

# Behavioral Science

ALUMNI  
NEWSLETTER



## A NOTE FROM OUR PROGRAM DIRECTOR:

The BSci Program had another strong year. Our faculty and students continue to produce high quality research, including a plethora of publications and grant proposals. This past year saw the reboot of our Friday Research Group, which is now called BSci Bonanza. The department created a schedule of graduate course offerings, making it much easier for students to create and/or make changes to their degree plans. We will welcome two new students in the fall (Daniel Kalanyos and Andrea Mack). I am very proud that not only do we continue to do well, but that we do it the right way – by following our core principles of commitments to science, training, culture, and diversity and inclusion.

*-Dr. Boals*

In this newsletter  
you can expect:

---

BSci Brags - 2

---

BSci Bonanza - 4

---

Conference  
Highlights - 5

---

Spotlight on  
Graduate Student  
Parents - 7

---

Alumni Spotlight -  
Dr. Alvin Akibar - 11

---

Incoming Student  
Spotlight - 17

---

# BSCI BRAGS

THESE AND SO MANY MORE

## GRADUATIONS

Banan Ramarushton, Brett Messman, and Madasen Briggs (pictured right on graduation day) have defended their dissertations and will graduate May 12th, 2024. Congratulations, Drs.!



## FACULTY AWARDS

BSci faculty members were awarded two of the four department faculty awards this year. Dr. Anthony Ryals was awarded the Excellence in Mentorship award and Dr. Danica Slavish was awarded the Excellence in Research award.

Dr. Slavish was also recently selected as the Cardiovascular Research Institute of Vermont Rising Star Visiting Professor for 2024-2025.

## PROMOTIONS

Dr. Heidemarie Blumenthal was recently promoted to Full Professor in the psychology department.



Braggs continued on the following page.

# BSCI BRAGS

CONTD.

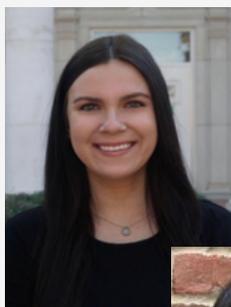
## PUBLICATIONS & GRANTING



Among the many exciting publications coming out of the program, Dr. Ryals would like to highlight a recent publication with his former McNair student, Madison “Sonny” Card (now pursuing her Ph.D. at Northwestern), titled ‘Toward Development of a Novel Proprioceptive Trail-Making Test: Comparing Health Dancers and Non-Dancers’ ([publication linked here](#)).

Dr. Ryals and Dr. Kelly also currently have an NIH grant under review titled ‘Specifying Memory and Executive Function Impairments and Associated Biomarkers in post-acute sequelae of SARS-CoV-2 infection (PASC).

Dr. Slavish is currently serving as the UNT site PI for a collaborative grant from the CDC National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health titled ‘Predicting Attrition from a Lifestyle Medicine Intervention.’



## STUDENT AWARDS

Linda Thompson (rising 4th year, pictured top left) received one of three Dr. Ann Marie Warren Student Research Grants to fund her upcoming dissertation. She was also awarded two department scholarships for the upcoming 2024-2025 academic year: the Charlotte Friedersdorff-Boyd Memorial Scholarship for Advanced Graduate Students and the Outstanding Scholarly Publication Award ([publication linked here](#)).



Joey Vilches (rising 5th year) was awarded the Graduate Student Research Award from Toulouse Graduate School to support his dissertation work.



In recognition of the fact that researchers can also have hobbies, recently minted Dr. Madasen Briggs would like to acknowledge that she has kept the same orchid alive for 4 years (her tenure as a Ph.D. student). This is apparently a big deal among Plant People.

Isamar Almeida (rising 4th year, pictured middle left) earned her second grant from the UNT Center for Psychosocial Health Disparities Research for her project titled ‘Understanding Psychosocial and Immigration-Related Factors Affecting Sleep Health among Hispanic/Latinx/a/a Immigrants.’

