



## Recent and Upcoming Events

**Endowed Awards Ceremony**  
February 3, 2021

**DNS Virtual Applicant Visit**  
February 22-26, 2021

**Experimental Biology Meeting**  
April 27-30, 2021

**ACES Funk Awards Ceremony**  
May 10, 2021

**NSGSA Nutrition Symposium**  
April 21, 2021

**ACES Spring Commencement**  
May 15, 2021  
Urbana, IL

**American Society for Nutrition Meeting**  
June 7-10, 2021

**External Advisory Committee Meeting**  
September 2021



## this issue

Note From the Director	<b>P.2</b>
Disparities in Nutrition	<b>P.3</b>
Focus on Students	<b>P.4</b>
Research Spotlight	<b>P.5</b>
Focus on Faculty	<b>P.6</b>
Focus on Alumni	<b>P.7</b>
Giving Back	<b>P.8</b>

## Personalized Nutrition Initiative at Illinois

The campus-wide Personalized Nutrition Initiative was established in July 2020 as a partnership between the Carl R. Woese Institute for Genomic Biology and the College of ACES. The Director of the initiative is Sharon Donovan, professor and Melissa M. Noel Endowed Chair in Nutrition and Health at University of Illinois (Illinois).

Donovan's research, administration, internal and external interdisciplinary collaborations, and industry relations experiences brings significant value to the Personalized Nutrition Initiative in achieving its goal of coordinating transdisciplinary research, education, outreach, and entrepreneurship. An internationally recognized leader in nutrition who has extensive leadership experience both on- and off-campus, Donovan served as director of the Division of Nutritional Sciences (DNS) from 1999-2009. She also served as president of the American Society of Nutrition and on the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans Advisory Committee of the USDA and HHS. She was elected to the National Academy of Medicine in 2017.



Precision or personalized nutrition was identified as a key area for strategic investment in Illinois' The Next 150 2018-2023 Strategic Plan, and more recently it was highlighted as a keystone of the new NIH 2020-2030 Strategic Plan for Nutrition. Illinois is uniquely positioned to more rapidly advance the field of personalized nutrition.

"Personalized nutrition offers a way to optimize human health and the quality of life by tailoring recommendations based not only on diet history

and phenotype, but also on an individual's genetics, microbiome, metabolome, and exposome" Donovan explains. "It encompasses almost all known aspects of science, ranging from the genomes of humans, plants and microorganisms, to the highest levels of analytical sciences, computing, and statistics of large systems, as well as human behavior."

To meet this challenge, Donovan envisions building transdisciplinary collaborative efforts across campus to answer fundamental questions regarding how nutrition modulates health and disease across the lifespan.

For the first six months, Donovan and her team have been busy and productive meeting with campus leaders, faculty, and industry leaders. This information, together with the results of our Campus Input Survey will be used to establish the research themes and our strategic goals for the next 3-5 years.

She also worked with faculty and researchers across campus to submit two responses on behalf of the Personalized Nutrition Initiative to NIH's request for information in the areas of "Challenges and Opportunities in Precision Nutrition Research" and "Data Science Challenges and Opportunities in the Field of Precision Nutrition." See these responses on our website. Donovan is excited about organizing the Spring 2021 DNS weekly seminar series "Personalized Nutrition –Challenges and Opportunities" offered via Zoom. Donovan is now focusing on establishing our Faculty Steering Committee, putting out a call for Affiliate Faculty members, and establishing Internal and External Advisory Committees.

Written by: Anna Keck



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## DNS Employees



**Dr. Elvira de Mejia**  
Director



**Dr. Jessica Hartke**  
Associate Director



**Dr. Anna Keck**  
Visiting Project  
Coordinator



**Ashley  
Negangard**  
Office Support  
Associate

Check us out on  
social media!



# Note from the Director

Dear members of the Division of Nutritional Sciences-

One of the 2018-2023 UIUC strategic goals is to enrich interdisciplinary connections to enhance our campus strength in food, nutrition, energy, health sciences, and cancer. The Division of Nutritional Sciences links interdisciplinary research with robust professional development and leadership training of our students. This strategy facilitates a successful transition to leaders in academia, industry, or government. DNS students integrate scientific reasoning and advance knowledge, solve complex issues facing the highly interdisciplinary field of nutritional sciences, analyze and interpret data ethically from research and scientific literature, and disseminate scientific knowledge effectively.

