

summer| 2026

La network

the college of liberal arts newsletter



The College of Liberal Arts | The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

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from the Dean's Desk.

After a long, hot South Texas summer, there is something especially energizing about welcoming everyone back for a new academic year. The temperatures will begin to ease at some point, but across the College of Liberal Arts, our research, scholarship, and creative activity are only getting hotter.

The College of Liberal Arts is a powerhouse of undergraduate, graduate, and faculty-led research. Through investments in cutting-edge research spaces, a commitment to protecting faculty research time, and an emphasis on interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration, the college continues to expand its research capacity and impact while advancing UTRGV's research mission. Our growing research infrastructure tells the same story. The new Texas Alliance for Research on Sociological Issues (TARSI) Lab provides advanced computing, visualization, and analytical resources for faculty and student researchers and directly supports UTRGV's R1 mission. Meanwhile, the Linguistics LAB and Phon LAB are turning language study into hands-on scholarship, from South Texas slang and Zapotec to syntax and bilingual speech perception, helping students envision themselves as researchers.

That spirit extends well beyond our laboratories, particularly in the expanding opportunities for undergraduate research across the College. The Gulf Scholars Program welcomed its first interdisciplinary cohort of 12 scholars this spring, bringing together students from across UTRGV to investigate some of the Gulf region's most pressing challenges through research, community partnerships, and hands-on learning. Just as importantly, we are introducing students to research from the very beginning of their university experience. NovaRhet 2026 brought together 1,630 participants across Brownsville and Edinburg, giving first-year writing students the opportunity to develop research-based skills, present their work publicly, and engage faculty, families, and community members in scholarly conversation. Together, these initiatives reflect something fundamental to our mission: in CLA, undergraduate students do not simply

learn about research—they are increasingly becoming researchers themselves.

Our faculty continue to distinguish CLA nationally and internationally through books, peer-reviewed articles, awards, and presentations on four continents and across the United States, and our students traveled this summer in several faculty-led study abroad programs all over the world.

This issue of La Network offers remarkable evidence of that momentum. Since 2024 alone, CLA faculty have generated more than \$15 million in research expenditures, supported by major federal, state, foundation, and community partners. Our faculty are transforming research into resources for our communities while creating extraordinary opportunities for our students. Most importantly, CLA is contributing significantly to UTRGV's historic research trajectory. This summer, the University crossed the \$100 million research-expenditure threshold associated with Carnegie R1 classification, while our doctoral programs continue producing graduates who represent the next generation of researchers and scholars. Our Psychology PhD graduates are already an important part of that story.

As this new academic year begins, we have much to celebrate, and even more to accomplish. Thank you for making the College of Liberal Arts a place where ideas become research, research becomes impact, and students become scholars.

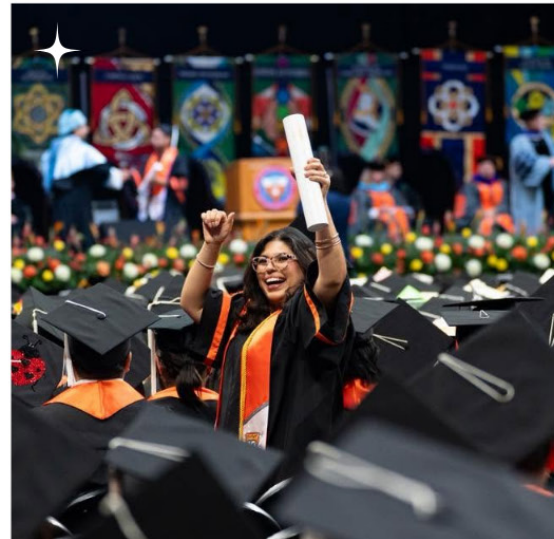
See you around, and ... ¡Vamos!

jd

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



CONGRATULATIONS
SPRING '26
GRADUATES



Photography by Silver Salas





Grant Funded Research

Research Admin Team Works to Support Liberal Arts Research Needs

By Nicole Nicholson

The College of Liberal Arts boasts a faculty committed to research as diverse in scope and interdisciplinarity as the college itself. In addition to publishing peer-reviewed scholarly articles, books, and book chapters, serving as editors, and presenting original works at local, national, and international conferences, CLA researchers have successfully sought external sources to fund their research, resulting in over \$15M in total research expenditures in the college since 2024, to say nothing of the years prior.

Top funders include the Valley Baptist Legacy Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education, the Texas Office of the Governor, the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Department of Justice, and the National Endowment for the Arts, along with many other government agencies and private organizations at

the local, state, and national levels. These researchers receive facilitation and support for their research endeavors through the UTRGV Division of Research (DoR), but they also receive support right here in our college – that’s the purvey of the CLA Research Admin Team.

A Research Admin Team Backed by Experience

The team is led by Associate Dean for Research Dr. Mario Gil, Associate Professor of Psychological Science and Neuroscience. Dr. Gil previously served as Faculty Fellow for Research under the now-retired Associate Dean, Dr. Russel Skowronek. Together, they supported the Division of Research’s efforts to advance and support the university’s research activities, benefiting students, faculty, and staff. As UTRGV moves ever closer to R1 status, Dr. Gil has hit the ground running as ADR, building on the previous years’ momentum with fresh enthusiasm.

With a focus on neuroscience and behavioral psychology, Dr. Gil brings to the table plenty of experience in research and securing outside funding. He is the PI of a current project being funded through the NIH’s National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) that examines the connections between psychological stress and acute heart events (e.g., heart attacks). He has been PI on other grants from organizations such as the UTHealth Houston Center for Clinical and Translational Sciences and the Rio Grande Valley Resource Center for Minority Aging Research. As ADR, Dr. Gil sees himself as a facilitator, an advocate, and a motivator. “My main goal is to support the faculty, provide resources — my time, the expertise of our team — in an effort to facilitate faculty research endeavors.” Dr. Gil hopes that this support will increase the number of grant submissions from the College of Liberal Arts.

Dr. Gil is joined on the research admin team by Faculty Fellow for Research Dr. Carina Marques, Associate Professor of Anthropology. Dr. Marques, a biological anthropologist, is the PI of a current project funded by the U.S. Department of Justice’s National Institute of Justice (NIJ) that utilizes AI to drastically improve age-of-death estimates of human remains, as well as another project funded by NSF, focused on developing a new method for the identification of cancer in past populations. Additionally, both Dr. Gil and Dr. Marques have drawn on the interdisciplinary potential of their work. They are partnering with research groups across the institution, including the School of Medicine Institute of Neuroscience (ION), the South Texas Diabetes and Obesity In-

stitute (STDIOI), the School of Integrative Biological and Chemical Sciences (SIBCS), and the Department of Human Genetics. With such combined experience of success in securing outside funding for their own research interests, the CLA research leadership is well-positioned to help other CLA researchers as they navigate the grant proposal development and management process.

The CLA Research Admin team also benefits from the support of dedicated research admin staff who go the extra mile to help our researchers. Jorge Solorzano was so good, in fact, that he is now working directly with the Division of Research. CLA Researchers can also count on the help of an additional Faculty Fellow, Nicole Nicholson (Lecturer III, WRLS), who garnered substantial experience in grant preparation and submission processes the previous year working as a Grant Research Officer in the DoR Office of Research Enhancement. Together, the research admin team is well-equipped and motivated to help increase the number of successful grant proposals submitted in our college.

Rolling Out Initiatives to Support CLA Researchers

To pave the way for this progress, the research admin team began the Fall 2025 semester with Research Administration Open House events, one on each campus. As the name implies, these events were open to all CLA researchers and were designed to be informal, low-stakes settings in which faculty could get to know the research team, ask questions both general to the UTRGV research infrastructure and specific to their own research agendas, and learn about upcoming events and available research tools. Just as importantly, it allowed the research admin team to get to know some of our researchers, especially those who are new to the college.

