Evidence of Learning Assessment

Aiswharyaa Lalgudi Nagarajan

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Independent Study and Mentorship

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Grant, Oliver C et al. “Generating 3D Models of Carbohydrates with GLYCAM-Web.” *bioRxiv : the preprint server for biology* 2025.05.08.652828. 9 May. 2025, doi:10.1101/2025.05.08.652828. Preprint.

Research Assessment

The article by Grant et al. (2025) provides a comprehensive overview of GLYCAM-Web, a web-based platform that enables researchers to build, visualize, and simulate three-dimensional carbohydrate and glycan structures for biochemical modeling. The paper describes how GLYCAM-Web integrates carbohydrate-specific force fields (notably GLYCAM06) to produce experimentally consistent 3D models of oligosaccharides in formats compatible with molecular-dynamics packages such as AMBER and GROMACS.

A key insight is that carbohydrates possess limited conformational flexibility compared with peptides or nucleic acids because of predictable glycosidic dihedral angles (φ, ψ, ω). This property allows GLYCAM-Web to predict likely 3D structures directly from primary sequences written in the GLYCAM condensed nomenclature. The tool automates energy minimization, resolves steric clashes, and can return large carbohydrate structures in under a minute. Importantly, the builders (including the GAG Builder and JSON API) allow high-throughput modeling and integration with other bioinformatics resources such as GlyGen.

From this article, I learned not only how glycan modeling works computationally but also how the standardization of carbohydrate nomenclature and automated structure generation removes a major bottleneck in glycoprotein engineering and structural bioinformatics.

This knowledge is directly relevant to my ISM research on RVG-Xplorer 2.0, which uses transformer-based AI to design optimized glycoprotein variants of the rabies virus glycoprotein (RVG) for blood–brain barrier (BBB) transcytosis and neuronal targeting in Alzheimer's therapy. Our workflow integrates protein language models (ESM-2) with molecular-dynamics simulations, and one of the most computationally demanding steps is glycosylation modeling. GLYCAM-Web provides a validated mechanism for constructing glycan chains on predicted protein structures. By linking predicted N- and O-linked glycosylation sites (identified through NetNGlyc/OGlyc) with GLYCAM-Web's carbohydrate builder, we can automate the addition of realistic glycan motifs before docking or MD simulation. The article demonstrates that GLYCAM outputs are compatible with AMBER OFF and PDB formats, which aligns seamlessly with our planned MD workflow using GROMACS and AmberTools.

Thus, the GLYCAM-Web study bridges a crucial methodological gap offering an experimentally grounded, reproducible framework to refine the glycosylation layer of AI-generated glycoprotein candidates, enhancing accuracy in receptor docking (e.g., LRP1, nAChR, p75^NTR). Compared with my previous understanding of protein modeling which often treats glycans as static or truncated moieties this paper clarified that glycan conformations can be systematically predicted and validated against NMR and PDB datasets. The distinction between pyranose and furanose ring conformations, and how they influence glycan orientation at receptor interfaces, provides a new dimension to RVG variant analysis.

This new information modifies my earlier approach: instead of ignoring glycan flexibility, I now plan to include rotameric diversity in glycosylated residues during transformer model fine-tuning and docking simulations. Integrating these insights, I have begun designing a new sub-pipeline within RVG-Xplorer 2.0 that automatically exports top AI-generated variants into GLYCAM-compatible input files. Using the JSON API described by Grant et al. (2025), the system can generate realistic glycan structures on selected asparagine or serine/threonine residues and return AMBER-formatted outputs for subsequent energy minimization and MD runs.

Blending this new knowledge with my transformer-AI methods enables a multi-modal protein–glycan modeling framework one that unites natural-language-based sequence optimization with carbohydrate-specific molecular mechanics. This could lead to the creation of a glyco-aware transformer fine-tuning dataset that recognizes the spatial and electrostatic implications of glycosylation.

Evaluating this new knowledge, I find it both effective and transformative for my project. The GLYCAM-Web framework provides experimentally validated, community-tested methods that strengthen the credibility and reproducibility of my computational results. Its open-source architecture and consistent energy-minimization protocol assure that any modeled glycan structures are grounded in well-established carbohydrate chemistry. This information was particularly motivating: it shows that complex glycosylation modeling once considered inaccessible to non-specialists can be integrated through user-friendly web APIs. It encourages a cross-disciplinary mindset, combining AI, structural biology, and computational chemistry. While the learning curve in glycan nomenclature and force-field parameters is steep, the reward is a quantitative enhancement in the biological realism of my BBB-targeted protein designs.

Overall, the article reinforces the principle that accurate modeling of post-translational modifications such as glycosylation is essential for translational relevance in neurotherapeutic protein engineering.