

La network

the college of liberal arts newsletter



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Table of Contents

	03	From the Dean's Desk
Milestone Achievement: Clinical Psychology	08	
	10	Profile in Generosity: Dr. Bert D. Levine
Profile in Generosity: Ilana Albanese-Penler, Ph.D.	12	
	14	B3 Scholar Success
Student & Faculty Success	16	
	20	Alumni Spotlight: JR Ortega, '09
Alumni Spotlight: Vanessa Vale-Saenz, '09 & '11	21	
	23	In Memorium: Dr. Gary Mounce
Back Home Again!	24	



from the Dean's Desk.

With the Spring 2026 semester well underway, I'm grateful for the energy, creativity, and commitment our college community continues to bring every day. Already, this semester has been a testament to what we can accomplish together, and I want to take a moment to reflect on the highlights that have shaped our journey so far through the current academic year.

Our Fall B3 Showcase brought together a passionate group of students and faculty, celebrating innovative research, creative projects, and the collaborative energy that defines our College as a leader at UTRGV. The Winter Graduation Ceremony was a moving tribute to our graduates' dedication and perseverance, highlighting the transformative power of education and the meaningful connections formed throughout their academic careers.

We also celebrated the accomplishments of our newest PhD graduates in Psychology—an inspiring milestone that reinforces our commitment to academic excellence and leadership in the field. Our college was honored to host the 19th Texas Association of Biological Anthropologists Conference, providing a vibrant forum for scholarly exchange and professional growth. This event was a resounding success, thanks to the hard work and vision of our organizing team and the enthusiastic participation of attendees from across the state.

The impressive publication record from the past semester spans Sociology, Criminal Justice, History, and Translation Studies, as well as other disciplines, reflecting scholarly excellence and innovation. This work has earned notable recognition through prestigious awards and honors for outstanding research. Several working groups in the social

sciences, the humanities, and language and communication are developing proposals for interdisciplinary doctoral programs that will take us to the next stage of becoming a strong contributor to UTRGV's future R1 status.

Our alumni and donors continue to play a vital role in sustaining our mission and supporting the next generation of scholars. They demonstrate the profound impact of generosity and partnership within our community. We also paused to honor the memory of valued colleagues, whose legacies continue to inspire us and whose contributions remain woven into the fabric of our college.

As we look ahead to the rest of the semester and reflect on the year so far, let us celebrate our shared successes and renew our commitment to fostering an environment where curiosity, engagement, and discovery thrive. Thank you for making this academic year truly exceptional. I look forward to the continued growth and achievements that await us in the months ahead.

I wish everyone a strong spring semester filled with successful projects, meaningful progress, and advancement for all.

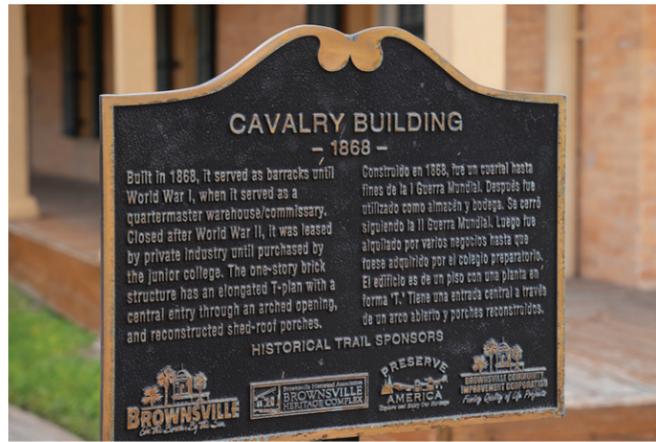
See you around, and ... ¡Vamos!

José Dávila-Montes, PhD.
Dean · College of Liberal Arts
Professor of Translation and Interpreting



Fort Brown Tour Builds Community for New CLA Faculty

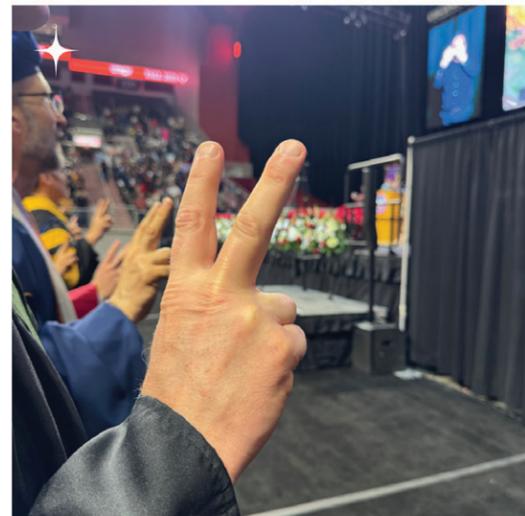
During the College of Liberal Arts New Faculty Orientation, faculty participated in a guided walking tour of Fort Brown in Brownsville in October 2025. The tour was led by historian and former UTRGV lecturer James Mills, who shared insights into Fort Brown's military, cultural, and educational significance. The experience offered new faculty an opportunity to connect place-based history to their teaching and scholarship while building community across the College.



