of neurons found in the hippocampus and the wiring diagram that interconnects all of them. The descriptions of these classes are distilled from data published in peer-reviewed journals.

Compiling and collating all of this knowledge into a single computerized resource will uncover new correlations and interrelations that will help discover the cellular mechanisms of hippocampal function and dysfunction. The student will learn to identify dendritic and axonal morphologies, microscopy techniques for their visualization, how they relate to the surrounding nervous tissue, and their effect on neuronal activity and network function. See also [http://hippocampome.org](http://hippocampome.org/) and <http://krasnow1.gmu.edu/cn3>

## NeuroMorpho.Org

NeuroMorpho.Org is a central, one-of-a-kind online neuroscience resource that provides free worldwide access to 3D digital reconstructions of neurons. Neurons are traced from microscopy imaging in many types of research laboratories, from the study of pharmacology to that of development. These same data can be reanalyzed for additional discoveries, including computational models of brain function. Data are deposited in NeuroMorpho.Org from various species ranging from flies, to rats, to humans, to elephants. Millions of neurons have been downloaded in more than 100 countries. NeuroMorpho.Org is a leading project in the emerging trend of data sharing in the neuroscience community that aims to maximize the research potential of collected data. The student will learn to identify dendritic and axonal morphologies, microscopy techniques for their visualization, how they relate to the surrounding nervous tissue, and their effect on neuronal activity and network function. See also [http://NeuroMorpho.Org](http://neuromorpho.org/)

# Dr Ancha Baranova

Professor

School of Systems Biology

Director, Study of Chronic Metabolic Diseases

## Molecular Pathways Involved in the Pathogenesis of Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease and Other Obesity Related Pathologies

Obesity is the abnormal or excessive increase in adiposity. Lately, obesity has got attention as the state of low grade chronic inflammation characterized by both macrophage infiltration of AT and increased production of pro-inflammatory cytokines that play a role in insulin resistance (IR). Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) is a common disease that comprises a morphological spectrum of liver pathologies ranging from simple triglyceride accumulation in hepatocytes (fatty liver or hepatic steatosis) to inflammatory conditions (non-alcoholic steatohepatitis; NASH), eventually leading to fibrosis and cirrhosis.

The major goals of the proposed studies are designed to provide novel insight into the molecular mechanisms by which adipose tissue of obese individuals promotes the development of secondary complication of obesity.

Techniques: ELISA assays, Bio-Plex assays, qRT-PCR, Cell culture

## Clinical Data Analysis in Metabolic Disease

This is a joint project with Dr. Alan T. Remaley at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and PhD Bioinformatics student Tiange Cui.

Cholesterol is transported in blood by different classes of lipoproteins, which differ in their association with cardiovascular disease (CVD). Cholesterol on low density lipoproteins (LDL) is positively associated with CVD because when in excess it is deposited in the vessel wall where it causes atherosclerosis. In contrast, cholesterol on high density lipoproteins HDL is inversely related to CVD because is believed that HDL promotes the removal of excess cholesterol from peripheral tissues and delivers it to the liver for excretion. By monitoring theNMR signal from the terminal methyl group one can determine both the quantity and size of the different major and minor classes of lipoproteins and provides the most detailed analysis of lipoproteins. We are looking for students who are interested in using the latest tools in cluster analysis and other related techniques to develop a classification system of lipoprotein phenotypes to determine whether it can be used for assessing cardiovascular risk. Data from 5000 participants in the Multi Ethnic Study of Atherosclerosis will be used for the analysis. Students in this project will gain experience in complex data analysis from large data sets and will the basics of lipoprotein metabolism

and the pathogenesis of atherosclerosis and the use of cardiovascular biomarkers. A general understanding of basic statistics will be required.

## Metabolomics of chronic diseases

Dr. Baranova and Dr. Chandhoke (School of Systems Biology)

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) is a consequence of sedentary life style and high fat diets with an estimated prevalence of about 30% in western countries. It is associated with insulin resistance, obesity, glucose intolerance and drug toxicity. Several studies have already investigated later stages of the disease, including NASH. The cumulative alterations in bile acids, BCAA metabolite and amino acid metabolism gene profiles represent either contributing factors to the development of NASH adaptive physiological response to disease-induced hepatic stress in NASH patients. In addition, a number of other metabolite studies were performed but not yet reviewed systematically. In course of this project, the students will collate the literature and write a comprehensive review of the findings in metabolome studies performed in patients with NAFLD and NASH as well as collecting the compendium of the techniques used for metabolome profiling. The review that is to be written will include both studies of NAFLD/NASH associated changes in human metabolome along with relevant metabolic observations made in animal models of NAFLD/NASH.

