

Scholar Profile: Cohort 1

**Thalia Fuentes '20 (CLAS, BUS)**

*Political Science, Business Management*

Born and raised in Luquillo, Puerto Rico, Thalia now resides in the town of Bridgeport, CT. Seeking an environment with diversity in higher education, she fell in love with the UConn community and decided that she would be the first in her family to attend a four-year university. She has previously worked as a Bennett Research Assistant, where she worked alongside a Political Science professor to find relevant information about the current state of human rights across the world, and how it differs in different countries.



Thalia has served as a learning community ambassador with Innovation House, as well a mentor with FYE. During her freshman year, Thalia volunteered with KUBE, where she mentored young children who hoped to expand their writing and reading skills in hopes of pursuing higher education. Thalia currently works as the assistant student manager for Putnam Refectory, serves as a member of Pi Sigma Alpha and NSLS, and is beginning to work with the SOS Food Recovery Program. Thalia enjoys playing soccer and her favorite food is 'Guineo al ceviche.'

Project Abstract:

Making the decision about whether to attend college is often based on a student's preparation for higher education due to their resources and where they grow up. Attainment of higher education should not depend on a person's socioeconomic background, which is in correlation with a person's race and ethnicity. Through this project, I will help to develop and implement a program based in public schools in Bridgeport, Connecticut to support students who need SAT/ACT prep materials/programs. In addition, I hope to produce workshops that will focus on college readiness and preparation specifically for students. These workshops will build the capacity of students to prepare for college by addressing a variety of topics including taking standardized exams, preparing college applications and essays, and choosing the right college for them.



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Scholar Profile: Cohort 1

**Abigail LaFontan '20 (CLAS)**

*Political Science*

Abigail came to UConn from the small town of Kent in the northwest corner of Connecticut where she grew up on an organic vegetable farm. With an inherent passion for advocacy, Abigail has been preparing to go to law school since she arrived at UConn. On campus Abigail is the secretary of the UConn Mock Trial Society and has been a competing member since 2016, during which time she has competed as a defense attorney, a lay witness, and an expert witness. She is also a member of the UConn Club Racquetball team and plays on Intramural soccer teams with her friends.



Abigail has a French minor and concentrates the rest of her elective course space in environmental and nutrition courses. Abigail also became involved with research at UConn during her first semester and has not looked back. She has worked as a research assistant under the Bennett Research Assistant program and under a SHARE grant. Abigail also earned an IDEA Research Grant last year which she used to conduct her own research service project over the summer of 2018. Besides her passion for farming and advocacy, Abigail loves to cook, read, and travel.

Project Abstract:

Food cultures promote healthy eating, as well as represent important traditions of certain societies. Modern food cultures center around historic customs adapted for today in which tradition is valued above processing and convenience. I will explore the concept of food culture and connect with experts in the field to establish my own definition. I will travel to France to experience their food culture and will take a course on the history of gastronomy. At the same time, I will experience food tours in and around Paris. I will continue living according to the most vital aspects of the French food culture when I return to the United States. Throughout this experience, I will create a blog and video logs to chronicle my experiences. Lastly, I will develop and implement a workshop for local audiences to advocate for adoption of a healthier food culture. My overall goal is to show the importance of making time in your day for food and encourage people to find a culture in their food in order to improve their health.

Abigail's blog can be found online at <https://justsimple.food.blog/>.



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Scholar Profile: Cohort 1

**Xinyu Lin '20 (ENG)**

*Civil Engineering*

*Minors: Environmental Engineering, Math*



Xinyu is fascinated by the intersection of engineering, environmental sustainability, and community. She pursues her passion for food waste reduction and food security as the program director for the SOS Food Recovery Program and through her involvement in UConn Access to Food Effort (UCAFE). She is a team leader for the service group Honors Across State Borders and also serves as the president of the UConn Seismic Design Team. Xinyu works at UConn Outdoors as a trip leader to get others excited about the outdoors and is an undergraduate researcher on UConn's PIRE Project called Taming Water in Ethiopia, where she researches how groundwater resources can be used to combat climate change effects on small-scale farmers in the country. In her free time, she loves going to the climbing gym, journaling, biking around campus, and eating good food!