DNS congratulates all graduates and welcomes twelve new students from the U.S. and international institutions, bringing our enrollment to 58 students from twelve different countries and 23% from underrepresented groups. Students in DNS continue to excel, as demonstrated by their scientific discoveries, invitations to deliver scientific presentations, and received awards. DNS acknowledges the remarkable contributions from faculty members who provide DNS students new knowledge, a positive and supportive educational environment, and advise them on professional ethics. All these are contributing to their professional development.

NSGSA has been working proactively to organize their 2021 symposium with an impressive list of speakers and poster presentations. DNS recognizes their efforts and enthusiasm, bringing together many scholars and private sector representatives for a promising April virtual event. DNS students are making a significant visible societal impact.

DNS had a well-attended virtual Endowed Awards ceremony. It provided us the opportunity to recognize students for their outstanding contributions and for conceptualizing, executing, and publishing high-quality research. We want to reward excellence!

DNS students have also contributed to the UI System's commitment to more diverse and inclusive academic communities, as President Tim Killeen demonstrated when launching the Illinois Mexican/Mexican American Student (I-MMÁS) initiative.

I appreciate and value your comments and suggestions. Please do not hesitate to contact me at any time ([edemejia@illinois.edu](mailto:edemejia@illinois.edu); 217-244-3196).

I thank Dr. Jessica Hartke, Dr. Anna Keck, and Ms. Ashley Negangard for preparing the newsletter and for all their contributions and constant support to the program.

Elvira de Mejia, Director

## Disparities in Nutrition Presentation and Discussion

### *Frontiers in Nutritional Sciences Seminar*

On December 2, 2020, over 100 people from across campus and surrounding areas engaged with community experts on the topic *Toward Nutrition Justice in Champaign County: Learning from Community Partners*. The seminar was led by Janet Liechty, a faculty member in Division of Nutritional Sciences, School of Social Work, and Carle-Illinois College of Medicine; as part of the fall 2020 *Frontiers in Nutrition* seminar series.

Dr. Liechty opened the seminar with a definition of nutrition equity, data on nutrition disparities, and a social-ecological conceptual framework for understanding social determinants of nutrition equity. This was followed by presentations from four innovative local leaders who are addressing nutrition justice in Champaign County (see page 3); and a moderated panel discussion and Q&A.

- continued on pg. 3

Introduction to nutrition justice and equity. Nutrition justice is the fair and equitable distribution and access to affordable, nutritious food and diet-relevant resources that influence health status among population groups. It includes but is not limited to ensuring food sufficiency and food security – freedom from hunger or worry about the next meal for you or your children. According to Feeding America, in 2016 and 2017, 15.7% and 15.0% of the population in Champaign County reported food insecurity within the past year (16.6 and 15.4% among children, respectively). Through local efforts, by 2018 the percent of food insecure adults decreased to 11% (12.8% among children). Nutrition equity goes beyond absence of hunger. It reduces disparities in diet quality, and increases access to affordable fresh produce regardless of income or zip code, thus increasing opportunities for all Americans to meet dietary guidelines.

Recent literature shows that achieving nutrition equity requires far more than individual dietary choices – we must address the social determinants of health and nutrition at every level (e.g., family, community, built environment, and policy). This includes affordable housing, healthcare, and a living wage that enables healthy dietary choices. Having basic needs met lessens survival level stressors such as choosing between buying medicines or food for your children. Ultimately, community-based solutions are needed to bring about nutrition equity.

Presentations by community experts: Presentations by panelists featured an array of local initiatives to increase access to fresh produce and improve dietary health. **Sola Gratia** is 10-acre non-profit vegetable farm in southeast Urbana that donates at least 10 percent of their produce to hunger assistance programs in East Central Illinois and provides outreach education on nutrition and sustainable farming. The **Community Nutrition Program** at Champaign-Urbana Public Health Department hosts many programs focused on food justice and equity for the community such as a community garden, breastfeeding support, and free summer lunches for school-aged kids.

The **Cunningham Township Supervisor’s Office** distributes locally grown fresh produce and provides a safety net for low-income households in Urbana; and the **Wesley Food Pantry** uses a “client choice” model in which recipients shop for food in the free pantry to align with their culinary preferences, and they offer healthy meal planning education.

Moderated panel discussion highlights.