This is just a sample of the amazing accomplishments of our program’s members. We cannot wait to see what we’ll do next!



# INTRODUCING – BSCI BONANZA!

This year we introduced BSci Bonanza- a reinvigorated form of Friday Research Group (FRG) and Psychology Research Symposium (PRS) so that members of the program can get together and present on the exciting research we're conducting.

Dr. Kimberley Kelly graciously served as the first faculty representative for this initiative and was assisted by two student representatives- Kara Stuart (rising 4th year, pictured bottom left) and Melissa Materia (rising 3rd year, pictured top left).

## WHAT'S NEW WITH OUR RESEARCH?

The first Bonanza events invited current graduate students to present on their work. Bonanza reps Kara Stuart and Melissa Materia kicked things off. Their presentations were titled 'Exploring the Mechanisms Underlying Judgment of Learning Reactivity on Cued-Recall using Eye-Tracking Measures' and 'Investigating the Effects of Exercise at Ventilatory Threshold on Neurocognitive Function', respectively.

During Interview Day in January, the lunch hour served as the program's first data blitz with 5-minute presentations from: Dr. Boals, Dr. Guillot, Kirby Doshier, Melissa Materia, Linda Thompson, Christopher Alkire, and (now) Dr. Ramarushton.

The final Bonanza hosted presentations from Dr. Madasen Briggs, Alexandria Alemán, and Isamar Almeida.

Dr. Briggs presented findings from their three-study mixed methods dissertation on the interactions between power, race, and emotionality for woman workers.

Alexandria presented the methodology for her upcoming thesis project looking at the role of vicarious discrimination on alcohol cue reactivity in Latinx individuals.

Isamar presented some preliminary findings from her ongoing dissertation project investigating sleep health among Latinx immigrants.

Dr. Casey Guillot has graciously volunteered to serve as faculty sponsor for BSci Bonanza 2024-2025.

We're looking forward to continuing the engagement and collaboration in the program!

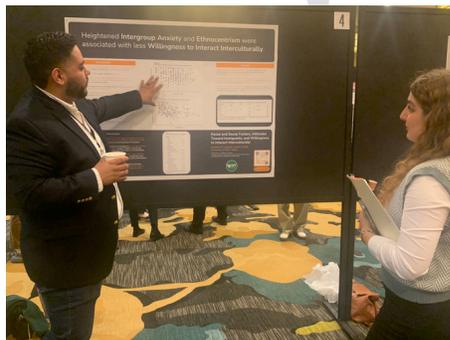
# Conference Highlights

## Southwestern Psychological Association (SWPA)



Multiple labs were represented at SWPA 2024 in San Antonio. We also used this conference as an opportunity to staff a recruitment booth to circulate information about the program. Alexandria, Ruth and Madasen are pictured at the booth above with the

Ruth King (rising 5th year, pictured below far left) presented a poster on her thesis project with undergraduate RA Laura Wilkinson (pictured far right). Ruth's thesis investigated the effects of self-labeling as 'survivor' and 'victim' following traumatic exposure.



Jonathan Cajas (rising 5th year, pictured far left) presented a poster based on some of his thesis findings indicating that heightened intergroup anxiety and ethnocentrism are associated with less willingness to interact inter-culturally.



Alexandria Alemán (rising 4th year, pictured above far left) presented multiple posters with her colleagues from Tarleton State, her undergraduate alma mater. She has maintained an active collaboration with them on projects looking at personal control and measurement evaluation.

When in San Antonio, eat good food! BSci buds enjoyed a meal on the river walk after a full day of presenting and recruiting. What better way to wrap up a conference weekend than with food, friends, mariachi, and pigeons?



---

# Conference Highlights

Contd.



## Collaborative Perspectives on Addictions (CPA) Meeting, APA Division 50



Dr. Ramarushton (pictured above, second from the left) chaired a symposium and received a travel grant for this year's CPA in Denver, Colorado.

