

VOL. 7 | FALL 2024

BIOLOGY (NUCLEO)TIDINGS

News from the Biology Department at Northeastern Illinois University



Stay in touch! Email us at biology@neiu.edu with news, updates, and stories you'd like to share!



LinkedIn

We're now on LinkedIn! If you're a past or present student of our program, give us a follow. We'd love to keep in touch and know what you're doing!

GIVING TUESDAY

This Giving Tuesday, you have a unique chance to make a lasting difference for our NEIU Biology students. Thanks to the generosity of our alumnus Dr. Mickey Drachler, **every donation (up to \$1,000 per individual gift) will be matched**, dollar for dollar, with no limit! Your gift—whether \$25 or \$1,000—will go twice as far, providing critical scholarship funds for deserving biology students. Please consider NEIU Biology students in your charitable giving on December 3, a global day of giving. **Let's make this Giving Tuesday one to remember!**

Message from the Chair

Exciting news: two new accelerated pathways allow biology majors to earn their master's degrees faster and more affordably! Students advance their careers sooner, whether in scientific research or teaching.

- **Accelerated Biology B.S./M.S. Track:** This path leads to a Master of Science in Biology- advanced training for careers in molecular biology, genetics, microbiology, ecology, botany, zoology, and more.
- **Accelerated Teaching Track:** For those interested in high school teaching, this path leads to a Master of Arts in Teaching-Secondary Education, including teacher licensure.

Eligible students can begin taking graduate courses in their junior or senior year, with up to 12 credits counting toward both degrees. Reach out to BioGradPrograms@neiu.edu for more info!

Sincerely,
Dr. Jennifer Slate

Undergraduate Student Spotlight



Alicia Thompson is a biology undergraduate doing research in Dr. Cindy Voisine's Lab and a McNair and MARC Scholar.

Why did you choose NEIU?

When I was ready to go back to school, I started looking at UIC and NEIU. I went to an open house and stopped at the Biology table. One minute into the conversation with the professor and I knew this would be the school I call home. I was simply asked what I wanted to do with a biology degree and when I answered research the professor gave me a whole walk through of how I should structure the next two years of my education. And when they were done they walked me over to the McNair table where I again met people passionate about my academic success. After a long conversation and more academic planning, I found a corner, filled out the application and handed it in. If that hour of interaction was what 2-3 years would be like as

a student, I knew NEIU was the school I wanted to call home.

What made you choose biology as a major?

I think like a lot of kids from immigrant families, I wanted to go into medicine because I liked science, but when I dropped out of school, I was lucky enough to work at museums and learn more about the different career paths Biology has to offer. When it was time to go back to school, I chose Biology as a major because during my time out of school, I started learning about microbiology. Infectious diseases are a big interest to me so I choose Biology as a major to take the classes needed to apply to a PhD program. Ultimately, I would like to earn a PhD so that I can become a researcher with a focus on harmful pathogens.

What is your favorite thing about being in science?

My favorite thing about science is that it is multifaceted. Science is more than just learning that the mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell. Science works well when we collaborate with others, find new and exciting ways to share knowledge with others, and never stop being open to learning through failure. Science isn't confined into a single box, and that is why it is my favorite thing.



Dr. Dennis Hall (center) visits NEIU's greenhouse with Drs. Steve Frankel (left) and Joel Olfelt (right), who carry forward his legacy in botany education. A special moment with mentors past and present!

Dr. Dennis Hall: Emeritus Faculty

We were thrilled to welcome retired professor Dr. Dennis Hall back to NEIU this past summer for his first visit in twenty-four years! Dr. Hall, who taught biology at NEIU from 1968-1999, was delighted to see our newly remodeled lab spaces. He was impressed by the students' research projects displayed in the hallways, which brighten the space and highlight the department's dynamic research culture. Dr. Hall also enjoyed walking through the campus's restored natural areas, including the prairie and white oak savanna, and noted that the new parking structure and reduced pavement give campus a greener, more welcoming feel. Conversations with biology faculty during his visit were a highlight, and he lost track of time. His message to today's students: "Enjoy learning and be kind to one another." We hope to see him back again soon!

Faculty/Staff Spotlight:

Sara Crow is the Natural Science Technical Assistant. She is also a Masters student in the NEIU Biology program, and an undergrad alum of the NEIU biology program.



What is your favorite part about working at NEIU?

What I enjoy most is working with the undergraduate students. As someone who found the material challenging during my own undergraduate years, I appreciate the opportunity to support students as they navigate their academic journeys. It's incredibly rewarding to help them build the skills and confidence they'll carry with them long after they leave the classroom.

Watching students grow, overcome obstacles, and bring fresh perspectives to the field reminds me why I love what I do.

What is your favorite part of doing science?

As a kid, I was always curious, constantly asking "why." Through my job and my research on turtles, I now have the tools and resources to keep exploring those questions. What I love most is how answering one question often leads to new ones—it feels like working on a giant, ever-evolving jigsaw puzzle. Each discovery brings me one step closer to seeing the bigger picture, and that process keeps me motivated and excited.

How has the science you do influenced who you are?

