Yale College STARS II Class of 2023

Laiba Akhtar

Hometown: Broken Arrow, OK
Major: Chemical Engineering
Residential College: Branford

Majoring in chemical engineering with pre-med, Laiba is fascinated with the overlap between medicine and engineering. As a member of the Saltzman lab, she studies the use of nanoparticles and polyplexes for medical applications such as drug delivery or gene editing. When she's not studying science, you can find her learning Russian—an unexpected interest that has turned into completing a Russian Language Certificate. Outside of academics, Laiba is actively involved in Pashto interpretation/translation for the Afghan refugee community in New Haven. She's passionate about helping others and is involved in a number of mentorship groups such as a Matriculate and Academic Strategies Mentoring. Laiba spends her free time perfecting her embroidery skills, hanging out with friends, and exploring New Haven.

Fun fact: she can bend her pinky backwards far enough to touch her wrist!

Faiad Alam

Hometown: Houston, TX
Major: Molecular, Cellular, & Developmental Biology
Residential College: Grace Hopper

Faiad currently conducts research surrounding T-cell immunity in the Lucas lab in the Department of Immunobiology. Particularly, he is looking into the gene ELF4 and its role in T-cell inflammatory response. Outside the lab, he is involved in the First-Generation, Low-Income community through Yale's FGLI Advocacy Movement and loves to teach health workshops with Community Health Educators. In his free time, he loves to watch movies, play basketball (Huge Houston Rockets Fan), and try out different foods.

Fun fact: Faiad is a huge movie buff and probably has seen the movie you're planning to watch!

Jaweria Bakar

Hometown: Brooklyn, NY
Major: Molecular, Cellular, & Developmental Biology
Residential College: Trumbull

Jaweria transferred from Kingsborough Community College after completing her associate's degree in biology and joined Yale's Eli Whitney Students Program in the fall of 2020. At Yale, she is conducting research in the Sheltzer lab, where she applies CRISPR to study genetic dependencies in cancer in order to identify new therapeutic vulnerabilities and targets for drug development. Additionally, through CRISPR mutagenesis, she investigates the on-target and off-target effects of different cancer drugs, with profound implications for their clinical use. After completing her bachelor's degree, Jaweria plans to pursue an MD/PhD in genetic engineering and would like to specialize in neurosurgery. She aspires to push the boundaries of science by combining all the skills that she will learn and applying them to reverse the damage caused by stroke and neurodegenerative diseases.

Julia Balch

Hometown: North Salem, NY
Major: Molecular, Cellular, & Developmental Biology
Residential College: Ezra Stiles

Julia’s research project in the O'Donnell lab involves defining a novel microbiome-dependent class of neuroactive glucosides in the function of the *C. elegans* nervous system. She is generally interested in how microbes influence animal behavior and physiology. Outside of the lab, Julia is a member of the Yale women’s fencing team and is involved with the first-year outdoor orientation program FOOT.

Fun Fact: Julia is an avid hiker and is in the process of hiking all 46 of the Adirondack high peaks!

Jay Baptista

Hometown: Lāhaina, HI
Major: Astrophysics
Residential College: Ezra Stiles

Working with the Geha group at Yale, Jay is interested in researching dark matter and the dynamics of galaxies within the Local Group. His research interests seek to answer the large-scale physics of the dark matter particle, and how galaxies (like the Milky Way) are formed. After Yale, Jay hopes to obtain his Ph.D. in astronomy/astrophysics and continue researching galactic dynamics. As an active member of Yale Rotaract, Jay participates in community service initiatives like beach cleanups to international service projects such as providing medical equipment for Syrian refugees. In his spare time, he enjoys reef snorkeling and paddle board surfing.

Danielle Castro

Hometown: Fairfax, VA
Major: Molecular Biochemistry & Biophysics
Residential College: Silliman

Danielle is a BS/MS student in the Crews lab using synthetic chemistry methods to produce drug candidates targeting chordomas, a type of spine cancer. She is passionate about addressing health inequities in developing countries, especially among Indigenous populations. Outside of the lab, she serves as a co-director at the HAVEN Free Clinic, works as the Yale Public School Intern at Fair Haven School, and is co-president of Latina Women at Yale (LWAY).