Student will also learn use of coulometric array detection coupled with HPLC (CoulArray® HPLC) instrumentation and perform analysis of metabolites in a set of serum samples collected from patients with various metabolic conditions, including NAFLD and cancer (this work is to be performed both at Inova and at PW campus)

# Dr. Avrama Blackwell

Professor

Molecular Neuroscience, Volgenau School of Engineering

## Signaling Pathways Involved in Striatal Synaptic Plasticity

The striatum is a brain structure that governs habit and skill learning. In addition, Parkinson’s Disease and Huntington’s Disease are neurodegenerative diseases that involve the striatum. Habit learning involves plasticity of excitatory synaptic inputs from the cerebral cortex, which occurs when cortical inputs are followed by dopamine inputs. In contrast, Parkinson's disease is caused by degeneration of the dopamine neurons. We are studying the cellular and subcellular mechanisms that produce dopamine- dependent plasticity and learning.

"The project involves the creation and simulation of single neuron and network models. The student will learn python programming, how experimental design applies to computer simulations. Knowledge of calculus and computer programming is recommended."

# Dr Ylenia Chiari

Assistant Professor

Department of Biology

## Population genetics of the invasive turtle Trachemys scripta in its natural distribution range

The freshwater turtle Trachemys scripta is one of the most invasive vertebrates in the world. This species is primarily native to ponds in the Southern USA, although it naturally occurs also in other places in the US. Because of its widespread natural occurrence in the Southern US, this species is ideal to test hypotheses on the influence of natural and human-made geographic barriers on the connectivity of the different populations. Data collected in our group on other species of freshwater turtles endemic in Alabama and Mississippi have identified distinct and disconnected water bodies as major barriers to gene flow. The goal of this project is to collect genetic data on individuals of Trachemys scripta sampled in Alabama and Mississippi to test if the previously observed pattern of genetic isolation observed in other species is generally occurring across widespread species of freshwater turtles occurring in the area. The student working on this project will learn how to extract DNA from different tissue samples, amplify genetic markers (mitochondrial DNA and microsatellites), and analyze the obtained genetic data. This project is for one student.

# **Dr Lorelei Crerar**

Assistant Professor

Department of Biology

## Ancient DNA Analysis and Sirenian Phylogeny

The student will work with a graduate student in the testing and development of protocols used to extract and sequence ancient DNA. The student will carryout research, compile results of BLAST phylogeny and help to produce a scientific paper that will be published in the literature. The student will become familiar with the use of laboratory equipment needed for DNA extraction (micropipettes, centrifuge, rocking water bath) as well as the use of the PCR machine. The student will also work to locate grant monies suitable for this project.

### Student Learning Objectives:

The student intends to learn how to extract DNA from bone samples both ancient and modern.

The student will work with PCR techniques to amplify DNA and finally with a capillary sequencer in order to obtain sequence for ancient DNA. The student will also participate in a project to determine the

relatedness of extant manatees, dugongs and Steller’s sea cows. Using DNA sequences that have been submitted to the NIH, the student will work with his mentor in order to develop phylogenetic trees relating manatees and dugongs. The aim of this project is publication in a scientific journal.

# Dr Amy Fowler

Assistant Professor

Department of Environmental Science and Policy

## Impacts of salinity on invertebrate and vertebrate community composition in the Potomac River, VA

Abstract: The composition of aquatic invertebrate and vertebrate communities is inexplicitly tied to salinity, especially in tidal regions. Salinity stress can impact community dynamics directly or indirectly through competition, predation, and parasitism. One particularly interesting community interaction that we will be investigating in the Potomac River, VA is that of an introduced barnacle parasite (*Loxothylacus panopaei*) and its mud crab hosts (*Rhithropanopeus harrisii* and *Eurypanopeus depressus*). *L. panopaei* was introduced via the oyster aquaculture trade from the Gulf of Mexico to the Chesapeake Bay in the 1960s, where it continues to infect up to 90% of local mud crab populations. While *R. harrisii* can exploit low salinities (down to 1ppt), the parasitic barnacles cannot survive well at sustained salinities below 10ppt. Therefore, it is possible that a low salinity refuge exists for *R. harrisii*. For our study, we will determine the community composition of invertebrates and vertebrates along a salinity gradient (0 – 20ppt) in the Potomac River, paying particular attention to the *L. panopaei* and *R. harrisii* interaction. Using these field data, we will examine how salinity mediates the physiological (i.e., heart rate, respiratory rate, morphological changes) and behavioral impacts (e.g., cleaning the parasite, interactions with predators) of *L. panopaei* on *R. harrisii*. These data will provide useful insight into how aquatic invertebrate communities change along a salinity gradient and how salinity can impact an interesting host – parasite interaction.

