Aristotle

Post-bac technician / reapplicant

PROFILE SUMMARY

Reapplicant with 2.5 years as a post-bac research associate in Dr. Tony Wyss-Coray's lab at Stanford studying brain aging, neuroinflammation, and plasma-derived pro-inflammatory factors driving cognitive decline. Strong technical portfolio in single-cell RNA sequencing, proteomics, ELISA, flow cytometry, and mouse behavioral assays. Co-author on a Nature Aging (2024) paper and first-author bioRxiv preprint (2025). Undergraduate GPA of 3.35 from University of Arizona is below typical top-program admission thresholds, which likely contributed to receiving zero interview invitations in the 2024-2025 cycle when applying almost exclusively to top-10 programs. The profile is exceptionally strong in research output and topical fit for neurodegeneration/glial biology — the issue is calibration, not credentials.

STRENGTHS

- 2.5 years in a world-class lab (Wyss-Coray) directly aligned with target subfields (brain aging, neuroinflammation, glial biology)
- Strong publication record for a post-bac: Nature Aging co-author + first-author bioRxiv preprint + SfN poster
- Sophisticated technique stack: scRNA-seq of microglia/astrocytes, proteomics, flow cytometry, IHC — directly transferrable to most Alzheimer's/aging labs
- Clear, focused research narrative tied to a personal motivation (grandparent's AD diagnosis)
- US citizen — eligible for all major federal fellowships (F31, F30, NSF GRFP, Gilliam)

AREAS TO ADDRESS

- Undergraduate GPA of 3.35 is the primary application weakness — must be contextualized by post-bac trajectory and addressed (briefly, without excuses) in the personal statement
- Last cycle's outcome (0 interviews) indicates the program list was miscalibrated, not that the profile is uncompetitive — this cycle requires deliberate inclusion of realistic and safer programs
- Submit the bioRxiv preprint to a journal before December if possible — even an under-review status strengthens the application materially
- Secure an explicit, enthusiastic letter from Dr. Wyss-Coray that directly addresses scientific independence and contextualizes the undergraduate GPA
- Apply NSF GRFP this cycle (eligible as 1st-time PhD applicant) — winning it would significantly de-risk admission to mid-tier programs

PROGRAM RANKINGS

REACH PROGRAMS

Program	University	Deadline	Stipend	Research fit	Why this tier
Neuroscience Graduate Program	University of California San Francisco	November 16, 11:59 pm PST	$43,800	UCSF is arguably the best fit on the entire list for this applicant: the Gladstone Institutes, Memory and Aging Center, and Weill Institute host a critical mass of Alzheimer's, glial biology, and neuroinflammation labs (Huang, Ransohoff-adjacent, Gan, Sirkis, Pollard). The Wyss-Coray connection — frequent collaborator and former UCSF trainee community — provides a real letter-network advantage.	Reach: UCSF admits ~25-30 students from 400-500+ applications annually; typical admitted GPA is 3.7+. The 3.35 undergraduate GPA is a meaningful headwind even with elite post-bac credentials. One-program-only rule within UCSF means this is a single shot. Placed in reach because of strong topical alignment and PI network, but admission is not realistic to assume.
Neurosciences PhD Program	Washington University in St. Louis	December 1	$41,000	WashU is the strongest AD-research environment in the country outside Boston/SF: Holtzman, Bateman, Karch, Cruchaga, Ulrich, and the Knight ADRC define modern Alzheimer's neuroscience. Glial biology and neuroinflammation are core program strengths. Single-cell genomics infrastructure is excellent.	Reach (borderline realistic): WashU Neuroscience accepts 15-20 from ~600 applications; typical admitted GPA 3.7+. The applicant's exceptional topical fit and publication record narrow but do not close the gap. Realistic if Wyss-Coray writes a strong personalized letter and the SOP names 3-4 specific WashU faculty.
Neuroscience PhD Program	Johns Hopkins University	December 3	$38,000	JHU Neuroscience has strong Alzheimer's and neuroinflammation faculty (Worley, Wong, Troncoso). Less aging-density than WashU/UCSF but adjacent strengths in microglial biology and proteomics.	Reach: JHU admits ~20-25 from 400+ applications, typical admitted GPA 3.7+. Topical fit is good but not exceptional; this is a competitive reach where the personal statement narrative and Wyss-Coray letter will be decisive.
Neurobiology and Behavior	Columbia University	December 1	$42,000	Columbia Zuckerman Institute hosts strong aging and neurodegeneration labs (Sulzer, Hen, Small) with growing single-cell neuroscience infrastructure. Adjacent fit — less aging-focused than WashU but strong glial and circuit-level neurodegeneration work.	Reach: Columbia Neurobiology admits 15-20 from a very competitive pool; the program is adjacent rather than core fit, and the 3.35 GPA is a hurdle. Lower priority than UCSF/WashU but reasonable to keep if SOP can articulate why Columbia specifically.
Neuroscience Graduate Group	University of Pennsylvania	December 1	$38,000	Penn NGG has strong Alzheimer's research (Lee/Trojanowski legacy at CNDR — Center for Neurodegenerative Disease Research), glial biology (Grinspan), and microglia/neuroinflammation labs. Excellent topical fit.	Reach (borderline realistic): NGG is highly competitive (BGS-wide: 3,000+ applications, ~300 offers, ~150 matriculants). One-program-only rule within Penn BGS. Topical fit is strong but the GPA hurdle and Penn's selectivity place this in reach.