Because the informal, open setting was successful, the team has instituted virtual office hours every Tuesday from 12:30 to 2:30 on Teams. CLA research faculty are invited to drop in at their convenience with questions large and small; for example, the team has provided sponsor-specific advice for grant preparation, provided guidance on protocols for proposal submission, and

“My main goal is to support the faculty, provide resources — my time, the expertise of our team — in an effort to facilitate faculty research endeavors.”

Dr. Mario Gil



Faculty Fellow for Research
Dr. Carina Marques,
Associate Professor of
Anthropology.



Faculty Fellow for Research,
Nicole Nicholson,
Lecturer III, WRLS.

facilitated connections with key Division of Research staff members.

As ADR, Dr. Gil works closely with the Division of Research, particularly with support from Assistant Vice President of Research Enhancement Dr. Megan Keniry. “By building relationships with our colleagues and the Division of Research, we can achieve our shared goals and shared mission.” One of Dr. Gil’s aims is to increase awareness within our college of the high-quality events hosted by Research Enhancement each semester, from the monthly write-ins to invited speakers to the asynchronous New Investigator Series. Dr. Gil would like to see more CLA researchers taking advantage of these events. However, he recognizes that the needs of researchers in the social sciences and humanities may be different from those of researchers in other fields. Indeed, one of his guiding objectives as ADR is to increase support for researchers in the humanities and to make sure that they feel acknowledged and part of the UTRGV research enterprise. “Research is very much a part of the humanities,” he notes. “There are important research questions that can only be answered by our faculty in the humanities. I want to fight alongside them to ensure that they receive the support that many of them need to be able to achieve success in funding their research.”

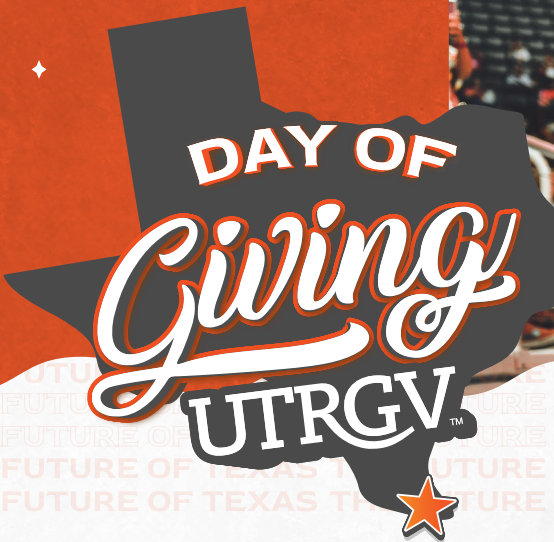
Dr. Gil made no assumptions as he began this first year of leadership as ADR – from Day 1, he stated that it was crucial to conduct a needs assessment to determine exactly which areas CLA researchers feel they need the most support. The survey was launched in October and will close in February, and the results will be analyzed and used as a guide as Dr. Gil and the research admin team form plans for college-wide research events and

opportunities. “We’re also hoping to provide other opportunities and workshops in addition to those provided by research enhancement so that faculty will be very well supported,” he said.

Support Finding Relevant Research Opportunities

In a similar effort to make research-related outreach more immediately relevant, visible, and accessible to researchers in the college, the team has started sending out announcements using the newly created cla_research@utrgv.edu account, and is developing an opt-in CLA research newsletter, slated to be released for the first time in February. Managed by Dr. Marques, the CLA research newsletter is designed to be visually attractive and readable and to cut through the noise of myriad daily emails and funding opportunity lists crowded with STEM-focused solicitations. “I think one of the biggest challenges for CLA researchers is finding information about funding, deadlines, or research opportunities that are adequate for our Social Sciences and Humanities research, which is often also interdisciplinary,” she said, noting that such opportunities “can feel scattered across different channels, making it easy to miss something important.” The newsletter is an important way the team will address these challenges, and Dr. Marques stressed the team’s hope that the CLA Research Bulletin will become a centralized space to share key opportunities with faculty who subscribe. She added, “The idea is not to flood inboxes or send long, dense announcements. It is about being strategic, intentional, and respectful of everyone’s time, and making sure the information that goes out is clear and relevant.”

Under the leadership of ADR Dr. Gil, the CLA research admin team’s efforts are characterized by receptiveness and responsiveness to research faculty’s needs, making themselves available in multiple modes. No matter the question or stage of the research project, the team encourages all CLA research faculty to drop in to weekly office hours or shoot them a message at cla_research@utrgv.edu – the team looks forward to connecting with you and supporting your research endeavors! ■




Your Gift Unlocks What's Possible!

Join UTRGV on **August 25** to fund student scholarships, improve educational programs, and open new opportunities for a brighter future in the Rio Grande Valley.

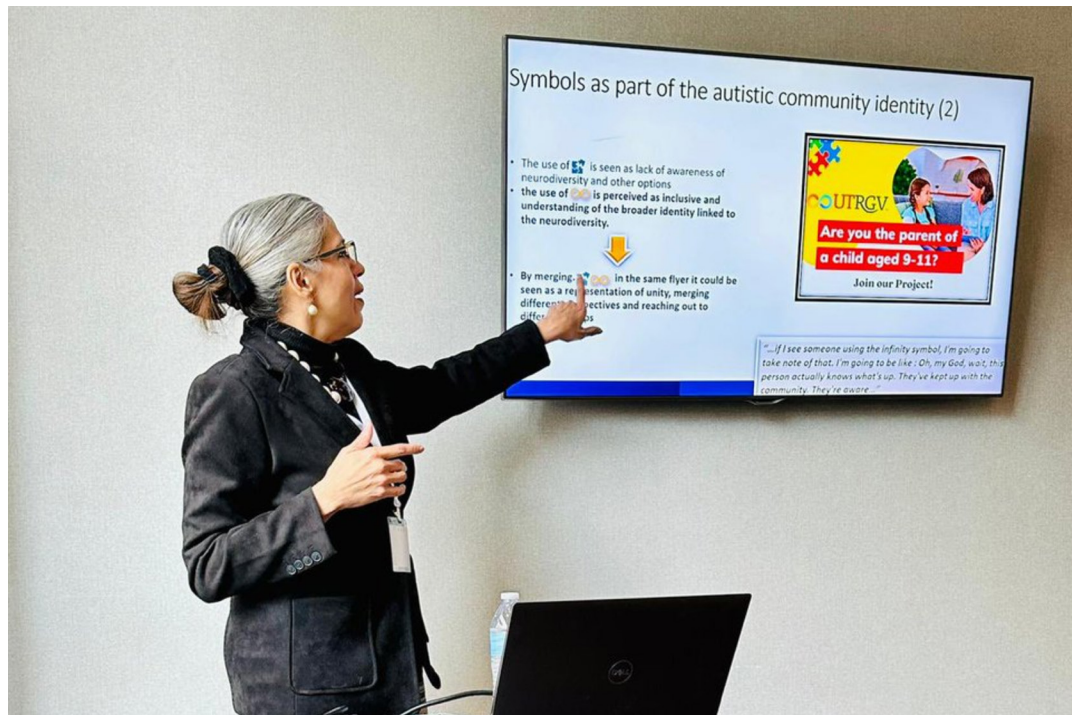
WANT TO LEARN MORE?



Scan the QR code or visit
utrgv.link/DAYOFGIVING-SS
today!



Make a difference and unlock the possibilities!
For more information, email give@utrgv.edu



Grant Funded Research

Turning Research into Resources

A \$650,000 grant will help UTRGV psychology researchers expand culturally responsive autism support for children and families across the Rio Grande Valley.

By Nicole Nicholson

For families of children with autism in the Rio Grande Valley, access to effective support can be complicated by cost, transportation, language, and a shortage of services. UTRGV Psychology Professor Dr. Cecilia Montiel-Nava and a team of College of Liberal Arts researchers are working to change that.