## The discovery of a new castrating isopod parasite in estuarine crabs of the Chesapeake Bay

Chesapeake Bay populations of the Harris mud crab (Rhithropanopeus harrisii) host a suite of parasitic organisms, but the two most common are an invasive rhizocephalan (Loxothylacus panopaei) and a putatively native entoniscid isopod (Cancrion sp.) (pers. obs.). L. panopaei was first introduced into Chesapeake Bay in the 1960s, where its lifecycle, impacts, and abiotic tolerances have been extensively studied. Recently, we have documented an isopod endoparasite infecting R. harrisii. Working with collaborators, this parasite was identified as an entoniscid, mostly likely from the genus Cancrion, and experts are describing it as a new species. Despite the extensive knowledge on L. panopaei, there is extremely limited knowledge on the life history or host relationships of entoniscid parasites in general, except that some species negatively impact host reproduction. Of all the literature on entoniscid parasites, none discuss or mention Cancrion sp. infecting R. harrisii. There are several aspects of this host-parasite that can be explored – seasonality of infection, number of broods expelled related to salinity or temperature, the survival of the isopod larvae across salinities/temperatures, the effect of parasitism on being preyed upon by other organisms, identifying alternative hosts, etc. Dr. Fowler will work with the student to determine questions which interest them.

## Salinity tolerances of invasive Japanese mystery snails

Invasive Japanese mystery snails are found in the Potomac River and various other tributaries of the Potomac River. These snails are 5-10x larger than any of the native snails and bear live young that mature inside female snails. Here, we are interested in determining the salinity tolerances of the juvenile snails, as they can be extracted directly from the female after dissection and placed in different salinity treatments.

## Reproductive output of native and invasive populations of the mud crab Rhithropanopeus harrisii

Invasive populations of organisms are hypothesized to leave behind predators and pathogens, thus allowing for increased energy resources to be available for reproduction. We will test this hypothesis by counting the eggs attached to female mud crabs (Rhithropanopeus harrisii) collected from Finland versus populations collected by the student from the Chesapeake Bay and North Carolina. Additional sampling may be possible, depending on funding.

# Dr Cara Frankenfeld

Assistant Professor

Global & Community Health, College of Health & Human Services

## Nutrition and Environmental Risk Factors for Human Health Conditions

Epidemiology is the study of the distribution and determinants of disease frequency in human populations and the application of this study to control health problems. Student/s will analyze existing human data to evaluate nutritional and environmental risk factors, including phytoestrogens, environmental toxins, or geographic location. Work may involve analyzing nutrient intake from dietary records, evaluating dietary and environmental biomarkers from existing data, or comparing different methodologies. Specific diseases and health conditions that student/s may evaluate include obesity, metabolic syndrome, or other chronic health conditions. Student/s will integrate biology knowledge with the application of epidemiological and biostatistical concepts.

# Dr Patrick Gillevet

Professor

Department of Biology

Director, MicroBiome Analysis Center

## Metabiome of Human Disease

We have been applying a systems biology approach to characterize the Metabiome of these host and microbial communities (microbiome) to determine which features are associated with the disease state. We define the Metabiome as all the interactions between the host and the microbiome. The initial thrust is based on Knowledge Discovery to define the correlations between features and disease classes but the ultimate goal is to develop new hypothesis that can then be tested using traditional hypothesis driven experimental procedures. We are looking at a number of human diseases that are associated with dysbiosis of the bacteria community in the human gut. These include Alcoholic Liver disease, Inflammatory Bowel Disease, Autism, and Colon cancer. Students will have the opportunity to work in the wet lab using NexGen sequencing, metabolomics, and transcriptomics technology and state-of-the-art bioinformatics pipelines.

## Microbial Ecology of Environmental Disease

We have been applying a systems biology approach to characterize microbial communities in the natural environment. These studies involve characterization of complex microbial communities and natural environments and looking at metabolic and expression functionality of these system. We are looking at a number of diseases or conditions that are driven by environmental factors such as Coral Diseases and Lobster Shell disease. We are also look at bioremediation processes in oil spills, the biogeochemistry of natural cold seeps, and plant-rhizosphere-microbiome interactions. Students will have the opportunity to work in the wet lab using NexGen sequencing technology and state-of-the-art bioinformatics pipelines.

## Phylogenomics and Population Genetics

We have been applying Nextgen sequencing to various projects in molecular systematics and population genetics of Swans, Rhinos, Falcons, and Corals. Students will have the opportunity to work in the wet lab using NexGen sequencing technology and state-of-the-art bioinformatics pipelines.