REALISTIC PROGRAMS

Program	University	Deadline	Stipend	Research fit	Why this tier
Graduate Division of Biological and Biomedical Sciences — Neuroscience track	Emory University	December 1, midnight ET	$42,000 (2025-2026)	Emory has one of the strongest AD and aging research environments in the Southeast: Goate (now Mt Sinai but network remains), Levey, Seyfried (proteomics — direct technique alignment), Wingo, and the Goizueta Alzheimer's Disease Research Center. Proteomics of AD is a particular Emory strength matching the applicant's experience.	Realistic: Emory GDBBS Neuroscience admits 10-15 from a more moderate applicant pool than UCSF/WashU. The Seyfried proteomics alignment is a real, namable hook. With the Nature Aging publication and Wyss-Coray's letter, this is a strong realistic match.
Neuroscience Graduate Program	University of Michigan	December 1	$43,788	Michigan has very strong AD/aging research (Paulson, Lieberman, Sherva) and excellent neuroinflammation labs. Cohort size and program culture are well-matched to the applicant's profile.	Realistic: Michigan Neuroscience is competitive but admits at a higher rate than top-10 programs. The applicant's profile is well above the bar for serious consideration here; the GPA is the only meaningful concern, partially offset by post-bac record.
Interdisciplinary Biomedical Graduate Program (IBGP)	University of Pittsburgh	December 1	$41,200	Pitt has growing AD research and the Pittsburgh ADRC, with strong neuroinflammation and microglia work. IBGP umbrella structure provides flexibility to find the right fit during rotations.	Realistic (borderline safer): Pitt IBGP is competitive but accessible to applicants with strong post-bac research; topical fit is good. The applicant's profile is comfortably within range here.
Neurosciences Graduate Program	Case Western Reserve University	January 1 (October 15 priority review)	$39,000	Case has a notable AD research program and the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center connection. Neuroinflammation and glial biology are present but less dominant than at top-tier AD programs.	Realistic (borderline safer): Case NSSA is less selective than the top realistic programs. With the applicant's publication record, this is a comfortable realistic-to-safer match. Priority review October 15 deadline is a real advantage.

SAFER PROGRAMS

Program	University	Deadline	Stipend	Research fit	Why this tier
Graduate Program in Neuroscience	Boston University	December 15	$34,000	BU has strong neurodegeneration research (CTE Center, Stein, McKee) and growing AD/aging programs. Glial biology and neuroinflammation are represented. Topical fit is solid if not elite.	Safer: BU Neuroscience admits 10-15 from a less competitive pool than the top realistic programs. The applicant's profile is well above the typical admitted profile here; this functions as a strong floor in the application portfolio.

PROFESSOR MATCHES

Professor	University	Research focus	Technique match	Taking students	Recommended action