Project Abstract:

Minority and lower-income communities are disproportionately affected by climate change as the poverty that many marginalized communities experience can exacerbate vulnerability. As the severity of weather events and pollution problems increase, vulnerable populations are more likely to be impacted by air pollution, pay more for basic necessities, and suffer more during natural disasters. Despite climate change impacting these groups more severely, minorities and lower income populations are widely perceived as having less interest in environmental issues than their white, wealthy counterparts. This belief is true within underrepresented groups themselves, who underestimate the environmental attitudes of their own social groups. Because environmental concerns and actions are driven largely by perceived norms, individuals within minority and lower income communities are conforming to this misperception by self-silencing. This, and other factors, has contributed to an environmental advocacy movement with a clear lack of diversity. With this research project, I aim to highlight the experiences and motivations of leaders within the movement that are diversifying the field. My goal is to increase representation within environmentalism, share the struggles of environmentalists that are part of marginalized groups, and inspire all individuals, especially those of marginalized groups, to get involved in the cause.

[Click here](#) to read a campus newspaper article about Xinyu's project showcase.



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Scholar Profile: Cohort 1

**Tanya Miller '20 (CLAS)**

*Physiology and Neurobiology*

Tanya is a Czech American that serves as chairperson for the Rowe Scholars Program. She is involved with Honors Across State Borders (HASB), a group on campus that goes on alternative spring breaks to help build affordable housing in America. Additionally, she is a member of the UConn Outing Club, which goes on various weekend trips to places such as Mount Monadnock and Acadia National Park. She recently joined the Conover Lab, which has a focus on neural stem cells. Her favorite band is Glass Animals, and her favorite book is “The Perks of Being a Wallflower.”



As a member of the 2019 BOLD cohort, Tanya plans to advocate for women within the STEM fields in order to improve professional and educational outcomes. After graduation, she plans to attend medical school in order to become a pediatrician. She hopes to eventually serve as a mentor within the healthcare field, with a focus on providing comprehensive care that adequately addresses the intersectional identities of patients.

Project Abstract:

In 2017, the amount of female medical school matriculates surpassed the number of male matriculates for the first time in history. Despite this milestone, gender inequality and lack of representation is still evident among physicians in America today. I seek to create a film, *#ILookLikeADoctor*, that will highlight what common and unique experiences female physicians experience today through interviews of women from diverse backgrounds, as well as different medical specialties. Overall, I anticipate that my film will increase the visibility of female physicians, promote dialogue on the importance of diversity within the medical field, and encourage young women who are interested in becoming physicians to pursue their dreams.

The full film can be [viewed here](#).



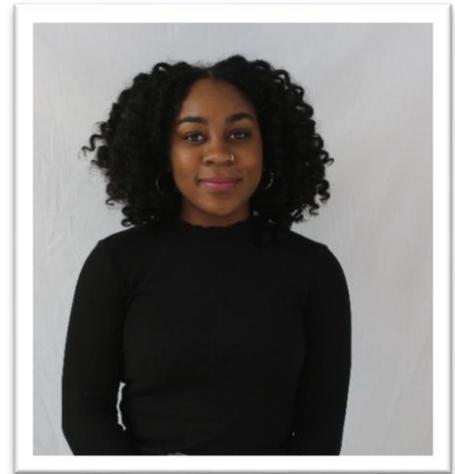
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Scholar Profile: Cohort 1

***Katharine Morris '20 (CLAS)***

*Cognitive Science & Anthropology*

Katharine is an Honors student studying Cognitive Science and Anthropology. She is a research assistant for the Experimental Anthropology Lab run by Cognitive Science and Anthropology professor Dimitris Xygalatas and a resident assistant for the Humanities House learning community, making her an RA2. She spent last summer as a research intern for the NSF REU Comparative and Developmental Origins of Social Cognition site at Yale University. She works in the Health Education Office and presents around campus on Bystander Intervention as a Pack Leader for Protect Our Pack!



