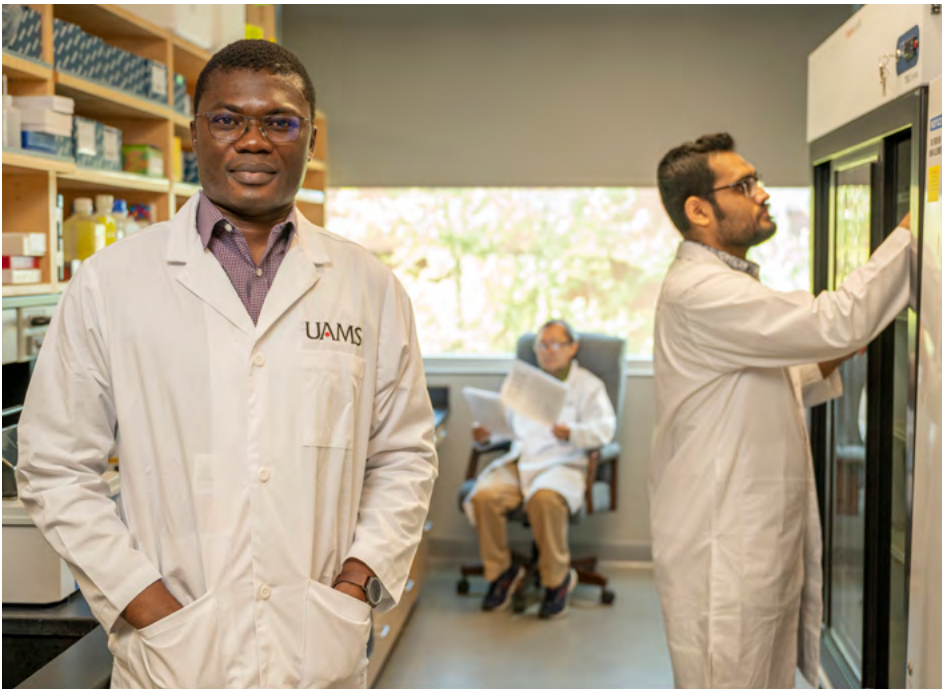


# THE TRIBUNE

NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2022

## Rising STARS

### TRI Program Nurtures Development of Underrepresented Faculty



STARS participant Bolni "Marius" Nagalo, Ph.D., here in his lab at the UAMS Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, said the grant-writing program was a "fantastic" experience. Photo by Evan Lewis

**Bolni "Marius" Nagalo, Ph.D.,** seized on every opportunity that came with last year's Strategies for Training and Advancing underrepresented Researchers (STARS) Program.

As a new researcher focused on drug development at the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, he thought the fall 2021 program would be a good way to improve his grant-writing skills, learn more about UAMS and TRI, and meet colleagues.

"It was a fantastic experience," said Nagalo, an assistant professor in the College of Medicine Department of Pathology, who was recruited to UAMS last year from the Mayo Clinic.

The three-month program, a partnership with the UAMS Division for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, offers grant-writing training, mentoring support and \$10,000 in Equity, Diversity, and Grantsmanship Expertise (EDGE) funding.

*Continued on page 2*



Dear Colleagues,

Clinical and Translational Science Awards (CTSA) programs like ours across the United States are seeking ways to increase the diversity of the clinical and translational research workforce to support inclusivity and effectively address the health needs of underrepresented populations.

At TRI, we initiated the Strategies for Training and Advancing underrepresented Researchers (STARS) program in 2020 with new grant opportunities for underrepresented researchers. We expanded STARS in 2021 with a grant-writing didactics program through support provided by a Chancellor's Circle grant.

We are beginning to see the benefits of the expanded program now. In this month's TRIBUNE, we share the successes of our 2021 STARS participants who are making great strides in their research by successfully competing

for intramural and extramural funding. I am proud to see comments like that of Dr. Michael Bauer, who said the program was a tremendous help, giving him much more confidence in his grant-writing skills.

The STARS program has benefited greatly from Dr. Jessica Snowden's leadership and mentoring. This year we also welcomed Dr. Antiño R. Allen as TRI's associate director of Diversity Initiatives, and he is now co-leading our 2022 STARS class along with Dr. Snowden and myself.

