Brooklyn College Cancer Center

ANNUAL REPORT 2025–2026

Brooklyn College Cancer Center

Brooklyn College

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

I am happy to share the Brooklyn College Cancer Center's Annual Report for Fiscal Year 2026. I have been the director for one year, and I continue to be honored to have been appointed by the academic leadership of Brooklyn College to serve in this role.

It is a delight to report a year of transition, revitalized momentum, and progress for the center. One facet of our mission is to reduce the burden of cancer through research, education, and service.

This academic year has marked a new chapter for the Brooklyn College Cancer Center. We have strengthened our research infrastructure, expanded opportunities for student training, and enabled community and clinical partners across Brooklyn. We at the Cancer Center are devoted to fostering innovation, collaboration, and equity in cancer research and outreach.

In this report, we highlight our accomplishments, including the support of graduate and undergraduate student researchers and grants for faculty to support their research. Indeed, we are highly dedicated to our students and faculty. We are eager to educate on cancer prevention and treatment, keeping the needs of our local community in mind.

As we look to the next academic year, we will continue our efforts in obtaining funding, advancing cancer research efforts, and connecting to community partnerships with a major focus on the borough of Brooklyn.

I appreciate your interest and support of the Brooklyn College Cancer Center.

Sincerely,

Alexander Greer, Ph.D.
Director, Brooklyn College Cancer Center

"The Brooklyn College Cancer Center reflects the very best of our mission as a public, urban college: advancing rigorous research, expanding opportunity for students, and serving the health needs of our communities. Through its interdisciplinary work, commitment to student training, and partnerships across Brooklyn and beyond, the center is helping to strengthen the pipeline of cancer researchers and improve public understanding of cancer prevention, treatment, and health equity. I am proud to support this important work and grateful to the students, staff, faculty, partners, and donors whose dedication continues to move the center forward."

—Michelle J. Anderson, President, Brooklyn College

MISSION

The Brooklyn College Cancer Center (BCCC) is a campus-based initiative dedicated to advancing cancer research, education, and community outreach. Through interdisciplinary collaboration with faculty and students, BCCC translates scientific discoveries into real-world applications while supporting academic and professional development.

INTEGRATION

Core research areas include computational drug design, anticancer therapeutics, epigenetics, nanotechnology, inflammation, and photomedicine—targeting such cancers as ovarian, breast, head and neck, prostate, glioma, and mesothelioma. BCCC actively engages funders across foundation, government, and corporate sectors, aligning with Brooklyn College's capital projects to create mutual benefits for the center and the broader campus.

THREE-PRONGED APPROACH

1. **College**
   BCCC fosters interdisciplinary research and education, preparing students for careers in science and health care while advancing impactful cancer research.
2. **Community**
   Rooted in Brooklyn's diverse neighborhoods, BCCC promotes cancer education, early detection, and career pathways in advocacy and care.
3. **Business**
   BCCC supports innovation through technology transfer, entrepreneurship, and small business development in areas such as medical devices, computational tools, and drug discovery.

In 2025, the center hosted a series of 13 scientific seminars that brought together students, faculty, and researchers to explore pressing questions at the intersection of cancer science, nutrition, and public health. These gatherings created space for interdisciplinary dialogue—fueling new ideas while exposing emerging scholars to the latest advances shaping the field.

Beyond the campus, the center's work extended into the community through 10 outreach events focused on cancer prevention and health equity. Reaching more than 600 participants, these efforts connected individuals—particularly those from underserved communities—with accessible, evidence-based information about their health. Through screenings, discussions, and resource-sharing, participants gained practical tools to make more informed decisions for themselves and their families.

This work is made possible by strong collaboration across Brooklyn College, including partnerships with the departments of Biology, Chemistry and Biochemistry, Physics, and Health and Nutrition Sciences. These relationships reflect a shared commitment to breaking down silos and advancing a more integrated approach to cancer research and education.

RESEARCH AND COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

BCCC-CURE includes 25 faculty (16 cancer-focused), one clinician scientist partner, two postdoctoral scholars, about 20 doctoral candidates, six master's students, four research assistants, and about 40 undergraduates. Every year, about 30 students participate in health education and outreach through partnerships with medical institutions.

