

CAMB Student Newsletter

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In this issue

- Special Interest:** Wellness Resources at Penn 2
- Faculty Interview:** Dr. Aime Franco 4
- Special Interest:** The Science Behind New Year's Resolutions 6
- Special Interest:** FAQs of Recruitment Season 8

Letter from the Editors

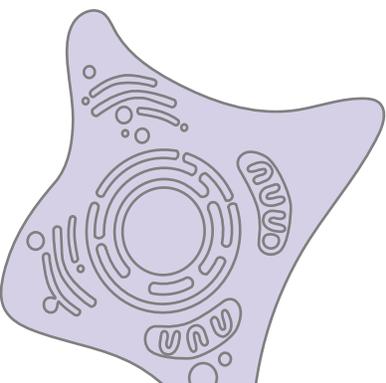
Dear CAMB Students, Faculty, and Alumni,

We hope that 2025 is treating you well so far, and we are excited to share with you the February 2025 installment of the CAMB Student Newsletter!

In this month's issue, we highlight wellness resources available to grad students at Penn and speak with CHOP investigator Dr. Aime Franco about her journey to Penn and her advice for current grad students. We also discuss the science behind setting a New Year's resolution and suggest potential grad school related goals to make the most of this year. Finally, recruitment season is here, so we compiled a list of common questions you may be asked by prospective CAMB students. We hope you enjoy this issue of the CAMB Student Newsletter!

For additional articles, past publications, and to learn more about the CAMB Student Newsletter team, visit our blog at <https://cambnewsletter.wixsite.com/blog> or follow us on Twitter at **@CambNewsletter**. The CAMB Student Newsletter is always looking for new writers and editors to join our team! Current students interested in contributing to the CAMB Student Newsletter can reach out to Kay Labella (klabella@penmedicine.upenn.edu), and/or Ariana Majer (majerar@penmedicine.upenn.edu) to learn more! You can also check us out in person — our next meeting will be Tuesday, March 4th at 3 PM in CRB 702. Join us to brainstorm ideas for the May issue. Snacks will be provided!

Sincerely,
Kay Labella and Ariana Majer
Editors-in-Chief



Special Interest

Wellness Resources at Penn

by Mara Davis
Peer Edited by James Gesualdi

It's 2025, and now that holiday breaks are over, it's time to return to the lab and prepare for the next twelve months of failing experiments, changing hypotheses, committee meetings, presentations, classes, exams, and looming self-, PI-, and/or institution-imposed deadlines for PowerPoints, papers, and grants alike. I don't have to convince you that a PhD is stressful. In fact, some will say that the imposter syndrome, generalized anxiety, and constant assessment and involuntary predictions of experimental and biological outcomes we all face on a regular basis are what make for a clever and well-rounded scientist. The academic expectations at an Ivy League institution can be especially daunting, but luckily, Penn has a multitude of resources available specifically for students to upkeep their mental, emotional, and physical wellness.

With the sun setting before 6 PM, Penn's Walking Escort service is beneficial for those graduate students doing late night/early morning experiments on campus who would like a little extra peace of mind walking to and from the lab in the dark. They can be reached by calling 215-898-9255, and are available 24/7.

Penn's Wellness Center has many resources available for promoting mental and emotional wellness, including drop-in appointments for individual therapy during business hours as well as a program called Let's Talk, where students can share their stress and

anxiety and work through their emotions in a free and confidential manner with trained professionals available at multiple locations on campus. The Counseling Office has 24/7 availability to get information and schedule an appointment at 215-746-9355.

But maybe you're hoping to get ahead of the problem and are interested in learning how to take care of your mental wellness. Setting boundaries with yourself and others can diminish your chances of reaching burnout. Equally important is learning how to handle imposter syndrome and the daily life we all lead outside of graduate school (because at some point I'm sure we all forget that we are people besides graduate students, and that this brings with it its own set of challenges). Well, Penn also has resources to educate students on the process of mindfulness, which brings awareness to your current physical, mental, and emotional state and helps you process your thoughts and work through your anxieties. These include mindfulness workshops where you can learn how to listen to your body and mind to uncover some of the roots of your anxiety and stress. Additionally, these workshops teach you how to better take care of yourself through small daily practices, as well as big ones, like setting boundaries on the time you spend in lab or extracurricular activities you dedicate yourself to. These workshops take place on Wednesdays from 4 – 5:15 PM at Student Health and Counseling 3624 Market St First Floor West, and you can register [here](#). You can also follow Wellness at Penn on Instagram for their Wellness' Mindful Moments and find additional tools to promote mindfulness [here](#).

