
High-Throughput Protein Perturbation Screens for AI-Designed Degraders

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Abstract

The development of specific protein binders is crucial for biologics and targeted protein degradation (TPD) therapies. However, current techniques rely on low-throughput, labor-intensive approaches and often use non-human display systems such as phage, yeast, or mRNA display, limiting their translational relevance. To address this, we developed a high-throughput, human cell-based binder screening platform that enables the functional evaluation of artificial intelligence (AI)-designed peptide binders in a mammalian context for protein perturbation. Our approach utilizes genetically engineered, doxycycline-inducible ubiquibodies (uAbs) that fuse libraries of computationally designed “guide” peptides to an E3 ubiquitin ligase domain, enabling modular, CRISPR-like TPD. Using target-expressing cells fused with an mCherry reporter to monitor protein degradation, we screened and validated AI-generated binders in a physiologically relevant setting. We successfully applied this platform to identify functional peptide degraders for β -catenin, GFAP, and EWS::FLI1, oncogenic and disease-associated proteins that have remained challenging to target with conventional approaches. Overall, this platform enables scalable discovery of AI-designed peptide binders for proteome perturbation and therapeutic development.

1 Introduction

A substantial fraction of disease-driving protein, including transcription factors and fusion oncoproteins, remain intractable to small-molecule inhibition due to disordered domains and inaccessible binding pockets [Chen et al., 2023]. Biologics such as antibodies, nanobodies, and peptides offer a compelling alternative for functional protein perturbation, as they can bind diverse epitopes without requiring classical active sites Wang et al. [2022], Mieczkowski et al. [2023]. Advances in generative AI have further accelerated the design of programmable binders, enabling precise perturbation of both structured and disordered targets [Watson et al., 2023, Chen et al., 2025a, Pacesa et al., 2025].

A recent approach to proteome editing leverages targeted protein degradation (TPD), where short, sequence-designed peptide “guides” are fused to the ubiquitin conjugation domain of the human CHIP E3 ligase, yielding genetically encodable chimeras called “ubiquibodies” (uAbs) [Brix et al., 2023, Bhat et al., 2025, Chen et al., 2025a]. These CRISPR-like tools act as programmable perturbation agents, degrading specific protein targets inside cells. The rise of generative peptide design models, including *PepMLM*, *PepPrCLIP*, *SalT&PepPr*, *moPPIt*, *SOAPIA*, *PepTune*, and *MOG-DFM* enables rapid generation of such uAb binders directly from target sequences [Bhat et al., 2025, Chen et al., 2025a, Brix et al., 2023, Chen et al., 2025b, Vincoff et al., 2025, Tang et al., 2025, Chen et al.,