We are all looking forward to building on the success of this novel training program.

Sincerely,

Laura James, M.D.  
Director, TRI  
Associate Vice Chancellor for Clinical  
and Translational Research, UAMS

## Rising Stars (continued from page 1)

Underrepresented faculty participants may include racial and ethnic groups, individuals with disabilities, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In addition to honing his grant-writing skills, Nagalo received a \$10,000 STARs grant that helped him secure a recent three-year \$300,000 American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) Career Development Award. He also found a collaborator and mentor in STARs Program lecturer Alexei Basnakian, M.D., Ph.D. Together they have published three papers and submitted an NIH R01 application. Basnakian is a professor in the College of Medicine Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology.

“The TRI grant was enough to open doors, and I was able to meet new people, recruit new collaborators and develop new ideas,” Nagalo said.

He credits the grant-writing sessions and the data produced with the grant support for improving the competitiveness of his AACR application as well as strengthening his NIH R01 application. He also successfully applied for Cancer Institute’s \$100,000 Team Science Award.

The awards will help Nagalo further his novel research on virotherapy to treat advanced pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma.

Other STARs participants also significantly advanced their research in 2022.

**Michael Bauer, Ph.D.**, a multiple myeloma researcher, credits the STARs program for helping him secure a two-year \$336,314 NIH National Cancer Institute Research Supplement to Promote Diversity in Health-Related Research, as well as this year’s \$50,000 Seeds of Science grant from the Cancer Institute.



Bauer’s NCI grant is a supplement to an NCI R01 award led by Fenghuang Zhan, M.D., Ph.D., a professor in the College of Medicine Department of Internal Medicine based at the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute.

Zhan’s grant is supporting research of NEK2, a gene with a key role in myeloma cell survival, drug resistance and overall disease progression. Bauer’s supplement aims to compliment Zhan’s work by using third-generation sequencing and a multi-omic approach to identify genomic structural aberrations, changes in downstream gene/transcript expression and methylation patterns that can be attributed to high NEK2 expression.

“The STARs program was a tremendous help to improving my grant-writing skills,” said Bauer, an assistant professor in the College of Medicine Department Biomedical Informatics. “The ability to go through writing a grant line by line with constructive critiques from the instructors was

invaluable. I put what I learned to use immediately, and I am much more confident in my grant writing now.”



STARs participant **Dina M. Jones, Ph.D., MPH**, recently received a five-year, \$733,000 K01 career development award from the NIH National Institute on Drug Abuse. Her research is focused on better understanding the role of tobacco product characteristics and psychosocial and social-environmental factors on tobacco use and smoking cessation. She also aims to develop interventions to help disadvantaged populations quit tobacco, particularly Black/African American menthol cigarette smokers.

Although she submitted her successful K01 application prior to her STARs participation, Jones said, “The feedback that I got on my proposal and the refinement of my grant writing skills during the STARs program will benefit me well into the future.”

Jones, an assistant professor in the Fay W. Boozman College of Public Health, is using the \$10,000 STARs seed funding to partially support a pilot study of Black and white smokers who will attempt to quit smoking. The resulting data will help her develop interventions to prevent relapse.



**Jennifer Andersen, Ph.D.**, whose research is focused on addressing the health needs of underserved and minority communities using digital health technologies, also secured a \$10,000 STARs grant in 2021.

The funding helped her successfully apply for a TRI KL2 Mentored Research Career Development Program Award. An assistant professor based at the UAMS Office of Community Health and Research in Springdale, Andersen is using the KL2 award to explore the feasibility and acceptability of remote glucose monitoring for Marshallese women whose pregnancies are complicated by pre-gestational and gestational diabetes.

KL2 scholars receive two years of didactic and mentored research training, 75% salary support and research support of \$25,000 per year.

The STARs training has been co-led by well-established NIH-funded researchers and research leaders Jessica Snowden, M.D., and TRI Director Laura James, M.D. This year, TRI named Antiño R. Allen, Ph.D., as associate director of Diversity Initiatives, STARs Program, joining James and Snowden as the program’s co-leader.



# Former KL2 Scholar Using NIH Grant to Address Urgent Health Needs of Pregnant Marshallese Women



A UAMS research team in Northwest Arkansas will study a potential way to improve health outcomes of pregnant Marshallese women using group-based care and health care navigators.