Montiel-Nava's project, "Comparative Delivery Model of Skills Training for Diverse Populations," has received a \$650,000 grant through the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's Autism Grant Program. The project was one of only six proposals selected in the Board-certified Behavior Analyst Training for Teachers/Paraprofessionals track.

Working alongside co-principal investigators **Dr. Valeria Yllades, Dr. Maria Montenegro, and Dr. Christelle Garza**, Montiel-Nava will focus on expanding support for bilingual children with autism and their families throughout the region.

The innovative project builds on the researchers' prior success with caregiver skills training that they adapted to the

cultural and linguistic needs of our region. It aims to develop and evaluate a free, naturalistic, parent-mediated intervention that evidence indicates will improve outcomes for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), including child learning in everyday environments. In an effort to overcome cost and transportation barriers for participating children and their caregivers, the program will develop and test in-person, hybrid, and fully online modalities.

"This project is deeply meaningful to us because it is rooted in the community we serve every day," Montiel-Nava said. "The Rio Grande Valley is home to a predominantly Latino, Spanish-speaking population where families of children with autism have historically had very limited access to evidence-based support services. What excites me most is that we are not just studying the problem — we are actively building solutions that are culturally relevant, linguistically accessible, and designed to work within the realities of daily life in our region. I hope families will feel seen, supported, and equipped with real tools to help their children thrive."

The researchers have strong reason to believe that their results will be scalable for use in other underserved regions in Texas and beyond.

UTRGV doctoral students in psychology will also benefit from the sponsored project. Dr. Montiel Nava explained that it is "an incredible opportunity [for PhD students] to engage in meaningful, community-based research that directly impacts the people we live and work alongside — developing skills in clinical research, community engagement, and evidence-based practice, all while doing work that truly matters."

Parents and caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorder, particularly bilingual families, can learn more or inquire about participating through UTRGV's BeChildLab (Behavior and Child Development Lab) at 956-665-7955, on social media at @be_childlab, on Facebook at BeChild Lab, or by email at bechildlab.com. ■

Grant Funded Research

Faculty Awarded Prestigious RWJF Grant to Advance Health Equity for Migrant Farmworker Mothers



Dr. Alejandra I. Ramírez, Assistant Professor in the Department of Writing and Language Studies, and **Drs. Stephanie Alvarez, José Martínez, and Silvia Solís** have been awarded a \$150,000 Rapid Response Research Grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Evidence for Action program. Their project, "Studying how migrant farmworker mothers, as healthcare managers for their families, understand their interactions with the U.S. medical care system," addresses urgent health equity challenges in the Rio Grande Valley. Through oral history and digital archiving, the project will document the lived experiences of migrant farmworker mothers, whose voices have been historically marginalized, to inform public health policy and advocacy. This 2-year initiative will partner with LUPE (La Unión del Pueblo Entero), Border Workers United, and the Museum of South Texas History to amplify community voices and disseminate findings bilingually.



Grant Funded Research

UTRGV Hosts Gulf Scholars Program

New interdisciplinary initiative prepares students to tackle the Gulf region's most pressing challenges through community partnerships, research, and hands-on learning.

UTRGV students from across the university now have a unique opportunity to grow as both scholars and agents of change within their communities. In Fall 2025, UTRGV joined the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine Gulf Research Program's five-year, \$12.7 million program to establish the Gulf Scholars Program (GSP).

Above: Dr. Marla Perez-Lugo and Maria Leonard with the first cohort of UTRGV Gulf Scholars.

The national program is a response to the critical issues of energy, food, water, and health in the Gulf region, and awarded institutions will help build a network of scholars and alumni working within their communities to create a healthier, safer, more resilient,

and sustainable future.

The GSP at UTRGV began recruiting students from across the university in the fall of 2025 and welcomed its first cohort of 12 scholars in the spring 2026 semester. The

cohort includes students from across the university, including the College of Liberal Arts.

The Gulf Scholars Program at UTRGV is directed by PI Dr. Marla Perez-Lugo, Professor of Sociology and Interim Director of the School of Interdisciplinary Programs and Community Engagement (SIPCE), and co-directed by Maria Leonard, Assistant Professor of Practice in the Dept. of Management (RCVCOBE). Dr. Perez-Lugo explains that while UTRGV has many excellent resources, there is a gap between those resources and the promotion of a more holistic, convergent approach to the interconnected issues of sustainability, resilience, energy, and health in the Gulf region. "That was one of the reasons why we wanted to bring the program here to UTRGV to start a collaborative interdisciplinary effort to create a common knowledge and a common language around the issues of the Gulf," said Perez-Lugo.

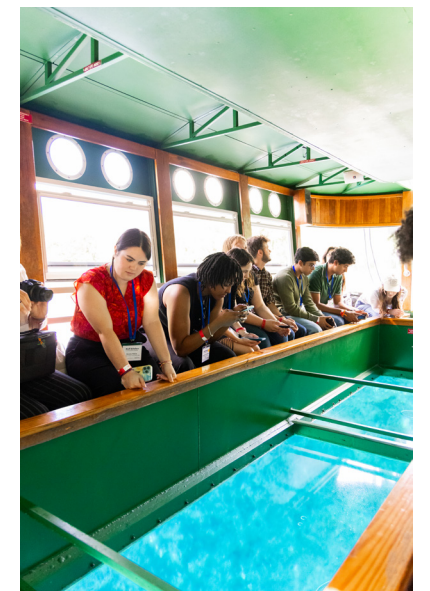
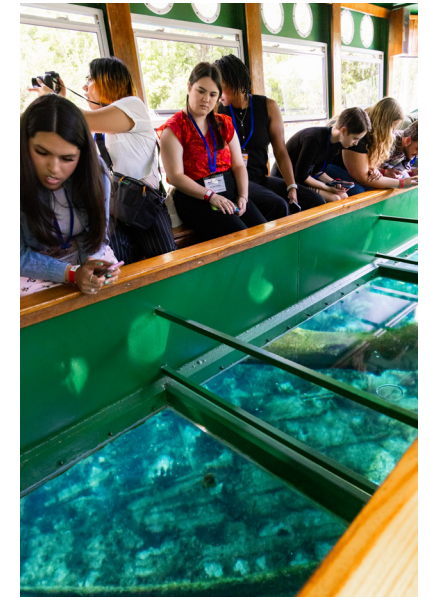
The convergence approach that Dr. Perez-Lugo and her colleagues used to design the program is already shaping students' perspectives and career trajectories. Jesus Hernandez, an Integrated Health Science major who plans to study medicine, is one example. "This program has taught me that there are other issues that can ultimately affect people's health and safety other than what is already presented within a health-care facility. Now I am devoted to advocating for the health and future of the people within the Rio Grande Valley," he says.

Dr. Perez-Lugo believes the program's most innovative feature is its focus on local partnerships. "We are following the UTRGV mission to be a regional university," she said. The purpose of the program was "to start promoting a conversation between community leadership and the university's resources — to bring sustainable solutions to these problems and issues." The program's intentional interdisciplinarity ensures that students develop a well-rounded understanding of the complex issues in our region rather than viewing them solely through the lens of their particular majors. Students engage in workshops and projects that introduce them to multiple epistemologies — ways of knowing — from a natural

science perspective to the arts to entrepreneurship.

These crucial relationships with local stakeholders are the result of the tireless efforts of Dr. Perez-Lugo, Ms. Leonard, and the members of the steering committee, which includes individuals from Student Success, the B3 Institute, and the colleges of Liberal Arts, Fine Arts, Engineering and Computer Science, P16 Education, Science, and the Robert C. Vackar College of Business and Entrepreneurship. Students have visited with and learned from a multitude of these community partners, including ARISE Adelante, Washed Up Texas artist Connie Lovell, and Hidalgo County Emergency Management. According to Dr. Perez-Lugo, plans for the program are wide-ranging. "From the farm to the supermarket and then to the consumer, we are going to be visiting a winery that uses renewable energy to produce their wine. We are going to be visiting Boca Chica Beach to see the problem of garbage on the coast and how to transform that garbage into something that elicits environmental awareness."

