

February 2026



Front row: L to R: Veerle Baekelandt, Pamela England, Špela Mirošević, Antonio Hardan. Back row: L to R Tobias Boeckers, Joseph Buxbaum, Saranna Fanning, Joseph Mazzulli, Michael Johnson

SPARK NS Translational Research Program, 2027 Cohort

Call for Proposals opens soon!

[Sign Up to Receive Updates](#)

Want to Work with Us? We're Hiring!

Director of Project Management

[Learn More](#)

Webinar: "Starting with the End in Mind"

Hosted by Parkinson Study Group

March 3, 2026 | 1 PM PT

Speaker: Opher Kornfeld, PhD, Managing Director of Translational Research and Development, SPARK NS

Open to all. Free. Registration required.

[Register Here](#)

News

Nine Principal Investigators Join the SPARK NS Program, 2026 Cohort

The nine projects are collectively eligible for up to \$18 million in funding and support for drug development.

SPARK NS has selected nine projects and principal investigators for the SPARK NS Translational Research Program, 2026 Cohort. The projects focus on therapeutics for autism and Parkinson's disease and are based in academic and nonprofit research institutions in the US, UK, and Europe. Participation in the program lasts two years during which each project is eligible to receive up to \$2,000,000¹ in milestone-based funding.

The SPARK NS Translational Research Program is based on an unconventional and proven model of translational research with an exceptional 50%² success rate at guiding discoveries from the lab to the clinic.

[Read More](#)



by Daria Mochy-Rosen, PhD
SPARK NS Chief Science and Education Advisor

Expert Content

What Surprised an Academic About Drug Development

Academia is a very different world from drug development. Academics are rewarded when we publish papers, teach, get grants—not if we make drugs. Of course, it's great to get one of your papers published in a top journal. You feel good for a day or two. But when you meet patients who got your drug, it's intoxicating! You become addicted to the feeling. I did.

[Read More](#)

Inside SPARK NS

Meet the New Project Managers on Our Translational Research & Development Team

Nick Aguirre, PhD SPARK NS Project Manager



Nick Aguirre, PhD, earned his PhD in Molecular, Cellular, and Integrative Physiology from UC Davis, where he focused on optimizing human neuromuscular health. He went on to complete postdoctoral work at The Buck Institute and UCLA, studying the biology of aging to develop interventions aimed at preventing age-related diseases.

In industry, Dr. Aguirre has led scientific programs at Juvena, Scribe, and Regel Therapeutics, where he translated the molecular foundations of neuromuscular and cardiovascular diseases into preclinical drug development efforts.

Outside of work, he enjoys spending time with his family—his wife, baby daughter, and mischievous beagle—along with hiking, working out, hunting for the best matcha, and diving into sci-fi and horror worlds across media and games.

Tony Gao, PhD SPARK NS Project Manager

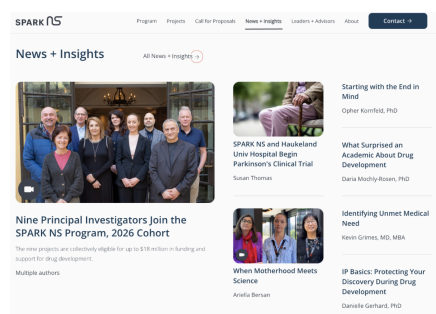


Tony Gao, PhD, is a bioengineer by training with deep expertise in gene therapy and genome engineering. He earned his PhD from Stanford University, where he invented CRISPR-based molecular tools to control gene regulation.

Following his PhD, Dr. Gao was an early hire in the gene therapy division at Mammoth Biosciences, where he led research on engineered CRISPR technologies and later served as a program team lead, directing cross-functional efforts to develop epigenetic editing therapies for neuromuscular and hepatic indications.

His work across academia and industry is reflected in his inventorship on nine patent applications and authorship on nine peer-reviewed publications. Beyond the lab, Tony is a baking and cooking enthusiast, an avid outdoor adventurer, a puzzle and board game lover, and a novice landscape and wildlife photographer.

A Trusted Resource for Academic Researchers in Neuroscience



Visit **SPARK NS News + Insights** for high-quality expert content offering fresh perspectives, practical guidance, and inspiration to think differently about drug development.

[Visit News + Insights](#)

About SPARK NS

SPARK NS is an independent nonprofit organization dedicated to efficiently advancing promising academic discoveries in neuroscience from the lab to the clinic. [Learn More](#)

[Sign up](#) to stay in touch with us!