Led by former Translational Research Institute KL2 Scholar

**Britni Ayers, Ph.D.**, the study of maternal health care involving small groups of women, known as CenteringPregnancy, is funded by a two-year, \$420,750 grant from the National Institute of Nursing Research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

Pacific Islanders/Marshallese living in the United States have almost twice the infant mortality rate as non-Hispanic whites. Arkansas is home to the country's largest population of Marshallese, about 14,000 residents.

Marshallese women face a number of barriers to medical care, including language, transportation and lack of

information to help navigate the medical system and access resources.

"Pregnant Marshallese women in Arkansas are experiencing urgent health needs, and we have the potential to move the needle tremendously with this type of concept," said Ayers, an assistant professor at UAMS Office of Community Health & Research in Springdale.

Over the last two years, Ayers used research pilot funding and training from a TRI KL2 Mentored Research Career Development Program Award to help secure the NIH grant.

## TRI Study of the Month

### UAMS Principal Investigator:

Kyle Kalkwarf, M.D., assistant professor, College of Medicine Department of Surgery, Division of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery

**Summary:** This multi-site clinical trial involving hospitalized traumatic brain injury patients will test the effectiveness of a non-invasive device (Infrascanner) for detecting the growth of intracranial hematomas.

**Significance:** The study of this FDA-approved device, which uses near-infrared light to detect bleeding, may lead to earlier diagnosis and improved treatments for traumatic brain injury patients, especially in areas with limited resources, such as rural America or on military deployments

**TRI Services:** Medicare coverage analysis, study budget development, regulatory and nurse/clinical coordinator support,



*Kyle Kalkwarf, M.D., is assisted on the trial by TRI's Shellah Rogers, B.S.N., RN, CMSRN, the study's lead clinical research coordinator.*

administration of Clinical Trial Management System, and post-award financial management of Clinical Trial Management System, and post-award financial management

**Sponsor:** University of Alabama at Birmingham

**Funding:** U.S. Department of Defense

## Four Community Groups Selected for 2022-2023 Research Leadership Program

Representatives of four community groups became trainees this fall in TRI's 2022-2023 Community Partners Educated as Arkansas Research Leaders (CPEARL) Program.

Led by TRI's Community Engagement Program, CPEARL targets leaders and emerging leaders within community-based organizations (CBOs) in Arkansas. It aims to foster research partnerships and program development competencies within CBOs.

This year's CBOs, representatives and their project titles are:

- **Engaging Arkansas Communities**  
Denise Alanis, Bobby Pierce and Jeff Walker  
**Project:** "E-P-I-C Food Pantry" HIV Food Pantry Pilot Project
- **Giving, Others, Ambition, Together (GOAT)**  
Kelvin Parker  
**Project:** G.O.A.T Health Initiative
- **Marshallese Educational Initiative**  
Trina Marty and Marcina Langrine  
**Project:** "Oncological Frontiers and the Role of Cultural Stereotypes"
- **The Confess Project**  
Dimika Nelson and Darnell Rice  
**Project:** Barbers as Community Gatekeepers



*Front row (l-r): Trina Marty and Marcina Langrine (Marshallese Educational Initiative), and Kelvin Parker (Giving, Others, Ambition, Together (GOAT) ); Back row: Bobby Pierce, Jeff Walker and Denise Alanis (Engaging Arkansas Communities), and Darnell Rice and Dimika Nelson (The Confess Project).*

As part of the CPEARL Program, the CBO representatives attend a three-day in-person workshop at UAMS in Little Rock, plus two virtual trainings.

Academic, practice and community experts provide didactic learning sessions during the training. UAMS researchers serve as mentors to the CBOs throughout the program year.

The participants receive up to \$2,500 in seed funding to implement a real-world project.

Participants also have the opportunity to apply to participate in the TRI Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) Scholars Program, which is now accepting applications and will begin in March 2023. CBPR scholars and their UAMS academic research partners can apply for a TRI pilot award of \$25,000 or \$50,000.

**To learn more, visit [TRI.uams.edu](https://tri.uams.edu),**  
"Community → Programs and Funding,"  
or contact Sarah Fountain, [sbfountain@uams.edu](mailto:sbfountain@uams.edu).