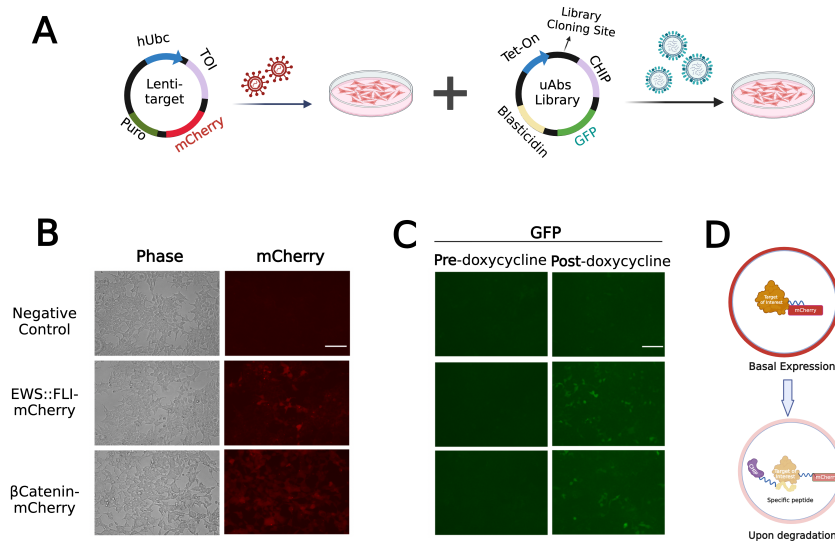


Figure 1: **Reporter cell line generation for screening of functional binder peptides.** A) Reporter cell line integration for both target-mCherry and uAb-GFP constructs. B) Target expression validation by mCherry fluorescence. C) uAb induction confirmed by GFP fluorescence following doxycycline addition. D) Schematic of uAb-mediated degradation in the target-mCherry reporter cell line upon peptide engagement.

2025c]. However, selecting and validating peptides that induce functional perturbation remains a key bottleneck.

In parallel, high-throughput CRISPR screening (CRISPR-HTS) has become a standard for scalable genomic perturbation using programmable nucleases such as Cas9 and dCas9 [Bock et al., 2022, Gilbert et al., 2014, Konermann et al., 2015]. These screens systematically assess perturbation outcomes by delivering sgRNA libraries to cells, applying selection pressure, and identifying enriched or depleted guides via deep sequencing [Shalem et al., 2015, Yang et al., 2023].

Motivated by this strategy, we establish a CRISPR-like high-throughput screening (HTS) platform for functional proteome perturbation using uAbs. We engineer HEK293T cells expressing mCherry-tagged target proteins and introduce a doxycycline-inducible uAb library, where each variant encodes a language model–designed peptide fused to the CHIP Δ TPR ligase domain [Brixi et al., 2023, ?, Bhat et al., 2025]. Functional peptide binders induce uAb-mediated degradation of the target, leading to loss of mCherry signal and enabling FACS-based selection of perturbed cells for sequencing. Using this screen, we successfully identified peptides that perturb disease-relevant proteins including the transcriptional coactivator β -catenin [Yu et al., 2021], the type III intermediate filament protein GFAP implicated in Alexander disease [Lin et al., 2024], and the fusion oncoprotein EWS::FLI1 [May et al., 1993]. Together, our platform enables scalable functional evaluation of AI-designed peptide perturbagens and establishes a foundation for CRISPR-like high-throughput proteome perturbation.

2 Methods

2.1 Binder Design

Novel binding peptides designed in this study were generated either by the target sequence-conditioned PepMLM algorithm [Chen et al., 2025a] (<https://huggingface.co/ChatterjeeLab/PepMLM-650M>), by the generative-discriminative PepPrCLIP model [Bhat et al., 2025] (<https://huggingface.co/ubiquitx/pepprclip>) by the motif-specific peptide generator moPPit-v2 [Chen et al., 2025b] algorithm (<https://huggingface.co/ChatterjeeLab/moPPit-v2>).

2.2 Lentiviral production

For target-reporter packaging and pooled peptide packaging, HEK293T cells were seeded in a 6-well plate and transfected at approximately 50% confluency. For each well, 0.5 μ g pMD2.G (Addgene #12259), 1.5 μ g psPAX2 (Addgene #12260), and 0.5 μ g of the target-mCherry reporter transfer vector were transfected with Lipofectamine 3000 (Invitrogen) according to the manufacturer's protocol. The medium was exchanged 8 hours post-transfection, and the viral supernatant was harvested at 48 and 72 hours post-transfection.

2.3 Target-mCherry reporter monoclonal cell line generation

For target-reporter cell line generation, 1×10^5 HEK293T cells were mixed with 20 μ L of the concentrated virus in a 6-well plate. Media was changed 24 hours post-transduction. Antibiotic selection was started 36 hours post-transduction by adding 2 μ g/mL puromycin (Sigma, P8833). Cells were harvested for sorting at 5 days post-antibiotic selection, and a single mCherry-positive cell was plated in a 96-well plate. Genomic PCR was performed after cell growth to validate the genotype of the monoclonal cell line.