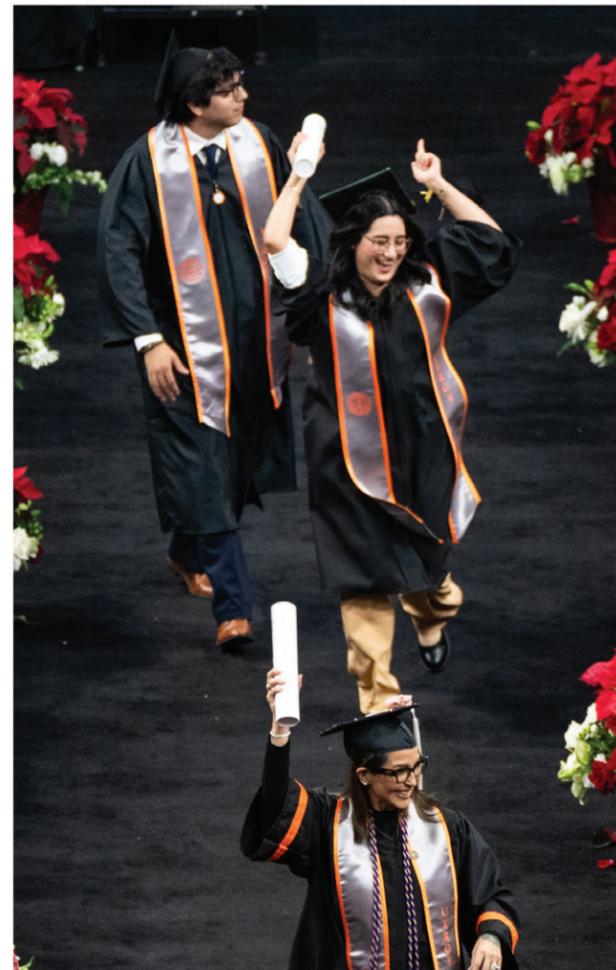
Donuts with the Dean
on the first day of the Spring Semester



CONGRATULATIONS
FALL 2025
 GRADUATES



Photography by Silver Salas





Milestone Achievement: Clinical Psychology PhDs in the Hood



FOR MOST GRADUATES, COMMENCEMENT MARKS THE END OF A CHAPTER. FOR THIS GROUP, IT ALSO MARKED THE BEGINNING OF A LEGACY. IN DECEMBER 2025, THE COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS GRADUATED ITS FIRST COHORT OF CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY PHDS.

UTRGV’s program was built with a clear purpose—to train bilingual clinical psychologists through an integrated model of academic, scientific, and professional preparation, with a strong emphasis on service to Hispanic and Mexican American communities in the Rio Grande Valley. Its training philosophy follows the scientist-practitioner model: Students are taught not only to deliver care but also to think like researchers and evidence-based decision-makers in every clinical setting.

That mission shaped the journey of the first cohort from day one. Clinical training begins in the very first semester, when students shadow advanced trainees and faculty before assuming their own caseloads under close supervision.

Program leadership has been central to that process. Under the guidance of Dr. Arthur Cantos, Director of Clinical Training, the program emphasizes rigorous supervision, sequenced practicum devel-



Front row: Dr. Maria Cecilia Montenegro, Dr. Gabriela Ontiveros, Dr. Frances Morales and (inset), Dr. Ines Cano. Back row: CLA Dean, Jose Davila-Montes, Clinical Psychology Program Director, Dr. Arthur Cantos, Dr. Cynthia Gonzalez, Dr. Cecilia Montiel-Nava, Dr. Philip Gasquoine and CLA Associate Dean for Graduate, Dr. Salvador Restivo.

opment, and culturally responsive preparation aligned with professional accreditation standards.

The scope is substantial. Students are expected to build broad competency across research, therapy, assessment, ethics, and multicultural practice, while completing a minimum of 1,000 clinical training hours. Students may also select advanced pathways in neuropsychology, trauma/anxiety, and integrative primary care.

For Dr. Maria Cecilia Montenegro, one of the inaugural graduates, being first carried a responsibility that extended beyond personal achievement. “Throughout our PhD journey, knowing we were the [first] PhD cohort guided us in pushing doors open for others. We (my cohort and I) ... felt immense honor in being able to help guide the program.”