# Dr. Scott Glaberman

Assistant Professor

Department of Environmental Science and Policy

## Host-Parasite Interactions in Galapagos Marine Iguanas

Marine iguanas are only found in the Galapagos Islands. They have a unique life history among reptiles, feeding on algae in the ocean and forming large groups on land that can number in the hundreds. These iguanas are also host to both ectoparasites, such as ticks, and endoparasites, which include a blood parasite related to malaria. The goal of this project is to genetically type blood parasites from iguanas through the archipelago and determine whether there is a single species or multiple species infecting their hosts. In addition, the evolutionary relationship of parasites from iguanas from different islands will be determined. This project will primarily involve skills in genetic sequencing, evolutionary biology, and population genetics. Courses in genetics, evolution, or microbiology, or experience in laboratory molecular biology are helpful but not required.

## Dr Geraldine Grant

Associate Professor

Department of Biology

## Mechanisms of Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis (IPF)

Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis is a fatal interstitial lung disease that kills over 40,000 individuals each year – more than die from breast cancer. Currently there are not therapies and no cure for this disease and patient survival time post diagnosis is less than 5 years. There are a number of projects currently available in my lab to investigate the potential role of particular proteins in IPF.

* 1. *Effect of cytokine exposure on the activation status of a novel human lung fibroblast population***.** Cytokine exposure plays a major role in the differentiation of human fibroblasts in the wound response – the pathway which is believed to be out of control in IPF. Transforming growth factor beta – TGFB1 is the most prevalent cytokine expressed in IPF and is capable of transforming normal fibroblasts into their activated wound repairing myofibroblast phenotype. We have isolated a novel population of Normal and IPF fibroblasts. The response of these cells to TGFbeta and any other IPF related cytokine is unknown. This project involves the exposure of these cells to TGFb1, IL1beta, PDGF and TNFalpha.
  2. *Investigation for novel surface marker for human fibroblasts and myofibroblasts***.** Fibroblast biology and investigations are marred by the lack of a suitable marker for their isolation. At present fibroblasts are isolated by outgrowth from tissue pieces…a procedure that results in loss of phenotype and dedifferentiation of cells to a “fibroblast-like” phenotype. The only currently accepted marker for fibroblasts is expression of alpha smooth muscle actin (alpha- SMA) – an internal marker and of no use in isolation of fibroblasts in mixed cell culture. We have isolated a novel population of fibroblasts by differential binding from both IPF and normal tissue. In addition, we have carried out extensive genomic analysis. This project will involve analysis of large genomic data sets to derive a candidate list for common surface markers between both populations AND exclusive surface markers that may serve as a biomarkers and tools for isolation

# Dr Ramin Hakami

Assistant Professor

School of Systems Biology

## Exosome-mediated intercellular communication during bacterial infections

Exosomes are small membrane bound extracellular vesicles that carry biological macromolecules from the site of production to target sites either in the microenvironment or at distant sites away from the origin. Recent studies have demonstrated that exosomes play a significant role in cell-cell signaling, cancer progression, host immune responses, infectious diseases, and even as carriers of prions, and The role of exosomes during the progression of infection is a subject that has garnered enormous interest in recent years. The focus of our research is to understand the fundamental mechanisms of how exosomes are involved during infection with pathogenic bacteria or viruses, including infection with the biodefense agents Yersinia pestis (Yp) and B. pseudomallei (Bp). We have examined various purification strategies for isolation of CD63+ exosomes released from a human monocytic cell line infected with Yp, and have performed a comparative analysis of exosomal miRNA profiles between infected and uninfected cells. Our results have shown that distinct exosomal populations are released from cells and have also demonstrated the enrichment of specific miRNAs within exosomes obtained from infected cells. Students on this project will perform functional studies of specific miRNAs that show strong enrichment in exosomes derived from infected cells. During the course of this project students will learn several main and important microbiology-related techniques, including culturing bacteria, measuring bacterial growth, setting up infection experiments, tissue culture techniques, protein analysis techniques such as Western blot analysis, cell staining, and microscopy techniques. In addition, students will learn the techniques for isolation and characterization of exosomes.