## Psychonomic Society's 64th Annual Meeting



Fall of 2023 Kara presented a poster at The Psychonomic Society conference in San Francisco, CA. Her poster involved exploring the mechanisms underlying judgment of learning reactivity, using eye-tracking measures. Kara also met with Dr. Ryals' advisor and déjà vu expert, Dr. Anne Cleary (Kara and Dr. Cleary pictured above).

# SPOTLIGHT ON STUDENT PARENTS

Multiple BSci graduate students have recently helped bring new life into the world while managing their doctoral studies. While graduate school is certainly busy enough as-is, it is not uncommon for students to grow their families before finalizing their Ph.Ds. To further this discussion, Dr. Brett Messman and Isamar Almeida graciously answered some questions on what it's been like adding the title 'parent' to their already impressive list of accomplishments.

Isamar and her spouse have a 16-month old named Kai and Brett and his spouse recently welcomed Oswald James to the world 21/2 months ago (ages as of May 2024).

## What surprised you most about having a baby while still in graduate school?



Pictured above: Baby Oswald practicing safe solar eclipse viewing habits with his parents from the comfort of a baby björn.

**ISAMAR:** Before having my baby, I was under the impression that very few people talked about or considered having children and starting a family in the academic environment, especially during graduate school. However, I was positively surprised when my mentor, most of my colleagues, and some of my professors were genuinely happy for me and offered a lot of support during my pregnancy and all the way until this point.

**BRETT:** I was surprised by how drastically having a baby has reduced my anxiety around major graduate school milestone projects (e.g., dissertation) and public speaking. When you have a baby the time you have to work with is much more limited, and as a result you spend less time in your head overthinking projects or worrying about your future performance.



## What was your biggest form of support while you navigated this process with your spouse?

**ISAMAR:** My biggest form of support (aside from my spouse and loved ones) was my mentor, Dr. Danica Slavish. She has been extremely kind, caring, and understanding throughout the entire time I've been in graduate school. Thanks to that, I've had the flexibility I needed to be a mother and a graduate student at the same time.

**Follow-up:** What would have given you more support during this process?

**I:** Having maternity leave and more family living nearby.



**BRETT:** I am forever grateful to my academic mentor, Dr. Danica Slavish, for her continued support, flexibility, and patience in helping ensure that I could meet my doctoral plan while adjusting to parenthood. I am grateful for the well wishes and gifts that my partner and I received to help welcome Oswald from individuals inside the BSci Program and the greater Psychology Department community. Together, this support helped make the transition into parenthood as a graduate student in the BSci Program a smooth one.

## What would you tell other graduate students who exploring family planning during their time in graduate school?

**ISAMAR:** I would tell them: it is possible!! There will be times when it doesn't seem possible. There will be times when you feel you are failing as a parent and you are failing as a graduate student. But with patience and (hopefully) good support from your family, mentors and colleagues, you'll find ways to make it work and be great at both. As far as planning go, I would say there is not a perfect time, but waiting until finishing the coursework to have a baby may be a good idea in terms of schedule flexibility.



**BRETT:** Integrate your graduate school plans into your family planning as soon as possible. When the time is appropriate for you, I would encourage you to be transparent and openly communicate with your faculty mentor (or teachers) about your plans to have a child and work with them to come-up with a plan to navigate your upcoming milestones while being a parent.



**In what ways are being a parent like being a graduate student? Lots of crying?**

ISAMAR: Huh! Good question. Being a parent and being in graduate school may be two of the hardest jobs you'll ever had! They both need you to give more than your 100%. In both cases, you'll find yourself accomplishing things you never thought you could. For both you need to be constantly learning, growing, and problem solving. Resourcefulness, time management, creativity, and passion are all critical in both scenarios. A big difference – you can quit graduate school, but you can never quit being a parent. No matter how overwhelmed you are, how tired you are or how sleep deprived you are, when you have a baby, you have to wake up every single morning and give the best you have to feed, entertain and keep this little human alive and happy! This may sound weird, but being able to do this will give you the strength and the motivation to also keep going with graduate school. Plus, you'll 100% learn to be more efficient and less perfectionist.