Off campus, Katharine serves on the board for the Daniel Trust Foundation, a non-profit dedicated to helping students with the career and educational needs through mentorship, educational programming, and scholarship. She is a member of the International Affairs Association, Youth Socialist Action, UConn Access to Food Effort (UCAFE), Hip-Hop Initiative, Minority Health Matters, and the West Indian Student Association.

Project Abstract:

How can cross-cultural engagement and intersectional activism on campus be promoted, organized, and mobilized for the benefit of marginalized communities? This is my motivating question. In an exploratory research project, I will investigate how students, faculty, and staff at the University of Connecticut engage with cultural centers on campus to glean insights on their current degree of cross-cultural interaction and understanding of the concept of intersectionality. This research project will have two components. The initial phase of the project will consist of conducting surveys and semi-structured interviews with UConn affiliates and stakeholders. During the second phase, I will use what I learned in my research to spearhead the formation and promotion of a coalition with an intersectional framework for collaborative organizing among students, faculty, and staff.

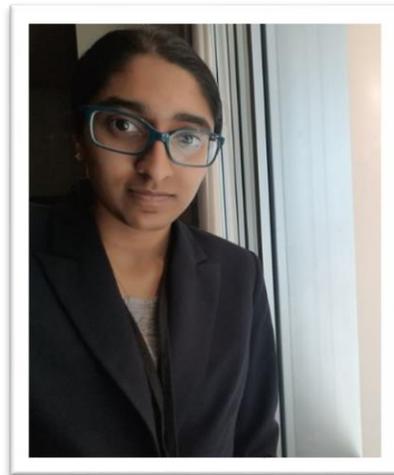
[Click here](#) to see the Facebook page for the campus organization Katharine developed through her project.



Scholar Profile: Cohort 1

**Himaja Nagireddy '20 (CLAS)**

*Molecular and Cell Biology, Physiology and Neurobiology & Sociology*



Himaja comes to UConn from Acton, MA. She is a STEM Scholar, Student Life Award recipient of the 2018 Spierer/Dueker Student Humanitarian Achievement Award, and a 2019 Leadership Legacy Fellow. She serves on the executive boards of TEDxUConn and Peer Allies Through Honors (PATH). Himaja is an elected representative of the National Council for the United Nations Association of the USA, a civil organization founded by Eleanor Roosevelt, where she works with over 200 chapters to coordinate efforts to support the UN. Himaja is currently a UConn-Eversource Research Fellow where she is conducting research to evaluate the benefits of NGSS-aligned energy conservation education for middle school students living in areas with high eviction rates in CT. She actively volunteers for three non-profit organizations during the semester (Barefoot College, Unite for Sight, and Paper Airplanes). In her free time, Himaja likes to hike, bike, and re-read her favorite books (Sherlock Holmes and Harry Potter). Himaja was nominated for the Truman Scholarship this past year.

Project Abstract:

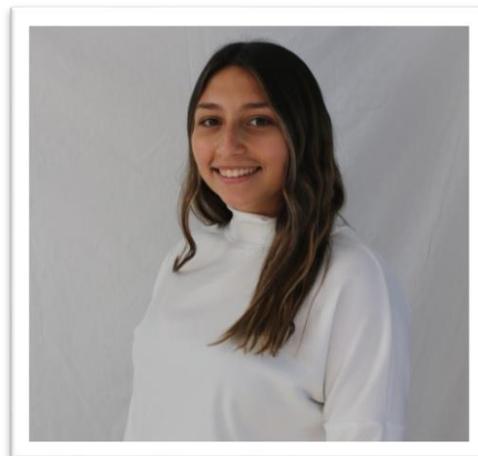
Doctors often do not inform patients fighting aggressive forms of cancer of non-routine forms of treatment, even though such therapies might work as effective complementary and/or alternative care. Through this project, I hope to decrease this information gap. I plan to conduct needs assessment interviews with patients and/or medical providers to gain a better understanding of how and when information on complementary and alternative care is shared. After this assessment, I hope to develop a product that provides information on the different types of cancer treatment options and builds the capacity of patients to communicate with their physicians about care options. Through this product, I hope to safely and ethically provide patients the information they need to access personalized cancer treatment options for their unique condition, giving them a better chance to recover and live thriving lives.

