

2023-2024 Health Equity Research Education Program (HEREP) SCHOLAR DIRECTORY



Patricia Ajayi-Fox, MD
Assistant Professor
Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology
School of Medicine
University of Alabama at Birmingham

**HEREP 2023
CARES Center**

Dr. Patricia Ajayi-Fox is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology at UAB. She completed medical school at Sidney Kimmel Medical College in Philadelphia, PA, residency at UPMC and her gastroenterology fellowship at Cleveland Clinic, Ohio. Currently, her research focuses on studying the colorectal cancer screening practices in underrepresented communities, and implementing strategies to improving these practices to help alleviate health disparities.



Kristen Allen-Watts, PhD, MPH
Assistant Professor
Division of Preventive Medicine
School of Medicine
University of Alabama at Birmingham

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Dr. Kristen Allen-Watts obtained her PhD in public health from the University of Alabama in 2018 and an MPH from the University of Alabama at Birmingham in Healthcare Organization and Policy. She completed a postdoctoral fellowship in the School of Medicine in the Division of Gerontology, Geriatrics, and Palliative Care (2018-2019) at UAB and shortly afterwards, was appointed a second postdoctoral fellowship as a MERIT IRACDA Postdoctoral Scholar in the College of Arts and Science (2019-2021) at UAB.

Dr. Allen-Watts is currently a Benjamin-Carver Scientist and Assistant Professor with a joint appointment at UAB and Tuskegee University. She is interested in the unique Self-management needs of diabetes-multimorbidity (i.e., chronic pain, cardiovascular disease, cognitive impairment, and high depressive symptoms) among under-resourced/under-represented communities with the goal of improving patient self-management and self-efficacy by focusing on self-identified needs and individualizing therapy (i.e., precision health).

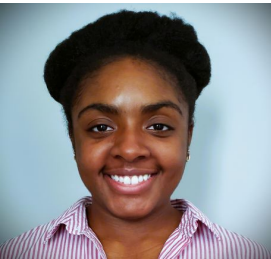
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Taylor Buchanan, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Family and Community Medicine
School of Medicine
University of Alabama at Birmingham

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Dr. Taylor Buchanan joined the Department of Family and Community Medicine as an Assistant Professor and Benjamin-Carver FIRST Scientist on July 1, 2023. Dr. Buchanan obtained her Ph.D. in Applied Physiology and Kinesiology from the University of Florida and completed a postdoctoral fellowship in clinical science and gerontology at UAB in 2023. Her primary research focuses on chronic pain management and aging with special focus on identifying biopsychosocial targets and developing efficacious interventions to reduce pain in older adults.



Amirah Burton-Obanla, PhD, MS
Postdoctoral Fellow
Cancer Health Equity Center
Morehouse School of Medicine

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Dr. Amirah Burton-Obanla is a postdoctoral fellow within the Cancer Health Equity Center at Morehouse School of Medicine. She received her PhD in Nutritional Sciences from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Dr. Burton also earned her M.S. and B.S. degrees in Biology from North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, North Carolina. Her previous research focused on understanding the prevalence of food insecurity among cancer survivors, and the impact of food insecurity on cancer-related outcomes, including diet quality and health-related quality of life. She is interested in further exploring issues at the nexus of nutrition, food and nutrition insecurity, and cancer health disparities, with the goal of developing clinical and community interventions that improve cancer survivors' diet quality, better address their food access needs, and help mitigate food and nutrition insecurity.

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Joy Doll, OTD
Resident Associate Professor
Program Director, Health Informatics Program
Creighton University

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Creighton
University**

Dr. Joy Doll is the Program Director for the Creighton University Health Informatics Program where she designs and implements innovative curriculum to transform healthcare delivery. Joy also owns and operates consulting firm to support organizations to bridge health care and social care, Hello Better Healthcare, LLC. Prior to launching Hello Better Healthcare, Joy was the Vice President of Community Programs for CyncHealth. In this role, Joy supported cross-sector partnerships to build a social determinants of health ecosystem that includes community based organizations, health information technology, 211 and health care organizations. She led the first EHR integration of health care and social care in the state of Nebraska. She is a passionate advocate for health equity supporting programs like the Health and Dwelling, a Medical Respite for the Homeless and the Greater Omaha Pathways Hub.