## Host signaling during infection with biodefense bacterial agents

New drugs with greater potency against bacterial infections are urgently needed in order to combat bacterial infections more efficiently and to counter naturally occurring and man-made antibiotic resistant strains. One main focus of our research is discovery of new measures to combat the biodefense agents Y. pestis (Yp) and B. pseudomallei (Bp), two agents for which effective therapeutic measures are needed. Yp is a model organism for pathogenic gram-negative bacteria and is the etiological agent of the plague. Yp can cause high mortality rates, especially in pneumonic form. Plague is now categorized as a reemerging disease given the rise in the number of reported human cases during the past two decades and the reappearance of outbreaks in various countries after decades of quiescence. Yp is also of great concern given the documented history of its use in biowarfare and the potential for its use for bioterrorism considering its high lethality and relative ease of production. Similar to Yp, Bp is a gram-negative biodefense agent. Bp can cause disease in both humans and animals and can infect a wide range of animal species, including mammals, bird, and shellfish. In humans, Bp causes melioidosis, often characterized by fever, cough, and chest pain in patients that present with the active form of the disease. Discovering host signaling pathways of importance that are engaged by dangerous pathogens such as Yp and Bp could lead to discovery of novel and potentially multiagent therapeutic measures that are immune to development of antibiotic resistance mechanisms. To address this critical need, students will perform functional studies of host signaling proteins that are involved during Y. pestis and B. pseudomallei infection, in order to understand the roles that these proteins play during infection. Only highly attenuated strains of Yp and Bp (approved for BSL-2) will be used. The important host proteins that have been identified and selected using a novel protein microarray platform called RPMA will be studied for their roles during infection. Students will learn several main and important microbiology-related techniques, including culturing bacteria, measuring bacterial growth, setting up infection experiments, tissue culture techniques, protein analysis techniques such as Western blot analysis and immunoprecipitation, cell staining, and microscopy techniques.

## Host response to SARS-CoV-2 infection

This project involves two aspects of COVID-19 infection: 1) preparation of cell cultures and their treatment with candidate therapeutics to test their efficacy against SARS-CoV-2; 2) analysis of host cell immune response to SARS-CoV-2 infection. The infections will be performed by a member of the laboratory who is certified to work in the BSL-3 containment and the inactivated samples will be brought out into the BSL-2 level for performance of the assays for this project by the Research Semester student. The student will learn in depth a variety of molecular biology and microbiology techniques in the course of this project, including cell culturing techniques, inhibition assays, cell viability assays, and Western blot analysis.

Dr Daniel Hanley

Assistant Professor

Department of Biology

## Perceptual and cognitive processes governing egg recognition in wild birds

Avian brood parasitism occurs when one bird (a parasite) lays its eggs in another birds’ nest (a host). This alternative reproductive tactic allows parasites to offload parental care on their hosts, which must either pay these costs or adapt tactics to avoid parasitism. Many hosts have adapted mechanisms to avoid the costs of parasitism through recognizing and removing the young of brood parasites (either as eggs or young). Theoretical models of co-evolution have long assumed that hosts detect and remove a parasite’s egg based on how different it appears to their own egg. Such choices depend on the visual perception of the host and down-stream cognitive decision rules it applies during egg recognition. However, recent research has demonstrated that these long-assumed perceptual and cognitive mechanisms underlying these host defense systems do not predict host egg recognition. Instead, hosts have strong biases against eggs of specific colors (rather than how those eggs’ colors differ from their own egg’s color). Such patterns alter the patterns and process of co-evolution. During this semester you will explore how perceptual-cognitive processes may explain host choices in the field and how those may have shaped the co-evolution between parasites and their hosts. You will gain experience with visual modelling and processing field and museum data.

## A holistic examination of visual signals

Visual signals are vital for plants and animals. These signals transmit information from a sender to a specific receiver, such that the receiver may act on that information appropriately. It is therefore vital to understand the signal (the information sent), the information content (the transmitted message), and how that information is received (the visual abilities of the receiver). Many organisms see quite differently than us, because they have fewer visual photoreceptors, have additional visual photoreceptors (e.g., ultraviolet), or the sensitivity of the photoreceptors they have differ than our own. Sensory ecologists use this information to learn about how organism navigate the world around them and make choices about food and mates that impact their fitness. However, while sensory ecologists have made substantial progress to understand signals from the perspective of a receiver, a large amount of contextual information is typically ignored. This information involves how the signal appears in comparison to other visual information and how/when it is displayed. In this project you will use novel technology that can capture full visual fields as animals would perceive them. In this case, we will examine how nectar guides (ultraviolet dark bullseyes on some flowers) help orient honey bees to nectar rewards. We will integrate visual modeling in natural light conditions across space and time to demonstrate the utility of considering a richer array of contextual information.