Lindsay Glickfeld	Duke University	Visual cortex circuits, sensory processing, plasticity	Two-photon calcium imaging, optogenetics — adjacent technique match but NOT a topical match for aging/neurodegeneration	likely	Do NOT contact. Database surfaced this match on technique keywords but research focus is sensory circuits, not neurodegeneration/aging. Skip.
Conor Liston	Weill Cornell Medicine	Depression, neural plasticity, transcranial stimulation, functional connectivity	Computational neuroscience and translational psychiatry — partial methodological overlap but topical mismatch with aging/neurodegeneration	unclear	Mention only if applying to Weill Cornell with broader interests; not a primary contact.
G. William Rebeck	Georgetown University	APOE4, Alzheimer's disease mechanisms, neuroinflammation, microglia-Aβ interactions	Strong: APOE biology, microglial response to Aβ, mouse models — direct overlap with applicant's microglia scRNA-seq experience	unclear	Email Rebeck if applying to Georgetown. Lead with the Nature Aging paper and microglial scRNA-seq experience. Ask whether he is accepting students in Fall 2026 and whether your aging/inflammation interests align with current projects.
Pablo E. Castillo	Albert Einstein College of Medicine	Synaptic plasticity, hippocampus, neuroinflammation in epilepsy and AD	Electrophysiology focus differs from applicant's omics/proteomics background — adjacent at best	unclear	Lower priority. Only contact if you have a specific synaptic-plasticity angle you want to develop.
Henriette van Praag	Florida Atlantic University	Adult neurogenesis, exercise, aging brain, BDNF	Aging brain research with mouse models — strong topical fit; her work on circulating factors and brain aging is methodologically parallel to Wyss-Coray's plasma-factors framework	unclear	Strong contact candidate. She is a peer/contemporary of Wyss-Coray in the brain-aging circulating-factors space. Ask Tony if he is willing to make a personal introduction. Note: FAU is not on the program list — consider adding it as an additional safer-tier application if her lab is accepting.
Bobby Thomas	Medical University of South Carolina	Parkinson's disease mechanisms, neuroinflammation, Nrf2 signaling, neurodegeneration	Mouse models of neurodegeneration, neuroinflammation — strong methodological and topical overlap	unclear	Consider if adding MUSC to the list. PD rather than AD focus, but neuroinflammation methodology overlaps significantly.
Alexis M. Stranahan	Augusta University	Adipose tissue, neuroinflammation, neurogenesis, aging brain, microglia	Direct: microglia in aging, neuroinflammation, mouse models — overlapping methodology and topic	unclear	Strong outreach target if expanding the list. Her work on peripheral-CNS inflammatory crosstalk is directly adjacent to Wyss-Coray's plasma-factors framework.

Aryn H. Gittis	Carnegie Mellon University	Basal ganglia circuits, Parkinson's disease, deep brain stimulation	Circuit neuroscience methods — not aligned with applicant's omics background	unclear	Skip. Database surfaced on broad neurodegeneration keyword but methods mismatch is significant.

FUNDING ELIGIBILITY MATRIX

Fellowship	Eligible	Reason	Notes
NSF GRFP	Yes	US citizen, applying to PhD programs, has not previously enrolled in a graduate program (assumed). As a 1st-year-eligible applicant, this is the highest-leverage fellowship.	Application typically due mid-October 2026. Strong publication record (Nature Aging co-author + first-author preprint) is exactly the profile GRFP rewards. Apply this cycle — winning the GRFP before matriculation materially de-risks admission decisions for programs on the bubble.
NIH F31	Yes	US citizen, applying to PhD programs. F31 is awarded after matriculation (typically Year 2 of the PhD), so this is a future-planning item.	Not relevant for the application cycle itself, but signal F31-fundability in the SOP — programs care that admitted students can attract external funding. The aging/neuroinflammation focus aligns with NIA's funding priorities (high-priority F31 area).
NIH F30	No	F30 is for MD-PhD candidates only. This applicant is applying to PhD-only programs.	Not applicable.
HHMI Gilliam Fellowship	Yes	US citizen pursuing a PhD. Gilliam targets students from groups underrepresented in science; eligibility depends on demographic factors not stated in the profile.	Nominated by the PhD advisor after matriculation (typically Year 2). Worth flagging to mention to the eventual thesis advisor. Not actionable this cycle.

COST OF LIVING SUMMARY

University	City	Cost	Median 1BR Rent	Monthly Stipend	Stipend / Rent ratio	Notes
University of California San Francisco	San Francisco, CA	High	$3,200/mo	$3,650/mo	1.1x	Stipend barely covers rent at the median — expect to live with roommates or in subsidized UCSF housing. SF is the tightest cost-of-living squeeze on the list.
Washington University in St. Louis	St. Louis, MO	Low	$1,100/mo	$3,417/mo	3.1x	Excellent stipend-to-cost ratio — among the most livable cities on the list at this stipend level.
Johns Hopkins University	Baltimore, MD	Medium	$1,600/mo	$3,167/mo	2x	Stipend comfortably covers rent with meaningful margin for savings.
Columbia University	New York, NY	High	$3,500/mo	$3,500/mo	1x	Stipend covers exactly one month of rent — Columbia subsidized housing is essen-