To promote self-care, several groups across campus either host workshops or events promoting wellness, or you might see opportunities to pick up self-care baskets across campus.

Further resources and programs aimed at helping Penn students with a multitude of goals include the SUPER Program (substance use, prevention, education, and recovery) and the recreation facilities. The SUPER program was created to aid students in their journey of recovery from problems with addiction- they have resources for finding AA and NA meetings, as well as their

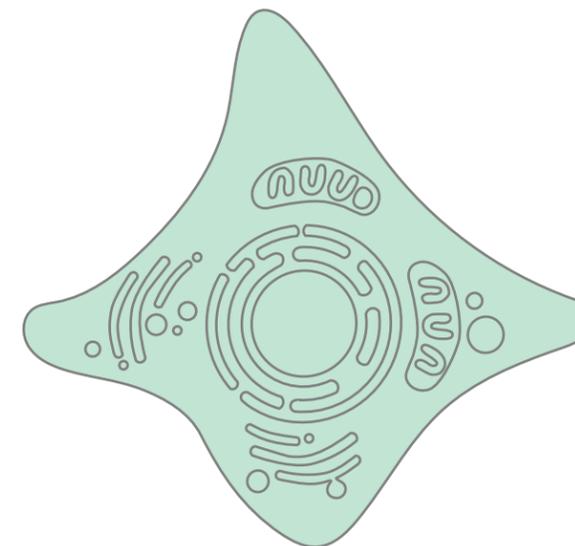
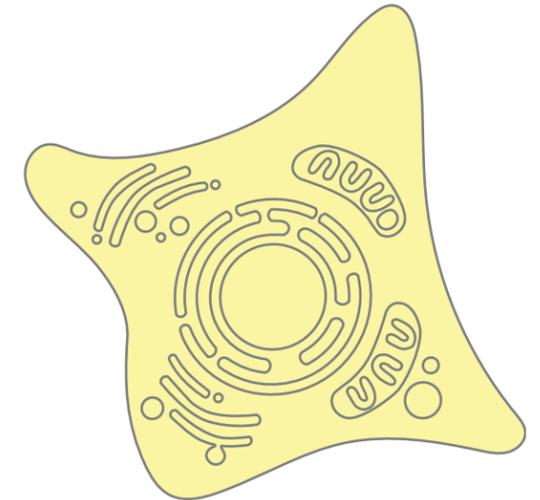
own SMART meetings for Penn students in recovery (Mondays at 5:30 at 3535 Market Street on the Mezzanine, Suite 50). The [recreation facilities at Penn](#), the Pottruck Health & Fitness Center and the Fox Fitness Center, both host their own wellness workshops! Additionally, they have resources for those looking for personal trainers and/or group exercise classes. Check out Pottruck to find a recovery room (with foam rollers, massage guns, and compression boots), a climbing wall, swimming pool and sauna, and 4 floors of lifting and exercise equipment!

I hope you'll begin to investigate and use these resources like I have in recent years as a way to maintain mindfulness, delay burnout, establish better work-life balance, and become a more confident scientist and person.

Wellness at Penn, in partnership with campus organizations, is excited to bring a free vending machine to students offering essential wellness products, located on the 3rd floor of the ARCH building (3601 Locust Walk). You can find:

- COVID-19 tests & hand sanitizers
- Menstrual products
- Harm reduction supplies (Naloxone & fentanyl test strips)
- over-the-counter medications

Access is FREE with your Penn ID! Available daily, 8 AM – 12 AM. Stay healthy, stay prepared!



Faculty Interview

Dr. Aime Franco

by Kay Labella
Peer Edited by Eva Agostino

In this midwinter edition of the CAMB Newsletter, our team is excited to introduce Dr. Aime Franco. Dr. Franco relocated her lab to the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia in 2019, where she now leads the Pediatric Thyroid Cancer Translational Laboratory. In speaking with the Newsletter, Dr. Franco shared with us her career journey and offered advice for students in the midst of their graduate work.