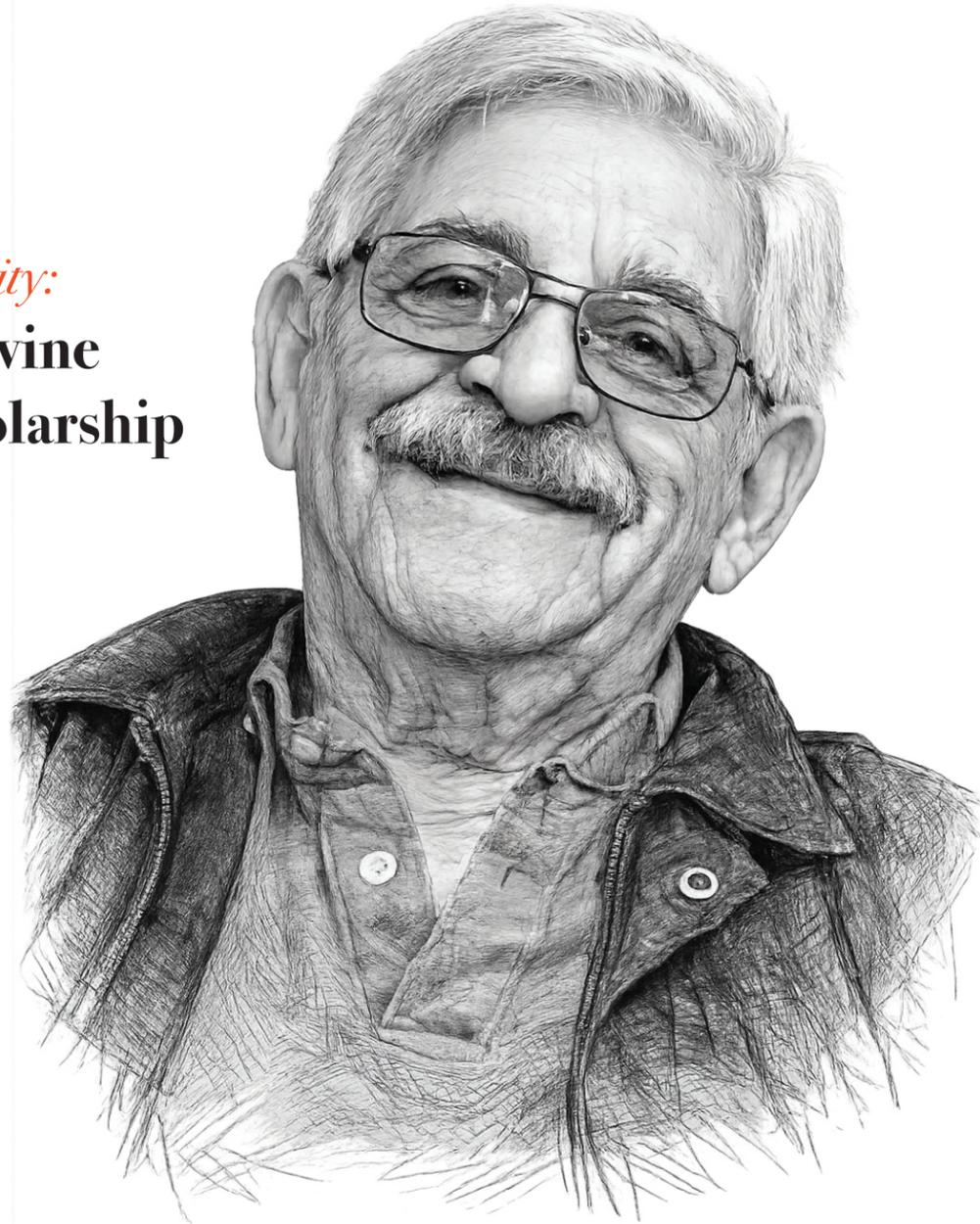
When asked what most prepared her for the next professional step, Dr. Montenegro pointed to the program’s simultaneous demands—many roles, all at once. “The clinical psychology PhD has multiple requirements to be completed at the same time,” Montenegro said. “We have to be therapists, evaluators, researchers, and students.” She also added that the program is community-focused and that they all began supervising students. “Having to fulfill all these roles taught me flexibility and a sense of pride in my efforts,” Montenegro said.

If the first class proved anything, it is this: Excellence is rarely built in comfort. The first cohort did not simply complete a program; they helped test, refine, and strengthen it in real time while holding the door open for the next cohort.

Profile in Generosity:

Dr. Bert D. Levine Endowed Scholarship in Psychology

By Nicole Nicholson



THE UTRGV DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE PROUDLY GRADUATED ITS FIRST FOUR PHD STUDENTS IN FALL 2025, MAKING THIS AN IDEAL MOMENT TO REFLECT ON THE DEPARTMENT'S GROWTH SINCE ITS BEGINNINGS MORE THAN 50 YEARS AGO AT PAN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY.

That story is closely tied to the life and work of Dr. Bert Levine—one of the first psychologists in the Rio Grande Valley, one of Pan American's first full-time psychology professors, and a driving force behind the professionalization of psychology in Texas. A lasting part of his legacy is the Dr. Bert D. Levine Endowed Scholarship in Psychology, established in 2008 to support deserving students. We recently spoke with Mr. Jason Levine, who created the endowment in his father's name, to learn more about Dr. Levine.

Jason describes his late father as “a very great man, very patient, very kind, very giving”—qualities that made him both a wonderful father and a mental health professional who left a lasting mark on the valley. Dr. Levine was born in Brooklyn, earned his undergraduate degree at Long Island University, and moved to Austin to complete his PhD in psychology. He first worked at the Gonzalez Warm Springs Rehabilitation Hospital with children with disabilities. Then, after hearing of the need for psychologists in South Texas, he moved to Harlingen in the 1950s, worked with the Harlingen school district, and opened a private practice—becoming one of the valley's first full-time psychologists. Jason recalls that his father marveled at people swimming in winter: “He came down here, fell in love with the place, and just never left.”

BUILDING MENTAL HEALTH ACCESS IN SOUTH TEXAS

At the time, mental health care was far less common and far less normalized. Dr. Levine helped change that, steadily building access across the region. He worked with veterans, often spending long hours at local VA centers. A U.S. Marine Corps veteran who served in World War II, he understood combat trauma and used that experience to counsel and support others. The impact was lasting. “After he passed away, a lot of veterans went to his [funeral] service... and they would always say, ‘Your father used to come over and talk with us, and he really helped me a lot just by listening.’”