BRETT: Having a kid is like being a graduate student in that they tell you it will change your life for the better, but I still need to find an adequate control to test that hypothesis.

**What's something you know now that you wish you could tell yourself before your child was born?**

ISAMAR: There are multiple ways of parenting and none is perfect. Do what works best for your family and don't be so hard on yourself.

BRETT: Having the baby write the dissertation is not an effective strategy for completing the doctoral degree.

**What's something you want to tell your child about how they've impacted your journey?**

ISAMAR: Kai has taught me how to be the best version of myself and how to enjoy the little things in life. The way he celebrates whenever he learns a new skill or discovers something new brings me so much joy. His curiosity and innate instinct to explore, learn, and enjoy life are such an inspiration to me every single day <3

BRETT: "You might not remember this, but I was still a graduate student when you were born."

**Any other sage wisdom to impart?**

ISAMAR: Having a child will change your life completely, including your journey in graduate school. If you are planning to have a baby, it is really important to speak about this with your mentor and plan together how to best navigate pregnancy and the first few years of parenthood while in graduate school. Communication is key!

BRETT: Regardless of what your life choices are surrounding the topic of kids, keep calm and science on.





# alumni spotlight: Dr. Alvin Akibbar

## CURRENT POSITION

Systems Change Director, Prepare +  
Prosper in St. Paul, MN

# BACKGROUND

## Positions at UNT



Pictured above: Dr. Akibar with fellow BSci alum Dr. Renee Cloutier at the Urban League Ball

Research Assistant, Follow-up Data Collection Supervisor – Teen STAR Laboratory  
Research Analyst, Lab Coordinator – Critical Race Research Laboratory  
Senator, External Relations Committee Chair – UNT Graduate Student Council  
GSC Representative, Diversity Symposium Organizer – UNT GASP  
Member-at-large – APAGS CSOGD  
Co-Coordinator – APAGS LGBTQIA+ Mentorship Program  
Campus Representative – Texas Psych Assn  
Outreach Coordinator – Psychology Advocates for Social Change  
Training Facilitator – UNT Housing & Residence Life Diversity & Inclusion Series

## Description of Experience

After graduating UNT in 2020, I began a tenure-track position at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, MN. Moving launching my post-grad career during the COVID-19 emergency was challenging to say the least, but as restrictions eased, I got to delve more into the community, and get a better idea of what type of life I could build up here. After successfully moving through my 2nd-year review, I found myself interested in delving more into community-oriented research/evaluation work than a lot of the infrastructure I was in would support (teaching 12-16 classroom hours/week was gratifying, but time consuming, especially with COVID-era cuts hitting research funding hard), and moved into a position with the Urban League Twin Cities, directing the Center for Social Justice Research, Policy, and Advocacy. Working with CSJ was really a wonderful challenge, diving deeper into the criminal legal system, and applying knowledge around critical race psychology to target policies for intervention, educate the public, and challenge systems of anti-Blackness in our policies and norms.