Steering committee member Dr. Cecilio Ortiz-Garcia, Professor of Public Administration in the School of Interdisciplinary Programs and Community Engagement, observed that "watching the students interact with the community partners was magical" because they were using the terminology and concepts that they had learned and asked excellent questions. He sees that the students are already developing leadership qualities and that future change in the region will require a sustained joint effort among these individual students, the university, and the community partners. "I'm very hopeful when I talk to [the students]."



Students also attended the Gulf Scholars Program Annual Conference, hosted by the University of Florida in Gainesville on March 26th and 27th. They participated in poster presentations, attended networking and plenary sessions focused on challenges faced by the Gulf region, and engaged in active learning through a field trip to Silver Springs State Park.



Already, students are seeing the program's impact on their awareness of their community and the kinds of changes they'd like to see.

Olivia Silva, an international student from Mexico studying marketing, has experienced that growth firsthand. "Since forming part of the Gulf Scholars Program, I have become more aware of the problems that communities and colonias in the Valley face. I have learned how to network, how to reach out to organizations, how to identify the issues the Valley faces, and most importantly, how I can make the public more aware of what is happening in their homes."



Olivia Silva

As the cohort returns in Fall 2026, the steering committee members will facilitate workshops to help students develop skills in entrepreneurship, financial literacy, proposing projects to lawmakers, and writing an op-ed piece. These skills will further empower students to be effective agents of change within their communities.



Jesus Hernandez

The culmination of the student experience in the GSP is their individual Gulf Impact projects, developed in conjunction with a local non-governmental organization. Students will present their Gulf Impact projects at the first "Wicked Problems Symposium" to be hosted here at UTRGV on October 29, 2026. Students from Gulf Scholar Programs across the region, including Rice University, TAMU Corpus Christi, and Prairie View A&M, will also be participating.

Recruitment for the next Gulf Scholars cohort will begin in Fall 2026, the second of four planned cohorts. As the program continues and the list of Gulf Scholars Program at UTRGV alumni grows, the college, the university, and the community look forward to these motivated agents of change and the difference they will make in the RGV and broader Gulf region.

FIRST GULF SCHOLARS COHORT

Brooke Patula,
junior, biology major.

Danielle Barber,
junior, biology major.

Diana Rocha,
junior, political science major.

Ewuradwoa Nketiah,
junior, information systems major.

Jesus Hernandez,
sophomore, integrated health science major.

Joel B. Cuellar,
sophomore, mechanical engineering major.

Miranda M. Hernandez,
sophomore, environmental science major.

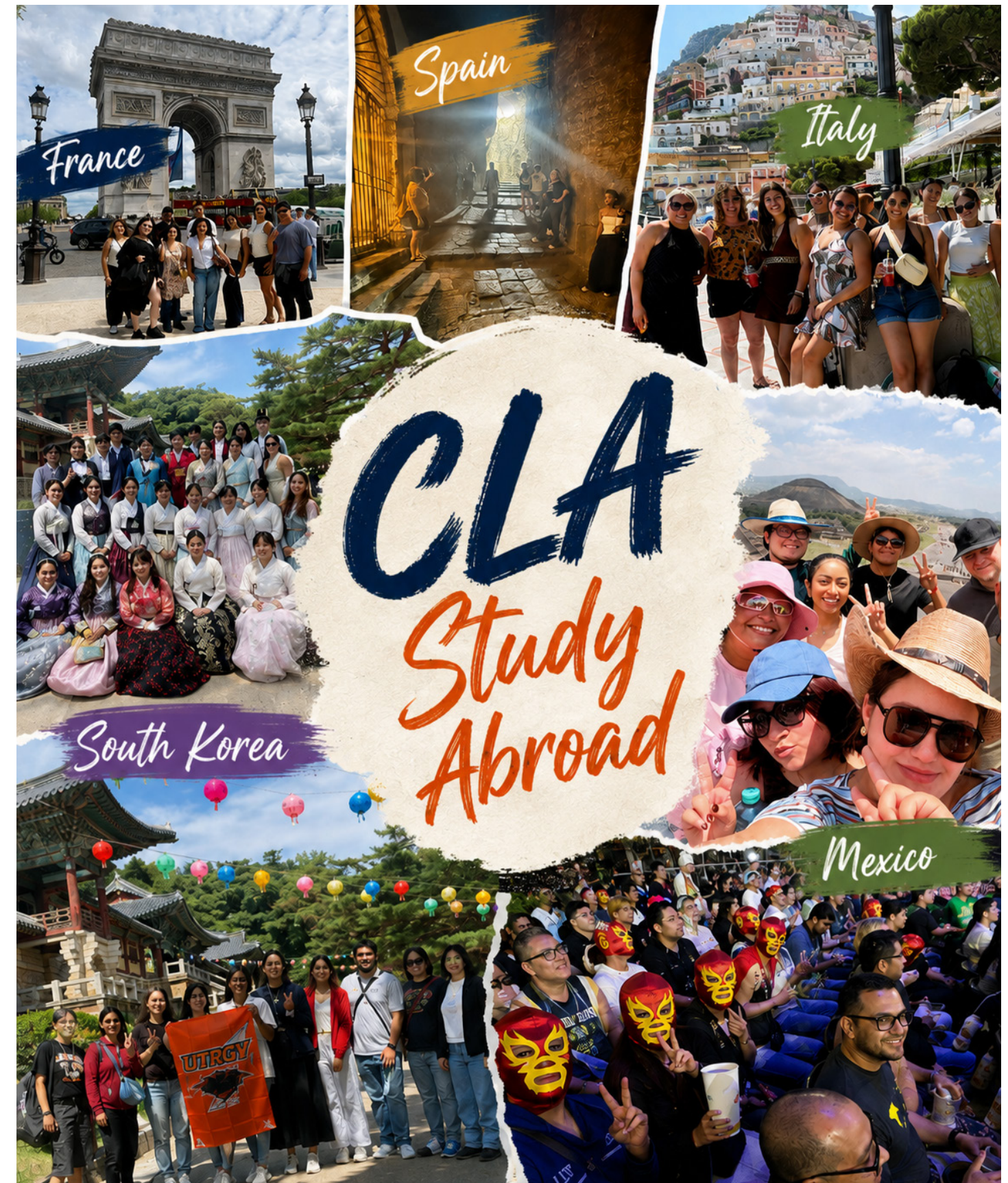
Natalee J. Roel,
junior, biology major.

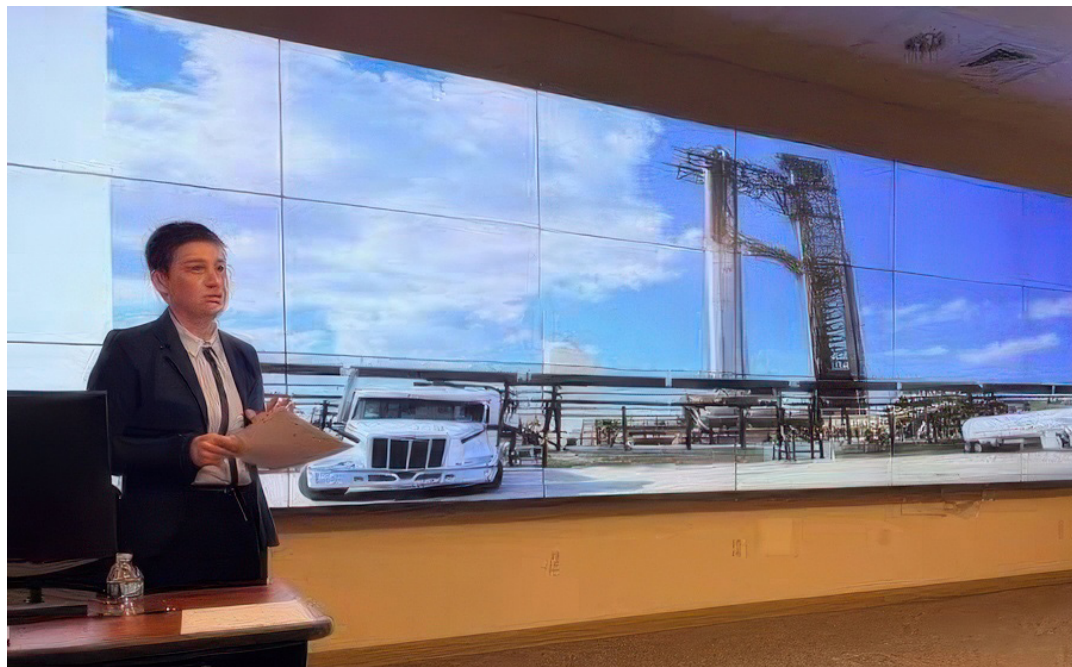
Nicole Logan,
junior, art education major.