She is a sought after speaker including the 2018 TedX Talk entitled [Cultivating Collaboration in Health Care: The Journey of an Accidental Expert](#). Joy earned her Doctor of Occupational Therapy degree in 2003 from Creighton University. In May 2022, she completed a mini-MBA from University of Arizona as a recipient of the CommonSpirit Equity Impact Scholarship.



Radhika Gangaraju, MD, MSPH
Assistant Professor
Division of Hematology/Oncology
School of Medicine
University of Alabama at Birmingham

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Dr. Radhika Gangaraju is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Hematology/Oncology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), specializing in the diagnosis and management of blood disorders such as thrombosis, thrombotic microangiopathy and bleeding disorders. Dr. Gangaraju completed fellowships in Transfusion Medicine at UAB, and Hematology-Oncology at the University of Utah. She also received a Master of Science in Public Health degree from UAB. Her research is focused on understanding the pathogenesis and risk factors for cancer-associated thrombosis and bleeding, with particular interest in clonal hematologic disorders and thrombotic microangiopathy.

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Iman Hassani, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Chemical Engineering
Tuskegee University

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Dr. Iman Hassani is an Assistant Professor of Chemical Engineering at Tuskegee University, Tuskegee, AL. After completing his Ph.D. in Chemical Engineering at Auburn University, Dr. Hassani gained valuable experience during his postdoctoral fellowship at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, MD. His research focuses on biomimetic materials and tissue engineering, with a specific interest in cancer, obesity, and cardiovascular diseases. This includes the development of innovative biomaterials and tissue-engineered platforms aimed at deciphering the complex interplay between biological systems and disease. His multidisciplinary approach combines principles of chemical engineering, biology, and materials science to pave the way for innovative solutions in the field of regenerative medicine and personalized healthcare.



Emily Johnston, MD, MS
Assistant Professor
Division of Pediatric Hematology/Oncology
School of Medicine
University of Alabama at Birmingham

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Dr. Emily Johnston is an Assistant Professor in Pediatric Hematology/Oncology and a member of the Institute for Cancer Outcomes and Survivorship and the Center for Palliative and Supportive Care. She practices pediatric oncology 20% of the time and conducts research 80% of the time. Her long-term goal is to establish quality measures for end-of-life care for children with complex chronic conditions and then use those measures as a tool to identify (and mitigate) disparities in care. She is from Iowa originally, did her medical training at Stanford, and moved to Birmingham in 2018. Dr. Johnston has a 3 and 6-year-old boy and is running obsessed.

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Abhay Lidbe, PhD
Assistant Research Professor
Department of Civil, Construction and Environmental Engineering
University of Alabama

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Dr. Abhay Lidbe is an Assistant Research Professor at the University of Alabama, Department of Civil, Construction and Environmental Engineering. His research focuses on the intersection of Transportation and Social Equity with an emphasis on transportation and accessibility barriers for social needs such as healthcare, education, employment, nutrition, etc. He hopes to see a better tomorrow where everyone has basic access to their quality of life needs.



Desmin Milner, MD
Assistant Professor
Department of Radiology
School of Medicine
University of Alabama at Birmingham

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Dr. Desmin Miller is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Radiology at UAB. She completed her undergraduate training at Xavier University of Louisiana, followed by medical school at University of Alabama Heersink School of Medicine. She then completed her residency training in Diagnostic Radiology and fellowship training in Neuroradiology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham before she joined the faculty in the Neuroradiology section. I hope to reduce imaging related healthcare disparities in the Birmingham area by evaluating our current practices to properly access populations who are being excluded at this time. In doing so, I hope to find impactful ways to engage with the Birmingham community and greater Jefferson County community to increase access to imaging exams perhaps by partnering with other health care practitioners, social workers, and community health care organizations.

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Rushil V. Patel, MD
Assistant Professor
Division of Hematology/Oncology
School of Medicine
University of Alabama at Birmingham

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Dr. Rushil Patel is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Hematology/Oncology. He graduated from the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill with his medical degree and completed internal medicine residency training at Cone Health in Greensboro, NC. He then completed clinical and research fellowships in hospice and palliative medicine at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, NY and hematology/oncology fellowship at the Levine Cancer Institute, Atrium Health in Charlotte, NC. His research focuses on developing culturally-concordant models of palliative care. He received funding from the Conquer Cancer Foundation to explore how culture influences the palliative care preferences for Hindu patients with cancer and their caregivers living in the US using community-based participatory research. He is interested in using CBPR to explore how culture influences the palliative care preferences of adults with sickle cell disease.