*There is a myth that low-income people do not want to eat fruits and vegetables; what have you observed?* Panelists were passionate about the way their participants seek out and value fresh produce and healthful food, and said the produce always runs out first. Their customers understand the importance of fresh fruit and vegetables for their health, but cannot afford it from grocery stores. One panelist described the excitement among participants when they discover that eating fresh produce makes you feel better.

*What do you wish nutrition scientists, researchers, and health professionals knew about nutrition disparities and barriers among lower income individuals?* Regardless of income level, client preferences matter. They want to be involved in decision-making and planning food outreach. Like everyone else, low income people also want produce that is fresh, not expired cast-offs; and they so appreciate that this produce is grown for them, with their input, based on their cooking preferences.

*What Community-university collaborations are needed? Is there a problem you are trying to solve and wish the university could help?* Several panelists described the challenge for busy families in preparing meals based on a box of produce just harvested from the ground. They described a need for more creative bundling and low-carbon, loose packaging of produce, so that it made it easy for families to utilize the produce and try new recipes. The Q&A showed strong interest in community initiatives to improve nutrition and equity and in continuing this conversation to strengthen community-university collaboration.

Written by: Janet Liechty

**DIVISION OF NUTRITIONAL SCIENCES**  
**Frontiers in Nutritional Sciences**  
**NUTR 500 Seminar Series**

**Toward Nutrition Justice in Champaign County:  
 Learning from Community Partners**

 <b>MODERATOR</b> Janet Liechty, PhD School of Social Work, Carle-IL College of Medicine, Division of Nutritional Sciences, UIUC	 <b>PANELIST</b> Traei Barkley Sola Gratia CSA	 <b>PANELIST</b> Tomas Delgado Cunningham Township
 <b>PANELIST</b> Dawn Longfellow Wesley Food Pantry	 <b>PANELIST</b> Valerie Koress Community Nutrition Program, CUPHD	 <b>PLANNING COLLABORATOR</b> Katie Shumway Community Learning Lab, School of Social Work, UIUC

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## New DNS Students

### Jessica Acosta Medellin

MS Candidate  
Advisor: Hans Stein

### Elizabeth Gutierrez

MS Candidate  
Advisor: Melissa Prescott

### Jade Hamann

MS Candidate  
Advisor: Nicholas Burd

### Shu Kwan

PhD Candidate  
Advisor: Ken Wilund

### Patrick McQueen

MS Candidate  
Advisor: Jaume Amengual

### Sergio Miranda Junior

MS Candidate  
Advisor: Maria Cattai de Godoy

### Ayca Mogol

PhD Candidate  
Advisor: Zeynep Madak-Erdogan

### Jessica Nicanor Carreon

PhD Candidate  
Advisor: Yanina Pepino

### Ashleigh Oliveira

MS Candidate  
Advisor: Manabu Nakamura

### Danielle Opetz

PhD Candidate  
Advisor: Kelly Swanson

### Marahi Perez Tamayo

PhD Candidate  
Advisor: Hannah Holscher

### Sujiyanto

MS Candidate  
Advisor: Ryan Dilger

## Student Recognition

**Hannah Bailey** received a Spring 2021 Conference Presentation Award from the Graduate College to attend the virtual American Society for Animal Sciences Midwest Meeting in March 2021.

**Olufemi Fabusoro** received a Spring 2021 Conference Presentation Award from the Graduate College to attend the virtual American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists Meeting in April 2021. He also published "Nutrition in HIV-Infected Infants and Children: Current Knowledge, Existing Challenges, and New Dietary Management Opportunities" in *Advances in Nutrition* with Dr. Luis Mejia.

**Ana Mitchell** has continued helping underrepresented students through multiple avenues including the Principal Scholar's Program teaching hand-on science lessons and editing college essay applications, the Illinois Mexican and Mexican American Students Initiative and being a guest speaker in an 8th grade science class talking about Metabolism and the Digestive System at Franklin Middle School. She has also continued her involvement on campus with the Student Advisory on Graduate Education (SAGE) Board and our department student group, NSGSA.

**Ivan Pinos** recently published " $\beta$ -carotene and Vitamin A Delay Atherosclerosis" in the *Journal of Lipid Research*. His lab also designed the cover art for the issue.

**Leila Shinn** published a first-author publication in October 2020 in *The Journal of Nutrition* that was featured as February's Editor's Choice and in a December 2020 commentary by Dr. Cara L. Frankenfield. Leila was also recently nominated as the Student Representative for the American Society for Nutrition's Medical Nutrition Council.



Ivan Pinos, Johana Coronel (FSHN student), and Dr. Jaume Amengual.