2.4 Generation of plasmids

The uAb plasmid was generated from the standard pcDNA3 vector, harboring a cytomegalovirus (CMV) promoter and a C-terminal P2A-eGFP cassette, as well as a human phosphoglycerate kinase 1 (hPGK) promoter followed by a blasticidin selection cassette. An Esp3I restriction cloning site was introduced immediately upstream of the CHIP Δ TPR CDS and a flexible GSGSG linker via the KLD Enzyme Mix (NEB) following PCR amplification with mutagenic primers (Genewiz).

2.5 Peptide library design and cloning

For each of the targets, the library included a set of polyG and polyA sequences as negative controls, along with 999 peptides generated using the PepMLM algorithm [Chen et al., 2025a] and 999 peptides generated using the moPPit algorithm [Chen et al., 2025b]. In total, 2000 peptides were synthesized by Twist as single-stranded DNA, PCR amplified, and cloned into the uAb architecture using Gibson assembly.

2.6 Peptide pooled lentiviral titration

The titer of the lentiviral peptide library pools for the single peptide libraries was determined by transducing 6×10^4 cells with serial dilutions of lentivirus and measuring GFP expression four days post-transduction using an Accuri C6 flow cytometer (BD). All lentiviral titrations were performed in the target-mCherry cell line.

2.7 Functional peptide binders screens

Each target-specific binder screen was performed in duplicate with independent transductions. For each replicate, 100 ng/ μ L doxycycline was added to induce uAb expression. Cells were harvested 5 days post-doxycycline treatment for sorting. A total of 1×10^7 target-mCherry cells were washed once with $1 \times$ PBS, dissociated using Accutase, filtered through a 30 μ m CellTrics filter, and resuspended in FACS buffer (0.5% BSA [Sigma, A7906], 2 mM EDTA [Sigma, E7889] in PBS). The highest and lowest 10% of cells were sorted based on mCherry expression using a SH800 FACS Cell Sorter (Sony Biotechnology). After sorting, genomic DNA was extracted with the Monarch Genomic DNA Purification Kit (NEB, T3010).

2.8 Peptide library sequencing

The peptide libraries were amplified from each genomic DNA sample in 100 μ L PCR reactions using Q5 Hot Start Polymerase (NEB, M0493) with 1 μ g of genomic DNA per reaction. PCR amplification was performed according to the manufacturer's instructions, using 25 cycles at an annealing temperature of 60 $^{\circ}$ C with the following primers:

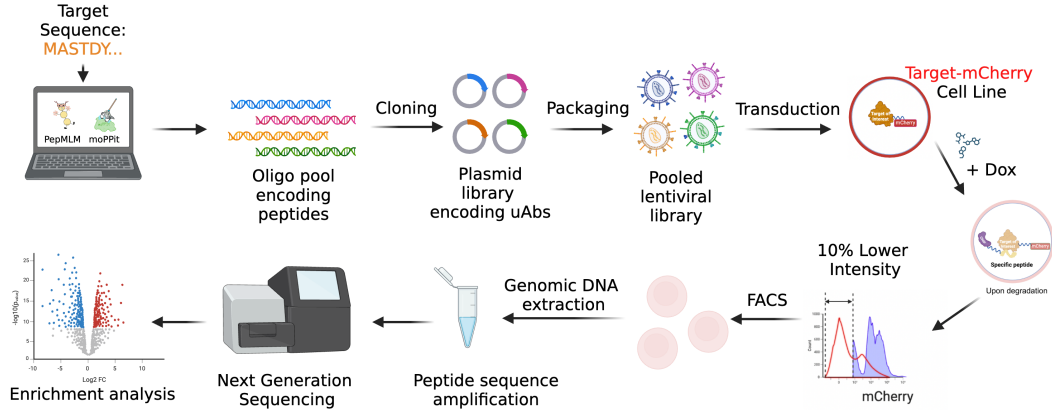


Figure 2: **High-throughput screening of AI-designed peptide-guided uAbs.** Schematic workflow from computational peptide design, cloning, lentiviral packaging, pooled transduction, FACS isolation of mCherry-low cells, and sequencing-based enrichment analysis.

