



January 2026

# R.K.M.I. RESEARCH REVIEW

## Scholar Spotlight - Dr. Mary Ellen Vajravelu, MD, MSHP

Mary Ellen Vajravelu, MD, MSHP, is a tenure-stream Assistant Professor of Pediatrics and Epidemiology in the Division of Pediatric Endocrinology at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh. Her clinical research program focuses on improving health outcomes for youth with type 2 diabetes and obesity through innovative approaches that combine behavioral economics, digital health technologies, and human-centered design.

Dr. Vajravelu's path to Pittsburgh included stops in Baltimore (BS in Biomedical Engineering at Johns Hopkins University), Cleveland (MD at Case Western Reserve University), and Philadelphia (pediatric residency, endocrinology fellowship, and early faculty at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and University of Pennsylvania). During fellowship, she completed a Master of Science in Health Policy research with a concentration in Healthcare Quality Improvement.

Her current research includes two clinical trials recruiting adolescents and young adults with type 2 diabetes: one uses an app to pair glycemic and physical activity to support healthy behavior change, and the other, in partnership with Dr. Maya Ragavan, will evaluate strategies to address health-related social needs such as food insecurity. Additional areas of interest include pediatric obesity management, including appropriate use of GLP-1 and other medications for weight loss. Dr. Vajravelu is excited about the cross-disciplinary work supporting these studies and looks forward to the opportunity to build new clinical and research partnerships.



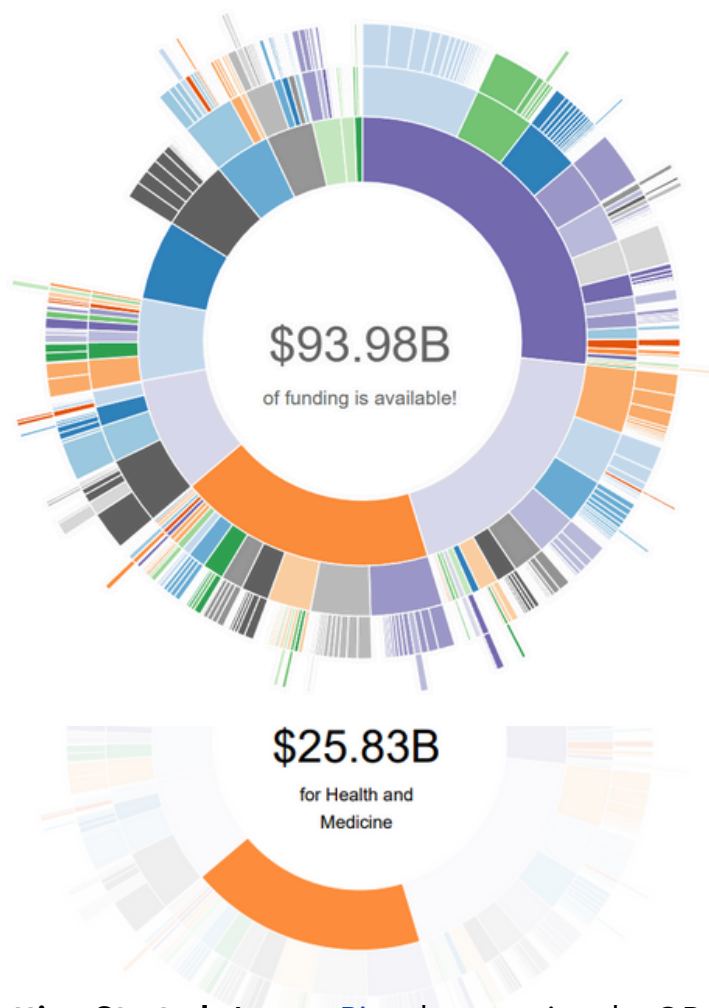
# Explore Pivot: Your Gateway to Funding Opportunities



Pivot, a powerful tool offered through The Office of Sponsored Programs (OSP), is designed to help faculty, researchers, and grant applicants discover funding opportunities with ease. Pivot provides access to a comprehensive database of grants, fellowships, and research funding from government agencies, foundations, and industry partners worldwide.

## Why Use Pivot?

- **Customized Searches:** Filter opportunities by discipline, sponsor type, deadline, and eligibility.
- **Funding Alerts:** Set up personalized alerts so you never miss a relevant opportunity.
- **Collaboration Features:** Identify potential collaborators within and outside your institution.



**Getting Started:** Access [Pivot](#) by scanning the QR code or click the link and log in with your institutional credentials. Once inside, you can create a profile, save searches, and start building your funding pipeline today.