Olivia Silva,
junior, marketing major.

Rosa Aburto,
sophomore, marketing major.

Sebastian Flores,
sophomore, biomedical sciences major.





Grant Funded Research Lab:

TARSI Lab Provides Critical Resources for CLA Researchers

By Nicole Nicholson

The Spring 2026 Semester saw the grand opening of the Texas Alliance for Research on Sociological Issues (TARSI) Lab at UTRGV. The lab provides state-of-the-art resources and space for College of Liberal Arts researchers, including student researchers. La Network spoke with Dr. Salvatore Restifo, Professor of Sociology and Director of the TARSI Lab, about this unique space.

Although the lab celebrated its official grand opening in March of 2026, it was a project several years in the making. “From the get-go, the lab has been very collaborative,” says Dr. Restifo. He and colleagues from UTRGV, TAMU, and UTEP realized their sociology students were facing similar challenges: they were being accepted into excellent graduate programs but lacked the kind of research experience that would make their transition to an active research program much smoother. At the same time,

there wasn’t a dedicated research space with sufficient computing and software access.

To address these dual needs, the group applied to the National Science Foundation’s Build and Broaden: Enhancing Social, Behavioral and Economic Science Research and Capacity at Minority-Serving Institutions (B2) program. With Dr. Restifo as PI, Dr. Steven Foy as Co-PI, and Co-PIs from UTEP and the TAMU system, their proposal

was awarded in August 2024, and the Texas Alliance for Research on Sociological Issues (TARSI) Lab became a reality!

Dr. Restifo emphasizes the collegial, collaborative nature of the lab, noting that additional funding and crucial support were provided by the UTRGV library, under the leadership of former Dean Paul Sharpe and current Dean Peter Cortez; the College of Liberal Arts, under the leadership of Dean Dr. Jose Davila; and the UTRGV Provost’s Office, under the leadership of former provost Dr. Luis Zayas. The result is a cutting-edge research space that supports the R1 mission of the entire university while prioritizing the needs of researchers and classes in the College of Liberal Arts.

In fact, the lab isn’t a small space for an exclusive research group; it’s a large room located on the first floor of the Edinburg library boasting 30 computers, a visualization wall, and ample seating. And this is no run-of-the-mill computer lab: “The TARSI lab provides access to updated statistical (STATA) and qualitative (ATLAS.ti) software as well as state-of-the-art hardware to facilitate more complex uses of software already more readily accessible throughout the university,” explains Dr. Foy, Professor of Sociology and Co-Director of the lab. “For example, we have a few computers in the TARSI lab with video cards powerful enough to run the most advanced features of ArcGIS Pro.” This kind of access to normally cost-prohibitive resources allows faculty and students the liberty to pursue advanced research projects and engaging, real-world classroom experiences with greater ease. Dr. Foy also highlights the adaptive nature of the TARSI lab. “Now that the physical infrastructure is in place, we’re open to collaborations to meet need, whether that means bringing in other software licenses or updating computers to handle new features as technology advances.”

One of the most exciting features of the TARSI lab is the visualization wall, which allows researchers to display multiple screens at once. For example, in his classes, Dr. Restifo often demonstrates “how to navigate the software, how to write code, how to look at the output, how to interpret [data].” At the same time, he can pull up data from the Census Bureau or the American Community Survey, often drilled down to data from Hidalgo and Cameron Counties. “Having the visualization wall where we can show [students] all sorts of different items simultaneously without having to bounce back and forth between screens -- it’s wonderful,” he says.

Dr. Restifo states that the aim was to create a space that would “serve as both a hub for research-related courses and then also a hub for research teams.” The TARSI research team has been meeting there since the beginning, and Fall 2025 saw the first courses launched there. Since then, more research teams and classes have begun using the lab. Once the visualization wall was installed, the TARSI lab was publicly inaugurated with a grand opening featuring

guest speaker Dr. Anna Szolucha, an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Jagiellonian University in Poland. The event was a well-attended welcome to the entire university community for this valuable research space.

True to the Pls’ (and now directors’) original intent, the lab has made substantial and lasting impacts on the student researchers in participating research teams and classes. A group of five student TARSI researchers attended a research conference in Spring 2025, and many more have benefited from the space as students and student researchers. Dr. Restifo explains that the lab’s resources enable faculty to equip students with a repeatable research skill set and a research trajectory, making them more competitive for graduate and PhD programs and better able to transition quickly and successfully into an active research program once admitted.

For example, Ismael Trujillo, now a graduate research assistant in Sociology but previously an undergraduate researcher in the TARSI group, has already presented at two conferences and is contributing to a research publication. “Working in the TARSI Lab has given me a deeper understanding of the research and publication process. As an undergraduate, I was not fully aware of the time, effort, and feedback required to complete a research project,” says Ismael. “This hands-on experience has also strengthened my research skills and provided valuable preparation for my graduate studies. Most importantly, my time in TARSI has reinforced my commitment to pursuing a career in this field and contributing to meaningful research in the future,” he adds.

Now that the lab is officially open, Dr. Restifo and Dr. Foy look forward to hosting not only classes and research group sessions but also trainings, webinars, and colloquia for a broader audience. Indeed, Dr. Restifo anticipates the TARSI lab holding events for the Census Bureau Higher Education Consortium; announced in July 2026, UTRGV is one of 24 university members of the consortium, the purpose of which is to “enrich teaching, research, and project based learning; build connections with peer institutions; and participate in a national network committed to innovation, collaboration, and preparing the next generation of data professionals,” according to the U.S. Census Bureau Website. The TARSI lab is perfectly positioned to host such high-profile and high-impact events.

By providing space and access to critical computing resources for research, the TARSI lab empowers our CLA researchers and students to take a leading role in UTRGV’s R1 research mission. Please contact Dr. Restifo (salvatore.restifo@utrgv.edu) or Dr. Foy (steven.foy@utrgv.edu) for further information about the lab, including requests for access. ■

Above: Dr. Anna Szolucha, Associate Professor of Anthropology, Jagiellonian University, Poland, presents the colloquium keynote.



Research Labs

Where Language Comes To Life

Linguistics labs are giving students a place to move beyond the classroom and into research, collaboration, and scholarship.

There is a lot more than conversation happening inside UTRGV's Linguistics LAB and Phon LAB. The two spaces have become gathering places for students and faculty studying everything from syntax and South Texas slang to Zapotec and the ways bilingual experience shapes how we hear language.

In the process, students are gaining something that can be difficult to create inside a traditional classroom: the chance to participate in research as it is actually happening.

During Fall 2025, the Linguistics LAB became home base for several projects as well as regular meetings of the Linguistics CLUB, bringing together students interested in language and research. The lab also hosted Zapotec fieldwork sessions devoted to documenting and analyzing the Indigenous language, as well as a student-driven Slang Research Project examining language here in the Rio Grande Valley.

For one group of students, work that began in the lab is already moving well beyond campus.