Fwd: ACACCTCTTCCCTACACGACGCTCTTCCGATCTATTGGCTAGCGGATCCGCCACCATG
 Rev: GACTGGAGTTCAGACGTGTGCTCTTCCGATCTAGTTCAGCCGGCCAGAACCGCTGCC

The amplified libraries were purified with the QIAquick Gel Extraction Kit and the amplicons were sent to Genewiz for next-generation sequencing.

2.9 Data analysis

We used MAGeCK and MAGeCK-VISPR to analyze peptide enrichment across experimental conditions [Li et al., 2015]. The pipeline normalizes sequencing counts, models read distributions across replicates, and identifies significantly enriched peptides by comparing post-sort and pre-sort populations. For each peptide, MAGeCK reports the \log_2 fold change ($\log_2 fc$), reflecting relative enrichment, and an associated p -value indicating statistical significance. To visualize these results, we generated volcano plots showing both the magnitude of effect ($\log_2 fc$) and statistical significance ($-\log_{10} p$ -value) for each peptide. Peptides meeting the thresholds of $\log_2 fc > 2$ and $p < 0.01$ were considered significantly enriched (red), while all others were designated as non-significant (gray).

2.10 Cell fractionation and immunoblotting

Cells were harvested, detached with 0.05% trypsin-EDTA, and washed twice with ice-cold PBS. Pellets were lysed in RIPA buffer (ThermoFisher, Cat #89900) supplemented with protease inhibitor cocktail (Millipore Sigma, Cat #P8340, 1:100), incubated at 4 °C for 30 min, and centrifuged at 15,000 rpm for 10 min. Protein concentration was determined using the Pierce BCA Assay Kit (ThermoFisher, Cat #23227).

Twenty micrograms of protein were mixed with 4× LDS sample buffer containing 5% β -mercaptoethanol (3:1), denatured at 95 °C for 10 min, separated on Bolt™ Bis-Tris Plus gels (ThermoFisher, Cat #NW04125BOX), and transferred using iBlot™ 2 stacks. Membranes were blocked in 5% milk-TBST and probed overnight at 4 °C with mouse anti-beta-Catenin (R&D Systems, Cat #MAB13292, 1:1000) and anti-GAPDH (Santa Cruz, Cat #sc-47724, 1:10,000), followed by goat anti-mouse HRP secondary (ThermoFisher, Cat #32230, 1:5000). Detection was performed by chemiluminescence (BioRad ChemiDoc™ Touch). Band intensities were quantified using FIJI gel analysis, normalized to GAPDH, and expressed relative to polyG uAb vector controls.

2.11 Real-time quantitative RT-PCR

Total RNA was isolated using a Monarch Total RNA Miniprep Kit (NEB, T2010). One microgram of total RNA was reverse transcribed using PrimeScript™ RT Master Mix (Takara Bio, RR036A).

Quantitative real-time PCR (qPCR) analysis using the fluorescent SYBR Green method (Bio-Rad, Richmond, CA) was performed according to the manufacturer's instructions.

The primers used were as follows:

- EWSAT1: 5'-TGTGCATTCCGCATCCAGGTGT-3' (forward) and 5'-GCTTCAGCAGAGATGTTGCAGG-3' (reverse)
- ACTINB: 5'-CACCATTGGCAATGAGCGGTTC-3' (forward) and 5'-AGGTCCTTTCGGATGTCCACGT-3' (reverse)

The PCR program consisted of enzyme activation at 95 °C for 10 min, followed by 40 amplification cycles (95 °C for 30 sec, 61 °C for 30 sec, 72 °C for 30 sec). Data were acquired using an iCycler iQ Real-Time PCR Detection System (Bio-Rad) and normalized against ACTINB.

