B-SIDER: Computational Algorithm for the Design

of Complementary β-sheet Sequences

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Abstract

The β-sheet is an element of protein secondary structure, and intra-/inter-molecular β-sheet

interactions play pivotal roles in biological regulatory processes including scaffolding,

transporting, and oligomerization. In nature, a β-sheet formation is tightly regulated because

dysregulated β-stacking often leads to severe diseases such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, systemic

amyloidosis, or diabetes. Thus, the identification of intrinsic β-sheet forming propensities can

provide valuable insight into protein designs for the development of novel therapeutics. However,

structure-based design methods may not be generally applicable to such amyloidogenic peptides

mainly owing to high structural plasticity and complexity. Therefore, an alternative design strategy

based on complementary sequence information is of significant importance. Herein, we developed

a database search method called B-SIDER for the design of complementary β-strands. This method

makes use of the structural database information and generates query-specific score matrices. The

discriminatory power of the B-SIDER score function was tested on representative amyloidogenic

peptide substructures against a sequence-based score matrix (PASTA2.0) and two popular *ab initio*

protein design score functions (Rosetta and FoldX). B-SIDER is able to distinguish wild-type

amyloidogenic β-strands as favored interactions in a more consistent manner than other methods.

B-SIDER was prospectively applied to the design of complementary β-strands for a splitGFP

scaffold. Three variants were identified to have stronger interactions than the original sequence

selected through a directed evolution, emitting higher fluorescence intensities. Our results indicate

that B-SIDER can be applicable to the design of other β-strands, assisting in the development of

therapeutics against disease-related amyloidogenic peptides.

Introduction

The β-sheet is one of the major units of protein structure [1], and has a variety of functions in transportation, recognition, scaffolding, and enzymatic processes [2]. The mechanism of a β-sheet formation has recently received significant attention owing to its close relations with several critical diseases such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, type 2 diabetes, and systemic amyloidosis [3, 4]. Such diseases are known to be linked to the precipitation of dysregulated β-stacking between neighboring β-strands [5-7]. In this regard, information on the amino acid propensity of intrinsic β-sheet forming motifs and its use in the design of their complementary sequences are crucial for understanding the mechanism of β-sheet formation and developing potential therapeutics specifically targeting aggregation-prone regions [8].

Whereas structure-based protein design approaches have shown notable successes in several cases [9], their application to *de novo* β-sheet designs still remains a challenge [2, 10]. Although structure-based design approaches require a well-defined protein structure, amyloidogenic peptides usually have highly disordered structures [11]. The structural identification of such peptides has long been hindered by high degrees of structural plasticity, transiency, and complexity owing to a self-oligomerization [12, 13]. It is thus necessary to exploit the complementarity across neighboring β-strand pairs using sequence information.

Intriguingly, significant conservation and covariations of residue pairs between neighboring β-strands have been identified in many different protein families [14]. For instance, pairs of β-branched residues and cysteines are preferred at nonhydrogen-bonded positions. Aromatic residues tend to be paired with valine or glycine [15]. Several computational algorithms have been developed to predict aggregation-prone regions based on the internal β-sheet forming patterns. While differing in detail, they make use of either statistical potentials such as Tango [16], PASTA [17], SALSA [18],

BETASCAN [19], and Waltz [20] or physicochemical properties of amino acids [21]. In addition,

consensus methods and machine-learning approaches have also been developed [22, 23], showing fine

agreement with the experiment results.

It has been reported that β-strand interactions can be stabilized by introducing β-sheet favored

pairs [24-28] and charge pairing between neighboring β-strands [29-31]. Recent studies have shown that

fragments derived from the amyloidogenic region can be used for β-stack modeling [6, 32]. While the

use of amino acid pairing information in a protein design has been attempted elsewhere, practical

applications of such patterns have been limited, mainly owing to the lack of a comprehensive

quantification for residue pairing and noisy patterns of β-sheet forming residue pairs [1, 33, 34]. The

β-sheet forming peptides appear to have poor sequence commonalities and imperfect repeats [19].

Therefore, a careful curation of meaningful patterns is required for a practical protein design

strategy of complementary β-strands.