[Click here](#) to view the online courses Himaja created during her project.



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Scholar Profile: Cohort 1  
***Sofia Nieto '20 (CLAS)***  
*Chemistry*



Sofia is the daughter of a Puerto Rican mom and a Peruvian dad, born and raised in Caguas, Puerto Rico. She is the vice-president of the Puerto Rican Student Association, the Community Assistant of the Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (LSAMP), as well as an LSAMP scholar on campus. In addition, she is a Honors, STEM and Special Program in Law Scholar, enabling her to combine her two passions of Chemistry and Law. Sofia spends her summers interning at the Puerto Rican House of

Representatives, working with several Representatives including the current vice-president and president of the House. In her free time, Sofia enjoys visiting family, which for her involves a lot of traveling, and looks for any excuse to dance salsa.

**Project Abstract:**

On the island of Puerto Rico, many new, non-profit organizations fail to achieve their goals of sustaining positive, long-lasting change. This is largely due to a lack of resources that limit their exposure and ability to communicate with their target population and each other. This is especially true for nonprofit organizations in Puerto Rico that focus on women's issues. The negative consequences of this phenomenon include reductions in women's health and safety on the island. While some may consider creating new organizations to serve this population, I will focus my project on supporting existing organizations that support the health and wellness of women. I will do this by collaborating with staff at existing non-profit organizations, key decision-makers, and stakeholders to conduct a needs assessment. I will seek to understand the available services and the needs of women, and how access to and knowledge of these services varies depending upon one's location on different parts of the island. I anticipate creating a database tool that identifies and connects existing organizations that focus on women's health. This can serve as a networking tool to decrease the communication gap between non-profit organizations, as well as the information gap between these organizations and the populations they hope to serve. This tool will also be helpful in identifying underserved issue areas, populations, or regions. Overall, my goal is to identify resources and networking opportunities that will lead to increased exposure and access to critical services that support women's health and wellness on Puerto Rico.

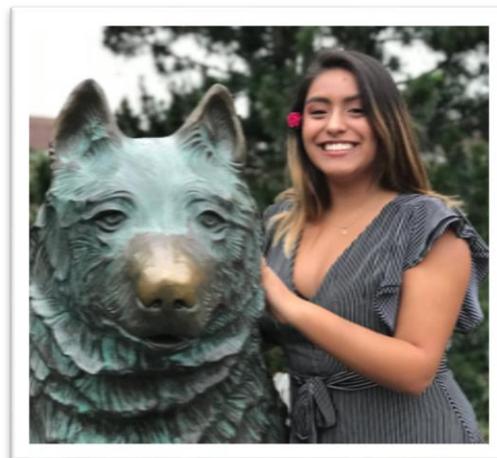


Scholar Profile: Cohort 1

**Valeria Popolizio Torres '20 (CLAS)**

*Political Science and Human Rights*

Born in Lima, Peru, Valeria moved to Manchester, CT at four years old. She is currently the Co-Coordinator for the Mentoring Educating and Training for Academic Success (METAS) Peer Mentoring program, works for the Educational Leadership Department, and is the Director of the Commission on the Status of Women for the University of Connecticut's Model United Nations. She was proud to represent the Puerto Rican/Latin American Cultural Center (PRLACC) in the 2018 Homecoming Pageant as their Homecoming Queen. Just recently, she has begun planning the New England Latinx Student Leadership Conference (NASPA Region I) which will be held at UConn in April 2020. Outside of school, Valeria enjoys attending concerts, going to the beach, being with her friends, family, and beloved dog, Sui.