2.12 TOPFlash Luciferase assay

DLD1 cells were seeded in 96-well plates at a density of 1×10^4 cells per well and incubated for 20–24 h prior to transfection. On the day of transfection, each well received a total of 100 ng plasmid DNA at a ratio of TOPFlash luciferase:uAb plasmids of 1:3. The plasmid DNA was mixed with Lipofectamine 2000 (Invitrogen) in serum-free Opti-MEM (Gibco) and incubated for 20 min at room temperature before being added dropwise to each well. After 72 h of incubation, the Dual-Luciferase® Reporter Assay (Promega) was performed according to the manufacturer's protocol.

2.13 Cell apoptosis assay

TC71 cells were seeded in opaque 96-well plates at a density of 1×10^4 cells per well and incubated for 20–24 h prior to transfection. On the day of transfection, each well received 100 ng of uAb plasmid DNA mixed with Lipofectamine 2000 (Invitrogen) in serum-free Opti-MEM (Gibco). The mixture was incubated for 20 min at room temperature and added dropwise to each well. After 72 h of incubation, 20 μ L of the Cytotoxicity Reagent from the ApoTox-Glo™ Triplex Assay (Promega) was added directly to each well and incubated for 30 min at 37 °C, protected from light. Luminescence was measured using a microplate reader to quantify caspase-3/7 activity as an indicator of apoptosis. All measurements were performed in triplicate, and results were normalized to untreated control wells.

3 Results

3.1 Generation of a dual reporter cell line for functional peptide screening

To establish a mammalian screening platform, we engineered a dual-reporter system (Figure 1A). Coding sequences of target proteins of interest were cloned into lentiviral vectors fused to an mCherry reporter and linked to a puromycin resistance cassette for selection. Following antibiotic selection, we derived monoclonal target-mCherry reporter cell lines to ensure stable and uniform expression of each target protein (Figure 1B).

Target-fused mCherry HEK293T cell lines were maintained in Dulbecco's Modified Eagle's Medium (DMEM) supplemented with 100 U/mL penicillin, 100 μ g/mL streptomycin, and 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS). For lentiviral peptide library integration selection, 8 μ g/mL blasticidin was added 72 hours post-transduction.

To enable pooled screening of peptide-guided ubiquitubodies (uAbs), we introduced an oligonucleotide library into the uAb vector architecture. This construct is driven by a doxycycline-inducible Tet-on promoter and included a GFP reporter for real-time monitoring of uAb induction. A blasticidin resistance cassette was incorporated to enforce dual-selection of both target-mCherry and uAb-GFP constructs. As can be observed in Figure 1C, doxycycline supplementation induces uAb expression, visualized by GFP fluorescence. As such, functional peptide binders will trigger uAb-mediated ubiquitination and degradation of the mCherry-tagged target protein, detectable as a loss of red fluorescence (Figure 1D).