Tell us a little bit about your scientific journey. What was your path like, from graduate student to postdoc to PI?

My path really began in undergrad when I thought if you loved science you would become a doctor. But I got to college and realized I kind of hated the premed curriculum, and realized being a medical doctor would not fuel my passion for science. I had a bit of a crisis moment not knowing what I would do! I didn't even know that this career path of being a professor but doing research existed.

I finished undergrad with degrees in Sports Medicine and Biology, but I was working for the University of Connecticut basketball teams and had the opportunity to stay on to do a Master's degree. I got a MS in Nutrition, focused on molecular nutrition investigating how zinc stabilized transcription factors. I refound my love of science and discovery, and that is when I decided to do a PhD.

I did my PhD in Cancer Biology investigating how *H. pylori* infection increases the risk for gastric

cancer. When I started in the lab, I had no idea what *H. pylori* was, but my mentor Rick's [Dr. Richard Speck] passion for the research was infectious, and I just knew that was where I wanted to be. I loved my research and loved the balance of doing both microbiology and cancer biology. We used gerbils as our model system because it was the most physiologically relevant to the disease that developed in patients. It was really important to me for our work to be as translatable as possible. I also realized that I didn't want to beg for money for my whole career so I decided I would go into industry (that obviously did not work out!).

I decided for my postdoc I wanted to learn more about mouse genetic models and more about molecular signaling, so I applied to a postdoc ad in the back of Science that literally stated it was using novel mouse genetic models of thyroid cancer to elucidate molecular signaling cascades. I am a thyroid cancer survivor, so I figured this was a good opportunity to learn a little more about my own disease, but fully intended on returning to *H. pylori* research (or industry). But during my postdoc, I also discovered my passion for advocacy, and how powerful my voice could be as both a cancer researcher and a cancer survivor. I also realized I was extremely independent and did not like being told what to do, and more importantly, that when someone told me I couldn't do something, it motivated me even more to do it and prove them wrong!

When I started applying for faculty positions, I had three small children, so I intentionally looked for positions at smaller institutions where I could build my research program. I spent 8 years at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences building my research program and helping to build their Cancer Institute. Then in 2019, I moved to Penn/CHOP to initiate and help build the Pediatric Thyroid Cancer Research Program.

What factors influenced your decision to become a PI? When did you know it was the right path for you?

I was still debating between industry and academia as a postdoc. I had an interview all arranged for an industry position, the limo was booked for the interview, and a couple days before the interview I was ghosted. I had no idea what was happening, but learned that they eliminated both the position and the entire research portfolio that I was going to be working on. I realized quickly that industry wasn't as secure as I thought it might be, and I knew my passion was asking my own question on my own terms. The industry door was closed for me, but this is where I belong, getting to follow my passion and ask the questions I want to ask.

What's your favorite part about being a PI?

I love the autonomy to answer the questions I find most interesting and getting to work with amazing labmates and collaborators. It is really an incredible honor to be a part of watching someone discover their passion, even if it isn't the research we directly do in the lab. Being a part of the journey of empowering folks to find their passion is really amazing. My philosophy is that we need to do great science to get funded and contribute to the field, but my greatest role is to empower those in my lab to attain their dream job, whether that is in my lab, in science, or in something completely unrelated!

What kind of environment do you aim to create in your lab, and how do you facilitate that as a mentor?

I want my lab to be a place where people want to come to work, where they can be themselves and find their passion. I try to be always accessible, have an open door policy, and not be judgmental. I view the lab as a family; we stick with each other through the good times and the not so great times. I don't expect everyone to be best friends, but we need to support each other and celebrate the successes and bring each other up through the setbacks.

Did you always know what area of study you wanted to focus on? What excites you about your research?

Honestly, I always wanted to go back to *H. pylori* research, and I even think about ways we can incorporate some sort of *H. pylori* project into our current work. However, the passion I have for thyroid cancer research comes from a deeply personal place, and although at times it is terrifying to know so much about your own disease, the perspective that I can bring to the research as a patient is invaluable. Everything we do in the lab I view through the lens of a patient and push to ensure that the questions are patient-centric and that we can translate the knowledge gained to improve the outcomes for patients. Our work isn't just a job for me, but a passion project, and because of that, it keeps me motivated even through the days of rejected grants and manuscripts.