Project Abstract:

According to data from the U.S. Department of Education, “Hispanic” (the term “Hispanic” is used in the literature, but I will use “Latinx”) undergraduate enrollment rates have “more than doubled” between 2000 and 2015. However, although Latinx students are going to college at a greater rate and graduation rates are increasing, there is still a large disparity between Latinx graduation rates compared to other racialized groups. In addition, there is a discrepancy in college graduation rates for Latinx, students despite increases in enrollment rates. This is due to certain characteristics such as coming from low-income backgrounds, being first generation students, and typically attending “overcrowded and underfunded community colleges or second-tier public universities.” It is critical that we identify what programs can be implemented to fix the educational pipeline that is failing Latinx students and causing this disparity.

The true beginning of the college success process is during the preparation and application phase. This phase can be complicated and overwhelming, and create barriers for underserved Latinx students to attend college. My project will focus on creating a space for underserved Latinx students in Manchester, CT to increase support and resources for these students to successfully navigate the application process, become more aware of the issues that the Latinx community faces within colleges and universities, and be better prepared to attend and graduate from college. By working in collaboration with town leadership, educators, and community service organizations, my project will aim to create opportunities for students to discuss the logistical and social/emotional aspects of college application and attendance. Using the lens of cultural capital, I hope to increase students’ sense of self – giving them more tools to navigate college.



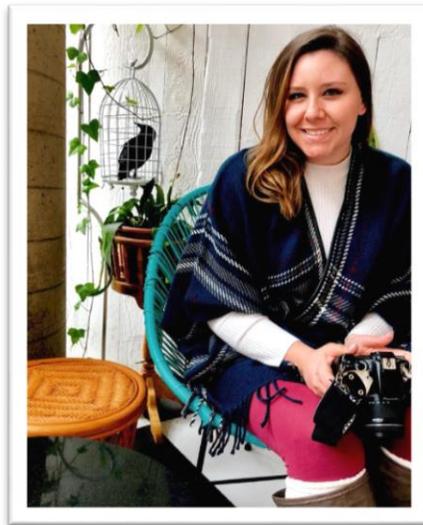
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Scholar Profile: Cohort 1

**Kathleen Renna '20 (CAHNR)**

*Diagnostic Genetic Sciences*

Kathleen is an Honors student from Troy, NY. She currently serves as a College Ambassador for CAHNR with a focus on One Health education in the college. As an ambassador, she helped design a Special Topics course that teaches students about the pillars of One Health. She is also the founding president of Students for One Health, a club established to share the importance of the theory through outreach and advocacy events at UConn and surrounding communities. In addition to these activities, she is also the secretary for United Against Inequities in Disease, a public health-oriented club, and a Student Supervisor for UC Cafés. Currently, Kathleen is an undergraduate research assistant in Dr. Ephraim Trakhtenberg's lab at UConn Health, where she investigates gene expression and its relation to axon regeneration to assist in treating optic neuropathies such as glaucoma and stroke. This research has granted her co-authorship on a publication in Nature Communications and will also be used to write her thesis as a recently selected University Scholar. Outside of her coursework and clubs, Kathleen is an avid photographer and hiker. She also enjoys finding quirky coffee shops and indulging in many seasons of The Great British Baking Show for hours on end.



Project Abstract:

Women earn 50% of all science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) bachelor's degrees awarded each year. However, less than half of these women ultimately end up in a career in STEM. This number decreases even more when considering women who identify as a member of a marginalized race and those of a low socioeconomic status. Numerous hypotheses have been developed that would account for this disparity. I propose that women do not enter STEM professions due to a lack of visible, female representation in their career paths. To begin to tackle this issue, I will develop and implement a workshop series that introduces middle and high school students to women scientists in the genetics profession. I will coordinate and facilitate hands-on diagnostic genetic science experiments led by successful, accomplished, women scientists. Not only will the students participate in educational activities that increase their genetic literacy, they will also be exposed to a diverse representation of women in STEM. I will establish a blog to track the progress of the program. Additionally, the entire process of development and delivery of the project will culminate in a portfolio that I will provide to the University of Connecticut to utilize for future implementations of this project.

[Click here](#) to see the website created to highlight Kathleen's project.