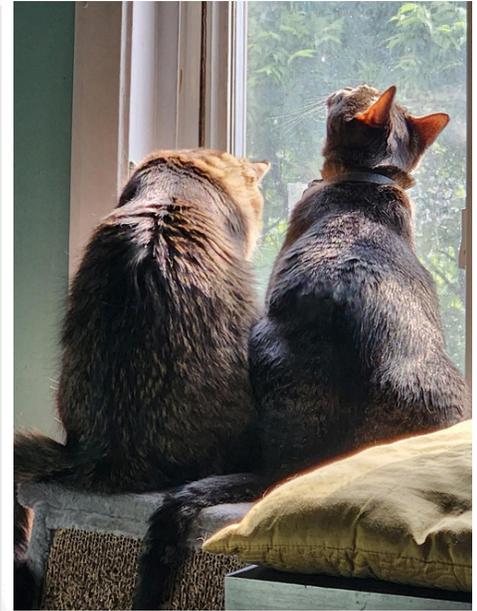
Towards the end of 2023, I was approached to take on the mantle of Systems Change Director at Prepare + Prosper in St. Paul. My work now focuses on building out organizational capacity, community engagement and coalition building, and policy response/adaptation to promote financial (and overall) health for all Minnesotans, especially those made vulnerable by systems of racism and poverty.

Pictured below: Dr. Akibar's kitties Everett and Trip gazing out of a window.

## What are your favorite things about your current position?

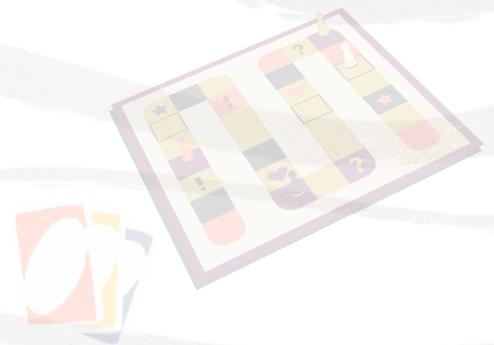
In the roles I've assumed since graduating, I've most enjoyed a greater ability to make a positive impact in the community. That's taken several forms, from testifying in front of Senate committees around the efficacy of policy interventions, conducting research to inform social equity language in legislation, helping to host the United Nations EMLER delegation last year to convene survivors of police violence with international experts.

Aside from the work itself, the autonomy for the types of work I take on here, and heightened flexibility in my work life have made it more feasible to have a life outside of work.



## What are you up to outside of work?

Things have been pretty busy outside of work as well! Over the last year, I bought a house in North Minneapolis, began my first term as a Board Member & External Relations Committee Member with Rainbow Health Minnesota, one of the most comprehensive providers for LGBTQ+ health and HIV care in the state of Minnesota. On an average week, though, you can typically find me singing bass with the Twin Cities Gay Men's Chorus, chilling at home with my cats (Trip & Everett), nerding out with friends (Pathfinder, MtG, Board Games), or exploring the parks/waterways and restaurants in the cities.



Pictured top left: Dr. Akibar closing on his new house!  
Pictured bottom left: Dr. Akibar singing with TCGMC.

# LOOKING BACK



Pictured above: Dr. Akibar testifying in front of the MN Senate Tax Committee.

## What are the most valuable/marketable skills you learned while in the program?

How to shape a proposal (thanks to Dr. Boettger & the Grants/Proposals Course)  
Creating work routines based on my own needs, rather than external expectations (thanks to Christina Hernandez @ the Learning Center)

How to strategically leverage my position to uplift the needs of those in subordinated positions (thanks to Dr. Flores Niemann)



Pictured above: Dr. Akibar with colleague Marci and fellow alum Dr. Agtarap at SPSSI, hosting a roundtable workshop about charting a non-academic and policy career.

## What drove your transition from academia to non-profits?

I did love teaching my students, and deeply enjoyed working with my colleagues at St. Kate's. With that said, in academia/higher ed, making room for financial health and personal development while remaining rooted in community is not necessarily structured for or easily supported, nor is the kind of trust-building that it takes to bridge the insights of academic research with the needs of the communities we belong to. Potentially uprooting your life every few years isn't necessarily great for building deep connections and trust needed to tackle complex, often traumatic issues.

## What do you know now that you wish you knew during your time in the program?

So much of this is made up. We are all (usually) doing our individual bests, and what that means is it is essential that you do \*your own\*, rather than someone else's idea of your best work. We all have different strides, and our circumstances (social, health, etc.) will play a pretty big role in whether we maintain a good pace, overexert, or burn out/fail to launch. Your best work comes from your best self, when you are caring for and cared for, and when you release yourself from some idea of perfection that exists only in hypotheticals and hindsight.

