

SRNDNA Newsletter

Where Are They Now: Chris Benitez, from Duke to UPenn

The Diversity Summer Research Awards are designed to encourage and aid undergraduates from underrepresented backgrounds to spend a summer participating in research. In 2019, one of those students was Christian (Chris) Benitez.

Chris Benitez is a first-generation Hispanic American. Coming from a low-income family, in summer of 2019, Benitez was preparing to find a job to help with finances. The [SRNDNA Diversity Summer Research Award](#) allowed him to continue doing research in the lab instead.

“Receiving funding from SRNDNA allowed me to completely immerse myself in the lab without worrying about how I would contribute financially back home,” he said, stressing the importance of diversity awards like the one from SRNDNA. “For individuals like me, awards like these remove an additional barrier, which allowed me to thrive and focus on what I love doing, research.”

Chris spent his undergrad working in Dr. Greg Samanez-Larkin’s lab at Duke, collecting fMRI and real-world behavioral data. He also developed valuable project management skills that helped him with his research and his education goals. Chris is now in a PhD program at University of Pennsylvania, working with Dr. Joseph Kable in the Integrative Decision Neuroscience Lab.

In addition to being the first in his family to go to college, he is the first to attend grad school.

“I knew [in] my junior year that I wanted to

“Diverse teams contribute to diverse thoughts and perspectives.”



Photo courtesy of Chris Benitez

Going places Chris Benitez received a Diversity Summer Research Award in 2019 while an undergrad at Duke. He is now pursuing a PhD at UPenn.

pursue research as a full-time career,” he said. “Enrolling in a PhD program always felt like the natural next step, regardless of how many detours I needed to take to get here.”

Chris’s career goals are to become a professor and PI, overseeing a decision-making lab to better understand how variations in sociocultural backgrounds interplay with the neural and cognitive mechanisms involved in social and temporal decision-making.

Chris credits the summer of 2019 with kickstarting his interest in research as a career. But it was the support of his mentors — Dr. Samanez-Larkin, Dr.

PILOT GRANT APPLICATIONS ARE OPEN!

What's so special about the Pilot Grant?

What is required? How do I apply?

- Provides initial resources to support a larger grant application
- Priority given to graduate students, postdoc fellows, and junior faculty, especially those from under-represented groups
- Will also consider senior researchers new to the area
- Be at a U.S. institution
- Proposed grant budgets limited to \$24,000 in total costs
- Budget should be allocated to data collection, not salaries
- **Email PDF with 3-page proposal, 1-page line-item budget, and NIH biosketches to SRNDNA@gmail.com by Sept. 15, 2023!!!**

[See website for details](#)

Another Year in the Record Books

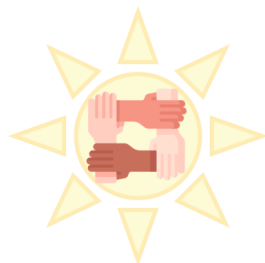
In fiscal 2022, SRNDNA awarded a total of **\$87,560** in pilot grants and awards! How does that break down?

[Pilot Grants \(2\) - \\$47,934](#)

[Collaboration Awards \(2\) - \\$7,000](#)

[Diversity Summer Research Awards \(7\) - \\$24,500](#)

[Open Data Awards \(2\) - \\$8,126](#)



We held our first in-person conference since COVID! We had 6 fantastic speakers, and 34 awesome attendees gather in Santa Barbara, Calif. Be on the lookout for future SRNDNA events!

Chris Benitez

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Kable, and Dr. Emily Falk — who helped him take the sometimes “frightening but exciting” next steps in his life.

“I firmly believe that my journey would not have been possible without scientists and mentors actively seeking and welcoming individuals like me into the scientific field,” Chris said.

Outside the lab, Chris enjoys mentoring students from under-represented groups who, like him, were not exposed to STEM research. He began mentoring when he was an undergrad at Duke and has continued this work in Philadelphia.

“I’d love to create outreach programs to help more underrepresented students get exposure to academic research,” he said. “One of my overarching goals is to give these students a voice in academic research. I want to inspire more people like me to join our growing scientific community.”

Chris laments the cascading events that influence the lack of diverse representation of research communities and the questions that are studied.

“Diverse teams contribute diverse thoughts and perspectives,” he said.