

**NHSN Quarterly Newsletter: El Faro**  
**December 2016**

**Welcome Message from the Editors of *El Faro*, Sandra Oviedo Ramirez and Allyson Hughes**



Welcome to the Winter 2016 edition of *El Faro: La Voz de la Red*. The purpose of this newsletter is to keep you up to date with current topics and research amongst the members of the National Hispanic Science Network (NHSN) and the Early Career Leadership Committee (ECLC). Each edition has a specific theme that features multiple NHSN members and their opinions on said theme. The current edition is focused on providing you with valuable information about collaborations from current NHSN members who have collaborated successfully. Collaborations can sometimes be very difficult to navigate and we want to provide you with advice for a smooth collaborative relationship.

This edition features an opinion piece from Dr. Salas-Ramirez. She shares her thoughts on the current political climate and what that means for researchers. Overall, this edition will highlight the importance of becoming more than just researchers and encourages us to become advocates for research. Lastly, we feature two new NHSN members.

We hope you have a happy holiday season and a happy new year!

*Allyson and Sandra*

### **Announcements**

The conference dates are October 4-6, 2017 in Phoenix, Arizona.

At this time the abstract deadline has not been set.

For more details on conference, please contact Betsy Giaimo at [mgiaim@lsuhsc.edu](mailto:mgiaim@lsuhsc.edu)



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## FEATURE ARTICLE



**Kaliris Salas-Ramirez, Ph.D.**, is an Assistant Medical Professor at The City College of New York. Dr. Salas-Ramirez's research interests are to

understand how drugs of abuse impact the brain at different times of development. In addition, another component of her work is to understand sex differences after cocaine exposure. Current and future projects are focused on investigating the mechanisms by which cocaine impacts neural plasticity, that in turn can impact behavior. In this feature article, Dr. Salas-Ramirez provides us with her take on the importance of collaborations but also encourages us to become advocates.

### **Becoming More than Researchers and Academics**

In talking to my son's preK teacher recently in preparation for a presentation being made to Dutch educators coming to visit his school, we reflected on the frailty of democratic structures and places where all people that composed a unit had a voice. My son attends a progressive school, the oldest public progressive school in NYC, that has gone through significant, dramatic changes because of what many believe is an attack on, not just progressive education, but integrated schools in NYC and good schools in Harlem, NY. Seems like 2016 has given many of us many similar lessons at our institutions, in our cities, states and even in

our country. Right now, a lot of us are in a state of anxiety wondering what is going to happen to our children's education system, to our immigrant students (some of which are undocumented), with our healthcare system, with climate change, and even with our basic rights. It is a time of doubt because we are unsure about our research and whether enough funding will be allotted for the things that we hope to investigate in the future. These are research topics that we are training students to tackle in order to move our country forward. But in the words of Senator Bill Perkins, "Democracy is messy, dictatorship is easy."

There have been some significant scientific advances made in the last couple of decades that have changed the way that we tackle questions of addiction in the field of neuroscience. Some have been technique driven, while others have been major discoveries that have lent themselves to other meaningful questions. In 2013, Ernst Bamberg, Ed Boyden, Karl Deisseroth, Peter Hegemann, Gero Miesenböck and Georg Nagel were awarded The Brain Prize for "their invention and refinement of optogenetics." Neuroscientists like Garret Stuber and Mary Kay Lobo have written extensively about the use of optogenetics in understanding drug reward pathways. By using these little wires, biomedical engineers and neuroscientists have worked together to turn on very specific subpopulations of neurons that regulate drug reward providing critical insights into the neural circuitry of addiction pathways and psychiatric disease.

In addition to optogenetics, neuroscientists like Eric Nestler and Peter Kalivas have made significant contributions



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to understanding specific genes and identifying specific therapeutic targets for addiction, relapse and psychiatric disease. Most recently, basic scientists have been investigating specifically the effects of sex and gender on how drugs affect the brain, dependence, addiction vulnerabilities, effects on withdrawal and relapse. We have begun to appreciate that although we had once viewed heroin abusers as “inner city young men from minority groups” now we talk about an opiate epidemic that is affecting whites more than people of color. One of the trending topics is the “neonatal abstinence syndrome” that is skyrocketing in rural areas because children are being born to mothers addicted to prescription painkillers and their babies are suffering from opioid withdrawals. Addiction as a field encompasses some dynamic structures and complexities, sex, gender, stages of development, race, ethnicity, geographic location, socioeconomic status, generation, lifestyle, genetic make-up, brain organization, and the list can go on and on. Many of us are understanding of that.