For training on how to use Pivot, click [here](#) to visit the Pivot-RP Training YouTube channel.



# Congratulations!

The leadership of the RK Mellon Institute for Pediatric Research is pleased to announce the recipients of the RK Mellon Institute for Pediatric Research awards for the January 2026 cycle.

**ERICA BRAVERMAN, MD**  
**PILOT AWARD**

*Investigating the Role of Anti-LAG3 Therapy in Pediatric Rhabdomyosarcoma*

\$50,000 year for 2 years

**MARY ELLEN VAJRARELU, MD, MSHP**  
**PILOT AWARD**

*A Pilot Observational Study to Inform Development of Nutrition Interventions for Adolescents Using GLP-1 for Weight Loss*

\$50,000 year for 2 years

One goal of the RK Mellon Institute Awards is to provide financial support for new and innovative areas of research by CHP Investigators toward a goal of future external funding and to support research aimed at improving pediatric health.

## Upcoming Grant Opportunities



### **Research Advisory Committee (RAC)**

Application Deadline for Cycle II Funding (July through June) – *February 15, 2026*.

Click the [link](#) or scan the QR code for further details and instructions.



### **Children's Trust Grantmakers' Award**

Grantmakers' Award aims to support junior faculty at CHP who are building independent research careers by providing small grants for basic, translational, and clinical studies. This year, 2–3 one-year awards of up to \$75,000 each are anticipated, starting July 1, 2026. After scientific and committee reviews, finalists will present a 10-minute summary at the Grantmakers' Meeting in May 2026, where Children's Trust members will vote to select recipients.

**The application period begins January 2026. Keep an eye on your inbox for details and direct any questions to Kate Critchlow at [critchlowkm@upmc.edu](mailto:critchlowkm@upmc.edu).**

### **Cochrane-Weber Endowed Fund in Diabetes Research**

The Cochrane-Weber Endowed Fund in Diabetes Research supports studies that benefit children with diabetes at UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh. Administered by hospital staff, the fund provides annual grants totaling approximately \$100,000–\$250,000, drawn from endowment investment income generously donated by anonymous benefactors. The Cochrane-Weber Endowment Review Committee, composed of medical researchers, will announce funding decisions in June 2026, with disbursement following any required regulatory approvals.

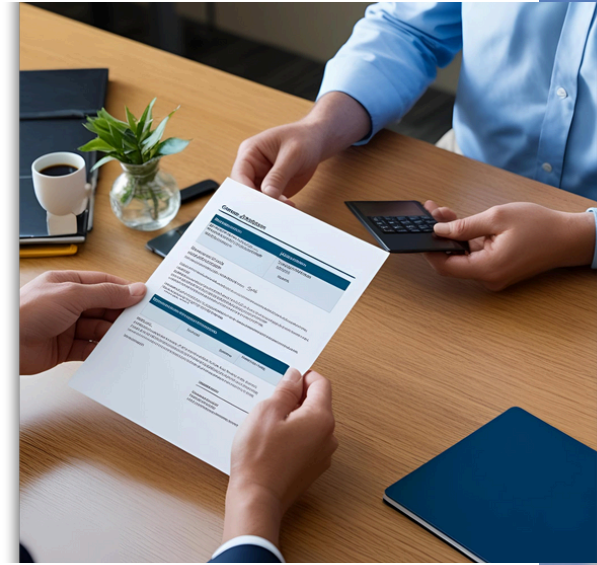
**The application period begins January 2026. Keep an eye on your inbox for details and direct any questions to Kate Critchlow at [critchlowkm@upmc.edu](mailto:critchlowkm@upmc.edu).**



## Mock Study Section Grant Review Process

Mellon Scholars are encouraged to submit their complete grant applications (understandably perhaps in a very rough draft form) to administration via email roughly two months in advance of the appropriate funding deadline, along with a list of 3-5 potential Pitt reviewers. Reviewers may meet for discussions. The scholar will be provided with the written critiques from each reviewer and a summary of the discussion between the reviewers if one occurs. The scholar will be blinded to the identity of their reviewers. Discussion summaries and critiques will be returned to the scholar prior to the grant's agency due date, so that the scholar can incorporate any changes in response to these critiques.

Submission Email Address: [RKMIAdmin@UPMC.edu](mailto:RKMIAdmin@UPMC.edu)



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*The mock grant review process was incredibly helpful... the reviewers gave me specific changes to help show my strengths as an applicant and frame my question in a way that was more accessible to those not in my field. Having experts provide feedback about grantsmanship in this way will hopefully make my proposal much more competitive. – Dr. Taylor Eddens, MD, PhD*

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## 2026 Summer Research Internship Program (SRIP)

The Office of Research Administration is looking for dedicated mentors from UPMC Children's Hospital or the University of Pittsburgh Dept. of Pediatrics to guide students in the [Summer Research Internship Program](#) (SRIP).