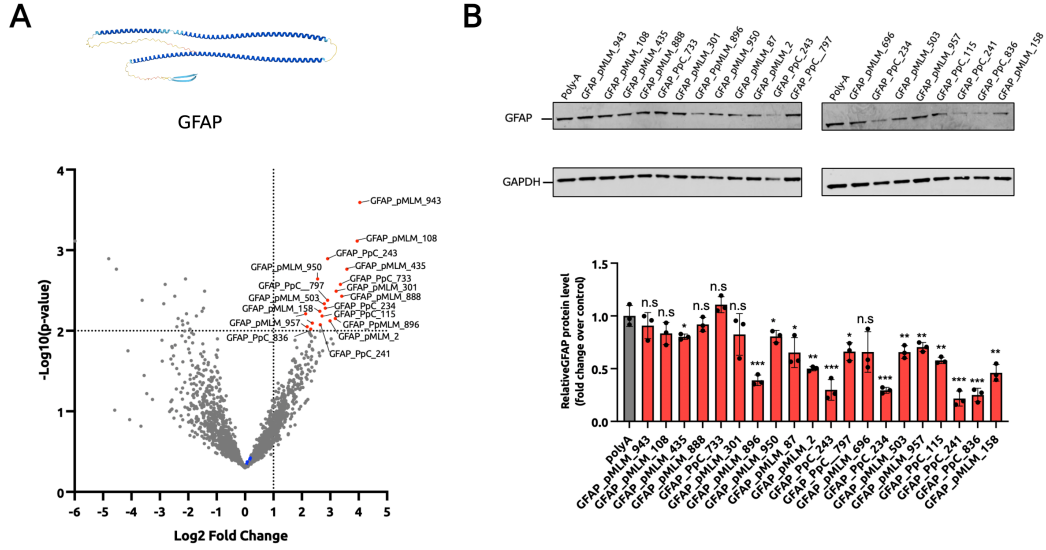


Figure 4: **High-throughput screening and validation of functional peptide binders for GFAP.** (A) Volcano plot of enriched peptides in the GFAP-mCherry reporter line. Red dots indicate peptides significantly enriched ($p < 0.01$, \log_2 fold change > 2). (B) Immunoblot confirming degradation of endogenous GFAP in U251 cells.

Finally, we sought to target the oncogenic fusion protein EWS::FLI1, a key driver of Ewing sarcoma [Braun et al., 1995]. Sixteen enriched peptide binders were selected for validation based on the volcano plot results (Figure 5A). The corresponding uAb constructs were co-transfected into TC71 cells, a human Ewing sarcoma line commonly used in EWS::FLI1 studies [Guan et al., 2005]. Quantitative RT-PCR analysis revealed that 13 of the 16 uAbs significantly downregulated *EWSAT1*, a canonical transcriptional target of EWS::FLI1 [Howarth et al., 2014], consistent with increased apoptosis observed in functional assays (Figure 5C). Together, these findings demonstrate that our pooled screening approach reliably identifies functional peptide degraders across both cytoskeletal and nuclear oncogenic targets.

4 Discussion

The CRISPR-Cas system has revolutionized genome editing due to its modular and programmable nature. The ability to design an sgRNA for a new genomic sequence enables precise Cas-mediated editing. Beyond gene disruption, CRISPR has been adapted for single-base editing, gene insertion, and transcriptional modulation [Pacesa et al., 2024, Wang and Doudna, 2023]. Inspired by this RNA-guided system, our peptide-guided uAb degraders are genetically encodable, allowing integration into a CRISPR-like high-throughput screening platform to identify functional peptide binders.

In this study, we established a mammalian high-throughput screening (HTS) platform for identifying peptide binders of targets of interest. The results showed that enriched candidates induced significant degradation of β -catenin and functional perturbation of EWS::FLI1. Beyond target protein degradation, these results motivated us to extend the platform toward target protein stabilization (TPS) via utilizing engineered dual antibodies [Hong et al., 2025], which can enable proteome-wide modulation and support combinatorial screening of protein activation and inhibition, analogous to CRISPRa and CRISPRi approaches for genetic perturbation Gilbert et al. [2014]. With recent advances in protein language model (pLM) architectures, such as SOAPA for fusion-driven oncoprotein targeting Vincoff et al. [2025] and PTM-Mamba for post-translational modification (PTM)-aware protein design Peng et al. [2025], our platform can be further applied to previously undruggable oncoproteins. Additionally, by integrating diverse PTM domains, including kinases, phosphatases, acetylases, and deglycosylases, our HTS system can potentially facilitate targeted editing of protein PTMs. Overall, we anticipate that this approach will accelerate the development of therapeutic modalities based