Herein, we present a database search method, B-SIDER (β-Stacking Interaction DEsign for

Reciprocity), for the design of complementary β-strands. The method generates a query-specific

score matrix from the structure database. To utilize the pairing information and overcome the

pattern noise, we hypothesized that significant complementary pairs can be amplified by

superposing a subset of sequence fragments. Moreover, the recent growth boom of β-sheet

structures [35] allows the solid statistics of β-sheet forming residue pairings [36]. Based on the

hypothesis and statistics of β-sheet forming residue pairings, we developed a fast and reliable

computational method for the design of complementary β-strand sequences. The methodology

augments β-sheet forming residue preferences by overlaying complementary fragment sequences

(**Figure 1**). We retrospectively validated our approach using a set of curated amyloidogenic targets

and compared it with two popularly used structure-based methods (Rosetta and FoldX) and a

sequence-based aggregation prediction algorithm (PASTA 2.0). Our algorithm was shown to

clearly distinguish favorable β-sheet forming sequences entirely based on the query sequence,

whereas the structure-based energy functions exhibited inconsistent results depending on the

targets. The utility and potential of our method were demonstrated by designing novel

complementary peptides for splitGFP. The designed sequences showed stronger interactions with

neighboring strands of the scaffold, and consequently higher fluorescence emissions, than the

original peptide selected through directed mutagenesis [37].

Figure 1. Overview of the B-SIDER algorithm. (A) When a query sequence is given, the query

is divided into smaller linear peptides ranging from three residues to its full length. (B) Exactly

matched sequences are identified and checked against the structure database such that the matches

indeed form β-sheets. (C) If the matches form β-sheets, their complementary sequences are

extracted. (D) A position-specific score matrix is constructed based on the complementary

sequence information. (E) Final complementary sequences are designed using the score matrix.

Materials and Methods

Computational algorithm for the design of complementary sequences

Collection of β-strand information　Non-redundant structures determined by high-resolution X-

ray crystallography were collected from the PISCES [38] (10~90% sequence identity), < 3 Å

resolution, < 0.3 R-factor and sequence length from 40 to 10000. Given the query target sequence,

the non-redundant structure database was used to extract pairing information from matched

sequences with the same directionality. The target sequence is initially divided into linear moving-

windows whose residues in length range from 3 to the entire target-sequence length. Any structures

with identical target sequence fragments as the split queries were collected, followed by further

filtering based on the definition of β-sheet secondary structure (the distance between the backbone

nitrogen-oxygen atom pairs < 5 Å). To remove any redundancy, protein structures that contain

matches were compared using TMalign [39]. If the TM-score > 0.7 and sequence identity > 90%,

one of the matched sequences is removed.

While the method is applicable to both parallel and anti-parallel β-sheets in theory, we

entirely focused on anti-parallel β-sheets in this study [27, 28] and all the test cases are anti-parallel

because anti-parallel cases are more frequently observed compared to parallel cases [40]. Disease-

related amyloidogenesis is also known to be initiated with anti-parallel β-sheets, and soluble

oligomeric amyloid species mainly exist as anti-parallel [41, 42].

Complementary sequence score　The β-sheet complementarity score function is derived from the

environment-specific substitution score [43]. We hypothesized that each position of a β-strand is

independent of one another, and their complementarities are determined through residue pairs from

neighboring strands. Given the query sequence, all identified neighboring sequences are pooled

together, as described in the previous section. The amino acid frequency at each complementary

position is counted as

$$A_{i,p} = O_{i,p} / \sum_i O_{i,p}. \tag{1}$$

123   where $A_{i,p}$ is the frequency of a certain amino acid (i) at a specific complementary position (p), and

124    $O_{i,p}$ is the total count of the amino acid at p. The background frequency of a certain amino acid B_i

125   is independent of the query and thus counted from a well defined structure database(HOMSTRAD

126   database [44]). The frequency is calculated as

$$B_i = \sum_p O_{i,p} / \sum_{i,p} O_{i,p}. \tag{2}$$

127   The complementary sequence score of the amino acid at the position $S_{i,p}$ is calculated as

$$S_{i,p} = -\log(A_{i,p}/B_i). \tag{3}$$

It should be noted that the complementarity score is completely data-driven, i.e., if an

amino acid never appears at a certain position, a high penalty score is imposed. We only consider

complementary amino acids that are found at least once in the entire identified sequences. The

final score is the sum of the scores at all positions.