# LOOKING BACK STILL

What are you most proud of from your time as a BSci grad?

I spent a lot of time being silent, internalizing negative and demoralizing views of who I am and what I'm doing, even from folks I those who I looked to as authorities and who'd made me want to get involved in this field from the start. It did some real damage to my health. Because of that, I think honestly I'm most proud of finding and using my voice to try and push back against those ideas, and make space for folks who may face similar challenges, even if people weren't always open to hearing it.



Pictured above: Dr. Akibar with colleague Dr. Filip-Crawford at St. Kate's.

What was the most impactful part of your graduate journey?

Finding and leaning into my communities of support was pivotal. Having my close friends living in town really helped during moments that were particularly isolating, but honestly I didn't really feel like I had a place in the field until I found communities of scholars who understood the value of what I was doing and were open to mentor me. Getting involved with groups like BlaSPR, SISSP, Div 44&45, and attending the NMCS conferences really helped me understand how often other folks faced similar challenges, and empowered me to try and advocate for the types of things that would improve circumstances for folks coming after me.



Pictured top left: Dr. Akibar behind the scenes with former RA, Marci, hosting the UN EMLER Testimony session. Pictured top right: Dr. Akibar behind the scenes at Governor's Press Conference at Prepare + Prosper.

# LOOKING AHEAD

## What would you like to tell current BSci graduate students?

Make use of your library access while you have it! It's an incredible luxury to pull up new original research on demand. SLEEP. Take a break. Go for a walk. Cap your regular plan for work at <40 hrs a week/whatever keeps you from being completely drained. There will always be more work to fill whatever room you have, so it's essential to make room for yourself as a human FIRST (yes, even if faculty have opinions about what that looks like for you). Prioritize it. Your health is more important than your PhD. Period. It's also instrumental to completing it well.

Essentially ...Rest when you're tired. Make time for your passions and loved ones. Keep a bedtime. Chronic illness and isolation are even more expensive than student loans.

Thank you, Dr. Akibar, for sharing your experiences with us and continuing to give back to the program!

## What is next for you in your career?

Right now, I think I'm going to stay focused on settling in at Prepare + Prosper and building out my department, diving into supporting the work of Rainbow Health, and continuing some really cool collaborative projects bridging community insights with data and policy.

# Incoming Student Spotlight: Ovidiu (Daniel) Kalanyos

## Background

Daniel is from Romania.

He got his Bachelors in Psychology from Dimitrie Cantemir University in Romania then his Masters in Counseling with a Clinical Mental Health Emphasis from Texas A&M Commerce.



## Research Interests:

- Posttraumatic growth!

## Hobbies

Pickelball  
Soccer  
Reading  
Exploring coffee shops  
Road trips



Daniel will be working with Dr. Boals in the fall!

# Incoming Student Spotlight: Andrea Mack

## Background

Andrea was born and raised in Arizona.

Andrea got her Bachelor in Science in Business Management (with a minor in Spanish) from the University of Arizona then her masters in applied behavior analysis (ABA) from Arizona State University.



## Hobbies

Quality time with her 1-year-old chiweenie Lyla (pictured far left)

Painting nature and portraits (one of her paintings pictured center)

Running, weightlifting, and reading

Andrea will be working with Dr. Dougherty in the fall!

## Research Interests

- Delayed discounting
- Risky behaviors
- “I intend to incorporate my background in ABA through research on function-based methodologies for vulnerable individuals with behavioral challenges.”

# THANK YOU

SCIENCE

TRAINING

CULTURE

DIVERSITY & INCLUSION



# BSCI

Congratulations to our students and faculty, both past and present, on their many accomplishments this year. We look forward to continuing to grow our program and network of alumni!