Students in the Advanced Syntax research group met regularly with Dr. John Foreman to develop a project that has since been accepted for presentation at a conference in California. After the presentation, the group plans to develop the research into a peer-reviewed publication — turning the kind of work that might once have ended with a course grade into the beginning of a scholarly contribution.

The labs are also giving graduate students the specialized environment they need to complete their own research. Graduate student Aziz Quenun used the Linguistics LAB's quiet, controlled space to conduct experimental sessions for his thesis, testing approximately 40 participants during the fall semester alone.

Just down the hall, the Phon LAB was equally busy. Dr. Ramsés Ortín conducted approximately 50 hours of participant testing during the semester for research examining how bilingual experience affects the perception of illusory vowels.

But perhaps one of the labs' most important contributions is harder to measure in hours or research participants.

At least 14 undergraduate and graduate students actively took part in lab meetings, research sessions, and related activities during the fall, with still more participating through the Linguistics CLUB and research collaborations. Faculty members also see signs that the community developing around the labs may be encouraging students to continue their studies at UTRGV. At least one undergraduate involved in the program continued into the MA program, while others have begun considering the same path.

That makes the Linguistics LAB and Phon LAB more than simply dedicated rooms with specialized equipment. They are becoming places where students discover what it means to be researchers — working alongside faculty, asking their own questions, collecting data, presenting findings, and beginning to see themselves as part of a larger scholarly community.

For a linguistics student, that can make all the difference between learning about research and realizing, I can do this. ■

Faculty and students used the Linguistics LAB to conduct the research behind “Predicative Possession in Macuiltianguis Zapotec,” which was accepted for presentation at the 2026 Workshop on American Indigenous Languages (WAIL28) at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Faculty Recognition

Texas Book Festival Names David Bowles Texas Writer Award Recipient

Recognizing a body of work that has made a lasting contribution to the state's literary landscape.

South Texas is more than home; it is the source material of a writing life shaped by family, language, memory, and the constant movement of culture across the Río Grande.

"Texas is the smell of pinkladies and mesquite, the heat rising off caliche roads, the cadence of Tex-Mex, the complicated love of my mestizo family, the ache of history, the daily miracle of communities that keep caring for one another despite being misunderstood from the outside," he said.

That sense of place runs through Bowles' work. He writes from what he calls a South Texas sensibility—one that is humorous, haunted, politically aware, family-centered, and deeply rooted in the border. His books resist easy versions of the Valley, making room instead for its folklore and history, its contradictions, its languages, and the people whose lives are too often reduced to someone else's idea of what the border means.

Across more than 40 books, Bowles has moved easily between poetry, children's and young adult literature, graphic novels, essays, and translation. Much of that work draws on Mexican folklore, border culture, and Indigenous Mesoamerican traditions. His books include *They Call Me Güero*, *My Two Border Towns*, *Ancient Night*, *The Prince & the Coyote*, and *Feathered Serpent*, *Dark Heart of Sky*.

His students have also played an important

role in shaping that work. Bowles traces his commitment to writing for young people to his years teaching middle school, when he began using border legends and folktales to reach struggling readers. At UTRGV, he said, students continue to remind him of the importance of representation and access.

"Talent is everywhere, but access is not," he said. "My students have pushed me to create work that opens doors, not just for readers but for future storytellers."

Receiving the Texas Writer Award, Bowles said, is both an honor and a responsibility.

And he has no plans to slow down. New historical fiction, graphic novels, translations, and other projects are already underway, continuing a career built around the

conviction that stories from the border belong at the center of Texas literature.

Bowles will be honored during the Texas Book Festival, Nov. 14–15 in downtown Austin, where he'll receive a pair of custom boots made by El Paso artisans Rocketbuster. ■

Source: Interview originally published by the Texas Book Festival, 2026. Used with attribution.



Endowed Professor

Dr. Brent Campney Appointed Dr. Robert S. Nelsen Endowed Professor

With the support of the endowment, Dr. Campney plans to complete his research projects examining the ethnic Mexican field laborers and the agricultural industry from the 1960s to the 1990s as part of the labor and civil rights movements here in the Rio Grande Valley. His research also analyzes the Chicano movement and the fight for educational equality in Kansas during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s.

With these scholarly endeavors taking shape in published monographs and peer-reviewed journal articles, Dr. Campney looks forward to helping showcase UTRGV as one of the nation's premier institutions in Mexican American history studies. He will hold the endowment through AY 2028.

The endowed professorship was established by Dr. Robert S. Nelsen, UTPA President from 2010–2014. During his tenure, Dr. Nelsen oversaw growth in freshman retention, graduation rates, and enrollment, as well as UTPA's designation as a doctoral-serving university.

Nelsen was appointed President of the California State University, Sacramento in 2015. Before leaving the Valley, hundreds of ranchers held a farewell celebration, and from that gathering the endowment was conceived, with contributions from many

of those present. Dr. Nelsen had worked closely with the Mexican American Studies (MAS) program and states that one of his goals for the endowed professorship was to help ensure there was always a place for that program. "We're on the border, in the middle of a Mexican American community. We need to acknowledge, celebrate, and study our roots and understand what our culture is here," he said. He sees the endowed professorship as an opportunity to serve our students and the Hispanic community. "Emmy [Pérez] was a great chair. I'm excited to see what the next chair will bring!"

Dr. Nelsen retired from CSU Sacramento in 2023 and moved back to the Rio Grande Valley, which he considers home. He continues to serve the RGV community, including as a board member for HOPE Family Health Center and Proyecto Juan Diego. ■

"Over the next three years, I intend to complete an expansive agenda of scholarly production and community engagement, and to incorporate my new research into the classroom at UTRGV by bringing original content to my students and by learning from their insights."

Dr. Brent Campney



College Initiatives

First-Year Research Finds an Audience

NovaRhet 2026 brought together more than 1,600 students, faculty, families, and community members to celebrate undergraduate research and public scholarship across the Brownsville and Edinburg campuses.

By Marcella Hebbard

On Monday, April 20, and Thursday, April 23, the First-Year Writing Program hosted its 6th NovaRhet Symposium. This event is designed to enhance ENGL 1302 freshman students' research-based skills and knowledge.

Through the mentorship of dedicated first-year writing faculty, students learn to prepare and publicly present their work. Students experience how to synthesize and effectively communicate their research to a broader audience that includes students, families, and community members across the Brownsville and Edinburg campuses in meaningful and engaging ways. The symposium also welcomed interdisciplinary

faculty who engaged students in conversation and provided feedback on their projects. The event took place concurrently on both campuses, starting at 9:30 AM and ending at 4:30 PM.

The symposium drew strong participation across both campuses. Monday's event included 367 student presenters, 474 attendees, and 41 volunteer faculty members,

reaching a total participation of 882 individuals. Thursday's symposium featured 257 student presenters, 459 attendees, and 32 volunteer faculty members, for a total participation of 748 individuals. Altogether, NovaRhet 2026 engaged 1,630 participants and highlighted the collaborative efforts of first-year writing students and faculty while fostering a culture of undergraduate research and public scholarship.

To support ENGL 1302 students' research development, NovaRhet partnered with university librarians. They offered several open houses during the month of March. We also collaborated with the Office of Bilingual Integration. The office sponsored four \$50.00 awards for student projects that relate to bilingualism or place-based research. The Engaged Scholarship & Learning Office, one of NovaRhet's key collaborators, supported this event by securing room reservations on both campuses and assisting with event setup. We would also like to thank Dr. Fresno, Interim Chair of the Department of Writing and Language Studies, and the College of Liberal Arts for providing funding support for this event. We are thankful to all our partners for their continued support and contributions to student learning and undergraduate research.