RESEARCH SPANS THREE AREAS:

1. **Cancer Biology and Biochemistry**
2. **Drug Development and Delivery, and Medical Device Development**
3. **Patient-Oriented Research**

Faculty come from the departments of Chemistry and Biochemistry, Biology, Health and Nutrition Sciences, Psychology, and Computer and Information Science. Key partners include Brooklyn College School of Natural and Behavioral Sciences Dean Peter Tolias, CUNY Graduate Center Dean for the Sciences Brian Gibney, and community collaborator Associate Professor Michael Menser. BCCC also works with Brooklyn College's Immigrant Student Success Office, Haitian Studies Institute, Caribbean Program, Health Programs Office, and Health Clinic, co-hosting events and initiatives across departments.

GENERAL FUNCTIONING OF THE CENTER

BCCC-CURE has streamlined administrative operations, including overseeing research foundation accounts for interns, scholars, and events. We have promotional efforts including flyer design, social media updates, and production of outreach and fundraising materials.

CONNECTING DISCOVERY TO IMPACT: RESEARCH, EDUCATION, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION OF CANCER RESEARCHERS

At the Brooklyn College Cancer Center, we are deeply committed to fostering innovation while preparing the next generation of cancer researchers and public health leaders. Over the past year, we have significantly expanded our training ecosystem, creating new opportunities for students at every stage, from high school through graduate education, to engage meaningfully in cancer research, community outreach, and translational science.

A cornerstone of our training efforts is the BCCC-CURE seminar series, which exposes students to both scientific discovery and real-world applications. Highlights included a lecture by Alexander Greer, professor of chemistry and biochemistry and director of the Brooklyn College Cancer Center, titled "From Lab Discovery to Business: An Introduction to Entrepreneurship for Researchers at Brooklyn College." This seminar bridged the gap between academic research and innovation-driven enterprise. In addition, Martin Hogan, CEO of Windsor Tough, led an impactful session on leukemia and stem cell donor registration, expanding student engagement in community health advocacy.

We are proud to partner with Saranna Belgrave-Banton, program director of the Gray STEM Scholars Program, whose students are actively engaged with the center. Their participation in BCCC seminars and programming reflects our growing commitment to inclusive excellence and sustained pathways into cancer research careers.

Experiential learning remains central to our mission. This year, four undergraduate students—Eniola Adiat, Desmond Kraynak, Mia Muskan, and Nikeisha Paul—received community outreach internship awards. These students designed and implemented innovative two-month social media campaigns focused on the prevention of breast, cervical, colorectal, and prostate cancers. Their work culminated in presentations at the Brooklyn College Annual Student Health and Wellness Fair, demonstrating the power of student-led science communication to impact public health awareness.

Twenty-seven students are enrolled in the Honors Senior Thesis Colloquium (SPCM 3185), with sections taught by Professor KC Johnson (History) and Professor Cheryl Carmichael (Psychology). The colloquium has been running in its present form for 48 years, providing generations of Brooklyn College students with rigorous research training and mentorship. In addition, students participating in the colloquium had their projects accepted for presentation at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR), underscoring the exceptional quality of undergraduate scholarship at Brooklyn College. Accepted projects explored a wide range of topics, including the role of exercise in cancer prevention and aromatherapy as a supportive intervention for breast cancer patients.

PROFILE

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

At the Brooklyn College Cancer Center, post-baccalaureate Gulnara Zaynullina '05 takes on a role usually reserved for advanced researchers through hands-on lab work and mentorship.

Zaynullina graduated from Brooklyn College two decades ago with a double major in political science and philosophy and law. After building a successful women-owned wholesale business, she decided to make a deliberate career shift, returning to her alma mater on a pre-med track in pursuit of work that would allow her to make a meaningful difference in people's lives.

It was in a Biology I lab course taught by Assistant Professor Cevher that Zaynullina became interested in an experiment. It required students to transfer the microscopic organisms under a microscope without damaging them. "Many students find the experiment challenging, but Dr. Cevher guided me through the process and taught me patience and proper technique," says Zaynullina. "That experience made me want hands-on research, and it made his lab feel like the right place to learn."