As an undergraduate, I discovered my passion for research in a Phycology class with Dr. Slate. My group studied algae on snapping turtles, and Dr. Slate left me a note on a lab report (I still have it) encouraging me to pursue research. Working in the Slate lab allowed me to explore algae further, and presenting our findings at symposiums and conferences helped me build confidence in both myself and my work.

When I started working at NEIU during the pandemic lockdowns, I worked with Kip Conwell, the Biology Lab Manager, to adapt lab activities into kits for students to use at home. This experience taught me to think creatively and find new solutions under challenging circumstances. Over time, I've come to appreciate how essential NEIU's community is. I often troubleshoot with other research labs and seek input from my colleagues, and I try to pass that support forward by helping students on their own academic paths. Their fresh perspectives inspire me, knowing they'll bring new ideas to the field.

My work in the Reinke lab has also been transformative.

Through hands-on field research, I've learned not only technical skills but also the importance of staying flexible and letting go of the habit of

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Positive Feedback Loops

Biology students gave excellent talks and posters at the 16th Annual SCSE Student Research Symposium this September!

Odmaa Grammenos (Class of 2018) got their Master of Science in Nursing as class valedictorian!

Howra Alzorfy (Class of 2024) was accepted to the Rush University College of Nursing!

Nina Irani (Class of 2024) was accepted into a PhD program in Microbiology at UIUC!

Jason Block won the Best Student Presentation at the 2024 Wisconsin Wetlands Association Conference!

Cassandra Ceballos received the Bernard J. Brommel Doctoral Scholarship for her PhD work at UW-Madison!

Dr. Aaron Schirmer was named a Fulbright Specialist in Biology Education and was approved for a Fulbright award to continue his work with the University of Warsaw in Poland for 2025!

Biology faculty **Elyse Bolterstein, Emily Booms, John Kasmer, Corey Palmer, Cheryl Park, Beth Reinke, Aaron Schirmer, and Cindy Voisine**, received Excellence Awards for Research, Teaching, or Service in the 2021 and 2022 school years!

Nkosi Evans (Class of 2023) co-authored a paper with **Dr. Tom Campbell** from their work at the Field Museum!

over-apologizing. Each step in my journey has shaped how I approach challenges, deepened my love for science, and reinforced my passion for mentoring the next generation of scientists.

What else do you want students to know about you?

As part of my master's program, I'm working on a research thesis in the Reinke lab. My project explores how anthropogenic noises (conversations, traffic, and construction) affect nesting painted turtles (*Chrysemys picta*) and their offspring. For this study, I spent two weeks camping to collect stress and behavioral data from the mothers and gather their eggs to hatch back on campus.

I'm excited to share that 239 turtle eggs successfully hatched! The hatchlings went through the same behavioral tests as their mothers and are currently being overwintered. In the spring, they'll be released back at the site where we originally collected them. This hands-on experience has been incredibly rewarding and has deepened my understanding of both fieldwork and lab-based research.



Northeastern
ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
Biology

FALL PLANT SALE

Indoor Plants for Home and Office!

Open on Wednesday
November 6th, from 10-4pm

At the Student Union across from
Café Descartes

*Proceeds from the sale support activities in the
NEIU Greenhouse!*

Congratulations to our recent graduates!

BIOLOGY MASTERS

December 2023
Gallagher, Johnie
Martin, Antoine

May 2024

Block, Jason
Irani, Nahid
Macnider, Joseph
Swedberg, Kristin

BIOLOGY MAJORS

December 2023

Aceves, Monika
Aref, Mohammad
Attia, Sana
Baste, Yusef
Curzio, Odalis
Dawood, Junaid
Figueroa, Estefania
Figueroa, Ramiro
Galdamez, Diana
Ghanimah, Rabia
Hassan, Mahmoud
Krechner, Agnetta
Perello, Miriam
Robles, Teresa

Roman, Giselle
Roman, Jonathan
Ruiz, Alejandra
Sabbah, Lydia
Villanueva, Leonardo

May 2024

Alfaqih, Sarah
Alzorfy, Howra
Badran, Lythe
Bilal, Anum
Flores, Julian
Garcia, Yuvica
Hasan, Nader
Jimenez, Angelica
Kisiel, Karolina

Lipana, Clare Geenen
Lotesto, Vincent
Martinez, Luis
McWhorter-Pusateri, Moira
Morales, Ivan
Morales, Javier
Phelan, Maggie
Portokalis, Nicholas
Puig, Miranda
Rice, Kimberly
Rivera, Ivan
Salgado, Jason
Scott-Haines, Jonathan
Shammari, Sabah
Singleton, Naomi*
Vega, Caren

Waychoff, Sara

August 2024

Boudakh, Dinkha
Numanovic, Dzana
Saadeh, Nisreen
Sackman, Emmanuel
Shumilina, Maria

BIOLOGY MINORS

December 2023

Hernandez, Andrea
Kovach, Edward
Navarro, Angela

May 2024

Hamp, Liam
Hunt, Jeremiah

August 2024

Chuquimarca, Lesly

*denotes double major



Follow us to learn more about what is happening in Biology!