On Friday, April 24, the First-Year Writing Program proudly launched its inaugural Collegiate High School NovaRhet Symposium at Edinburg Collegiate High School, located at 1401 E. Freddy Gonzalez Dr., Edinburg, TX 78542. Building on the vision and success of the NovaRhet symposia held across the Brownsville and Edinburg campuses earlier that week, this new initiative expanded undergraduate research opportunities for dual-enrolled ENGL 1302 students and highlighted the growing culture of research, writing, and public scholarship within the Rio Grande Valley. The event was organized by first-year writing faculty Thomas De La Cruz, Cynthia Garza, and Sebastian Castillo, who teach at that site. FYW faculty volunteers Tomas Guerrero, Stefanie Herweck, Sylvia Vera, Cyndy Lopez Guerrero, and Marcela Hebbard also participated in the symposium, engaging 72 UTRGV dual-enrolled students in conversation and providing feedback on their projects.



Student Erwin Alcocer, and Dra. Yemin Sanchez



Thomas De La Cruz, Cynthia Garza, Sebastian Castillo, Tomas Guerrero, Stefanie Herweck, Sylvia Vera, Cyndy Lopez Guerrero, and Marcela Hebbard

PUBLICATIONS



Dr. Angela Achorn
Department of Anthropology

“Heritability of gray matter volume and asymmetry in chimpanzees (Pan troglodytes) and their association to cognitive abilities and tool use” in Brain Structure & Function.

Dr. Servando Z Hinojosa
Department of Anthropology

“Nahua Hands, the Feast of Toxcatl, and the Transmission of Legacy. (2025).” Ethnohistory. Vol. 72, No. 3, pp. 341-364, September 2025. Duke University Press, USA.

Dr. Carina Marques
Department of Anthropology

“Assessing the effectiveness of the one paleopathology workshop.” Evol Med Public Health.

C. Marques coauthor (2026). “A large-scale Bayesian validation of FIDBv2 and FIDBv3 methods for adult age-at-death estimation using root dentin translucency in single-rooted teeth.” International Journal of Legal Medicine, 1–26.

C. Marques, coauthor. “Refinement of the Bayesian probabilistic framework for forensic adult age-at-death estimation using dentin translucency in intact single-rooted teeth.” Forensic Science International 385 (2026).

Dr. Lou Falk
Department of Communication

“Faculty Use of AI in Research and Writing.” Competition Forum: A Global Business Journal. Vol 23, Number 1 & 2, pp. 99-107, November 2025. USA.

Dr. Ben Wasike
Department of Communication

“Me, myself, and the influencer: Examining how parasocial interaction and self-congruence with social media influencers affects news media trust.” New Media & Society. October 2025.

“Knowledge Gaps and Misinformation: Social Media Engagement, Ideology, And Elections.” In Political Communication and Digital Advocacy Strategies and Implications. pp. 102-120, September 2025. Peter Lang.

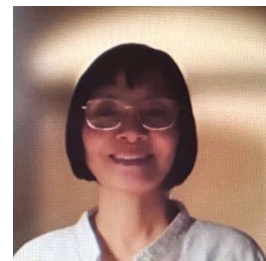
Dr. Soo Yun Kim
Department of Communication

“Beyond the minority label: A case for disaggregating minority status at border-region Hispanic-Serving Institutions.” Journal of Latinos and Education.

Dr. Soo Yun Kim
Dr. Yanrong Chang
Department of Communication

“Internalized colorism as a gendered barrier to skin cancer information avoidance among Hispanic college students.” (Advance online publication). Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health.

“Health practices, resilience, perceived social support, and mental health well-being among college students.” Journal of American College Health.



Dr. Yanrong Chang
Dr. Dora Saavedra
Department of Communication

“A communication-process-centered (CPC) approach to intercultural communication education.” Journal for Multicultural Education.

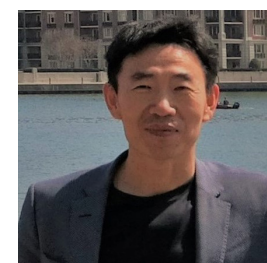


Dr. Marika Dawkins-Cavazos
Department of Criminal Justice

“Youth Attitudes and Perceptions Regarding Police, Courts, and Political Engagement: A Texas Study.” Humanity & Society. September 6 2025.

Dr. Lucas Enrique Espinoza
Department of Criminal Justice

“Relaciones Saludables (Healthy Relationships): A Peer-Led Approach to Intimate Partner Violence Prevention on University Campuses.” Texas Public Health Journal, a quarterly publication of the Texas Public Health Association (TPHA). Editors: Mathias B. Forrester & Terrie S. Pali, Vol. 78, No. 2, pp. 20-25, April 2 2026. Longview, Texas, United States.



Dr. Yudu Li
Department of Criminal Justice

“Understanding Pro-Police Sentiment in a Marginalized Group: Evidence from a Hispanic Border Community.” The Howard Journal of Communications. pp. 46040, November 10 2025. Washington, DC, USA.

Dr. Rachel L Rayburn
Department of Criminal Justice

“Understanding Pro-Police Sentiment in a Marginalized Group: Evidence from a Hispanic Border Community.” The Howard Journal of Communications. pp. 46040, November 10 2025. Washington, DC, USA.

Dr. Rolando Avila
Department of History

“Homeschooling.” In The Administration & Supervision of Special Programs in Education (6th ed.). Editors: Michelle H. Abrego, Jesus Abrego, Jr., & Anita Pankake, pp. 182-186, 2025. Kendall Hunt Publishing Company. Dubuque, IA, United States.

PUBLICATIONS

Dr. Erica M Buchberger
Department of History

“Local Identity in the Lives of the Fathers of Mérida: When Ethnicity and Religion Aren’t the Point.” Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies. Vol. 17, No. 3, pp. 293-314, October 2025. international.

Dr. Brent Steven Campney
Department of History

“‘A Small Victory in a Battle that Should Not Have Been Necessary’: Rebecca Flores and the Struggle for Field Sanitation in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.” Journal of Texas History. Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 87-120, July 2025

Dr. Thomas D Knight
Department of History

“Migration the Early Chesapeake: Dorchester Co., MD, as a Case Study, 1650-1750.” Genealogy. Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 43, September 12 2025.

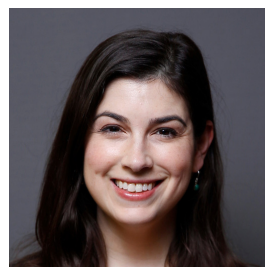
Dr. Linda Marie Belau
Dr. Ed Cameron
Department of Literatures and Cultural Studies

“The Shadow of the Past: Hauntology, Melancholia, and Rosewood as Reparative Narrative.” In Refocus: The Films of John Singleton. Editors: Daniel Dufournaud, pp. 163-81, September 2025. Edinburgh UP. Edinburgh, UK.

Dr. Amy E Cummins
Department of Literatures and Cultural Studies

“The Case of the Recommended Mystery Books: Underscoring the Importance of Independent Reading.” In TALE Yearbook 2025. Vol. 12, pp. 44-56, November 2025. Texas Association for Literacy Education (TALE).

PUBLICATIONS



Dr. Marisa Palacios Knox
Department of Literatures and Cultural Studies

“Tawny, Tyrannous Dr. Francia and Carlyle’s Confused South America.” *Victorians: A Journal of Culture and Literature*. December 2025.



Dr. Robert Jacob McDonie
Department of Literatures and Cultural Studies

“The Sermons of Geoffrey Auxerre in the Troyes Médiathèque Manuscript 503: The Beginning of an Edition of the Sermons.”

Cistercian Studies Quarterly. Vol. 60, No. 3, pp. 239-61, 2025.

Dr. Caroline Miles

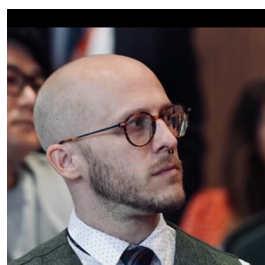
Department of Literatures and Cultural Studies

“Performing Security: A Confrontation between National Narrative and Migrant Bodies at the US-Mexico Border.” In *US-Mexico and EU-Balkans Bordering Practices and Lives in the Borderlands*. November 2025.