After the course ended, she asked whether she could join Professor Cevher's lab. She had no prior research experience

(Left to right) Gulnara Zaynullina '05 and Assistant Professor Murat Cevher

beyond coursework, but she was eager to learn and was accepted in spring 2025. She quickly found herself working alongside graduate students on active research projects, gaining practical experience in cancer research through nuclear extract preparation, tissue culture and insect cell handling, and participation in a project examining metallothioneins, proteins that help cells regulate essential metals such as zinc.

The research project in Cevher's lab explored how metallothioneins may interact with the Mediator complex, a group of proteins that helps control gene activity. This interaction reveals a previously undiscovered layer of gene regulation. Because maintaining a proper metal balance is critical for healthy cell function, understanding these interactions could provide new insights into diseases such as cancer.

"Working in the lab showed me how scientific discoveries begin with a question and develop through experimentation," Zaynullina said.

That level of involvement is intentional. "Students like Gulnara are integral to the lab," says Cevher, who has won the Brooklyn College Excellence in Scholarly and Creative Achievement, the BCCC-CURE/Gray BRCA-Related Cancers Research Award, and recently the Feliks Gross Award for Outstanding Research for Assistant Professors. "They contribute meaningfully to experiments and help move projects forward. They also learn by training one another and working as a team."

That collaborative approach is matched by concrete opportunities that allow students to sustain and deepen their research over time. Supported by funds from a Gray Foundation grant to Brooklyn College, Zaynullina was able to continue working in Cevher's lab over the summer. In addition to lab research, the summer program included weekly meetings focused on exploring career paths in science and medicine and on preparing for graduate school.

"The impact of the Cancer Center has been tremendous. In less than a year, I've seen incredible growth in myself—not just in how I work in the lab, but in how I think about my future."

— Gulnara Zaynullina

Zaynullina has also become an unofficial ambassador for undergraduate research, answering fellow students' questions about how they might get involved. She directs them to the Cancer Center and to opportunities within Cevher's lab. Students who benefit from its support often become conduits, helping to build a larger, more engaged research community. Her willingness to guide other students reflects the mentorship she has received throughout her time in the lab.

"The confidence and support Dr. Cevher's mentorship has provided has been transformative," states Zaynullina.

PROFILE

RESEARCH IN ACTION: PRISCILLA RAMCHAND EXPLORES THE MOLECULAR ROOTS OF DISEASE

Macaulay Honors student and Goldwater Scholar at Brooklyn College Priscilla Ramchand '26 has built a sustained research path using epigenetics and mentorship. She finished her final semester at Brooklyn College much the same way she had spent much of her undergraduate career—immersed in research, asking careful questions, and thinking deeply about how disease works at the molecular level.

Ramchand's academic journey has been shaped by sustained scientific inquiry and close mentorship, particularly through her work in the lab of Associate Professor of Chemistry and Biochemistry Mariana Torrente, a member of the Brooklyn College Cancer Center faculty. Rather than pursuing brief research experiences, Ramchand set out early to find a lab where she could build a lasting mentorship relationship with a principal investigator.

MODELING HUMAN DISEASE

Ramchand uses yeast cells, simple organisms commonly used in research because they share many basic cellular processes with human cells.

"Yeast is useful because many of the basic cellular processes inside yeast cells are very similar to those inside human neurons," she says. "The model makes it easier to study what happens when a protein is produced in excess, a hallmark of ALS, without all the complexity of the human brain."

Much of her work examines the epigenome—how DNA is organized inside the cell. The lab is now testing a drug that modifies the epigenome to see whether loosening that DNA structure can help cells recover and remain healthy. At the same time, Ramchand is studying how the protein aggregation contributes to cellular damage.

Ramchand's work takes place within a broader research environment shaped by the BCCC. That context has helped her recognize how similar molecular problems can underlie very different diseases.

Within the Torrente Lab, related projects examine defects in DNA repair in ALS models—pathways that are also central to cancer development.