As a result, we seek to establish collaborations and continue to attend meetings like the National Hispanic Science Network Conference because it provides us with opportunities to discuss what we do from bench to bedside. In a matter of days, we can sit and talk about how we turned the mesocorticolimbic circuit on, neuron by neuron and regulated self-administration in males that could lead to addictive behaviors. We take that information and then discuss treatments to prevent relapse once we have an addicted animal model and how that translates to the human

condition. Next, we tackle how we study addicts within the Latinx community. More specifically, we discuss what factors (both protective and at risk) that may be impacting the Latinx community. However, few times, we have the conversation of whether we have connected with our state senators to advocate for more addiction research in our state or within our country. Or for more programs like the ones that we discuss in the conference to be implemented in our area.

This year, I have been more intentional about my social activism, and started by tackling something small, which was fighting to remove an unfit principal out of my son’s school. It has been a year, and our activist group has yet to have that happen. Through this experience, I have used my experiences to help others understand why progressive education can work for all children, why an integrated, diverse, inclusive school is imperative for children and why children of color are entitled to a quality public education within this democratic country we live in. I have used my degree and my science as a platform to elevate my argument for my son and his education; but I am unsure whether that will work.

As I look at what lies ahead for me as a Latinx, female, neuroscientist that performs basic science studies, I become concerned. Because it can all be taken away from me and my child if I don’t continue to raise my voice and teach him to have one. Advocating for a just education system is just one layer of the work that we all need to continue to do. Our home institutions also need to stand by us and our students as we enter this time of uncertainty of the



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future, where democracy has been manipulated. I am fully aware that my work is only beginning, and just as I have established a research team for my science, we should consider establishing teams for advocacy for our research to our politicians. If there are people that know the complexities and intricacies of how things work, it is a scientist; independent of whether they are a behavioral, biological or social scientist and part of our responsibility is informing our constituency of our discoveries and how we see this play out for our future. We too, as academicians, are public servants, and we must continue to find ways to reinvent ourselves to improve the world.

## Career Divos



**Robert García, MPH,** is completing his PhD in Health Behavior Research at the Keck School of Medicine of USC. He is

currently a pre-doctoral trainee for the USC Tobacco Center of Regulatory Science for Vulnerable Populations (USC TCORS). Robert received his MPH from Claremont Graduate University (CGU) with a concentration in Health Promotion, Education and Evaluation. Prior to beginning his graduate studies worked as an Athletic Trainer at inner city high schools in

Texas and California. He has worked on community-based and participatory research projects and is actively involved in several efforts with promotores de salud in the Latino community. Robert is passionate about serving the Latino community and identifying culturally responsive practices to promote health behaviors.



**Lourdes Baezconde-Garbanati, Ph.D.,** is a Tenured Professor at the Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California and principal

investigator and director of the Tobacco Education and Material Lab (TEAM Lab). Her work focuses on community-based research and public health initiatives that explore the role of culture in health behaviors, with an emphasis on the elimination of health disparities. She develops and tests innovative interventions that help better understand the impact of social determinants of health on the health status of Latino Americans, and Latino populations in Latin America. Her research focuses on providing an evidence base for best practices to modify cultural and lifestyle risk factors for cancer and tobacco control at the community level. Her research interests include advancing our cultural knowledge regarding the indigenous cultures of the Americas. She teaches courses on gender and ethnic minority health, culture,



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and on community organizing and mobilization for health locally and globally.

## **Making Collaborations Work**

### **How did you seek collaborations with NHSN members?**

The NHSN really makes networking easy among Hispanic scientists. NHSN is great at keeping everyone in contact and informed about what others are doing, latest job postings, postdoctoral positions, and state-of-the art research. In many organizations, the annual conference is the only opportunity to connect. With NHSN's member database, emails from Betsy Giamo, the NHSN Monthly eBlast and eOpportunities, and the El Faro newsletter, we learn about what is happening. These all help us stay connected to each other, provide opportunities for seeking collaboration, help us promote open positions, and gives us reasons to celebrate each other's successes and reach out to those in need of support or assistance. Via this publication and these other means, the NHSN makes it easy to find potential collaborators.