Brittanny Polanka, PhD, MS
Assistant Professor
Division of Preventive Medicine
School of Medicine
University of Alabama at Birmingham

**HEREP 2023
FIRST BCS**

Dr. Brittany Polanka is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Preventive Medicine at UAB. She received her PhD in Clinical Psychology with an emphasis in health/medical psychology from Indiana University, Indianapolis. Her program of research currently has two aims: 1) identify psychosocial and behavioral risk factors for and exacerbators of cardiovascular disease (CVD), and 2) elucidate behavioral and biological mechanisms underlying these relationships. As an early career investigator, she will use this work to inform a future research aim: 3) design and test the efficacy and implementation of psychological and lifestyle interventions to reduce CVD risk among underserved populations.

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Gregory Sakwa, PhD, MS
Post Doctoral Fellow
University of Alabama at Birmingham/
Kenya Medical Institute

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Dr. Gregory Sakwa is an upcoming community health researcher based in Kenya where he teaches and conducts mixed methods research in vulnerable populations, including among women of reproductive age, in a wide range of socio-behavioral and community-based studies. He is a post-doctoral fellow at University of Alabama at Birmingham and Kenya Medical Research Institute sponsored by the Fogarty International Center of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) under the INSIGHT consortia.

Dr. Sakwa has a strong interest in addressing health disparity and health equity among communities. His research interest is in working with communities in advancing health promotion among the vulnerable communities. He participated in developing a new communicable disease surveillance model to complement the existing Pune municipal disease surveillance model in India. He continues to work in communities by empowering women through community health volunteers and Community Health Workers on aspects of cervical cancer and screening. The objective is to reduce the burden of cervical cancer and health disparity through early detection and treatment. Dr. Sawka's post-doctoral fellowship is focused towards *assessing the acceptability and usability of self-sampling for HPV testing among women in the rural communities of Kakamega, Kenya*. On completion he aspires to be a global health researcher.



Rachel Skains, MD, MSPH Assistant
Professor
Department of Emergency Medicine
School of Medicine
University of Alabama at Birmingham

**HEREP 2023
RCMAR**

Dr. Rachel Skains is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Emergency Medicine (EM) at UAB with a joint faculty position at the Birmingham VA Medical Center (BVAMC). As an early-stage investigator, Dr. Skains is focused on improving health equity and mitigating disparities in the acute care of older adults through patient-centered outcomes research. After EM residency at UAB (2019), she completed a Clinical Research Fellowship focused on Geriatric EM (GEM) while pursuing a Master of Science in Public Health (MSPH) in Clinical and Translational Science from the UAB School of Public Health (2021). During fellowship, she was awarded the AHRQ NRSA T32 Postdoctoral Scholar Fellowship in the UAB Health Services Research Training Program (2020-2022), in addition to funding through the UAB Integrative Center for Aging Research (ICAR) and Geriatric Emergency care Applied Research (GEAR) 1.0 pilot grant programs. Recently, Dr. Skains received the NIA Grants for Early Medical/Surgical Specialists' Transition to Aging Research (GEMSSTAR) R03 award for the proposal "Risk Factors and Time Course of Incident Delirium Among Older Adults in the Emergency Department (ED)." Finally, she was also the recipient of the 2023 Academy of Geriatric Emergency Medicine Early Career Achievement Award.

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Korijna Valenti, PhD, IPCC, MS, MPW
Instructor
Division of Gerontology, Geriatrics, and Palliative Care
School of Medicine
School of Public Health
University of Alabama at Birmingham

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Dr. Korijna Valenti is a palliative care (PC) trained gerontologist with a focus in health equity and health services research. Her primary research is in cancer survivorship, PC, and end-of-life care with diverse LGBTQ+ older adults and their chosen support systems. She has spent her career investigating how health care professionals' interactions with LGBTQ+ patients inform structural and organizational inclusivity, decision making, and goal concordant care. Ultimately, Dr. Valenti's goal is to increase the opportunity, through community based participatory research, for LGBTQ+ older adults living with cancer to receive exceptional care, in an inclusive environment, by people who understand and foster a safe and equitable experience.