Protein expression and complementation assay

Gene construction The gene coding for splitGFP [37] consists of the first through tenth (GFP1-10)

and 11th strand (GFP11) templates (Supporting Information, **Table S1**). They were cloned into

pET-28a (Novagen) vector between the Nde-I and Xho-I restriction sites. We introduced additional

mutations to GFP1-10 to inhibit aggregation and for a convenient expression [45]. The GFP11 strand

was fused with a P22 virus-like particle scaffolding protein [46] for a soluble and stable expression.

Mutations on GFP11 were introduced through PCR using mutagenic primers (Supporting

Information, **Table S2**), and the resulting genes were cloned into the pET-28a vector. Six histidine

residues were fused to the N-terminal of the GFP1-10 and GFP11 genes as an affinity purification

tag.

Protein expression and purification   All constructs were transformed into BL21 (DE3)

Escherichia coli strains. The transformed cells were grown overnight and inoculated into a Luria-

Bertani media containing 50 µg/ml of kanamycin at 37 °C. The cells were then grown until the

optical density of the cells reached 0.6–0.8 at 600 nm, followed by the addition of 0.7 mM of IPTG

(isopropyl β-D-1-thiogalactopyranoside) for induction. After incubation for 16–18 h at 18 °C, the

cells were harvested and suspended in a lysis buffer containing 50 mM Tris (pH 8.0), 150 mM

NaCl, and 5 mM imidazole. The suspended cells were disrupted through sonication, and insoluble

fractions were removed using centrifugation at 18,000 g for 1 h. The supernatants were filtered

with 0.22 µm syringe filters and purified through affinity chromatography using Ni-NTA agarose

Superflow (Qiagen). The solutions were applied to the resin-packed columns and washed with a

buffer containing 50 mM Tris (pH 8.0), 150 mM NaCl, and 10 mM imidazole, until no proteins

were detected through a Bradford assay. An elution buffer (50 mM Tris (pH 7.4), 150 mM NaCl,

300 mM imidazole) was then applied to the column. The buffer exchange was performed with

phosphate buffered saline (PBS, pH 7.4) using a PD-10 column (GE health-care). The

concentrations of the proteins were determined by measuring the absorbance at 280 nm. All

purification processes were conducted at 4 °C. The purities of the proteins were then evaluated

using SDS-PAGE.

Complementation assay The assembly of splitGFP variants was monitored and measured using

a fluorescence complementation assay. An excessive amount of GFP1-10 (50 pmol) in 180 μl and

20 μl of equal molar concentration for each GFP 11 strand (3 pmol) were co-incubated in a PBS

buffer (pH 7.4). The fluorescence kinetics (λ_{ex}= 488 nm /λ_{em}= 530 nm) were monitored for 12 h

at 25 °C using a TECAN infinite M200 microplate reader at 5 min intervals [37] with shaking for 2

sec between intervals. Each experiment was conducted in triplicate using a Nunc F 96 Micro-well

black plate, blocked with a solution of PBS containing 0.5 % of bovine serum albumin (BSA) for

30 min before the assay.

Results/Discussion

Overview of the design process

We hypothesized that repetitively observed amino acid pairing patterns indicate a strong

preference toward the β-sheet. It was also assumed that the sequence with the most frequent

patterns will directly form a β-sheet without considering other environmental contributions.

There are two major steps applied in the algorithm: 1) The extraction of complementarity

information of the β-sheet and 2) the construction of a scoring matrix (**Figure 1**). When a query

sequence is given, it is fragmented into several pieces of short peptides longer than three residues

in length, and the matching neighboring strands are collected. These fragmentation and overlaying

processes naturally impose weights on complementary-prone positions and amplify the pattern

signals. It should be noted that the subsequence search starts from the -2nd position in order to

avoid underweighting teminal regions (Supporting Information, **Figure S1**). After the collection

of matched sequences, a position-specific complementarity scoring matrix is constructed. The

scoring matrix obtained is used to evaluate and design the complementarity of β-strand interactions.