Kathleen E. Hunt

Assistant Professor,

Department of Biology and Smithsonian-Mason School of Conservation

Baleen, horn and tusk: Reconstructing patterns in stress and reproduction from hormone patterns in whale baleen, antelope horns and narwhal tusks

Slow-growing tissues such as whale baleen, antelope horn, and narwhal tusk have recently been found to contain reproductive hormones and stress hormones and can serve as detailed, years-long record of reproductive cycles and stress over time. Such specimens can be used to calculate pregnancy rate in females, evaluate testosterone cycles in males, assess patterns in stress across years, and even can allow us to "look back in time" to compare past populations to present populations (for example, to assess the impact of current climate change). A new project focusing on Smithsonian museum specimens of blue and fin whale baleen from World War II will focus on identifying pregnancy rate of adult female whales at a time when the oceans were still relatively pristine. Baleen from several other species of whale, including the critically endangered North Atlantic right whale and the bowheads of the Arctic, are also available for student projects on individual whales. In another project, hormones in antelope horns (from Kruger National Park, South Africa, and the SMSC) will be inspected to determine whether human disturbance from tourism and poaching causes long-term elevations in stress hormones. New sample types under investigation include narwhal tusk and elephant tail hairs. Students will have the opportunity to visit Smithsonian "backstage" areas, will help drill powder from specimens and extract hormones from the powder, will learn how to do hormone assays, will produce real data on reproduction and stress, and (if interested) can contribute to papers. This project is primarily lab-based, with some visits to the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.

# Dr Nadine Kabbani

Associate Professor

Molecular Neuroscience, School of Systems Biology

## Axon Growth and Regeneration in the Brain

Our laboratory studies the molecular mechanisms by which nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs) signal and operate in the developing and adult brain. We are investigating how nAChRs direct neuronal development by examining the role of nAChRs in growing axons and growth cones. Growth cones are important developmental structures that play a role in neuronal survival and target selection within the developing brain. We have developed a neuronal culture system to examine the contributions of nAChRs in growth cones of neurons from the hippocampus and cortex. We are currently investigating the mechanisms driving growth and movement of axons.

## Calcium signaling in xenopus fertilization

Calcium signaling through nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs) is important for sperm and egg cell development and function in many species including humans, mice, xenopus, and sea urchin. A series of functional assays will be used to determine mechanisms of receptor signaling during fertilization. The goals will be:

1. Determining the role of 7 nAChR mediated calcium signaling in oocyte maturation and fertilization, where calcium signaling, and transients are vital.
2. Identification of 7 nAChR signaling pathways in oocytes and sperm and analysis of pathway conservation across species.
3. Explore the impact of environmental toxins with specificity at the nAChR (e.g. pesticides) on cell health and reproductive capacity.

Dr HC Lim

Assistant Professor

Department of Biology

## Quantification of resource use of pollinators through DNA sequencing and color space characterization of pollen pellets.

This project seeks to quantify spatiotemporal variation in food plant use of honey bees by quantifying pollen they collect through DNA sequencing and color matching. The student will sort pollen pellets collected from Virginia and Maryland by color. He/she will then collect RGB color data of each pellet with digital photography and computer software. Next, the student will extract DNA from a subset of pellets and sequence them. Species identification will be conducted by matching DNA sequences with those from an international database. The student will test the validity of the following claims: each plant species does not produce pollen of different colors; different plant species found in the local area do not produce pollen that overlap with each other in the color space. Shortlisted student may need to attend training sessions.

# Dr David Luther

Assistant Professor

Biology Department

## The Evolution of Acoustic Competition in Songbirds

Just as the ecological theory of niche competition applies to food resources it can apply to other resources. In this project we use niche competition to assess acoustic signals, bird songs and frog calls, to investigate if they avoid having similar signals at the same time and location which would reduce competition and improve signal detection. Results of the project will focus on the ecology and evolution of animal communication and how species interactions can influence animal communication strategies. This project will also be in conjunction with research from the National Park Service Soundscape division as recordings from Teton National Park will be used for the project. The student participating in this project will learn to identify a variety of bird songs and frog calls based on acoustic and visual cues. The student will also become proficient at using Raven a sound analysis program as well as participate in collaborative statistical techniques and meetings with scientists from the National Park Service. Finally the student will be asked to participate in writing a scientific paper based on the results of the project.

## Assessing the effectiveness of conservation actions for endangered species

Conservation actions, such as habitat protection, attempt to halt the loss of threatened species and help their populations to recover. Various research has examined the efficiency and the effectiveness of actions individually. However, conservation actions generally occur simultaneously so the full suite of implemented conservation actions should be assessed. We will use national (Endangered Species Act and global datasets (IUCN RedList) to assess the effectiveness of all categories of conservation actions for a wide variety of taxa in terms of their association with population increases in the threatened species.

# Dr Claudius Mueller

Research Assistant Professor

Center for Applied Proteomics and Molecular Medicine-

School of Systems Biology.