If you are unfamiliar with SRIP, it is an 8-week, paid, undergraduate internship based on learning the rationale, design strategies, methods, and other aspects of biomedical research. They anticipate accepting another 50 or so students this summer which will require the direct supervision of experienced researchers who are willing to help them grow in their knowledge and to support them through the completion of their final project, a poster presentation. We encourage you to apply to be a student mentor as it is a rewarding experience and a fun summer!

The RK Mellon Institute will fund SRIP students for a second summer if you wish to invite them back to your lab! If you mentored a student and would like to offer them another year, let us know—we'll connect them with the application portal.

To submit a mentor application, click the [link](#) or scan QR code.

Have questions? Please contact Kate Critchlow, Manager of Grants & Contracts. [critchlowkm@upmc.edu](mailto:critchlowkm@upmc.edu) 412-692-6081



## Regulatory Services



**Follow the link above or use the QR code for more information on the comprehensive services offered by PCRS.**

As an RKMI Scholar, you will have shared access to a dedicated regulatory coordinator from the [Pediatric Clinical Research Services](#) (PCRS) group to assist with your regulatory needs.

Regulatory Services Available:

- Institutional Review Board (PittPRO) submissions
- IACUC submissions
- Organization and maintenance of regulatory files
- ClinicalTrials.gov support
- Industry-sponsored study submissions and management

To access these services, please reach out to our PCRS regulatory coordinator:

Valerie Miller ✉ [millerv4@upmc.edu](mailto:millerv4@upmc.edu) | 📞 412-692-7336

*"Leading my first clinical trial has been a complex undertaking, so I am especially grateful for the added regulatory support of CRSS through the Mellon Scholar Program. Their expertise has provided me with peace of mind, and their quick responses and practical guidance have been invaluable. Special shout out to Valerie, Vibha, and Liz for their support!" – Dr. Jessica Jarvis, PhD, MT-BC*

## Core Funds

Core funds in the amount of \$2000 are available annually to Mellon Scholars that are not R01 funded.

To receive funds, submit a paragraph request via email to Dr. George Gittes at [Gittesgk@upmc.edu](mailto:Gittesgk@upmc.edu) explaining the planned use of the money.

## Core Fund Recipients

Anna Wang-Erickson  
Takuto Chiba  
Megan Culler Freeman  
Mary Ellen Vajravelu

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*My lab is grateful to receive the Mellon Core Scholarship to defray core costs. We spend a lot of time at the confocal microscope and it's great to have support from the Mellon Institute while we collect that data! – Dr. Megan Culler Freeman, MD, PhD*

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## Biostatistics Support

Faculty in the Department of Pediatrics now have access to dedicated Biostatistics support! Whether you're designing a study, analyzing complex data, or preparing a manuscript, we have experts here to guide you through every step of the research process. From methodology to interpretation, we're committed to helping you turn data into meaningful insights that advance child health. Reach out today to elevate your research!

Qiong Wu, PhD – Qiongwu@pitt.edu  
Rangos Office Hours:  
Thursdays 9:30am – 1:30pm | Room 6109



## Upcoming Speakers at Rangos

### **Mellon Scholar Seminar Series: 3PM-4PM**

***Reception to follow seminar***

### ***Mellon Seminar Watch Party at CHOB***

01/21/26 – Takuto Chiba, PhD & Aidan Porter, MD  
02/18/26 – Vikram Raghu, MD, MS & Marty Piazza, MD  
03/18/26 – Heather Joseph, DO & Kelsey Schweiberger, MD, MS

### **Rangos Research Seminar Series: 12PM-1PM**

01/06/26 – Maya Ragavan, MD, MPH, MS  
01/13/26 – Iwjin De Vlaminck, PhD  
01/27/26 – Alok V. Joglekar, PhD  
02/03/26 – Ioannis Zervantonakis, PhD  
02/10/26 – Navjot Pabla, PhD  
02/17/26 – James Casset, MD, PhD  
02/24/26 – TBD  
03/10/26 – Melissa Kane, PhD  
03/17/26 – Catherine Forster, MD  
03/24/26 – Daniela Zarnescu, PhD  
03/31/26 – TBD



**Share Your Feedback!**  
**RKMIAdmin@upmc.edu**



[www.chp.edu/research/rkmfi](http://www.chp.edu/research/rkmfi)