Validation of the score function on retrospective cases

In an effort to validate the complementarity score, we manually curated a test set of

naturally occurring β-strand pairs whose environmental effects are minimal. It is known that β-

strand pairing is in general significantly hindered by local environments [47], whereas amyloidogenic

peptide segments are known to form natural β-sheets themselves [17]. We thus selected a set of

widely known amyloidogenic structures whose aggregation-prone regions have been identified

(**Table1** and Supporting Information, **Table S3**). When multiple β-strands are present, we assumed

that the first strands may be the primary amyloid building unit and so only the first two strands as

a pair were extracted for the structure-based energy calculation.

Table 1. Retrospective test set

Source	PDB ID
Amyloid-β	2lnq, 2y2a, 2y3l, 3pzz
Insulin	2omq
IAPP(amylin)	3fth, 5e61
Prion	3md4, 3nve
Tau	4e0m
β-2 microglobulin	3loz, 4e0k, 4e0l
Immunoglobulin	6dj0, 6dix
SOD1	5wor

To assess the complementarity of the native sequences, we compared their scores with

those of random sequences which were generated using all 20 amino acids in a position-

independent manner. Natural amyloidogenic segments are known to be highly prone to

aggregation, and thus they are expected to be highly preferred, i.e., having fairly low scores in the

random sequence score distributions. **Figure 2** shows that all native sequence scores are ranked

extremely low in all distributions. On average, the native sequences are within 5.2% of the

distributions (**Figure 2**). The results indicate that the scoring function is extremely useful in

detecting favorable β-strand counterparts.

Figure. 2. The predictive power of the B-SIDER score. In this test set, native sequences were compared against 1,000 random sequences. A lower score indicates more favorability. The native complementarity scores are marked as (▼) and their percentile values are displayed next to the marks. This plot was generated using the Raincloud Python package [48].

We also compared the B-SIDER score with two structure-based all-atom energy functions and a sequence-based score matrix. For the structure-based methods, we picked Rosetta (Talaris 13) [49, 50] and FoldX [51], which have been popularly used in *de novo* protein designs [52, 53]. PASTA 2.0 [54] is a method for predicting regions prone to aggregation using a scoring matrix derived from residue pairing patterns of β-sheets. To avoid any biases, 1,000 random sequences were newly prepared per target. The "FastRelax" protocol [55] from Rosetta (Ver. 3.7), the "BuildModel" command from FoldX (Ver. 4.0), and the scoring matrix from PASTA 2.0 were used against the native and random sequences. The predictive power of the score function was assessed based on the percentile of the native sequence score against the random sequence score distribution.

Figure 3A shows that structure-based score functions are generally worse than the sequence-based scoring matrices. The results indicate that the Rosetta energy score function is not sufficiently accurate for ranking complementary β-strands (35.1^{th} percentile on average), whereas the predictive powers of PASTA 2.0 and FoldX were moderate, showing 7.4^{th} and 16.4^{th} percentiles on average respectively. B-SIDER was shown to be the most accurate in an extremely consistent manner (5.2^{th} on average. Standard deviations of Rosetta, FoldX, PASTA 2.0 and B-SIDER are 25.2, 23.3, 8.7 and 6.2, respectively). Although the assessment by PASTA 2.0 is also fairly consistent, the query-specific nature of B-SIDER may provide better results.

Figure. 3. Predictive power of B-SIDER score and its robustness. (A) The B-SIDER score is

compared against two popularly used structure-based protein design methods (Rosetta and FoldX)

and the scoring matrix for the prediction of an amyloid formation (PASTA 2.0). For a fair

comparison, we generated new sets of 1,000 random sequences per target and assessed their scores

using each energy function. The percentile values of native complementary sequences against the

score distributions of the randomly generated sequences are presented. The B-SIDER score

provided the most consistent assessment. (B) The robustness of the B-SIDER score was evaluated

at various sequence identity threshold values. The percentile values of B-SIDER are overall fairly

consistent at even low sequence identity cutoff.