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Scholar Profile: Cohort 2

***Alani Arias '21 (CLAS)***

*Psychological Sciences*

Alani is Puerto Rican and was born and raised in Waterbury, CT. She came to UConn aspiring to be a doctor while being very passionate about community service and assisting the less fortunate. She has been on three service trips thus far during her college career. In 2017, she was a member of the Women in Math, Science, and Engineering Learning Community and was awarded the 100 Years of Women Scholarship from the Women's Center. Alani is a Resident Assistant and a member of the Puerto Rican/Latin American Cultural Center's Peer Mentoring program, the BAILE Dance Team, and the Collegiate Health Service Corps. Over the summer, she shadowed doctors and volunteered at the UConn Migrant Farm Workers Clinic for the second year in a row. For many years, Alani was a competitive gymnast in her hometown. In her free time, she likes to read, watch movies, dance to Spanish music, and travel to new places. As a member of the second BOLD Cohort, Alani plans to explore the discrimination against minorities within the healthcare system, in hopes of educating the community on barriers they face, helping them understand their rights as patients, and advocating for better treatment for themselves.



Scholar Profile: Cohort 2

***Laura Sofia Bedoya '21 (CLAS)***

*Political Science & Latin American Studies*

Laura is a Colombian-American who resides in East Haven, CT. She has extensive experience as an undergraduate research assistant focusing on civil and human rights issues. Through her research experiences, Laura has contributed to the creation of educational equity policy blueprints, as well as an art exhibit on Hartford housing inequity among oppressed groups throughout history. Laura has served her peers as a mentor in several settings on campus, including as a First-Year Experience Mentor and as a Mentor for the Mentoring Educating and Transforming to Achieve Academic Success (METAS) Peer Mentoring Program. Laura is an active member, and the previous Cultural Representative, for UConn's chapter of Por Colombia, which is the largest network of college students with Colombian background in North America. As a member of the second BOLD Cohort, Laura plans to collaborate with The International Movement of Absolute Renewal (MIRA), a Colombian Political Party, to create a policy memo on equal access to education for the country. She hopes to investigate and identify the parallels of educational inequality between the United States and Colombia. After graduation from UConn, Laura plans to pursue a Master's in Public Administration and her long-term professional goal is to become an International Lawyer.



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Scholar Profile: Cohort 2

**Wesia Malik '21 (CLAS)**

*Physiology and Neurobiology*

Born and raised in New Rochelle, NY, Wesia currently resides in Newington, CT. With a passion for serving others, becoming involved in a community that advocates for equal rights, and taking her passion to the next level, she chose UConn's community to guide her in not only exploring her passions, but to shoot for medical school. On campus, Wesia is the treasurer for Honors for Diversity, Medical Humanitarian Society, and Huskies for Haiti. With these leadership positions, she takes a deeper role in advocating for global health and human rights issues. During her free time, she enjoys spending time with family and friends, traveling, and eating! This past summer she visited Maine with her family and simply enjoyed the breathtaking views. Wesia worked for Starbucks this past summer and has enjoyed making crafty beverages, a new passion. As a member of the second BOLD cohort, Wesia hopes to raise awareness about women doctors in telemedicine. After graduating from UConn, Wesia plans to attend medical school, as well as to continue to do humanitarian-relief work in third world countries.



Scholar Profile: Cohort 2

**Natalie Roach '21 (CLAS)**

*Environmental Sciences*

Natalie is from Cheshire, CT. She came to UConn to learn how to best solve social and environmental issues, which are inextricably linked. On campus, she is an officer of Revolution Against Rape, co-chair of the USG Sustainability Subcommittee, a lead organizer of September's Climate Strike, co-facilitator of a Rainbow Center discussion group, and a participant in Community Outreach's alternative breaks. She works at UConn's Office of Sustainability, where she focuses on outreach, environmental justice, office blogs, and more. She is part of this year's UConn@COP25 cohort, which will be traveling to Chile to attend the annual United Nations climate change negotiations. Natalie is also an undergraduate researcher of cross-cultural climate communication as part of UConn's PIRE Project, which focuses on sustainable development in Ethiopia. Outside of UConn, she is a dedicated member of the CT Sierra Club Political Committee. She loves learning, climbing trees, learning about urban farms, baking, and spending quality time with her friends. As a member of the second BOLD cohort, Natalie hopes to bring light to the concept of climate migration and help to create better support systems for people who have been displaced because of climate change. After graduation from UConn, she plans to carry on the mindset of finding community-based, intersectional, and just solutions to environmental and social issues into a career in public service.