Fun fact: She’s currently trying to learn guitar!

Cecilia Chak

Hometown: Pinole, CA
Major: Molecular, Cellular, & Developmental Biology
Residential College: Benjamin Franklin

A member of the Yan Lab, Cecilia's research focuses on the biofilm formation of *Vibrio cholerae*. She spends her time in lab growing herself bacteria friends, constructing strains, running PCRs, and doing microscopy work. She loves hanging out at the balcony on the first floor of YSB while her experiments run. Beyond biology, Cecilia enjoys her language studies.
Outside of research and academics, Cecilia works as a student tech coordinator as part of the Student Technology Collaborative (STC). She is involved in American Red Cross at Yale and Yale Undergraduate Prison Project. She loves to take walks around New Haven and take photographs of all sorts of plants.

Fun fact: Cecilia had two baby teeth that were fused together as a child and only one adult tooth that came in after those baby teeth fell out, so she has one less tooth than the average adult.

Peter Choi

Hometown: New York City, NY
Major: Molecular, Cellular, & Developmental Biology
Residential College: Morse

Peter is a pre-medical student interested in cell biology. His research in the Melia Lab focuses on how the pre-autophagosomal compartment maintains its integrity and organization in autophagy. As hobbies, he enjoys playing the guitar and cycling.

Awa Cisse

Hometown: Dakar, Senegal
Major: Molecular, Cellular, & Developmental Biology
Residential College: Trumbull

Under the mentorship of Dr. Amy Bei in the Department of Epidemiology, Awa's research project focuses on accounting for the different SNPs present in a protein that has transmission blocking activity in order to elaborate a malaria vaccine candidate. Her passion is in involving more women in science and fighting gender inequality. She is a redactor for *Amuse-Bouche*, a student run French journal at Yale. During her free time, she enjoys trying new foods and listening to crime and storytelling podcasts.

Sally Jiang

Hometown: Staten Island / Brooklyn, NY
Major: Astrophysics
Residential College: Silliman

Sally is a FGLI student interested in stellar and planetary astronomy related to how stars and planetary systems form and evolve. Her current research involves studying magnetic fields in the Orion Nebula, and exploring how they affect the formation of structures and stars in the region. Sally hopes to either continue into academia and research or work in public outreach and science communication for astrophysics or both after Yale! Besides research, she engages in outreach/teaching with the Yale Education Tutoring Initiative and Women in Physics. She also works as a Student Tech Coordinator for the Yale Student Technology Collaborative!

Fun Fact: All of her favorite films are animated movies!

Katerina Kargioti

Hometown: Serres, Greece
Major: Applied Physics
Residential College: Pauli Murray

Katerina is interested in the intersection of Physics and Electrical Engineering. Her current research at Qulab involves developing a microwave filter for superconducting quantum devices. She is also pursuing a certificate in Energy Studies, and she is interested in the potential impact of quantum computing on sustainability issues. Outside of class, Katerina is passionate about diversity, inclusion and equity in STEM. She serves as the co-president for Women in Physics and a lead academic strategies mentor. In her free time, Katerina likes hiking and biking.

Fun fact: She grew up in a 100-resident village and can drive a tractor.

Lynne Kim

Hometown: Los Angeles, CA
Major: Biomedical Engineering
Residential College: Davenport

Lynne is a biomedical engineering student on the pre-med track. Her research interests lie in cardiac biomechanics and effects of mutations on cardiovascular phenotypes and diseases. As a member of the Integrative Cardiac Biomechanics lab, she is studying the underlying mechanism of myocardial diseases caused by alpha-Tropomyosin (TPM1) mutations. Outside of research, Lynne is a volunteer at the Elder Horizons Program at Yale-New Haven Hospital interacting with Alzheimer's and dementia patients, providing key interventions to prevent delirium, and learning about patient care. In her spare time, Lynne enjoys outdoor climbing, pottery, and drinking tea with friends.

Fun Fact: Lynne eats the whole apple, bottom up!