## Deciphering the communication between tumor cell sub-populations

Tumor heterogeneity, the presence of genetically and phenotypically diverse cell populations within a tumor, is a major obstacle in the development of effective treatment. Resistant clones, which may only make up a small fraction of the total tumor cell mass, persist and expand to lethal tumors following treatment. But how is this heterogeneous mix of tumor cell sub-populations maintained? Is it simply the result of high genomic instability and spatial heterogeneity within the tumor tissue? Or is the tumor cell society actively maintaining its diversity?

Cancer cells are known to cooperate with and manipulate host cells of the tumor microenvironment to ensure tumor survival and regulate angiogenesis and metastasis. But the communicative network between individual tumor cells remains elusive and largely unstudied. We developed a cell culture model, using a brain cancer cell line that allows us to eavesdrop on tumor cell-cell communication and cooperation. Using this model, we have observed that slow growing, perceived "weaker" cancer cells, are supported in the presence of a more "aggressive" population. At the same time, the "weaker" cell sub-population regulates the migration of the "aggressive" sub- clone. But how do these cells communicate with each other? And which principles govern this tumor sub-clone alliance?

Students will learn various 2D and 3D cell culture techniques, fluorescence and bright-field microscopy, as well as proteomics technologies (Western Blotting, Reverse Phase Protein Microarrays), with the ultimate goal to decipher and block the communication between these tumor cell sub-populations.

# Dr Valerie Olmo

Associate Professor,

Department of Biology

## Environmental factors and vertebrate development

Since the 1950s, it has been understood that environmental factors can have significant, and at times detrimental, impacts on embryonic development. Advances in technology have made it possible to study the teratogenic effects of environmental factors at the morphological, cellular, and molecular levels. The Developmental Biology laboratory uses the zebrafish model organisms to further our understanding of the interplay between the environment and embryonic development. In particular, the research semester student would choose a teratogen (alcohol, nicotine, bisphenol-A, or temperature) and design a project to further our understanding of how these teratogens impact embryonic development.

# Dr Mikell Paige

Associate Professor

Department of Chemistry & Biochemistry

## Leukotriene A4 hydrolase enzyme as a potential target for pulmonary inflammation

The leukotriene A4 hydrolase (LTA4H) enzyme is a bifunctional enzyme that promotes inflammation as well as the resolution of inflammation. Emphysema is characterized by persistent pulmonary inflammation. Inhibiting the pro-inflammatory effects of the LTA4H enzyme was shown to not be efficacious in the clinic. We hypothesize that a secondary function of the enzyme that promotes resolution of inflammation is critical for halting emphysema-associated pulmonary inflammation. In this project, we will explore the structural biology, enzymology, and thermodynamic properties of the LTA4H enzyme.

## The FK506-binding proteins as potential targets for pulmonary fibrosis

The FK506-binding proteins (FKBPs) are a family of proteins are peptidyl-prolyl cis-trans isomerase enzymes that catalyze the isomerization of the peptide bonds of proline residues in proteins. FKBPs have been implicated in the maturation of procollagen, which leads to formation of fibrotic tissues in the lung. However, classical inhibitors of FKBPs are known to be immunosuppressant by simultaneous inhibition of calcineurin. In this project, we will use computational, biochemical, and synthetic chemistry methods to study the multiple functions of the FKBP family of proteins.

## Capsid and importin proteins in Venezuelan equine encephalitis virus infection

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The Venezuelan equine encephalitis virus (VEEV) is a mosquito-borne virus endemic to the Americas and can potentially spread to the US. VEEV is considered a category B agent that is easily aerosolized, and there is no current FDA-approved therapy available to treat VEEV. We are using computational and medicinal chemistry approaches to target the interactions between the capsid protein of VEEV and host importin proteins as a therapy for VEEV infection.

# Dr Esther Peters

Associate Professor

Department of Environmental Science and Policy

# Using Histology to Understand Interactions between Organisms and the Environment

The study of cells, tissues, organs, and organ systems is critical not only to learn about the physiology and metabolism of an organism, but to gain knowledge of that organism's relationships with other organisms (e.g., viruses, bacteria, protozans) and the impacts of environmental changes that the organism experiences. Alterations in the cells and tissues from exposure to biotic and abiotic stressors can lead to disease, impairment in the organism’s vital functions, organs, or systems. The GMU Histology Laboratory supports research on non-human diseases, systematics and taxonomy, physiology, microbiology, molecular biology, or other areas, using light microscopy to learn how changes in structure affect function. Projects undertaken in the laboratory include microbial diseases of corals, effects of ingested metals in drinking water on rats and mice, reproduction in local fish species, distinguishing species of invasive gastropods, and digestion in fireworms. The student will learn histological techniques to mount tissue sections of samples from field or laboratory experiments (either a current lab project or one of their choice) and basic slide reading skills to gain an appreciation of the power of this field in organismal and environmental research. The student will also conduct literature research and prepare a short report on their observations.