Defects in DNA repair are also a major driver of cancer. Those findings could have important applications beyond neurodegenerative disease."

— Priscilla Ramchand

MENTORSHIP AND EXPANDING RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Equally important to Ramchand has been mentorship. "Dr. Torrente supports each student's individual goals by helping them access the resources they need," Ramchand says. "That personalized mentorship has been essential in helping us build confidence and plan our next steps."

In addition to her lab work, Ramchand was a participant in the NIH-funded URISE program, which supports students preparing for Ph.D. and M.D.-Ph.D. paths by providing mentorship and exposure to the broader scientific community.

Having completed her undergraduate studies, Ramchand is less focused on summarizing accomplishments than on building from the foundation she established at the BCCC.

There, she learned how progress in science takes shape—through persistence, iteration, and careful inquiry—and it is this understanding she brings with her into the next stage of her career.

ADVANCING FACULTY-LED DISCOVERY AND MENTORSHIP

Building on this student-centered momentum, BCCC also invests in faculty-driven research opportunities that directly strengthen the training pipeline. Through the BCCC–Gray Foundation BRCA Cancer Research Awards, five faculty researchers—professors Anjana Saxena and Shaneen Singh, and assistant professors Murat Cevher, Garumma Feyissa, and Ankit Jain—were supported in advancing innovative cancer research while simultaneously mentoring undergraduate students who also received awards, reinforcing a culture of collaborative, multilevel training. In parallel, three pilot grants were awarded through the American Chemical Society (ACS) Cancer Research Institutional Development Grant, led by Principal Investigator Professor Maria Contel, enabling faculty to pursue new lines of inquiry and generate the preliminary data that drives future discovery. Together, these investments ensure that cutting-edge research and student mentorship remain deeply interconnected at BCCC, accelerating both scientific progress and the development of the next generation of cancer researchers.

Priscilla Ramchand '26

PROFILE

INVESTING IN DISCOVERY: ACCESS IS THE CATALYST

At the Brooklyn College Cancer Center, Professor of Biology Anjana Saxena turns mentorship into momentum.

Pathways into scientific research are at the heart of the BCCC's mission, and Professor Saxena has been instrumental in making that vision a reality. As a cancer biologist, she has worked to bring undergraduate and graduate students into impactful, publishable research while mentoring them toward long-term careers in science and medicine. "Opportunity doesn't just occur," she says. "It has to be intentionally built."

That way of thinking carries into her science as well. Saxena focuses on aggressive cancers like triple-negative breast cancer. Her research looks at the molecular signals allowing cancer cells to resist chemotherapy and radiation, with the aim of identifying potential targets for more effective treatment. But despite her lab's ongoing work studying the biology of cancer, Saxena is also clear that the people who do the work are just as important as the findings themselves.

"Science isn't just data," she says. "It's who gets the chance to ask the questions."

This vision is heavily influenced by her work at the center, an interdisciplinary effort to link research, education, and real-world impact. In Saxena's laboratory, undergraduates and graduate students make up the backbone of daily research. Many come with little or no lab experience. Some are managing school, jobs, and family. Saxena does not think of being a mentor as a temporary apprenticeship but as a sustained process of intellectual growth. "Students don't enter knowing what they're capable of," she says. "They discover it through doing the work, making mistakes, and being taken seriously."

At Saxena's lab, students aren't restricted to typical tasks. They design experiments and analyze results, and like scientists in any laboratory, must sometimes rethink explanations when data runs counter to the original hypothesis. Students are often co-authors on publications and present their work at conferences, such as that of the American Associations for Cancer Research (AACR), the CellBio of the American Society of Cell Biology (ASCB) and the European Molecular Biology Organization, and the Protein Society annual meeting. "If they've earned it, they should own it," Saxena says. "That ownership changes the way they see themselves."

The center makes this level of student engagement possible by providing structural support that breaks down common barriers to participation.

