



Come join us!

Are you interested in building a network amongst women in chemical biology? We are looking for post-baccalaureate and post-doctoral fellows that would like to be part of the CBL Women In Chemistry.

February Highlight

Monesha Nambiar and Sierra Marker win the Sallie Rosen Kaplan (SRK) Postdoctoral Fellowship for Women Scientists

Congratulations to CBL fellows, Monesha Nambiar from the Schneider Lab and Sierra Marker from the Schnermann Lab for winning the 2022 SRK Postdoctoral Fellowship. This fellowship prepares female NCI postdoctoral fellows for their independent careers by providing mentoring and networking opportunities, and career building tools for women in science. For the February Women in Chemistry Highlight, we interviewed Monesha and Sierra to learn about this great program, their experience during the application process, and what it means to be a SRK fellow.



Monesha Nambiar



I'm a third-year postdoc at the CBL in the Schneider Lab. I received my Ph.D. in Chemistry from Purdue University, where I trained as a peptide chemist and studied the higher-order assembly of alpha-helical peptides. Currently, I am working on developing peptide-based hydrogels for drug delivery applications. I have always aspired to be a scientist, more specifically in academia, so I may pursue the answers to scientific questions that interest me. I also endeavor to teach, mentor, and inspire students to follow their own scientific passions. All the diverse activities and skills involved in being a professor, such as writing grants, publishing, teaching, and mentoring, are challenging, but that's what makes it an appealing and rewarding career.

A motto that I live by: **"Never be afraid of doing something because of the amount of time it takes, the time will pass anyway"**.

1) How did you learn about the fellowship? I learned about it through the emails sent by Erika Ginsburg to the NCI postdocs mailing list. I also contacted a couple of former SRK fellows who helped me learn more about the program and what to expect.

2) What interested you the most about the SRK program?

What initially stood out to me was the opportunity to seek out a second mentor. As part of the program, you choose a mentor from a group of women scientists with similar training backgrounds and yet diverse in terms of their career paths. These women were once in the same shoes as a postdoc and might have had similar doubts or concerns as you do now. The second mentor can help you navigate the transition from postdoc to independent scientist. I selected a mentor who has a similar path as the one I want to take. She helps me set achievable goals in developing my career plan and our regular interactions keep me accountable towards staying on track.

"Am I ready for the next step? Do I need to develop other skills? Are my expectations realistic? The SRK fellowship is a great opportunity to examine my life and career goals and help me answer these questions."

The program will also help you build a strong network of fellow women scientists consisting of your current cohort, SRK alumni and the scientists who serve as second mentors. Together, they form a pool of scientists who have chosen very diverse scientific careers (academia, industry, government, etc.) and are also at different stages of their careers. As an SRK fellow, you have life-long access to this network.

Lastly, the program conducts numerous workshops that focus to develop and foster skills that may be lacking or keeping you from achieving both your professional and personal goals. It will help you develop a working style that is more inclusive of other life roles, leading to a better job and life satisfaction.

3) How was the application process? The application takes some time to prepare. It took me a month to put the materials together. You need to provide your CV, letters of support from your PI and branch chief, personal statements of why you want to apply and what it would mean for your career to be a SRK fellow, as well as a description of your work environment and what you want to get out of the program. There is also an optional document to account for any special circumstances, i.e., representation from an underrepresented minority, etc.

4) How important is the support of your advisor/PI? Your PI must be onboard. For the application process, you need a strong letter of support from your advisor acknowledging the time you will have to invest in the program with the activities, homework, workshops, etc. This implies that you also must be cognizant of the time commitment and be mindful about prioritizing and managing your time well between research and this program. My advice is to have this discussion with your PI as early as possible, about why you want to pursue the fellowship and how this would add value to your career both as a current postdoctoral fellow and as a future independent scientist.

5) What do you recommend for CBL fellows that are interested in applying? Every female fellow should consider applying for this fellowship regardless of their career goals. Even if you are unsure of what you want to do next, this fellowship can help you navigate your career path. It is an opportunity to identify any skill/knowledge gaps and employ methods to develop them. The earlier you are in your postdoc, the bigger the advantage, because you have the remainder of your postdoc to practice and apply everything you have learned in the program. That being said, it's never too late to learn something new and useful, and it's always worth investing the time to do so.