Miriam Kopyto

Hometown: Woodmere, NY
Major: Molecular Biophysics & Biochemistry
Residential College: Jonathan Edwards

Miriam currently studies immunobiology in the Schatz Lab. Her research focuses on Somatic Hypermutation (SHM), a process in developing B-cells involved in antibody diversification. Miriam is currently working to identify and characterize novel factors of SHM. Miriam is Senior Advisor and Alumni Coordinator of the Yale Student Mental Health Association (YSMHA) and enjoys working on projects to destigmatize mental health on campus. In her free time, Miriam choreographs for danceworks, volunteers at hospice, and sings with Yale's only Jewish a capella group, Magevet.

Fun fact: Orangutans are my favorite animal.

Tenzin Kunsel

Hometown: Kathmandu, Nepal
Major: Biomedical Engineering
Residential College: Ezra Stiles

Kunsel is currently doing research at the Wiznia lab studying the mechanics of the patellofemoral joint. She does this by making 3D models of the articular cartilage of the patellofemoral joint and then accessing the congruence between the cartilages. She is interested in orthopedics and hopes to pursue a career in this field. Outside of the lab, Kunsel loves to dance and learn new languages. She is a part of Yale's only K-pop and open style dance group, Yale Movement. She is also a part of the Yale e-Nable Chapter that focuses on providing free, customizable 3D printed upper limb assistive devices to those in need.

Fun Fact: Kunsel will always say yes to getting boba.

Maxine Mackie

Hometown: Dearborn, MI
Major: Ecology & Evolutionary Biology
Residential College: Morse

Maxine's research in the Ishizuka Lab is dedicated to elucidating the effects of dsRNA sensor agonists on various T-cell surface markers, and how these effects ultimately culminate into a more robust anti-tumor response in the tumor microenvironment. Maxine is both a Palliative Care and Medical Oncology Patient Aide volunteer at Yale-New Haven Hospital, and was heavily involved in the Yale Graduate-Undergraduate Mentorship Initiative as the Program Chair. She also teaches health education with the Community Health Educators. Outside of Yale, she loves to try local New Haven restaurants with her friends.

Fun fact: Maxine has watched over 90 television shows and loves to chat about any of them with whoever is interested!

Jaida Morgan

Hometown: Irvine, CA
Major: Molecular, Cellular, & Developmental Biology
Residential College: Ezra Stiles

Jaida conducts research on small molecule inhibitors as therapeutic agents for chemotherapy-resistant ovarian cancers in the Huang Laboratory. After undergrad, Jaida plans to pursue an MD/MPH program and combine gynecologic oncology practice with cancer prevention/therapy research. Outside of academics, Jaida is a volunteer for HAVEN Free Clinic, part of the HAPPY program, is the co-founder of the Black Pre-Health Organization at Yale, and is a peer liaison at the Afro-American Cultural Center. She is passionate about reducing racial disparities in healthcare, particularly in oncology and cancer research.

Fun Fact: Jaida is a first-degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do.

Josh Nguyen

Hometown: West Des Moines, IA
Major: Molecular, Cellular, & Developmental Biology
Residential College: Grace Hopper

As a researcher in the Choate lab, Josh studies rare inherited and mosaic skin disorders to identify and understand novel, responsible genes. He is also a Peer Liaison at the AACC, a regular volunteer at the HAVEN Free Clinic, and an enthusiastic member of the Yale Outdoors Club and Concert Band. In his free time, he loves to explore campus and the outdoors, play musical instruments, and scroll for way too long on TikTok. He hopes to attend medical school after Yale.

Fun fact: Josh loves to wear his retainer.