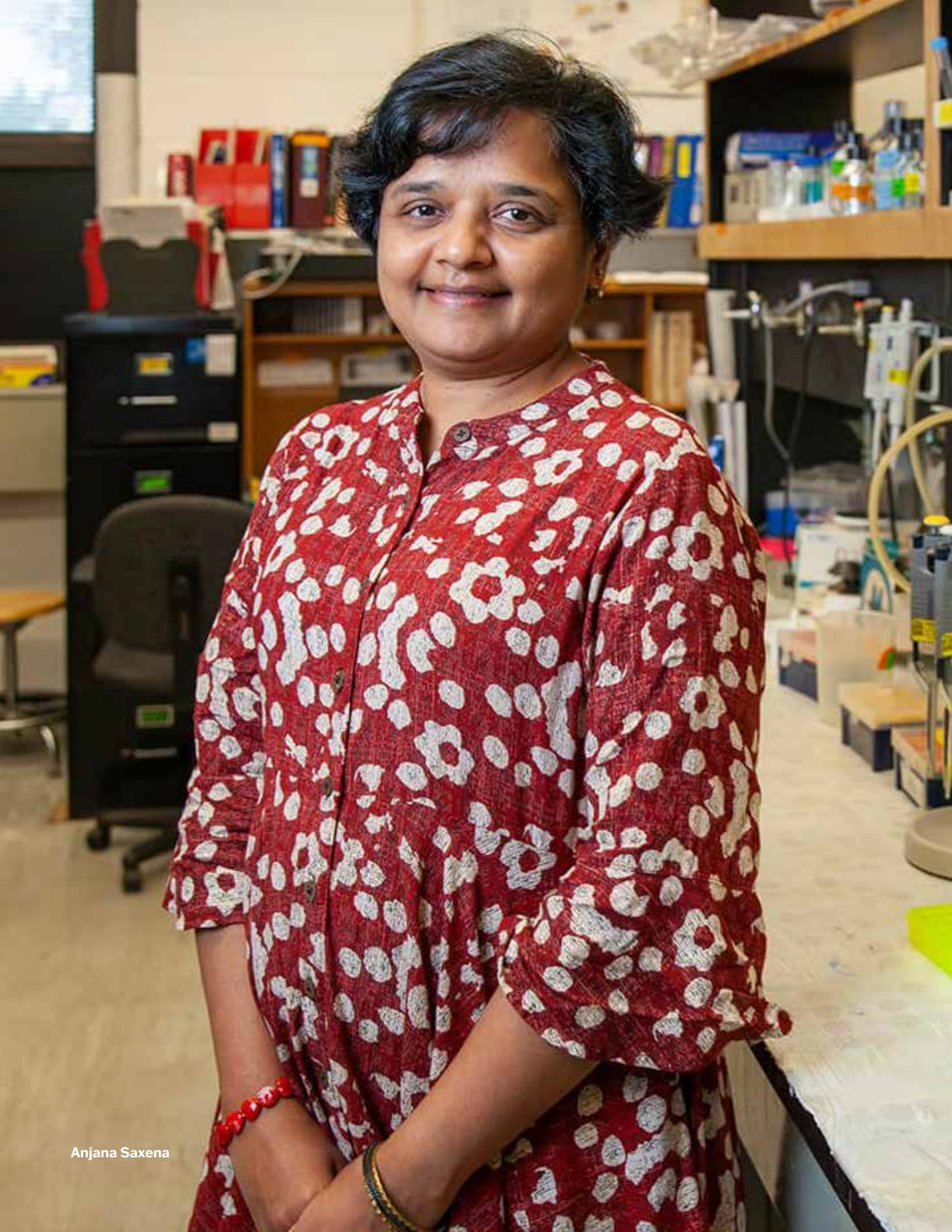
Using grants and collaborations with other nonprofits, including the American Cancer Society and the Gray Foundation, students receive stipends that allow them to focus on research rather than unpaid labor. Providing those resources is part of the center's broader commitment to campus academic and professional development. "The center is not just a building," says Saxena. "It's an infrastructure for opportunity. It shows students that their time and ideas matter."

Those stipends and access to funded, mentored research are real-life opportunities.