Considering that the Rosetta relax protocol performs flexible backbone refinements, the

use of a fixed-backbone calculation seems to be better for an evaluation of the β-sheet

complementarity. It should be noted that the inconsistent results of Rosetta imply that FoldX

prediction will also be highly driven by the preparation of the structure, i.e., a design with an ill-

defined model may not be generally successful. By contrast, B-SIDER and PASTA 2.0 do not

require any structure at all, and thus can be applied to general cases such as β-sheet interactions

with high structural plasticity and poor structural integrity, which are the common features of

amyloidogenic peptides. Furthermore, the process of collecting complementary motifs of B-

SIDER also appears to be powerful, making it possible to distinguish favorable complementary

sequences not easily detected through one-to-one residue pairing. We also tested the robustness of

the B-SIDER approach by examining the algorithm at various sequence identity cutoff values of

the structure database. The results are fairly consistent until < 40% sequence identity cutoff

(**Figure 3B** and Supporting Information, **Figure S2)**. We observe that significant outliers start

appearing at < 30%. Despite such outliers, B-SIDER still successfully discriminates most test cases

as favorable. The length distributions of matched subsequences (**Figure S3**) show that

complementarity information is mainly derived from subsequences with the minimal length.

Perhaps the consistency of the predictive power at low homology thresholds may come from the

subsequence overlapping.

Prospective appplication of the algorithm to splitGFP

As shown in the retrospective test, B-SIDER is extremely useful in discriminating naturally

β-strand forming sequences. As a proof of concept, we prospectively designed novel

complementary β-strands for splitGFP. SplitGFP is a fragmented protein pair derived from

superfolderGFP [37], comprising a scaffold containing ten β-strands (GFP1-10) and their

complementary β-strand peptide (GFP11). GFP11 specifically interacts with GFP1-10, and the

strand tightly forms a stable β-sheet structure, which facilitates the chromophore maturation in an

irreversible manner [56]. This assembly process results in the emission of green fluorescence.

Because GFP11 is known to be disordered in a solution, its conformational transition from a

disordered to an induced β-sheet is similar to that of amyloidogenic peptides [57, 58]. This model

system thus efficiently assesses whether sequences designed using B-SIDER have favorable β-

sheet interactions.

Table 2. GFP 11 variants

Variant	Sequence	Score	Relative Assembly*
top_var1	M**V**L**VE**F**VT**	-12.34	1.17
top_var2	M**Y**L**VE**F**VT**	-12.14	1.4
top_var9	M**T**L**VE**F**VT**	-11.79	1.36
top_var3	M**V**L**VE**I**VT**	-12.11	0.59
top_var4	M**V**L**VE**F**VY**	-11.95	0.56
top_var5	M**Y**L**VE**I**VT**	-11.92	0.88
top_var6	M**V**L**VE**V**VT**	-11.90	N.D.
top_var7	M**V**L**VE**F**VV**	-11.89	N.D.
top_var8	M**V**L**VE**F**VW**	-11.83	N.D.
top_var10	M**V**L**VE**F**VF**	-11.77	N.D.
neg_var	M**V**L**GE**K**VE**	-4.60	0.04
Ori	MVLHEYVN	-6.50	1

268   *Normalized values compared to the fluorescence level of the original GFP11 strand.

Figure. 4. Design process of GFP11 variants. (A) The strand to be designed (GFP11) is highlighted in red, and query sequences to consider are shown on the right. Dotted lines represent hydrogen bonds. The residues pointing inward, which are not subject to a mutation, are colored in gray. (B) The B-SIDER score of the original GFP11 (▼) is compared against the score distribution of randomly generated sequences. The negative variant (neg_var) is marked as × (the 77th percentile). (C) The position-specific scoring matrix for the query sequences. Amino acids that never appeared at each position are colored in black. The amino acids of the native sequence are highlighted with black boxes. The white circles represent the lowest scores at each position.