The annual conference also presents more opportunities than usual to connect. They provide several opportunities at social events. It's hard to not walk away with a stack of business cards, emails, phone numbers and a feeling that you have come home intellectually motivated. Prior to the annual conference, we usually try to identify who is working on what, who might be going, and seek opportunities to reconnect with friends and colleagues and meet the rising scientists among Hispanics. If we are not able to attend, we still do this as the

conference program provides a wealth of information on everyone's work.

We also use research literature to seek collaborations. When we see an article that has similar research questions or uses a method that could be applied to our work we will try to reach out the authors. Many of them are often NHSN members. The first communication is typically an email that provides a brief introduction of ourselves and ideas for collaboration, or inquiry about their work. ResearchGate also provides communication opportunities to follow other Hispanic scientists research and see their work. We usually try to set up a conference call soon after to keep the ball moving.

### **What are the do's and don'ts of collaborating?**

For a successful collaboration, there must be clear and continuous communication, trust in each other's expertise and ability to deliver. Because most collaborations are among scientists in different parts of the country, it's so important to actually periodically see each other face-to-face, not only work via email. There are so many moving parts so it is easy for something to get lost in the communication channels. There are many tools now beyond email that can help organize communication among Hispanic scientists to enhance and strengthen our collaborative adventures. Everyone needs to be on the same page for the collaboration to succeed. With so many ways to communicate you also need to respect everyone's time, and their expertise. It is easy to just send an email or text at any time but not everyone likes to be connected 24 hours a day. With time differences around



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the U.S., and differences in “night owls” versus “larks” it’s best to limit communication to normal business days/hours, and respect each other’s time zones. Not only will this respect other’s time, it won’t infringe upon their personal time, and will also help to make our communication more visible.

There should also be a clear understanding of everyone’s role and the goals of the collaboration, concerns, priorities, different agendas, authorship expectations on papers, roles and leadership on projects need to be clearly communicated from early on. Do not leave this for later. This should be settled before moving forward. No one likes surprises that could have been avoided. This is especially important for those times you are working with others who are across the country or even in a different country. Long distance collaboration always contains challenges so it is best to try to prevent confusion or disappointments later, by having a clear and detailed plan agreed upon initially. Of course, things may change. So being flexible is also imperative in a successful collaboration. There is also a need to be clear on what is expected from everyone’s institution or department, expected contributions, getting all the right people on board, and working with folks that have common interests. Each institution has its own complexities so it is important that everyone is clear on what will be needed for the institution to participate. Always get in writing what an institution is willing to provide for your collaboration, the type of support, amount of support, monetary and non-monetary resources that will be made available, and understanding the

mechanisms for formal and informal communication with all parties involved.

Given that there sometimes unexpected events that can change or even terminate a collaboration, it is good to always have at least one backup plan. One project comes to mind, where there was an MOU from a local clinic with multiple locations that they would assist in participant recruitment. Once the project was funded and data collection was set to begin, the clinic backed out for a variety of reasons unrelated to the study collaborators. The project was delayed for several weeks while a solution and alternative sites were found. As it was in this case the reason this collaboration fell apart was not due to the collaborators themselves, but to external forces. Here the clinic’s legal counsel did not feel comfortable with the collaboration. Once again it is important that every collaborator is clear on what their institution can and is willing to provide.

Everyone is busy and always playing catch up so it is important that a timeline for the collaboration be created and agreed upon. It is also important to understand that this timeline is likely to change many times. However, everyone should be clear on the progress that is expected. Milestones and timelines set a priori well help to do that. What milestones do you want to accomplish and by when? This will also help everyone decide if they can really commit to the collaboration. If the timeline presented does not fit with a person’s other commitments or is unrealistic, people need to speak up, to prevent delays and frustration later on.