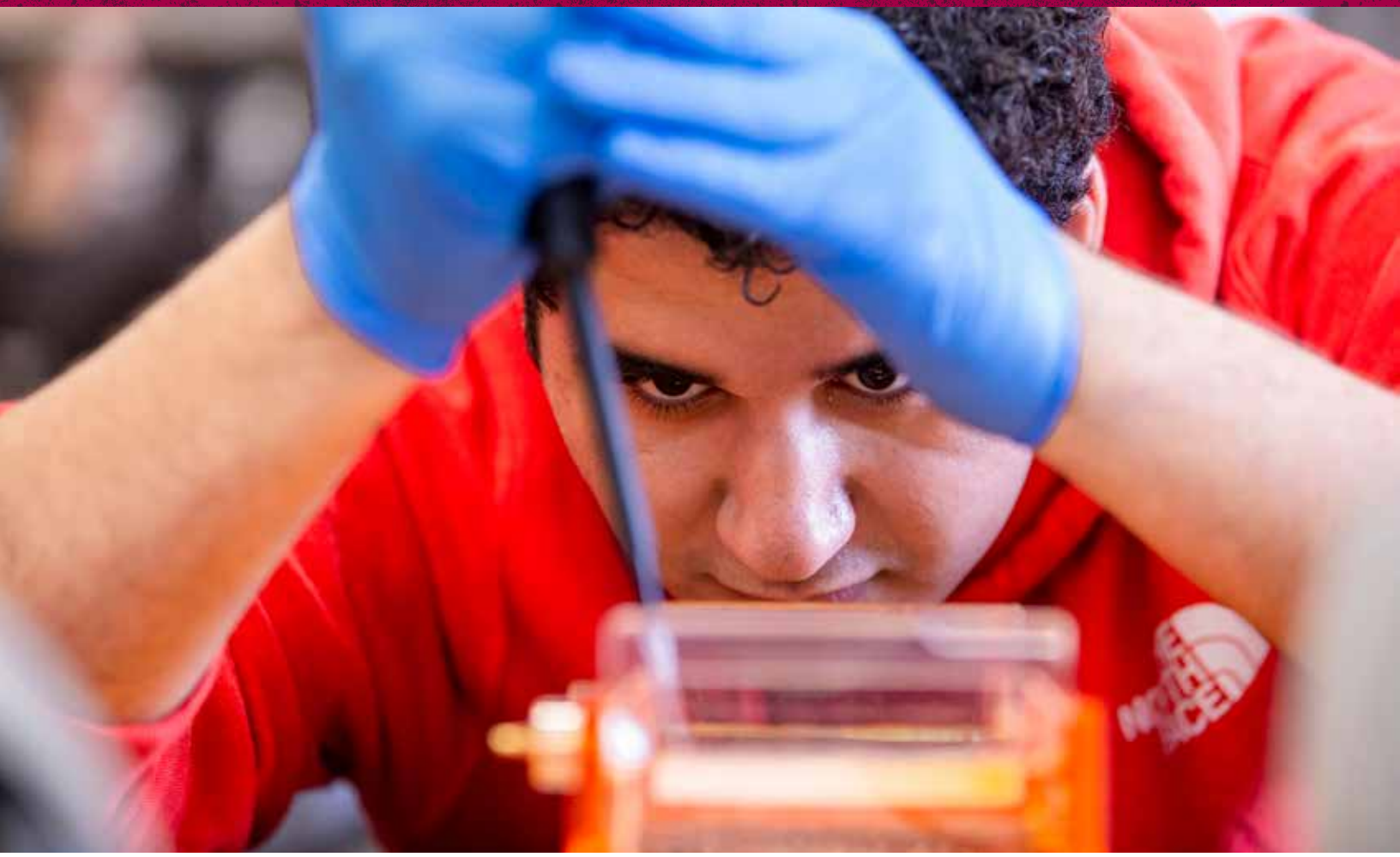
Students from Saxena's lab go on to medical school, dental school, Ph.D. and master's programs, careers in pharmaceutical companies, and biotechnology and drug development. The training also enables students to secure other fellowships and awards such as the Rosen and Tow fellowships. One student was awarded a Fulbright scholarship, and others presented their work for the first time at national scientific meetings. Saxena stays in touch with many of them long after graduation.