## NSGSA 2021 Nutrition Symposium

## December 2020 Graduates

**April 21, 2021**

### Keynote Speaker

Catherine J. Field, PhD, RD  
Department of Agricultural, Food and  
Nutritional Science, Faculty of Agriculture,  
Life and Environmental Science,  
University of Alberta

### Mini-Symposium

"Personalized Nutrition:  
Putting the "U" in Nutrition"

### Faculty Presenters:

Manabu Nakamura, PhD, DVM  
Margarita Teran-Garcia, MD, PhD, FTOS  
Yuan-Xiang Pan, MS, PhD

### Celeste Alexander, PhD

Advisor: Kelly Swanson

### Erin Davis, PhD

Advisor: Sharon Donovan

### Kaylee Hahn, MS

Advisor: Ryan Dilger

### Jacky Lin, MS

Advisor: Bo Wang

### Katie Ranard, PhD

Advisor: John Erdman



## Research Spotlight

*DNS faculty member Dr. Aditi Das led a study of modified lipids that target the body's endocannabinoid system, which is involved in regulating pain and inflammation.*

When modified using a process known as epoxidation, two naturally occurring lipids are converted into potent agents that target multiple cannabinoid receptors in neurons, interrupting pathways that promote pain and inflammation, researchers report. These modified compounds, called epo-NA5HT and epo-NADA, have much more powerful effects than the molecules from which they are derived, which also regulate pain and inflammation.

Reported in the journal *Nature Communications*, the study opens a new avenue of research in the effort to find alternatives to potentially addictive opioid pain killers, researchers say.

The work is part of a long-term effort to understand the potentially therapeutic byproducts of lipid metabolism, a largely neglected area of research, said University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign comparative biosciences professor Aditi Das, who led the study. While many people appreciate the role of dietary lipids such as omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids in promoting health, the body converts these fat-based nutrients into other forms, some of which also play a role in the healthy function of cells, tissues and organ systems.

“Our bodies use a lot of genes for lipid metabolism, and people don’t know what these lipids do,” said Das, also an affiliate of the Beckman Institute for Advanced Science and Technology and of the Cancer Center at Illinois. “When we consume things like polyunsaturated fatty acids, within a few hours they are transformed into lipid metabolites in the body.”

Scientists tend to think of these molecules as metabolic byproducts, “but the body is using them for signaling processes,” Das said. “I want to know the identity of those metabolites and figure out what they are doing.”

She and her colleagues focused on the endocannabinoid system, as cannabinoid receptors on cells throughout the body play a role in regulating pain.

When activated, cannabinoid receptors 1 and 2 tend to reduce pain and inflammation, while a third receptor, TRPV1, promotes the sensation of pain and contributes to inflammation. These receptors work together to modulate the body’s responses to injury or disease.

“Understanding pain regulation in the body is important because we know we have an opioid crisis,” Das said. “We’re looking for lipid-based alternatives to opioids that can interact with the cannabinoid receptors and in the future be used to design therapeutics to reduce pain.”

Previous research identified two lipid molecules, known as NA5HT and NADA, that naturally suppress pain and inflammation. Das and her colleagues discovered that brain cells possess the molecular machinery to epoxidize NA5HT and NADA, converting them to epo-NA5HT and epo-NADA. Further experiments revealed that these two epoxidated lipids are many times more potent than the precursor molecules in their interactions with the cannabinoid receptors.

“For example, we found that epo-NA5HT is a 30-fold stronger antagonist of TRPV1 than NA5HT and displays a significantly stronger inhibition of TRPV1-mediated responses in neurons,” Das said. It inhibits pathways associated with pain and inflammation, and promotes anti-inflammatory pathways.

The team was unable to determine whether neurons naturally epoxidate NA5HT and NADA in the brain, but the findings hold promise for the future development of lipid compounds that can combat pain and inflammation without the dangerous side effects associated with opioids, Das said.

The Das research group collaborated with Hongzhen Hu, a pain and itch researcher and professor of anesthesiology at Washington University in St. Louis, and with U. of I. biochemistry professor Emad Tajkhorshid, who helped simulate how the lipids are metabolized by enzymes known as cytochrome P450s.