# Dr Anna Pollack\*

Assistant Professor

Global & Community Health College of Health & Human Services

## Environmental chemical exposure and women’s health

Environmental epidemiologists are interested in the study of disease in populations of people and how modifiable exposures may influence population health. Exposure to environmental chemicals within personal care products are widespread and may lead to adverse health effects. Exposure to chemicals in personal care products, diet and lifestyle factors and are not entirely understood. In particular, the chemicals of interest include phenols such as: bisphenol A and triclosan, and parabens. These chemicals have chemical structures that enable them to impact hormonal binding in experimental settings. These chemicals are therefore classified as endocrine disruptors, which have health implications on reproductive health, cancers, and possible links to obesity and diabetes. Their possible health effects in humans are an ongoing area of research. As people are exposed to multiple chemicals and there are multiple factors that combine to cause disease processes, it is necessary to implement statistical modeling to appropriately understand the exposure-disease relationship of interest. The student will learn statistical modeling necessary for epidemiologic research and the project will focus on phenol and paraben chemical exposures, predictors of exposure (including diet and lifestyle factors).

\* Please note that Dr. Pollack will not be taking students in the Fall of 2021

Dr Monique van Hoek

Professor

School of Systems Biology

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## Antimicrobial Peptides

Antimicrobial peptides are small peptides that act against bacteria. Students will be assigned a peptide and will explore its activity against various pathogens, including multidrug resistant bacteria. Students may also design rational variants of their peptide in order to improve its performance characteristics or perform synergy experiments. Skills taught will include (1) bacterial culturing, McFarland standards, CLSI standards. (2) antimicrobial peptide assays (3) biofilm assays (4) hemolytic assays (5) cytotoxicity assays (6) advanced data analysis (IC50 plots, etc), (7) bioinformatic analysis of peptide sequence and prediction of structure. This project can accommodate more than one student; each student will study a different peptide or a different bacteria.

## Novel Antibiotics

Novel antibiotics are critically needed. Students will be assigned candidate compounds that have potential to be antibiotics in order to explore their activity against various pathogens, potentially including multidrug resistant bacteria. These may be natural products or chemically synthesized molecules. Students may also design checkerboard assays to determine synergistic or antagonistic activity. Skills taught will include (1) bacterial culturing, McFarland standards, CLSI standards. (2) MIC assays (3) biofilm assays (4) cytotoxicity assays (5) advanced data analysis (IC50 plots, etc), (6) bioinformatic analysis of bacterial genomes to identify possible drug targets (7) advanced literature searches to develop the background of the antibiotic and its potential mode of action. This project can accommodate more than one student; each student will study a different antibiotic or a different bacteria.

# Dr Michael von Fricken

Assistant Professor

Department of Global and Community Health

## Collect and analyze Ixodes scapularis ticks for Lyme disease in low elevation settings along the Appalachian Trail in Virginia.

Student(s) will be expected to hike portions of the Appalachian Trail (AT) in the late Summer and early Fall months with the instructor to drag and flag for *ixodes* ticks. Study will incorporate field epidemiology, medical entomology, and if possible, lab methods focusing on molecular characterization of *Borrelia sensu lato* and *Borrelia burgdorferi* in collected ticks. As temperatures continue to rise, I*xodes scapularis* ticks are expanding farther south, potentially introducing Lyme disease to new regions of rural Virginia. This study will incorporate extensive background research on the geographic distribution of tick vectors in Virginia, a targeted sampling approach based on National parks in VA, and prolonged hours in the field flagging for ticks.

# Dr Andrea Weeks

**Associate Professor Dept. Biology**

**Director of the Ted R. Bradley Herbarium (GMU)**

## Evolution of Madagascar myrrh trees: species discovery

Description: Madagascar is often referred to as the eighth continent in recognition of its spectacularly diverse and unique biota. It is also among the most environmentally degraded regions on the planet, which adds urgency to research regarding the discovery and analysis of its biodiversity. This RS project will take place in a molecular systematics lab on the Fairfax campus and will focus on collecting and analyzing genetic data necessary for describing newly-discovered species that are endemic to island, the Madagascar myrrh trees. Students will learn to apply lab techniques of DNA extraction, PCR, agarose gel electrophoresis, DNA sequence preparation, and phylogenetic analysis of comparative DNA sequence data for these as-yet-undescribed species. Students will also become familiar with the multi-faceted process of scientific species description

Dr Yuntao Wu

Professor

School of Systems Biology

## Screening for anti-HIV activity using an HIV-Rev dependent reporter cell

Screening anti-HIV activity from small-molecule inhibitors targeting cellular signaling pathways.