"I still get emails years later," she says. "They tell me, 'I didn't think I belonged in science until this lab.' That stays with you." Saxena believes that students need to see themselves as valued contributors in the classroom. Her coursework asks students to make complex scientific concepts accessible through public service announcements or brief community presentations. The goal of these assignments isn't only clarity but connection. "If you cannot tell a nonscientist why cancer research is important," she says, "you don't fully understand it yet."

The emphasis on helping students understand the significance of cancer research reflects Saxena's commitment to addressing health disparities; it is a key aspect of her research



Anjana Saxena



and teaching. Brooklyn is home to diverse communities that face unequal access to early diagnosis and care. Saxena wants her students to recognize how biology connects with social realities. “Cancer doesn’t exist in a vacuum,” she explains. “It exists in bodies, families, and neighborhoods. Students need to appreciate that context.”

To this end, Saxena regularly participates in community programs led by the BCCC, contributing to educational events focused on cancer prevention that include screening and awareness. These efforts help fulfill the center’s broader commitment to community engagement. For students, they offer a different kind of lesson. “For many of them,” Saxena says, “it’s the first time they realize their work has immediate meaning beyond a grade or a publication.”

Back in the lab, the work done on any given day captures the essence of her approach. The Brooklyn College Cancer Center provides the space, resources, and interdisciplinary framework. Still, it is Saxena’s steady belief in her students that animates it. “If we do our jobs right,” she says, “we don’t just generate data. We generate confidence—and that may be the most powerful result of all.”

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Over the course of FY2024/25, BCCC made meaningful progress in strengthening its foundation and expanding its reach. Efforts focused on refining and clearly communicating the center’s mission while building the infrastructure needed for long-term growth. This included developing targeted fundraising materials and increasing visibility for faculty engaged in cancer research. The organization also prioritized community engagement through outreach events, seminars, and symposia, alongside a comprehensive website redesign to better reflect BCCC’s work and impact. Throughout these initiatives, a strong commitment to financial stewardship remained central.

UPDATE ON FY2025/26 GOALS

- **Continue to communicate BCCC's mission**
- **Further focus on development of fundraising materials and strategies**
- **Strengthen the advisory board**
- **Produce news pieces highlighting student and faculty success in cancer research**
- **Host outreach events, scientific and entrepreneurial seminars and symposia**
- **Maintain the new website's modern and appealing appearance**
- **Maintain financial stewardship: We are grateful for funding from the Gray Foundation, the American Cancer Society, Bernard Garil '62, and the Brooklyn College Alumni Association Palm Beach Chapter.**

As BCCC builds on this momentum, new opportunities are shaping the path forward. By 2028, the program aims to increase cancer-focused grant submissions, support key career transitions, and enhance mentorship for junior faculty. Contributed income will further benefit investigators and students, while seminars and collaborative initiatives will foster interdisciplinary advances in drug development, cancer disparities, and prevention. Looking toward FY2026/27, the organization will continue to pursue foundation and grant funding, deepen community partnerships, and drive innovative research with a particular focus on the borough of Brooklyn.

SUPPORTERS

We thank our generous donors who have supported the Cancer Center's mission. They include foundations, individual contributors, health care partners, and government agencies. We are grateful for every gift that we have received, as it helps us in advancing our research, outreach, and education initiatives.

OUR MAJOR SUPPORTERS ARE:

American Cancer Society

Gray Foundation

Bernard Garil '62

Brooklyn College Alumni Association Palm Beach Chapter

Brooklyn College Foundation, Inc.

WE HAVE ACTIVE PARTNERSHIPS WITH:

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SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University

Memorial Sloan Kettering

Mount Sinai

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OUR PROGRAM PARTNERS ARE:

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Maimonides Health

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Brooklyn College Immigrant Student Success Office

Brooklyn College Haitian Studies Institute

HPV Cancers Alliance

SHARE Cancer Support

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BROOKLYN COLLEGE CANCER CENTER MISSION

The Brooklyn College Cancer Center serves as a dynamic hub that connects Brooklyn College with the broader community and business sectors, fostering collaboration, innovation, and impactful cancer-related initiatives.

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