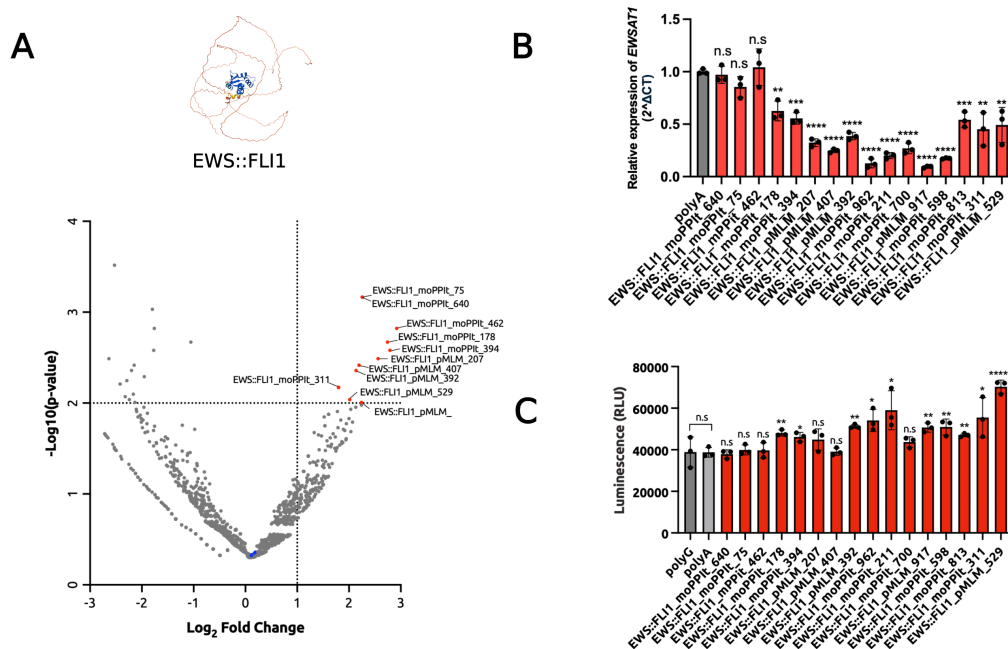


Figure 5: **High-throughput screening and validation of functional peptide binders for EWS::FLI1.** (A) Volcano plot of enriched peptides in the EWS::FLI1-mCherry reporter line. Red dots indicate peptides significantly enriched ($p < 0.01$, \log_2 fold change > 2). (B) RT-PCR showing downregulation of *EWSAT1* in TC71 cells following transfection with enriched EWS::FLI1 uAbs. (C) Cell apoptosis assay confirming the functional impact of EWS::FLI1 degradation.

on selective target binders and broaden the scope for designing novel interventions across multiple disease contexts.

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Table 1: Summary of translated amino acid sequences with associated p -values and \log_2 fc.