Written by: Diana Yates

Dr. Das received her undergraduate degree in Chemistry from Indian Institute of Technology (I.I.T.) Kanpur . She received her Ph.D. in Chemistry at Princeton University. She did her postdoctoral research with Prof. Stephen Sligar at Beckman Institute at University of Illinois Urbana Champaign. Her laboratory is focused on the biochemical mechanism of cytochrome P450s mediated metabolism of omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids and on the pharmacological evaluation of the anti-inflammatory action of the lipid epoxides in neuro-inflammation model. Her laboratory has been funded by several grants from American Heart Association (AHA), National Institute of Health, Multiple Sclerosis Society and other private fundings.

## Faculty Updates

### New Faculty in DNS



**Jacob Allen, PhD**, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Community Health. His research program concentrates on understanding how specific environmental interventions and conditions- 1. Exercise 2. Stress and 3. Nutrition interact to influence gut microbial communities (i.e. gut microbiota) during both homeostatic and pathological disease states. Dr. Allen's lab applies research methods spanning in vitro organoid systems, pre-clinical animal models and human studies to study these effects. The Allen lab is particularly interested in understanding how gut microbes interact with the immune systems of the gut and brain to shape our physiology.

**Dr. Kelly Swanson** gave a webinar on "Dietary Modulation of the Canine and Feline Gastrointestinal Microbiome" during the Petcare Innovation Summit on Pet Health and the Microbiome: Mother Nature Knows Best on Decemeber 10th, 2020.

**Dr. Sharon Donovan** served as a Member of the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans Advisory Committee, completed 7 years of service as an Associate Editor of Nutrition Reviews and is currently serving on the BEGIN (Breastmilk Ecology: Genesis of Infant Nutrition) Project Expert Committee, which is a partnership between US government agencies and others such as the Gates Foundation, American Academy of Pediatrics, Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and the Human Milk Banking Association of North America. Sharon was also named as 1 of 7 new Center for Advanced Study Professors, one of the highest forms of campus recognition.

### DNS Faculty Featured in the News Gazette's "100 Masked Illini" series



**Aditi Das**  
Associate Professor  
Dept. of Comparative  
Biosciences  
College of Veterinary  
Medicine

**Ryan Dilger**  
Associate Professor  
Dept. of Animal Sciences  
College of ACES

**Sharon Donovan**  
Professor and Melissa M.  
Noel Endowed Chair in  
Nutrition and Health  
Dept. of Food Science and  
Human Nutrition  
College of ACES

**John Erdman**  
Professor Emeritus  
Dept. of Food Science and  
Human Nutrition  
College of ACES

**Hannah Holscher**  
Assistant Professor  
Dept. of Food Science and  
Human Nutrition  
College of ACES

**Naiman Khan**  
Assistant Professor  
Dept. of Kinesiology and  
Community Health  
College of Applied Health  
Sciences

**Yuan-Xiang Pan**  
Associate Professor  
Dept. of Food Science and  
Human Nutrition  
College of ACES

**Kelly Swanson**  
Professor of Animal and  
Nutritional Sciences  
Dept. of Animal Sciences  
College of ACES

**Margarita Teran-Garcia**  
Research Assistant Professor  
Dept. of Biomedical and  
Translational Sciences

**Ana Mitchell**  
Nutritional Sciences Graduate  
Student

Alumni Updates

**Brian Berg** (PhD 2004) was promoted to Associate Director, Field Medical at Rhythm Pharmaceuticals in 2020.

**Lauren Killian** (PhD 2019) welcomed a baby boy, Aaron Michael Killian on September 3, 2020.

**Henna Muzaffar** (PhD 2012) was recongnized as a Fellow of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics in April 2020.

**Claudia Luevano Contreras** (PhD 2013) was appointed as Director of the Department of Medical Sciences at the University of Guanajuato, Leon Mexico.



**Sean H. Adams**  
 Scientific Director  
 UC Davis Center for Alimentary and Metabolic Science  
 Vice Chair Basic Research  
 Department of Surgery  
 UC Davis College of Medicine

**Cindy Davis**  
 Director of Grants and Extramural Activities  
 Office of Dietary Suuplements  
 National Institutes of Health

**Ratna Mukherjea**  
 Director  
 Global Nutrition  
 DuPont Nutrition & Health

**Christine Pelkman**  
 Principal  
 Pelkman NSci Consulting

**Christina Sherry**  
 Director  
 Global Nutrition Sciences,  
 PepsiCo

**Amanda Young**  
 Vice President Research & Development  
 Shared Development, Cost Engineering, Nutrition, & Business Processes  
 The Kraft Heinz Company