						tial, not optional. Budget very carefully.
University of Pennsylvania	Philadelphia, PA	Medium	$1,900/mo	$3,167/mo	1.7x	Reasonable margin; Philadelphia is one of the more affordable major Northeast cities at this stipend.
Emory University	Atlanta, GA	Medium	$1,700/mo	$3,500/mo	2.1x	Strong stipend-to-cost ratio — Atlanta offers meaningful disposable income at the Emory stipend.
University of Michigan	Ann Arbor, MI	Low	$1,250/mo	$3,649/mo	2.9x	Excellent stipend-to-cost ratio — Ann Arbor is one of the most livable PhD destinations on this list.
University of Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh, PA	Low	$1,200/mo	$3,433/mo	2.9x	Excellent stipend-to-cost ratio — Pittsburgh is among the best quality-of-life PhD cities relative to stipend.
Case Western Reserve University	Cleveland, OH	Low	$1,000/mo	$3,250/mo	3.3x	Best stipend-to-cost ratio on the list — Cleveland offers significant disposable income at this stipend.
Boston University	Boston, MA	High	$3,000/mo	$2,833/mo	0.9x	Stipend does NOT fully cover the median Boston rent — this is the tightest squeeze on the list. Plan for roommates and minimal disposable income. The lowest-stipend safer-tier choice in the most expensive city is a real financial concern.

Stipend / Rent ratio: how many months of median 1BR rent your monthly stipend covers. A ratio below 1.0x means rent alone exceeds your monthly stipend — budget carefully. Rent figures are approximate 2025 market rates for a 1-bedroom apartment near campus.

APPLICATION CALENDAR

Date	Event	Notes
August–September 2026	Finalize program list, draft SOP v1, request letters from Wyss-Coray + 2 others	Wyss-Coray's letter is the single most important document — give him 6+ weeks lead time and a 1-page brief on each program with named faculty.
December 1, 2026	Columbia, Penn NGG, Emory, Michigan, Pittsburgh deadlines	Five applications due same day — finalize all SOPs by Thanksgiving.
December 15, 2026	Boston University deadline	Latest deadline — useful buffer for a final polish.
December 3, 2026	Johns Hopkins Neuroscience deadline (letters included)	Letters must be submitted by this date, not just requested.
January 1, 2027	Case Western Neurosciences final deadline	Only relevant if October 15 priority deadline was missed.
	Interview invitations expected	

Late January – February 2027		Most neuroscience programs notify by late January; UCSF typically earlier (early-to-mid January).
Mid-October 2026	NSF GRFP deadline	Highest-leverage fellowship — apply this cycle. Use the Nature Aging publication as the centerpiece.
November 15, 2026	UCSF fee waiver deadline	Fee waiver closes the day before the application deadline — submit waiver request early.
November 16, 2026	UCSF Neuroscience application deadline (11:59 pm PST)	One-program-only rule across UCSF. This is the earliest hard deadline.
October 15, 2026	Case Western Neurosciences priority review deadline	Submit by this date for fee waiver and earlier decision. Case discourages faculty outreach — do not email PIs.
October 31, 2026	WashU early submission ($20 fee tier)	Submit by Oct 31 for reduced application fee.

PROFESSOR OUTREACH TEMPLATE

Subject: Prospective PhD Applicant — Aging, Microglia, and Neuroinflammation

Dear Dr. [Last Name],

I am a research associate in Dr. Tony Wyss-Coray's lab at Stanford and am applying to PhD programs for Fall 2026. I am writing because your work on [specific paper or research direction — name a recent paper] is directly aligned with the questions I want to pursue in graduate school, and I am considering applying to the [Program Name] at [University].

For the past 2.5 years I have been studying how plasma-derived pro-inflammatory factors accelerate cognitive decline in aged mice, primarily using single-cell RNA sequencing of microglia and astrocytes from young and aged brains. This work contributed to a recent Nature Aging paper (2024) and a first-author preprint on bioRxiv (2025) characterizing the cellular response of aged microglia to circulating inflammatory factors. My broader interest is in understanding how peripheral signals reshape glial state during aging and how that drives selective neuronal vulnerability — questions that connect directly to [specific aspect of their work].

I would be grateful to know whether you anticipate accepting rotation students in Fall 2026, and whether the direction of my interests aligns with active projects in your lab. I am happy to send my CV and the bioRxiv preprint if that would be useful.

Thank you for your time.

Best regards,
Aristotle
[email]
[ORCID or Google Scholar link]