Name	Amino Acid Sequence	p -value	\log_2 FC
β cat_moPPIt_581	DAC EQVQLCQRQLAEQAK	0.00029121	2.3573
β cat_pMLM_439	SPEGSRDALADNLLVAVLL	0.00093245	1.6682
β cat_moPPIt_212	DKIQEQLNASRLANLAEQAK	0.0024091	1.8876
β cat_moPPIt_140	HKYREQVTAAPNERLARLQAQ	0.0024091	1.8876
β cat_moPPIt_666	DNARKERLSASRQEELAA LQG K	0.0024091	1.8876
β cat_moPPIt_231	AQYQEQLTAERNALAEQA K	0.0024091	1.8876
β cat_pMLM_286	EPVVVRQMSSSLLDLLVLLQ	0.0037798	1.9364
β cat_pMLM_636	DPEVRQLASDDQLNAVVLK	0.0043269	2.2151
β cat_pMLM_574	SPRVEEVSSDLDLDAVVVAQ	0.0050152	1.3357
β cat_pMLM_871	DPVRVEMLAEDLLDLLVLL	0.0058447	1.6440
β cat_SnP_8	PTAPPYDSLIVFDYEGSGS	0.0078037	1.1268
β cat_pMLM_611	REVQVRMSAEDDLDAVLVK	0.0083450	1.3289
β cat_pMLM_566	DEVQREMSELQDNDVVLL	0.0088921	1.1565
GFAP_pMLM_943	VKRGEELAIKKYLLLLQ	0.00025521	4.0392
GFAP_pMLM_108	KSRREEDLSSLITLDEILA	0.00077057	3.9489
GFAP_pMLM_435	KKVRVEDLIILLKYYQMQL	0.0012760	3.5840
GFAP_pMLM_888	KVRRTEPAASLYKYDMLLA	0.0017171	3.4014
GFAP_PpC_733	GGNKVEASCRNLQKEGVLAL	0.0022721	3.3602
GFAP_pMLM_301	FKVGTLPISRLITYLLELAQ	0.0026536	3.2069
GFAP_pMLM_896	KVRRVEPLSSLYYYDMILL	0.0032235	3.1774
GFAP_pMLM_950	KVRRTRRLSSIITYLLMIQQ	0.0037240	3.1012
GFAP_pMLM_87	KKLGVRPLSSLIKYDQMILA	0.0041799	3.0304
GFAP_pMLM_2	KKLGVLDLSSLYTLLDELAQ	0.0046259	2.9916
GFAP_PpC_243	RVWNEIEEQMHQKRNMVWD	0.0052404	2.9076
GFAP_PpC_797	MNTKAIAAELLKIIVAERRR	0.0057260	2.9060
GFAP_pMLM_696	KVRGEEPLSILIKYYQEILA	0.0061472	2.8833
GFAP_PpC_234	WLEKRDMCCEEVEKKIKEEEE	0.0065585	2.8256
GFAP_pMLM_503	FSLVEEDLSRLYKKLDEQAA	0.0070392	2.7915
GFAP_pMLM_957	KVVVTLPLISIKYLLEQLA	0.0075348	2.7307
GFAP_PpC_115	KKEIREWRKRRAFVAWVMN	0.0080204	2.7122
GFAP_PpC_241	EQIKTGELRRIRGEIGEKWD	0.0084317	2.6451
GFAP_PpC_836	WDERKRQKGMWWLYWGIKID	0.0089223	2.6450
GFAP_pMLM_158	FSLVVERLSIILTYLQELLA	0.0095417	2.6327
EWS::FLI1_moPPIt_640	HPPPPKPSMSDYHHDDWHY	0.00068272	2.2562
EWS::FLI1_moPPIt_75	CPPPPKEEDEYYDKHWDNHV	0.00068272	2.2562
EWS::FLI1_moPPIt_462	NPLPQQSPSDSYTQQQAQQQ	0.0015068	2.9209
EWS::FLI1_moPPIt_178	WPPPKPEKDEYYDKHRDNHW	0.0021384	2.7441
EWS::FLI1_moPPIt_394	NPPTPKESAWDYDSWDNWV	0.0026256	2.7924
EWS::FLI1_pMLM_207	PMPPLIAAADYYTAQAAQQ	0.0032572	2.5615
EWS::FLI1_pMLM_407	NPQPQIRPSDYIRDNLAAQS	0.0038347	2.1937
EWS::FLI1_pMLM_392	PPQPQKRLSESITQQLALAQ	0.0043881	2.1367
EWS::FLI1_moPPIt_962	NPPPKETSNGDYHWDNWV	0.0067220	1.7985
EWS::FLI1_moPPIt_211	VPPPPKEKDCYYDYHNDNWV	0.0067220	1.7985
EWS::FLI1_moPPIt_700	VPPPPKEKCNYYDNGWDNWY	0.0067220	1.7985
EWS::FLI1_pMLM_917	NPPPPKRASSEISDLQQAQQ	0.0067220	1.7985
EWS::FLI1_moPPIt_598	NPPPPKTKDEYYDHHWRNCD	0.0067220	1.7985
EWS::FLI1_moPPIt_813	YPPPPKEKDEYYDWFGSNWY	0.0067220	1.7985
EWS::FLI1_moPPIt_311	VPPPPKCKDEYHEKHWDNWV	0.0067220	1.7985
EWS::FLI1_pMLM_529	DVLVLKRAADEGRAQLQQQQ	0.0091521	2.0155