Dr. Levine became a trusted resource throughout the valley, conducting psychological evaluations for newly hired McAllen police officers, evaluations for disability claims, and depositions for administrative law hearings. With such broad service, he became a familiar figure in the community. Jason and his brothers used to joke they “couldn't go anywhere with him without somebody knowing him and engaging him” in conversation.

He was also known for his availability outside office hours. Jason remembers evenings when patients would call their home and his father would make time no matter what was going on.

FROM PRACTICE TO THE CLASSROOM

Dr. Levine influenced mental health care not only through practice but through teaching and training future professionals. In 1958, he was hired as a part-time professor at Pan American University; in 1967, he became one of its first full-time psychology faculty members. A few years later, the university offered a BA in psychology. Jason said his father loved teaching: “He loved the university life, giving back to those students, and hopefully impacting them as they went on to pursue that field as well.”

He was also instrumental in strengthening psychology licensure in Texas. In the 1950s, the process lacked rigor. As Jason put it, “It was like you could just apply for a license and you could become a psychologist. You didn't really have to have a whole lot of instruction, a whole lot of training.” Dr. Levine advocated for stronger, standardized requirements. In 1969, the Texas State Board of Examiners of Psychologists was established—an outcome that shaped the profession statewide.

Dr. Levine retired from UTPA in 1992 as Professor Emeritus and occasionally returned to guest lecture. He maintained his private practice until just months before his passing in 2007.

TURNING LOSS INTO LEGACY

Jason shared that his father's passing was devastating, but someone close encouraged him to turn grief into something lasting. “I really thought that was a great idea because my father had done so much in the Rio Grande Valley that I wanted to continue with his memory and keep him around the university. I know that he loved teaching; he loved what he did. I wanted to keep that alive in some way throughout these years.” He contacted UTPA to begin the endowment process shortly thereafter. With support from Dr. Levine's colleagues and community contacts, the endowed scholarship fund grew and began disbursing scholarship funds in 2013.

The scholarship supports senior or graduate psychology students with at least a 3.5 GPA, with funds designated for tuition, fees, and textbooks. Recipients are selected by the Psychology Department Scholarship Committee. One such recipient is Kasandra Gonzalez, who was a senior earning her BA in Psychology at the time and who is currently a graduate student in the counseling program. She shared that the endowed scholarship supported her transition into graduate school.

“As a first-generation student, this scholarship represents one of the earliest and most impactful resources contributing to my pursuit of a career in counseling.”

Kasandra Gonzalez

Jason hopes recipients continue forward with purpose: “I hope that they become great in the profession that they choose... I hope that they excel and continue to pursue their dreams.” And for students following his father's path, he offers this: “There's so much you can do with psychology. Don't hold back... so many lives that you can touch, so many people that you can help.”

Whether they realize it or not—and whether they serve here in the valley or far beyond—today's UTRGV psychology graduates walk a path helped shape by Dr. Levine's dedication to students, patients, and community. The UTRGV College of Liberal Arts is proud to sustain that legacy through the endowed scholarship in his name.

If you would like to make a contribution to the Dr. Bert D. Levine Endowed Scholarship in Psychology, please visit: [Dr. Bert D. Levine Endowed Scholarship in Psychology](#), or for more information on establishing an endowment, please contact give@utrgv.edu.



Profile in Generosity:

Ilana Albanese-Penler, Ph.D.

Psychology Scholarship Endowment

By Nicole Nicholson

The College of Liberal Arts boasts 19 graduate programs, including both a Master of Arts and a PhD in Clinical Psychology. One of UTRGV's own adjunct professors, Dr. Ilana Albanese, has chosen a remarkable way to support these two graduate programs: the establishment of the Ilana Albanese-Penler, Ph.D. Psychology Scholarship Endowment, which has assisted individual graduate students in clinical psychology since 2023.

Though she was born in New York City, Dr. Albanese is a Texan through and through. As a young girl, her family

moved to San Antonio, where her father was stationed as a physician at Brooks Air Force Base during the Vietnam War. She grew up in the Texas Hill Country and made her life in Texas, attending the University of Texas at Austin for her undergraduate degree and then her PhD in clinical psychology at the University of Florida before moving back home to the Lone Star State. She chose the field of psychology because she wanted to understand humans and why they do what they do; she finds it fulfilling to be able to help people one-on-one in meaningful ways.

A CAREER BUILT ON THE VALUE OF EDUCATION & HELPING OTHERS

Dr. Albanese has certainly helped many individuals over the course of a full career. While living in Austin, she began her private practice, focusing mostly on psychological and neuroscience evaluations and working with children, teenagers, and families. She also served our country as a clinical auditor for the Medicaid program for twenty years, reviewing records to make sure that people nationwide were receiving adequate care. She feels that this was probably the most meaningful job she has held: “Really, those are the people most in need in our country, and I helped make sure they actually got good, evidence-based care.” Dr. Albanese has also found herself happily in the classroom, teaching graduate and undergraduate classes since 1987 as an adjunct professor at Texas institutions of higher education, including Austin Community College, UT Austin, and Saint Edward’s University.

Then, in 2020, she was ready for a change. At the height of the COVID-19 shutdown, she was working remotely, providing care via telehealth services. She and her husband, Paul Penler, came to the Valley for a brief escape to South Padre Island— they had often brought their children to the coast when they were little – and fell in love with the area in a way that felt less like a short-term pandemic strategy and more like a permanent change. Dr. Albanese opened a private practice in Laguna Vista and shortly thereafter began teaching for UTRGV. She has been teaching two courses per semester ever since, including a variety of undergraduate courses and, most recently, a graduate course in marriage and family therapy.