**Mike Zora**  
 Vice-President  
 Archer Daniels Midland Company

Guest Lecturers Support new DNS Courses

Introduction to US Food Regulations Course

**Karleigh Bacon**, Kraft Heinz

**Robbie Burns**, formerly Grocery Manufacturers Association

**Jessica Campbell**, General Mills

**Bryan Endres**, University of Illinois, Urbana

**Bridget Hannon**, Abbott Nutrition

**Kristin Harris**, PepsiCo

**Guy Johnson**, Johnson Nutrition Solutions LLC

**Peter Lu**, Mars Food North America

**Michael McBurney**, formerly DSM Nutritional Products

**Luis Mejia**, University of Illinois, Urbana

**Ross Peterson**, Abbott Nutrition

Translating Science and Communication Course

**Nancy Z. Farrell Allen**, Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science, Germanna Commnuity College

**Melissa Edwards**, Executive Director, Strategic Research Communications, Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research, University of Illinois, Urbana

**Mike Wilson**, Director of Content and Executive Editor, Farm Futures magazine, a Farm Progress/Informa brand

**Sharyl Sauer**, Global Business Platforms Communications leader, Corteva Agriscience

2020-2021 Fellowship Recipients

**USDA National Institute of Food and Agricultural Fellowship:**  
Sharon Thompson

**National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship:**  
Ana Mitchell

**CONACyT Fellowship:**  
Jessica Nicanor  
Marahi Perez Tamayo

**Ann E. Radcliff Tudor Research Scholarship:**  
Ashleigh Oliveira

**Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health Scholar Fellowship:**  
Christian Maino Vieytes

**NIH T32 Tissue Microenvironment Predoctoral Fellowship:**  
Ashlie Santaliz-Casiano

**Jonathan Baldwin Turner Fellowship:**  
Colleen McKenna  
Leila Shinn

**The Kraft Heinz Company Human Nutrition Fellowship:**  
Elizabeth Gutierrez

2021 Endowed Student Award Winners

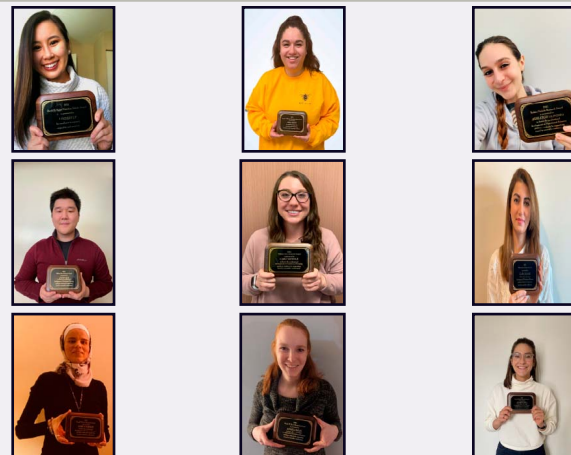
**David H. Baker Nutrition Scholar Award Fund**  
Lindsey Ly

**James L. Robinson Nutrition Impact Award Fund**  
Leila Shinn

**Toshiro Nishida Research Award Fund**  
Ashleigh Oliveira

**William C. Rose Endowment Award**  
Justin Kim  
Carly Rundle  
Clara Salame

**Frank W. Kari Endowed Memorial Award Fund**  
Asma'a Albakri  
Angela Dean  
Ana Mitchell



- **Mary Frances Picciano Endowment Fund (#11336465):** In recognition of Mary Frances Picciano, this fund provides support for DNS students on a competitive basis.
- **Nutritional Sciences Margin of Excellence Fund (#339154):** Provides conference travel grants and research seed-grant funding to DNS students on a competitive basis.
- **DNS Excellence Endowment Fund (#773001):** Provides permanent funding for the recruitment and retention of the best graduate students and enhanced research and professional development experiences for all DNS students.
- **DNS Annual Fund (#332984):** Provides unrestricted support for DNS.
- **Frontiers in Nutritional Sciences Fund (#339153):** Supports the weekly DNS seminar series for University of Illinois faculty and students.



**Support DNS**

We are very thankful to the faculty, students, alumni and friends who have supported DNS through contributions to the Endowment Fund, the Annual Fund, and the Margin of Excellence Fund. Contributions of all amounts are greatly appreciated. DNS would like to ask that you consider taking this opportunity to help secure our brilliant future by making a new contribution or an additional contribution to your alma mater.