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## **Any other advice you would like to share with the readers about seeking collaborations with other scientists**

Establishing collaboration is like bringing gifts to the table. With the Christmas season upon us, it reminds me of the story of the “Tres Reyes Magos” (The Three Magi). Each brought gifts of their own to the table. Although they came from different parts of the world, they had to work together to reach their destination. Together they followed a common star. Once they reached their goal, they had to discuss the dreams they each had, and decide on taking a different route home, to avoid putting Baby Jesus at risk. It took planning and collaboration! Melchor, Gaspar and Baltazar were very different people. Lessons learned from this story for intellectual collaboration remind us that we can seek collaboration with people who are different from us, in different fields, who bring different gifts to the table. It will help to give you a new perspective to your research questions, a new route, a new way of thinking. Many times, we focus on how we want to answer a research question forgetting that there are other ways of obtaining the answer, and different ways of asking the question.

We often hear the term “transdisciplinary” rather than “multidisciplinary”. Transdisciplinary collaborations bring really different people together, to not just bring pieces of a puzzle together, but to create more of a chemical reaction, one in which the products are unique; truly outside the box, and would have never have happened, unless the right individuals, expertise, and chemicals had

come together to create this unique and fantastic reaction. In future collaborations, remember that collaborators can be found outside the universities as well. Promotores de salud and other community health workers are exceptional collaborators. There are also many non-governmental and governmental organizations that are eager to collaborate. Many of these bring rich resources and human capital that will enrich your thought process and research. We have extensive relationships with our communities. They participate in a two-way street fashion in our research. We bring academic and general community folks together, and have been successful not just in doing the research, but also in translating our research into public health policy, working with decision makers and key community gate keepers, and engaging communities directly in the research process. Working in varied collaborations has only made us better researchers as we work tirelessly to improve the health and mental health of all Hispanics in the country.



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## New Member Spotlight



**Sara Weidberg, Ph.D.**, is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Oviedo (Spain). She obtained her PhD in Psychology in 2015, with a major in the area

of addictive behaviors, particularly in the behavioral assessment of impulsivity among drug dependent populations. Dr. Weidberg is currently working on several research projects such as the application of Contingency Management Techniques among smokers with the depression and the prevalence and incidence of problems associated with problem.

### ***Why did you decide to join the NHSN?***

I decided to join the NHSN after a colleague (Irene Pericot-Valverde) told me about the network. She joined NHSN the year before and went to one annual meeting. After returning, Irene told me that it was a great network for early career researchers like us in order to present the results of our research and make new contacts. Thus, I decided to join the network and confirmed that Irene was right: researchers from the network were really friendly and gave me the opportunity to present the results of one of my studies in an oral communication.

### ***When and why did you become interested in Hispanic health research?***

As I live and work in Spain, my whole research experience has been acquired by working with different types of Spanish subpopulations. Specifically, I have experience working with smokers from the general population with and without dual pathology. I also have experience collecting data from cocaine dependent individuals and adolescents. I became interested in health research after studying Psychology of Addictions during my degree in Psychology. I really enjoyed studying this subject!

### ***Briefly describe your current line of research (2-3 sentences).***

My research is focused on the assessment of impulsivity and its related constructs in different drug dependent populations. I am also interested in assessing the efficacy of different psychological treatments for smoking cessation as well as the feasibility of using behavioral economic measures of relative reinforcing efficacy among smokers.



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***What is your ultimate dream in terms of your career? Have you already accomplished this?***

This question is difficult to answer because conducting research in Spain nowadays is a real challenge due to the economic situation. I think that the key factor is to keep on working and having new objectives while you achieve others. Apart from research, I really enjoy teaching in university (which is something I am currently doing at this moment). Hopefully, one day I will get a permanent contract that will enable me to conduct research and teaching on a regular basis.

***What is the most important lesson you learned as a graduate student?***

The biggest lesson for me is that persistence always has a reward, even if this appears in the long-term. Getting a PhD is not a question of intelligence but hard work over a period of years.

***What is the most important quality you look for in a mentor?***

I think that a good mentor should be practical. In Spain you have between 3 and 4 years to get your PhD, and if things get complicated, you need practical solutions. My PhD mentors, Roberto Secades-Villa and Olaya García-Rodríguez, were great for me in this regard.

***What advice would you give on how to handle stress?***

Sleep eight hours and try to go for a walk/run every day. Also chatting with a friend after a tough day usually helps me to realize that nothing is too important to disturb my mental health.