Sierra Marker

I'm from a small town in rural, upstate NY, where I went to undergraduate school at Binghamton University and then graduate school at Cornell University. My graduate work was in bioinorganic chemistry, designing metal (rhenium)-based anticancer agents. This work is slightly different than the work I am doing in the Schnermann lab now. In the Schnermann lab, I mostly synthesize organic fluorophores for detecting cancer, which uses my background in ligand synthesis and chemical biology. I've really enjoyed getting to work at the NCI/CBL, there is a lot of interesting science, a great community, and lots of career trainings and opportunities.



My career goal after the NCI is to teach at a PUI. I have always loved mentoring and teaching students and I like the close-knit community and interpersonal relationships professors and students have at a PUI. I think teaching at a PUI allows me to have the best of all worlds – a small research group, high teaching load, and community involvement (both at the university and through outreach).

In my spare time I like to draw/paint, do puzzles, and hike. I was definitely surprised at how scenic Maryland is. It's nice that a short drive out of the city takes you to beautiful parks and trails, it makes me miss home a little less.

1) How did you learn about the fellowship? Through the emails – I think we got them through the CBL-listserve. My PI also suggested that I apply to the program.

2) What interested you the most about the SRK program? I think what interested me the most was the potential to expand upon skillsets that would be useful for being successful in my future career and the opportunity to be more connected with women fellows and faculty. The program offered both skill-building aspects, like leadership and mentoring, but also ways to learn more about yourself, which I think is just as important as career building skills. I also am now the only female fellow in my research group, so I was looking forward to getting to know other female fellows and COVID restrictions have made that hard to do outside of work. I think that this program will complement my involvement in the Women in Chemistry group and allow me to bring some new life skills to the table.

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3) How was the application process? The application process was pretty straightforward and relatively short, granted I had just applied to the PRAT fellowship, which required 20+ documents, so this felt much easier. I think in total there were only 4 documents needed to apply: personal statement, CV/resume, description of work environment, and a special circumstances document. You also needed two letters of support, one from your PI and the other from your lab chief. The hardest document for me was the personal statement, we had to list our non-scientific career goals, which is something that we don't think about enough. We always associate our career goals with science and trying to separate the two was difficult, so that took the longest for me to write. I didn't end up

writing anything for the special circumstances, I didn't feel that there was a relevant circumstance for me.

4) How important is the support of your advisor/PI? I think the support of your PI is one of the most important things. When applying to the program, they mention the heavy time commitment over the next year and I'm only about 1 month into the program, but they were definitely right in this regard. There is homework and long meetings (over Zoom now, but previously in-person) that take up at least half of your workday. As long as your PI understands the time commitment and is supportive (mine has been very supportive), then there is no reason not to apply to program. Overall, I think that this program will benefit you and your PI.

5) How has been your experience so far? My experience has been really good so far. Like I mentioned, I am only about a month into the program, and we are just starting the “life coaching” portion of the program, so it is all new and exciting. But I already feel like I will make strong relationships with the other fellows and my secondary mentor. The secondary mentor is someone that we were able to choose, and we picked based on our personal connection with them and their background, not necessarily their research background, but more career-wise. My secondary mentor is an Assistant Professor at Georgetown University, but did her undergraduate schooling at a PUI and has lots of experience in STEM clubs and outreach, all aspects that I was interested in. I'm looking forward to seeing this program through and seeing the positive changes that it can bring to my career and life.

6) What do you recommend for CBL fellows that are interested in applying? I would say talk to another fellow that has completed the program, and see if it's something you want to invest your time in. Of course, the fellowship will look good on your resume, but I think the more time and energy you are willing to put into it, the more you will get from the program. So mostly to just prepare yourself for what the program actually is and not what you think it is (I'm not sure I realized all that was going to go into it). Also make sure your PI is fully aware of the time commitment and will be supportive if you get it, having a supportive mentor makes the program a lot easier.

Do you have great news to share with the CBL fellows? Would you like to nominate women scientists for the monthly highlight? Please contact Tania Lopez (tania.lopezsilva@nih.gov) and Sierra Marker (sierra.marker@nih.gov)