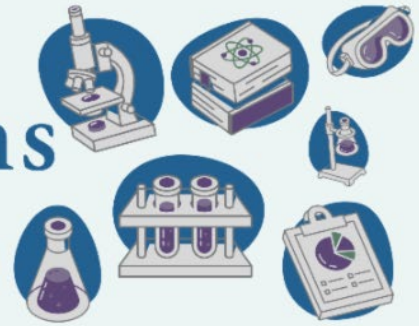


GSBS Office of Career Development

# Career Connections

A monthly newsletter highlighting  
career & funding opportunities



**Morgan Riba**

**4<sup>th</sup> Year, Immunology Program**

**MD/PhD Student**

**1. Ruth L. Kirschstein National Research Service Award Individual Fellowship for Students at Institutions with NIH-Funded Institutional Predoctoral Dual-Degree Training Programs (F30, PA-25-426)**

**Title:** “*Evaluating antigen spread after cDC1 vaccination.*”

**Opportunity Details:** The [NIH F30](#) program’s goal is to enhance the integrated research and clinical training of promising predoctoral students, who are matriculated in a combined MD/PhD training program, and who intend careers as physician/clinician-scientists.

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### **From Early Curiosity to a Physician-Scientist in Training**

Morgan Riba has been drawn to science for as long as she can remember. In fifth grade, she dressed up as pioneering chemist Marie Curie for a school “living museum” project in which she recited facts about Curie’s life. Riba credits this as an early reflection of both her scientific curiosity and her motivation to

serve as a future role model in science. That early interest has since grown into a passion for understanding how and why biological systems work.

Riba has harnessed her passion for understanding how biological systems work as an MD/PhD student at the Graduate School. Drawn to scientifically complex concepts, she was drawn to understanding the immune system and its role in disease treatment. She is particularly interested in how different immune cell types interact, a space where each answer often leads to new questions. The complexity of immunology leads to continuous learning, which Riba finds to be one of the most rewarding aspects of her research. She joined the lab of Stephanie Watowich, PhD under the co-mentorship of Cassian Yee, MD, where she studies how a specialized immune cell, type 1 conventional dendritic cells (cDC1s), can be co-opted as an anti-cancer therapy. She studies cDC1s using mouse models to see how their presence changes immune responses and cancer migration. While other types of dendritic cells have shown limited success in clinical trials, cDC1 therapy outpaces these other therapeutics in both effectiveness and safety in the laboratory. Riba hopes her work will lead to these cells becoming a new therapeutic option for cancer patients.

### **Building Momentum to Craft a Winning Proposal**

Riba first became interested in applying for a National Institutes of Health (NIH) fellowship during her postbaccalaureate training at the National Cancer Institute. When she arrived at the Graduate School as an MD/PhD student, the F30, which supports both her research and clinical training, was a natural fit. Riba found that the most difficult part was simply getting started on her application. Faced with a large number of required documents, the process initially felt overwhelming, as her previous experience had been largely in editing documents she'd already crafted. Beginning with a blank slate for many of the required NIH documents was a new challenge for her. She decided to shift her mindset to view perfection as the enemy of progress. It was most important to get her writing onto the page and come back later to revise. This allowed her to build momentum and make steady progress across all components of the application.

*“Break down your to-do list into a small manageable amount of work for each day, and you’ll be surprised how much you can accomplish.”*

She also made use of key Graduate School resources, including the scientific writing course and the fellowship development course. She found the mock study section hosted by the immunology program through the required scientific writing course essential for receiving constructive feedback from her peers. She also found that both the Scientific Writing and NIH Fellowship Proposal Development courses significantly improved her writing through regular, structured feedback from course instructors, in addition to her peers. The structure of the courses also kept her on track to submit her application on time, as organizing a writing timeline was critical for her progress.

Riba found that the process of writing her grant helped her understand the depth and breadth of the Graduate School’s writing resources for students. It also prepared her to think more critically about her project and set clear goals and timelines for her degree. Given her need to return to finish medical school after the completion of her PhD, having a concrete timeline and research plan keeps her on track for her overall educational progress as well.

## Preparing the Next Generation of Scientists Today

After Riba finishes medical school, she plans to pursue a medical specialty in pathology with a focus on cellular therapies. She plans to incorporate research as an essential component of her career, with a goal of running a laboratory in addition to her clinical duties. With her early success in fellowships, she is confident her understanding of the grant writing and submission process will help her pursue her long-term career goals.

Outside of her research, Riba is passionate about mentorship and the promotion of science. She recently mentored undergraduate students through a summer research internship as part of MD Anderson's CPRIT Cancer Undergraduate Research Experience (CURE) program. She found this experience especially rewarding as she watched their scientific curiosity grow. She takes great joy and pride in the success of her mentees, celebrating their accomplishments, including a poster award for the work they completed together. She has also discussed biomedical research funding in Washington, D.C., where she met with state senators to share her scientific story and discuss the importance of continued investment in science. Riba is committed not just to advancing scientific discovery, but to supporting the next generation of scientists to continue the scientific excellence of the Graduate School's future trainees.



*Riba poses at her lab bench.*



*Riba (left) poses with other trainees at the US Capitol Building.*



*Riba poses with her experiment in the lab.*



*Riba (bottom left) spends time outdoors with the Watovich lab.*