***What is your cultural background and how did it influence your choice of career and/or research area?***

My father is English and my mother is Spanish, so I have family in both countries. Is funny to see how differently we behave as a function of our country of birth; English people tend to be more reflexive and shy, while Spanish people are usually more impulsive and outgoing (clichés always have something in them!). These differences in personality traits have always interested me and influenced the choice of my research area, namely impulsivity.

***What do you do for fun?***

I like listening to music and going to the cinema. Watching a good and inspiring film is a way to relieve stress for me.



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**Bryan Cruz**, B.A., is a second year doctoral student under the mentorship of Dr. Laura O'Dell at the University of Texas at El Paso. He obtained his degree in Biological Psychology with a

minor in Spanish in 2015 from California State University San Bernardino.

***Why did you decide to join the NHSN?***

I decided to join NHSN to build strong relationships amongst a community of scientists that focus on studying drug abuse research in vulnerable populations, such as underrepresented ethnicities.

***When and why did you become interested in Hispanic health research?***

I became interested in Hispanic health research when I began graduate school in fall of 2015. Primarily because Hispanics are one of the largest ethnic minority groups with emerging health disparities.

***Briefly describe your current line of research (2-3 sentences).***

My current graduate research focuses on examining the role of insulin hormone on the rewarding effects of nicotine in an animal model of diabetes. In my line of graduate studies, I utilize a pre-clinical approach to examine the potential factors

(behavioral & neurochemical) that drive nicotine addiction in vulnerable populations such as people suffering from diabetes.

***What is your ultimate dream in terms of your career? Have you already accomplished this?***

My ultimate dream is become a mentor to students pursuing STEM-related fields. I haven't accomplished this, but I try to practice with undergraduate students seeking help in the laboratory and/or coursework. I am very enthusiastic about creating a team-based working environment for undergraduate students interested in pursuing higher education. I strive to captivate a diverse student body to engage in research.

***What is the most important lesson you learned as a graduate student?***

The most important lesson I've learned thus far is the power of networking. I've noticed that building strong relationships with other scientist can promote potential collaborations, and recommendations for positions.

***What is the most important quality you look for in a mentor?***

The most important qualities I look for in a mentor are the willingness to share constructive feedback, patience, skill, and knowledge. I believe a mentor requires these qualities for students to grow successfully into their respective careers.



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## ***What advice would you give on how to handle stress?***

Find your anchor and hold on to it! Whether it is exercise, meditation, and/or watching a movie fit it in your schedule. Most importantly, set time aside to speak with friends and family. Speaking to someone about your feelings can help cope with stress.

## ***What is your cultural background and how did it influence your choice of career and/or research area?***

I come from a Mexican cultural background. I am also first-generation Mexican-American. My cultural background influenced my decision to pursue a science-related field to boost underrepresented ethnic groups. When I began conducting research as an undergraduate, I noticed that there are many opportunities for minorities in research like myself. It is just a matter of seeking and applying. This richened my undergraduate research experience and gave me confidence to apply to behavioral neuroscience graduate programs.

## ***What do you do for fun?***

In my spare time, I love playing a pick-up game of soccer with my laboratory mates (also NHSN members)! Also, I love watching movies (especially from director and producer Quentin Tarantino) and getting my hands greasy by working on my Jeep Wrangler TJ.

## **A Final Note and Meet the New Editors**

It is hard to believe that our time as co-editors has come to an end. The last two years have been a great learning experience for both of us. We would like to thank everyone who has been part of this journey and made this all possible. First, thank you to the ECLC members for your constant support in every issue. Second, thank you Betsy for all your help when we had endless questions about membership, conference details, and member accomplishments. Last but most importantly, we would like to thank all those who contributed to El Faro. We truly appreciate each and every one of you. Without you, El Faro would not be possible.



The time has come for us to pass down the torch to new co-editors. We could not be more excited to introduce to you the new co-editors of El Faro: Bryan Cruz and Rodolfo Flores. They are not only our colleagues but also our friends. They are both doctoral students at the University of Texas at El Paso and are conducting neuroscience research under the mentorship of Dr. Laura O'Dell. We are certain that they will continue to provide the network with great issues. Welcome to El Faro, Bryan and Rodolfo!



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