What are the overarching questions your lab hopes to answer?

We really want to understand why thyroid cancer acts so differently between males and females, and between young and older patients. We think that if we can understand this differential pathogenesis in thyroid cancer, we can apply this knowledge to other cancers.

What do you enjoy doing outside of the lab?

I enjoy cooking, running local races (not to win, just all about the bling with the medals and just getting out to be active), traveling, and doing cancer advocacy work both locally and nationally.

What advice would you give to current PhD students?

Follow your passion! This PhD process is only one step in a piece of hopefully a very long life. Take time occasionally to just sit and reflect on the things that make you happiest and the things that make you most discouraged, and use that information to recalibrate what you are doing. I think we spend a lot of time doing what we think others want or think we should be doing, and not enough time doing what truly lights our own fire.

If you'd like to reach out to Dr. Franco, she can be contacted at francoa1@chop.edu.

The Science Behind New Year's Resolutions

by Katey Stone
Peer Edited by Eva Agostino

How are your New Year's resolutions coming, CAMB students? We are reaching the time of year where many New Year's goals might be starting to taper off. As we all know, most goals set with the new year do not come to fruition. Here, we'll discuss some of the discourse around New Year's resolutions, including how the clean slate of the new year may actually be psychologically significant in helping you reach your goal. We'll also offer some inspiration for graduate-school-themed goals you could aim for this year. Let this article be the motivational reminder you need to reinvigorate your resolutions!

New Year's resolutions are a divisive topic. Many people love setting goals for the next calendar year, while others are more cynical about using January 1st as the start date for a change. The cynical may argue, if you want to make a change, why wait until

the new year? Or, they might be turned off but how many people drop their goals once the year gets going, or even set the same resolution year after year. However, resolutioners may be onto something with using the New Year as the start for their goals – it turns out that the time point at which you implement the goal could be a significant factor in your likelihood of success.

Katherine Milkman, PhD, a Wharton Professor, coined the term “The Fresh Start Effect” in a 2014 study investigating how important landmarks in time affect behavior changes (1). Since then, Milkman has published several studies investigating the relationship between goal-motivated behavior changes and significant temporal landmarks. They examined the relationship between events like the start of the year, a birthday, or a holiday and interest in common behavior changes like di-

- **Improve your work-life balance:** Set defined working hours, remove email and Slack from your phone, or turn off notifications, resist checking email or Slack on weekends or evenings, keep all work out of your home (do computer work at your work desk or a third space)
- **Strengthen your mentee-mentor relationships:** Request a meeting to update goals and needs with your mentor, reflect on your mentorship needs and how they may be changing
- **Boost effective time management:** Switch up your planning methods or reinvigorate your use of methods you have, try out digital planning options for project management like trello.com and notion.com, plan out the next week each Friday
- **Revamp your organization:** Switch to or add on a digital lab notebook if your lab allows it, build in regular note-taking time to each day, reset and clean up your bench at the end of each day
- **Plan for post-graduation:** Attend student group sessions for career exploration, browse the CAMB careers pages, connect with CAMB alumni in various career paths and begin information interviews
- **Prioritize mental health:** Create a stable routine with rest, exercise, and social time, visit Penn Health and Wellness, check in with the BGS counselor