PAYING IT FORWARD

It is this commitment to education and community that motivated Dr. Albanese to establish the scholarship endowment. She followed the example of her parents, who instilled in her a high value for education: Her mother immigrated from Yugoslavia as a small child after being displaced during the second world war, and despite coming to the United States without knowing any English, she graduated as high school valedictorian and went on to attend an Ivy League school on scholarship; her father was also a first-generation college student. “I’ve always said, I could lose all kinds of things in my life, but I could never lose my education because it’s within me,” Dr. Albanese reflected.

This high esteem for education is shared by her husband, Paul Penler, who also teaches for the UTRGV Robert C. Vackar College of Business and Entrepreneurship. Together, they decided that they wanted to support UTRGV through individual endowments. Dr. Albanese recognized UTRGV as an “up and coming” university and wanted to be a part of its sustained growth. It was the perfect combination of her family’s ties to the UT system and their new community. The gift is meaningful to her precisely because of the stu-

dents and faculty she has worked with and all the personal connections she has made here in the Rio Grande Valley. Rather than one large, “a-ha!” moment, the endowment was inspired by a sense that “when you’re fortunate, you pay it forward,” she says.

“As a graduate student, this support truly gave me the space to breathe and remain focused on my academic goals, making a meaningful difference in my educational journey.”

Maria Chapa

The support certainly makes a difference to the scholarship recipients. Maria Chapa, UTRGV graduate student in psychology and recent awardee, notes, “The financial support from the Ilana Albanese-Penler, Ph.D. Psychology Scholarship Endowment allowed me to focus more fully on my studies while significantly reducing the financial stress that often accumulates during an intense academic semester.”

ENCOURAGING THE NEXT GENERATION OF RGV CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGISTS

Dr. Albanese hopes that the support of the endowed scholarship will galvanize awardees’ drive to continue their education as far as they can, including pursuing doctoral degrees. She encourages scholarship recipients and all students, saying, “Don’t be afraid of how long it takes because that time is going to pass anyway. Stick with it.” She remembers being in school and folks asking her why she didn’t have a job or why she hadn’t graduated, watching her peers buy cars and do things she couldn’t afford to do as a student, but her persistence and hard work paid off in the long run. “My daddy used to tell me if you work harder in the beginning of your life, you work less hard for the rest of your life.” She urges students not to be shy and to reach out to her and others in the field for help and advice.

Dr. Albanese hopes that the scholarship endowment has a ripple effect in the community, impacting not only our students’ education but also the acceptable standards of civil life and health care: The more our community is educated, the more “we’ll make better decisions and we’ll take care of one another better,” she says. “To educate young people is to help them, help their families, help their future families, and help the community.”

If you would like to make a contribution to the Ilana Albanese-Penler, Ph.D. Psychology Scholarship Endowment, please visit: [Ilana Albanese-Penler, Ph.D. Psychology Scholarship Endowment](#) or for more information on establishing an endowment, please contact give@utrgv.edu.



COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS Celebrating B3 Learning Across the College of Liberal Arts

The College of Liberal Arts hosted the B3 Showcase in November 2025, highlighting faculty work centered on Bilingual, Bicultural, and Biliterate pedagogy. The event brought together colleagues across departments to share teaching practices, research projects, and community-engaged work that reflect CLA's commitment to B3 learning and intellectual growth. We designed this as a collaborative and celebratory space, hosted at our Edinburg campus, and the showcase encouraged conversation, connection, and cross-disciplinary inspiration while spotlighting the many ways CLA faculty support students both inside and beyond the classroom.



CLA B₃ SCHOLARS

Fall 2025 saw the graduation of 395 new B3 Scholars.

Of those, 132 students are studying in CLA disciplines.

Every department in the CLA was represented by a new B3 scholar.





STUDENT RECOGNITION

Department of Writing & Language Studies
Translation & Interpreting

Translation and Interpreting students were recognized for excellence in multiple areas: Sergio Velázquez (Innovation); Almendra Ramos, Julie Martínez, and Melanie Velázquez (Interpreting); and Ashley Osorio, Delaney Dwyer, and Fernanda Martínez (Translation). Mr. Marco Hanson also shared words of support on behalf

of the Texas Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (TAJIT), which awarded scholarships to Denyse Sandoval, Héctor Saca, Paulina Olvera, and Rotceh Magdaleno.

ALUMNI RECOGNITION

Diana Lara

Department of Writing & Language Studies



UTRGV alumna Diana Lara received the 2025 School Outreach Award, presented by the American Translators Association (ATA) and the American Foundation for Translation and Interpretation (AFTI). She was honored during the kickoff of ATA's 66th Annual Conference, held in Boston, Massachusetts, in late October 2025. An El Paso native, Lara earned both a B.A. in 2018 and an M.A. in 2020 in Spanish Translation and Interpreting from UTRGV. She is a Spanish-English certified medical interpreter (CCHI), a licensed court interpreter in Texas, and a lecturer in the Minor in Translation & Interpreting at The University of Texas at El Paso.