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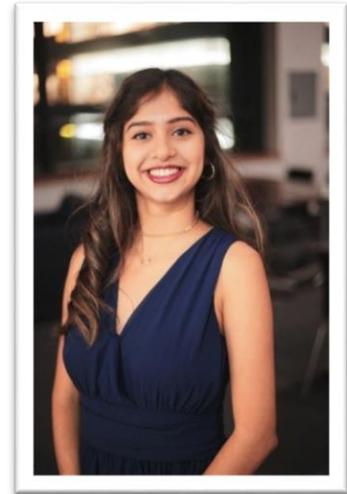
Scholar Profile: Cohort 2

***Simran Sehgal '21 (ENG)***

*Major Biomedical Engineering*

*Minors: Math, Human Rights*

Simran is an Indian American honors student from Westford, MA studying biomedical engineering. She is interested in the intersection between technological advancement and health care delivery. Exploring this field, she pursues research focused on using real-time modeling to predict diseases among hospitalized patients. In addition to her passion for research, Simran enjoys serving the community through her involvement with the Kidney Disease Screening and Awareness Program and Act in Miracles. Additionally, she serves as an undergraduate teaching assistant and a resident assistant. In her free time, she enjoys running, reading, and watching movies. As a member of the second BOLD cohort, Simran is interested in investigating the role of medical technologies in health care delivery, specifically analyzing the barriers that reduce accessibility to medical devices.



Scholar Profile: Cohort 2

***Noor Taweh '21 (CLAS)***

*Physiology and Neurobiology, Human Rights*

Noor came to UConn from Farmington, CT, where she grew up with two Lebanese-immigrant parents. She is an Honors student studying Physiology and Neurobiology and Human Rights, and is motivated by the unique intersection of human rights, cultural identity and its implication in the clinical setting. She actively pursues this field with her work alongside the Yale AIDS program in the School of Medicine where she contributes to manuscript writing, clinical research, and data analysis among vulnerable populations of drug users, HIV/AIDS patients, homeless individuals, and those in the criminal justice system. On campus, Noor is an undergraduate research assistant in the Jackson Lab, which is conducting research on cell types in the lateral hypothalamus (LHA). Outside of school, Noor continues her passion for dance as a choreographer in the UConn Dance Company, as well as a teacher and choreographer for the competition team at Evjen Academy of Performing Arts. Besides dancing, Noor enjoys going to concerts, journaling, and hiking. As a member of the second BOLD cohort, Noor plans to explore the unique experiences of first-generation immigrants and how it has shaped their perspectives and goals. She hopes to create a space for this population on campus where they can reconcile their battling identities.



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Scholar Profile: Cohort 2

***Mara Tu '21 (CLAS)***

*Environmental Science, Urban and Community Studies*

*Minor: Human Development and Family Sciences*

Mara comes to UConn from Cheshire, CT with hopes to be involved on campus as much as possible with her interests in conservation, planning, climate and environmental justice, and social issues. She is an Honors student that values open dialogue, the spread of ideas, and communal energy and hopes these values are reflected in her work around campus and beyond. Mara works at the Office of Sustainability as an intern and is an officer of UConn's EcoHusky and Student Farmworker Alliance. She has been in the UConn Climate Corps independent study program, on UConn Community Outreach alternative breaks, and a member of ChinaCare, Fridays for Future, the USG Sustainability Subcommittee, Chinese Undergraduate Student Association, and UC Chamber. She enjoys working on crossword puzzles (but rarely finishes them), crafting, taking photos, and hanging out with friends. As member of the second BOLD Cohort, Mara hopes to explore how climate change has affected and will affect the mental health of individuals and communities and how these issues should be addressed.