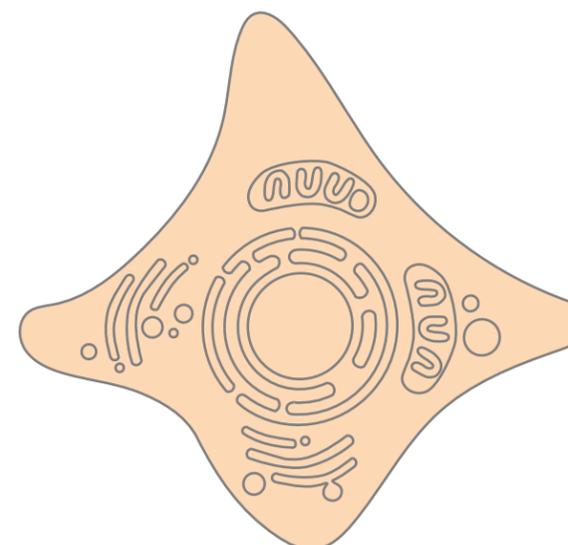
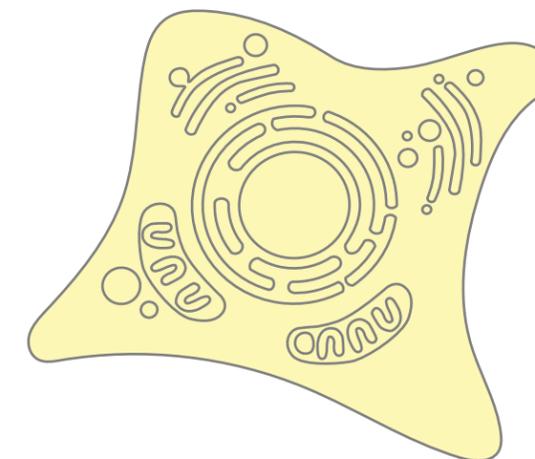
ets or exercise plans, and found that participants were more likely to take action toward a goal immediately following one of these temporal landmarks (1). Furthermore, participants more frequently chose to be reminded about a goal they set on a date significant to them over a random or sooner date. Dr. Milkman suggests that this is due in part to the feeling of a clean slate that comes with these timepoints, perhaps providing some separation between the ideas of a “past” and “future” you, which was supported by a study in which participants indicated increased propensity to set goals when a life change felt more like a fresh start or big change (2). Together, these results suggest that a landmark like the New Year can help motivate you to set and start working toward a goal. However, it remains unclear if it truly aids in your success in achieving that goal.

So, if you've set a New Year's resolution, it might be down to your own cold hard discipline and hard work from here. But, if you've yet to choose a goal to work on, consider the graduate school-related targets listed on page 6.

If you are interested in learning more about “The Fresh Start Effect”, Dr. Milkman can be found in various places discussing her work – check out her website [here](#).

References

1. Dai, H., Milkman, K. L., & Riis, J. (2014). The Fresh Start Effect: Temporal Landmarks Motivate Aspirational Behavior. *Management Science*, 60(10), 2563–2582. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2014.1901>
2. Dai, H., Milkman, K. L., & Riis, J. (2015). Put Your Imperfections Behind You: Temporal Landmarks Spur Goal Initiation When They Signal New Beginnings. *Psychological Science*, 26(12), 1927–1936. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797615605818>



FAQs of Recruitment Season

by the CAMB Newsletter Team

Recruitment season is (virtually) right around the corner! Prospective students will have all kinds of questions, so the CAMB newsletter team compiled some of the most frequent ones so you're ready for them come interview and visit time.

Frequently Asked Questions

- Why did you pick Penn for your PhD?
- What do you like about CAMB/Penn/Philly?
- What do you not like about CAMB/Penn/Philly?
- Are you happy at Penn?
- Do you feel adequately supported by Penn/BGS/CAMB?
- Do you feel CAMB is more community-focused or competitive as a research environment?
- Do you feel you benefitted from being in an umbrella program like CAMB?
- How should I best prepare for interviews?
- When should I reach out to start looking for rotations? Is it competitive to get a rotation slot?
- Is everyone able to find a lab they are happy with, or are lab slots limited?
- How was the balance between classes and rotations in the first year?
- Are you able to maintain a healthy work-life balance?
- Do you feel the stipend is livable? Do you need to have roommates? Can you afford hobbies and fun activities?
- What do you do for fun in Philly?
- Do you feel safe in Philly?
- How hard is it to find an apartment?
- Do you need a car? Is it difficult to have a car?

Some topics to highlight about CAMB that may differ from other programs

- Coverage of both medical and dental insurance
- No TA requirement
- Stipend-to-cost of living ratio is pretty good, particularly for an East Coast city of this size
- Access to labs/mentors from three acclaimed institutions:
 - 1) University of Pennsylvania
 - 2) The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
 - 3) The Wistar Institute

Thank you for reading.

For any questions, comments, concerns, or if you're interested in joining our team, please feel free to contact us at:

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Check out our [blog](#) page!

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