GUEST SCHOLAR

School of Political Science, Public Affairs, Legal & Security Studies



Dr. Jeronimo Cortina, the Senator Don Henderson Endowed Chair Professorship in the Department of Political Science at the University of Houston,

visited the School of PPLSS on November 6. During his visit, he delivered a POLS Colloquium talk on his latest book, *Proximity Politics: How Distance Shapes Public Opinion and Political Behaviors*. He also visited Dr. Mi-son Kim's Political Parties class.

Additional thanks to: POLS Colloquium Committee: Drs. Corral, Erlingsson, Gutierrez, and Karadeli; Dr. Kim and CSRPA; Sallie, Ela, and Ricky for their help.

ALUMNI VISIT

Juanita Dellett

Department of Communication



Six years after graduating from UTRGV, Juanita Dellett returned triumphant to her alma mater Oct. 23 to speak to Dr. Greg Selber's journalism writing class, telling the students about her career path, which has included

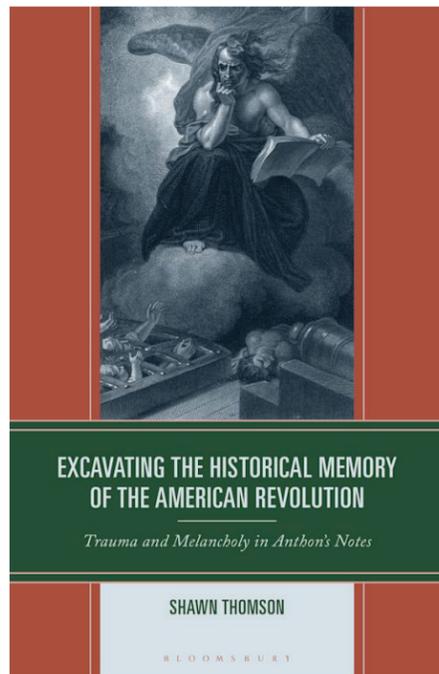
hard work, ups and downs, and much success.

Recently promoted to the role of director of media relations and player engagement for the RGV Vipers G-League basketball team, Dellett (Vaquero Class of 2019) regaled the class about her career arc, which began in high school and has continued apace. She worked for the student newspaper at UTRGV as sports reporter and editor, interned with UTRGV Athletics, and had several side projects, including gigs at a local magazine and with her old high school district, Weslaco ISD.

Dellett told the class that obviously, hard work is a must for up-and-coming students, no matter what field they get into. She also noted that many of her opportunities along the path seemed insignificant but often grew more prominent because she never let a chance go by to try something new. She discussed risk-taking and advised the class to "just do it," telling them that the go-getters of the world will always step up and take their shot.

The students were interested to hear about Dellett's struggles with burnout and confidence, and especially about how she has overcome the obstacles to become one of the faces of the Vipers. Ironically, a history of pageant competition has come in handy, particularly when it comes to talking in front of crowds, as Dellett has done for numerous media outlets, as a broadcaster.

In sum, it was an inspirational event, students acting as reporters for the day, in preparation for writing a feature story about her visit. They got to hear a motivational speech from a young graduate who has risen through the ranks to become one of the new stars in the Valley media landscape. Dellett once sat in the same writing class during her college days, and connected perfectly with the students from the moment she walked back in.



PUBLICATION

Dr. Shawn Thomson
Department Literature & Cultural Studies

This monograph examines the collective and personal memory of Staten Island Loyalists and New Jersey Whigs and highlights the indelible link between landscape and memory. The book connects with the United States at its 250th anniversary.



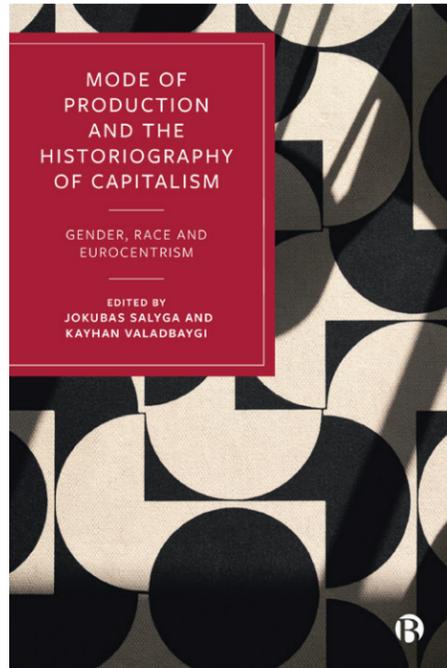
PUBLICATION

Dr. Alvaro Corral
School of Political Science,
Public Affairs, Legal & Security
Studies

Dr. Alvaro Corral published an open-access article in PS: Political Science & Politics titled, "From Commonality to Unity:

The Opportunities and Challenges of Latinxs' Cross-racial Alliances with Blacks." The article is scheduled to appear in a special issue commemorating the 30th anniversary of Paula McClain's Can We All Get Along? Racial and Ethnic Minorities in American Politics.

The article examines how multiple dimensions of Latinx racial group consciousness—including perceptions of discrimination, intra- and intergroup commonality, and racial identity—influence the potential for Latinx-Black political coalitions.



PUBLICATION

Dr. Jokubas Salyga
School of Political Science, Public Affairs, Legal & Security Studies

Jokubas Salyga has published the co-edited book Mode of Production and the Historiography of Capitalism with Bristol University Press. Bringing together world-renowned scholars and activists, the volume calls for a renewed engagement with the 'mode of production' debate in order to examine both the origins and contemporary realities of capitalism, with particular attention to questions of gender, race, and the non-West.