The original GFP11 was designed using directed mutagenesis, and it shows a high intrinsic
propensity to form hydrogen bonds with the neighboring β-strands of GFP1-10 [59]. In our case, the
queries are the neighboring strands of GFP1-10 (**Figure 4A**). The total score was calculated as a
sum of the scores from both sides without specific weights. It is known that the inward pointing
residues (1, 3, 5, and 7th positions) directly interact with the chromophore, and thus are not subject
to a mutation. It should be noted that we utilized the best structure data available (PDB < 90 %

sequence identity). B-SIDER identified 2,637 non-redundant sequences from the structure

database. The native sequence is ranked modestly among 1,000 possible randomly chosen

sequence variants (46th percentile), indicating that there could be room for complementary

sequences with stronger interactions than the original (**Figure 4B**). We then selected sequences

with the lowest B-SIDER scores (top_vars; **Table2**). Amino acid compositions of the ten variants

are mostly hydrophobic or branched amino acids (Supporting Information, **Figure S4**). In addition,

one sequence with a high score (> 75th percentile) was randomly selected as a negative control

(neg_var, 77th).

The selected variants were successfully expressed and purified (Supporting Information,

Figure S5) except for four clones (top_var6, 7, 8, and 10), which were observed to be insoluble,

perhaps due to aggregation. Among those expressed, three variants (top_var1, 2, and 9) showed

faster assembly patterns and higher signals compared to the original GFP11 (**Figure 5**). No

functional aberrance with excitations or emissions was observed (Supporting Information, **Figure

S6**). All successful variants, which emitted stronger fluorescence levels than the original, were

shown to have pairs of phenylalanine and threonine at positions 6 and 8, respectively. These results

demonstrate that the designed variants indeed formed complementary β-strands in a more

favorable fashion than the original peptide as predicted. The other variants showed slightly lower

signals than the original, but still gave rise to clear fluorescence signals (**Figure 5**). The negative

control (neg_var) barely emitted any signal, suggesting that the score indeed indicates the

complementarity of the β-stacking interactions. We also assigned scores to the GFP11 variants

using other scoring methods. As shown in the retrospective test set, Rosetta and FoldX were unable

to discriminate top_vars as favorable (Supporting Information, **Figure S7**). However, PASTA 2.0

was again fairly accurate in this case.

Figure. 5. Complementation assay with the designed GFP11 variants. Among the six

successfully expressed variants, three variants exhibited stronger fluorescence emissions than the

original peptide identified through a directed mutagenesis.

Conclusion

For understanding the aggregation mechanism of disease-related β-sheets and developing

potential therapeutics against them, β-sheet forming patterns are essential. Unlike α-helices,

however, there has been no established design principle for the complementarity of β-sheets. In

this study, we developed B-SIDER, a database search method for the design of complementary β-

strands based on the intrinsic β-sheet forming propensities. Statistical patterns of interacting

residue pairs between neighboring β-strands enable the complementary interaction to be quantified.

We demonstrated that the statistical potential can be directly applied to the design of

complementary β-strand sequences. Using splitGFP as a model system, we successfully designed

fragment variants, which led to stronger fluorescence emissions than the native one originally

identified through a directed mutagenesis. The results clearly indicate that B-SIDER can be useful

for the detection and design of β-stacking interactions between unstructured fragments. Therefore,

our approach can find wide applications in protein designs where structure-based methods are

ineffective, including the development of protein binders specifically against intrinsically

disordered disease-related proteins.

Notes

B-SIDER is freely available at http://bel.kaist.ac.kr/research/B-SIDER

Supporting Information

Supporting Information Available: Sequences of GFP constructs (Table S1 and S2), identification

of query sequences of the retrospective test set (Table S3), schematic description of B-SIDER

scoring (Figure S1), discriminatory power of B-SIDER scoring at various sequence identity cutoff

values (Figure S2), length distribution of matched subsequences (Figure S3), sequence logo of

GFP11   variants   (Figure   S4),   SDS-PAGE   analysis   of   GFP11   variants   (Figure   S5),

excitation/emission spectral analyses of GFP11 variants (Figure S6), score reassessment of the

GFP11 variants using PASTA2.0, FoldX and Rosetta (Figure S7).

This material is available free of charge via the Internet at http://pubs.acs.org

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Abbreviations

GFP, green fluorescent protein; PCR, polymerase chain reaction; IPTG, isopropyl β-D-1-

thiogalactopyranoside; BSA, bovine serum albumin; IAPP, islet amyloid polypeptide precursor;

SOD1, superoxide dismutase 1; PDB, protein data bank

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