To the International Society for Autism Research Student/Trainee Award Committee,

As a doctoral student in child language at the University of Kansas interested in the language abilities of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) across the life span, attending the 2018 International Society for Autism Research (INSAR) Annual Meeting as a travel awardee will help me further my research career goals. Attending the 2018 INSAR Annual Meeting will expose me to new research that will add to what I have learned through work experience, doctoral studies, and research training. This will allow me to become a stronger researcher and advocate for individuals with ASD.

My studies approach a comprehensive understanding of language from genotype to phenotype. I am interested in the language abilities of individuals with ASD across the life span relative to factors such as quality of life and cognitive abilities. I am specifically interested in the language abilities of adolescents and young adults with ASD as they transition out of the public education system. Prior to the University of Kansas, I was a public school teacher of adolescents and young adults with severe-to-profound ASD. Virtually all were minorities from low-income neighborhoods and were not participants in research. One can imagine the practical difficulties of getting such students into laboratories, where research is often conducted, and of establishing the rapport with families needed to recruit them into research. Thus, I entered my doctoral program questioning how to best assess and characterize the language abilities of adolescents and young adults with ASD, especially those who are underrepresented in research.

At the University of Kansas, I have gained valuable research skills in behavioral science on a T32 training grant. In the Language Acquisition Studies Laboratory, directed by Dr. Mabel L. Rice, my duties as a research assistant have included training on a comprehensive assessment protocol examining cognitive and language ability, and training others on the protocol, as well as data analysis, coding, collection, and processing. My secondary research training experiences have allowed me to gain experience in psycholinguistic methods to examine language acquisition with Dr. Utako Minai, as well as in the evaluation of intervention research with Dr. Steven F. Warren. Altogether, these skills have complemented my practical experience with individuals who have ASD and made me well qualified to investigated the language abilities of adolescents and young adults with ASD. Community-based intervention research alone has demonstrated the paucity of research for this age group, not to mention ones who are minorities. My career goals are to pursue longitudinal study of their language abilities relative to developmental outcomes, and to translate longitudinal knowledge of language development trajectories in individuals with ASD into community-based intervention research. More broadly, my research interests concern the phenotypic variability in ASD relative to other conditions, including language impairment.

In spring 2018, I am conducting a pilot study on the language abilities in adolescents and young adults with ASD who are minorities. This pilot study will serve as a feasibility study, checking whether an assessment protocol of standardized assessments may be appropriate for this population. Additionally, the pilot study will provide insight as to what recruitment methods may be effective with minority populations. The protocol will consist of assessments examining omnibus language ability, grammar, nonverbal cognitive ability, and working memory. The assessment results may provide preliminary data on the relationship between language ability and ASD, either in the presence or the absence of language impairment. Furthermore, the pilot study will inform my dissertation, which will also be on language abilities in adolescents and young adults with ASD, and ultimately, my programmatic research.

In sum, the 2018 INSAR Travel Meeting Award will allow me to travel the 4,581 miles from Lawrence, Kansas, United States, to Rotterdam, The Netherlands. My work experience, research training, and research activities have made me well qualified to pursue study on the language abilities in individuals with ASD across the life span, beginning with adolescence and young adulthood. The travel award will directly help me further my goal of pursuing an academic research career in the field of ASD.