PUBLICATION

Dr. Nazaret Fresno
Department of Writing & Language Studies

"Professional translators in clinical cross-cultural adaptation protocols: A matter of mistrust?" Translation and Interpreting

Studies. Volume 20, Issue 2, Dec 2025,

PUBLICATION

Dr. Minzhi Ye
Department of Sociology

Co-authored, "Sedentary Behaviors and Functional Disability Among Chinese Older Adults (2008-2018): Evidence Including Mahjong. Journal of Applied Gerontology: The official journal of the Southern Gerontological Society.

PUBLICATION

Dr. Minzhi Ye
Department of Sociology

Co-authored, "From Disconnection to Well-Being: A Longitudinal Study on Digital Access as a Social Determinant of Health for Older Adults." The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences.

PUBLICATION

Dr. Canan Tanir
Department of Sociology

"Naturalizing Motherhood: Neoliberal Femininity and the Re-Traditionalization of Gender in Turkey" is published in Journal of Middle East Women's Studies Vol:21 Issue:2 JMEWS is an interdisciplinary journal that publishes area-specific research informed by transnational feminist, sexuality, masculinity, and cultural theories and scholarship.



FACULTY RECOGNITION

Dr. Arthur Cantos
Department of Psychological Science

Angels of Love announces Dr. Arthur Cantos as the 2026 Scholar for Change Award recipient at the Black and White Awards Gala. The award honors educators whose scholarship, advocacy, and compassionate service advance the fight against domestic and intimate partner violence. Dr. Cantos's decades of clinical, academic, and research leadership exemplify that mission.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATION

Dr. Canan Tanir
Rebekah Villanueva
Department of Sociology

The co-authored study with ESAA awardee student Rebekah Villanueva, titled "Empowered or Oppressed: Understanding Online Reconstructions of Female Empowerment," was presented at the 120th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association in Chicago in August 2025. The study discusses how the controversial social media trend #tradwives has contributed to the hyper-normalization and popularization of normative gender roles by analyzing the #tradwife content collected from TikTok. Rebekah majored in Sociology with a minor in Women and Gender Studies. She is now pursuing a Master's degree in Sociology at UTRGV.



FACULTY RECOGNITION

Dr. Linda English
Department of History

On October 17, 2025, at the Western History Association Annual Conference, Dr. English received the Armitage-Jameson Award for Best Monograph Published in Western Women's, Gender, and Sexuality History for Run For Your Lives! Gender and the Runaway Scrape (Texas A&M Press). Presented by the Coalition for Western Women's History, the award includes a \$1,000 prize. Dr. English was recognized at the CWWH breakfast and again during the evening awards ceremony.



FACULTY RECOGNITION

Dr. David Bowles
Department of Writing & Language Studies

David Bowles' translation of THE INTERPRETER by Olivia Abtahi has been selected as one of the 14 Best Children's Books of the Year in Spanish by the Children's Book Committee at Bank Street College of Education.



Senior Communication Specialist, Caterpillar

JR Ortega
Mass Communication,
Journalism
BA '09

“Communication opens doors, networking matters, and journalism still matters.”

JR ORTEGA, A LA FERIA NATIVE AND PROUD GRADUATE OF THE MASS COMMUNICATION PROGRAM'S JOURNALISM TRACK, HAS BUILT A CAREER THAT NOW PLACES HIM AT CATERPILLAR INC., A FORTUNE 100 COMPANY WITH GLOBAL REACH. LONG BEFORE CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS BECAME HIS PROFESSION, ORTEGA KNEW HE WANTED TO WORK IN JOURNALISM.

In college, Ortega focused on print journalism and joined The Pan American, the student newspaper, first as a reporter and later as an editor during his junior and senior years. He credits Dr. Greg Selber as a major mentor, recalling that Selber gave students space to learn through real newsroom responsibility. “He really gave me an opportunity at The Pan American to soak it all in, make mistakes,” Ortega says. “He understood that it was a training ground for us to learn and grow from.” That experience taught him to pair humility with ambition.

He also credits Donna Pazdera, now at Texas A&M University–San Antonio, for teaching him to embrace the unpredictability of journalism. Ortega further recognizes Dr. Kimberly Selber for giving him foundational experience in marketing, photography, and advertising—skills he now uses in corporate communications. He remembers the Communication Department, especially the journalism track, as a supportive and dynamic community.

About a week before graduation, Ortega received an offer from The Victoria Advocate in Victoria, Texas. Over ten years there, he worked as a reporter, covered breaking news and health, then transitioned to design and eventually became design desk supervisor. Along the way, he built a network that would shape his next move.

One of those connections led him to Caterpillar’s Victoria facility communicator role. Though initially unsure about entering a global corporation, Ortega applied and was hired. Six years later, he now serves at Caterpillar’s headquarters in Irving as Senior Communications Specialist for the Electrification and Energy Solutions Division, translating complex engineering concepts into clear internal communications.

His advice to students is simple: The grass is greener where you water it.

“Think big and never limit yourself. Always try to see where you can have an impact and pursue it.”

VANESSA VALE-SAENZ IS A STRONG EXAMPLE OF HOW SERVICE, DISCIPLINE, AND VISION CAN BUILD A HIGH-IMPACT CAREER IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY. HER JOURNEY BEGAN IN EDINBURG, WHERE SHE GRADUATED HIGH SCHOOL A YEAR EARLY AND ENROLLED IN PSYCHOLOGY AT UTRGV'S LEGACY INSTITUTION, UTPA.