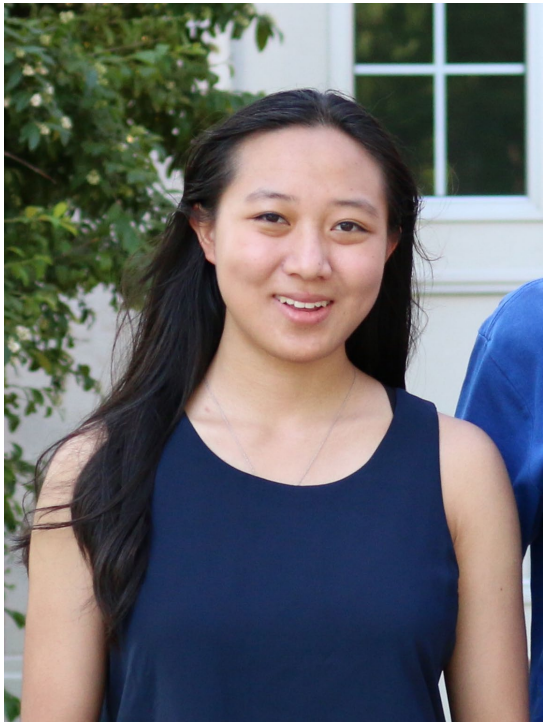
Yu Jun Shen

Hometown: Singapore
Major: Electrical Engineering and Physics
Residential College: Pauli Murray

Yu Jun became interested in quantum computing after taking a first-year physics class, and is now doing research with Professor Abhishek Bhattacharjee on the topic of quantum cognition. Yu Jun has explored various quantum computer programs that simulate human decision making processes. Outside of lab, Yu Jun also worked on the Yale CubeSat project and likes to play historical board games.

Fun fact: His favourite snack is potato chips.

Jennifer Wang



Hometown: Cleveland, OH
Major: Molecular, Cellular, & Developmental Biology
Residential College: Benjamin Franklin

As a member of the Ring lab, Jennifer is developing a technology that lets researchers study biology at the high resolution of single cells and at the high dimensionality of all genes and cell-surface proteins. This work has applications anywhere from research in cancer to development. Outside of lab, Jennifer enjoys learning about data science and machine learning, doing computational modeling of learning in the Clinical and Affective Neuroscience Lab, and getting New Haven public schoolers excited about STEM through Pathways and Yale's first Immunology Day.

Fun fact: in lab, Jennifer uses nanobodies – which are very small antibodies originally found in camels, alpacas, and sharks. Sadly, she has yet to see any of these animals in her time at Yale.

Allison Cairns

STARS II Graduate Coordinator

Allison is from Santa Ana, CA and completed her Bachelor's Degree in Physics at Portland State University (OR). She is a third-year PhD student in Applied Physics and Physical Engineering Biology. She works in The Clark Lab (neuroscience) studying vision in drosophila. She uses two-photon microscopy and does behavior experiments. After Yale, she plans to become a professor so she can inspire others to join STEM fields and consider interdisciplinary research. She has a passion for teaching and research.

Fun Fact: Even though Allison's entire family eats meat, she was born a super stubborn baby that wouldn't eat meat and has been vegetarian ever since.

Cathy Carolina Garcia

STARS II Graduate Coordinator

Born and raised in South Central Los Angeles, CA, Cathy is a 5th-year PhD candidate in the Genetics Department and the Yale Cancer Biology Institute. She is interested in studying how obesity increases the risk of cancer. As a member of the Muzumdar lab, Cathy studies how obesity promotes pancreatic cancer progression through an endocrine-exocrine signaling axis. She aspires to enter academia and support URM students along their journey in STEM.

Fun fact: when not in lab, you can find Cathy with her two furbabies. She has a 12-year-old tuxedo cat, Nene, and a 1.5-year-old Pomsky, Bumi.

Alyssa Mitson-Salazar

STARS II Graduate Coordinator

Originally from Manassa, CO, Alyssa attended Yale College as a QuestBridge Scholar and studied Molecular, Cellular, and Developmental Biology. Thanks to the STARS summer program, she spent three years studying DNA damage repair in the laboratory of Dr. Gary Kupfer. Upon graduating, she worked as an IRTA postbaccalaureate fellow at the National Institutes of Health for two years, where she studied human Th2 cells in allergic disease. She returned to Yale in 2014 to pursue an MD/PhD. Now in the PhD phase of her training, Alyssa studies regulatory T cells in intestinal homeostasis and allergy in the laboratory of Dr. Ruslan Medzhitov.