She knew early on that psychology was her path. At UTPA, she found mentorship in Dr. Amy Weimer and Dr. Edna Alfaro (now at Texas State University) and gained research experience in developmental psychology labs. After earning her bachelor’s degree, she immediately entered the master’s program in clinical psychology. She remembers UTPA as warm and supportive, shaped by group study sessions, engaged faculty, and active participation in Psi Chi, the International Honor Society in Psychology.

In 2011, Vale-Saenz completed her master’s degree, passed her state board exams, became a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), and accepted a position at DHR. She credits her graduate training for preparing her to transition smoothly into clinical practice, especially through rigorous practicum and internship courses.

She began as a child therapist in DHR Behavioral Hospital’s pediatric inpatient unit, serving children ages 4 to 12. Her work focused on helping young patients build coping strategies and healthier responses to depression and emotional distress. Over time, she became increasingly interested in operations and recognized the need to integrate behavioral health with the broader health system.

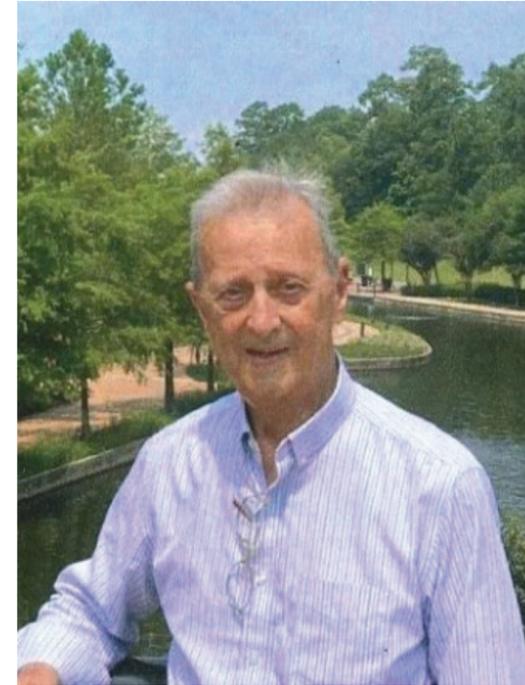
As a counseling services supervisor, she helped make that integration real by building partnerships across DHR service lines, including diabetes, trauma, and transplantation. In 2017, she was promoted to Vice President of Behavioral Health Services. Today, she oversees outpatient counseling and psychiatry services and an inpatient behavioral health hospital expanding from 87 to 194 beds by September 1—positioning it to become the largest inpatient behavioral health hospital in South Texas.

She encourages students to see that clinical training can open doors beyond direct patient care and into leadership roles that shape systems and strengthen communities.



Vice President of Behavioral Health Services, Doctors Hospital at Renaissance Health System

Vanessa Vale-Saenz
Psychological Science,
Clinical Psychology
BA '09 & MA '11



IN MEMORIUM

Dr. Gary Joe Mounce

School of Political Science, Public Affairs & Security Studies

It is with deep sadness that we share the passing of Dr. Gary Joe Mounce, Professor of Political Science. Dr. Mounce passed away peacefully in Spring, Texas, on December 21, 2025, four days before his 88th birthday.

A beloved teacher, mentor, and scholar, Dr. Mounce left a lasting mark on our campus through a decades-long academic career. He served with distinction on the faculty through three institutional eras—from Pan American University to The University of Texas–Pan American (UTPA)—from 1974 to 2015, and chaired the Department of Political Science from 1985 to 1987. After retiring from UTPA in 2015, his commitment to education brought him back to the classroom at UTRGV in Fall 2025.

Dr. Mounce earned his MA in Political Science from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1964 and his PhD in Political Science from The University of Texas at Austin in 1977. He was also a proud Army veteran, serving from 1958 to 1962.

Throughout his career, Dr. Mounce was known not only for his deep knowledge of political science, but also for his engaging teaching style and genuine care for his students' intellectual and personal growth. His influence extended far beyond the classroom, shaping critical thinkers, future leaders, and engaged citizens.

In addition to his work as an educator, Dr. Mounce was a longtime writer and public commentator in the Rio Grande Valley. He wrote a regular political column for the Rio Grande Guardian, and in 2025, a collection of those writings was published as *A Writing Fool*. His voice—both scholarly and deeply civic-minded—enriched public discourse in the region and reflected a lifelong commitment to critical inquiry, community engagement, and public service.



Back Home Again.

The UTRGV Spirit Trophy is back where it belongs—in the CLA trophy case! Students, faculty, and alumni stormed the Fieldhouse on Monday, February 16th for the annual “Battle of the Colleges.” CLA was represented by Dean José Davila-Montes and Communication student Adam Cruz in the halftime free-throw shootout. The duo had a great hand-to-basket rate at the paint but tied for third. The Spirit Trophy was awarded to the college with largest turnout, and CLA did not disappoint. With a loud and rowdy cheering section, CLA brought the spirit home.



Photos: UTRGV Athletics

We want to know.

Send in your “did you know” accomplishments, publications, kudos, grants, student successes, and other bragging points - big and small - to be included in our CLA college newsletter.



Use the below QR Code to access our submission form.



<https://tinyurl.com/4ukp3m3v>