Dr. Alberto Rodriguez

Department of Literatures and Cultural Studies

“Los Circulos Sociales: Tejanas in Higher Education 1925-1940s.” In *¡Somos Tejanas!*. pp. 242-256, 2025. University of Texas Press.



Dr. Kevin Jobe
Department of Philosophy

“Coding Anti-Discrimination Jurisprudence: A Hybrid Computational Model of the Arlington Heights Test.” *Journal of Social Computing*. Vol. 6, No. 3,

pp. 46041, September 30 2025. Tsinghua University Press, China.

Dr. Danny Marrero Avendano

Department of Philosophy

“Is the Right to a Stable Climate System Necessary for the Preservation of Our System of Rights and Liberties?” *Human Rights Quarterly*. Vol. 47, No. 3, pp. 454-477, 2025. Cincinnati, Ohio / The Johns Hopkins University Press, United States.

Dr. Perry Neil Fuchs

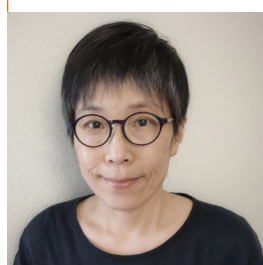
Department of Psychological Science

“A Multidimensional Preclinical Investigation of the Biogenic Amine Depletion and Subchronic Swim Models of Fibromyalgia.” *Journal of Pain*. Vol. 34, September 1 2025.

Dr. Philip Gerard Gasquoine

Department of Psychological Science

“A Community-Based Participatory Research Approach to Evaluating Perceptions of Bilingualism Among Latino Parents of Autistic Children.” *First Language*. January 2026.



Dr. Michiyo Hirai
Department of Psychological Science

“Social engagement and cognitive function among older Mexican heritage Latinos.” *Clinical Gerontologist*. December 2025.

“Longitudinal examination of online expressive writing intervention outcomes comparing Hispanic survivors of childhood trauma and adult trauma.” 2025.

“Consumption of negative media content mediates the association between levels of trauma exposure and insomnia severity in Hispanic young adults.” *Journal of Psychiatric Research*. September 2025.

Dr. Joseph D Hovey

Department of Psychological Science

“Social engagement and cognitive function among older Mexican heritage Latinos.” *Clinical Gerontologist*. December 2025.

Dr. Claudia Martinez

Department of Psychological Science

“Understanding animal introductions and welfare in zoos: A scoping review.” *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*. Vol. 291, pp. 106737, October 2025.



Dr. Cecilia Montiel-Nava
Department of Psychological Science

“A Community-Based Participatory Research Approach to Evaluating Perceptions of Bilingualism Among Latino Parents of Autistic Children.” *First Language*. January 2026.

Dr. Ana Cristina Ramirez

Department of Psychological Science

“A Community-Based Participatory Research Approach to Evaluating Perceptions of Bilingualism Among Latino Parents of Autistic Children.” *First Language*. January 2026.



Dr. Dean Kyne
Department of Sociology

“Three Mile Island.” In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Environmental Justice*. Editors: Taylor, Dorceta E., pp. 1448, July 2026. The SAGE Encyclopedia of Environmental Justice.

“Colonias with a Lack of Infrastructure.” In *Handbook of Infrastructure Communication*. Editors: Keri K. Stephens, and Kasey M. Faust, April 2026. Wiley.

“Development and Diffusion of the Social Capital Index (SoCI).” *Social Sciences*. Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 138, February 19 2026. Basel, Switzerland.

PUBLICATIONS

Dr. James Parisot

Department of Sociology

“Historicizing the Prison in the History of Capitalism.” *Journal of World-Systems Research*. Vol. 31, No. 1, 2025.



Dr. Marla Del Pilar Perez-Lugo
Department of Sociology

“Crises, Coloniality, and Energy Transformations in Puerto Rico.” In *Confronting Climate Coloniality*. Editors: Farhana Sultana,

2025. Earthscan from Routledge. New York, United States.

Dr. Igor Ryabov

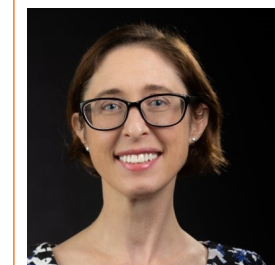
Department of Sociology

“Employment, Precarious Employment, and Unemployment Among Female Immigrant Youth in the United States.” *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*. Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 596-610, July 28 2026. United States.

Dr. Jose Luis Cano

Department of Writing and Language Studies

“The Composition of Thoughts.” *Harvard Educational Review*. Vol. 96, pp. 126-144, April 2026.



Dr. Katherine O'Donnell Christoffersen
Department of Writing and Language Studies

“Hablo pocha, ¿no?: divergent language ideologies of pocho and mocho at the U.S.-Mexico border.” *Applied Linguistics*. June 9 2026.

PUBLICATIONS

Dr. Julio Fernandez Cordero Ciller
Department of Writing and Language Studies

“Language Proficiency in Translator and Interpreter Programs: Insights from Administrators and Instructors.” *Translation and Interpreting Studies*. November 2025.



Dr. Gabriel Gonzalez Nunez

Department of Writing and Language Studies

“Translating and Retranslating Sarmiento’s *Facundo*”. *SKASE Journal of Translation and Interpretation*.

interpretation.

“Translating the Book of Mormon into Spanish: A case study of the translation of sacred texts.” *Cadenos de Tradução*.

“Art, esthetics, ideal”: An ethics for literary translators in the age of translating machines.” In *Testing Borders: A Tribute to Anthony Pym*. Editors: Kayoko Takeda, Ester Torres-Simón, David Orrego-Carmóna, Nune Ayvazyan & Bei Hu, pp. 155–173, June 26 2026. Intercultural Studies Group. Tarragona, Spain.

“A Community-Based Participatory Research Approach to Evaluating Perceptions of Bilingualism Among Latino Parents of Autistic Children.” *First Language*. January 2026.

“‘The way we do our translation’: a case study of translation policy for Spanish speakers in the public parks of Sonoma County, California.” *Current Issues in Language Planning*. Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 20-40, January 2026.

“Geographies: Dissemination of Multilingual Texts, Products, and Services.” In *A Cultural History of Translation*, Volume 6. Editors: Yves Gambier & Judy Wakabayashi, pp. 57–77, November 2025. Bloomsbury.



Dr. John G Newman
Department of Writing and Language Studies

“Metaphoric Sense Developments in the Names of Places of Worship in Contemporary American.” *LingBaW: Linguistics Beyond and Within*. Editors: Anna Bloch-Rozmej, Vol. 11, December 2025. Lublin, Poland.

Dr. Ramses Ortin Soriano
Department of Writing and Language Studies

“Moroccan Arabic-Spanish bilinguals’ linguistic profile and their perspectives and experiences on learning Standard Arabic.” In *Sociolinguistic Approaches to Arabic and Spanish in Contact*. Editors: Farah Ali, Carol Ann Ready, Sherez Mohamed, pp. 29-52, 2025. John Benjamins.

Dr. Cynthia M. Jones
School of Interdisciplinary Programs and Community Engagement

“Relaciones Saludables (Healthy Relationships): A Peer-Led Approach to Intimate Partner Violence Prevention on University Campuses.” *Texas Public Health Journal*, a quarterly publication of the Texas Public Health Association (TPHA). Editors: Mathias B. Forrester & Terrie S. Pali, Vol. 78, No. 2, pp. 20-25, April 2 2026. Longview, Texas, United States.



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

“The Irrepressible/Irresponsible Trap: Justifying Migrant Deaths at the México-U.S. Border from ‘Prevention Through Deterrence’ to ‘Operation Lone Star.’” *Latino Studies*. Editors: Marta Caminero-Santangelo, July 17 2026.



Dr. Alexandre Couture Cagnon
School of Political Science, Public Affairs, Legal & Security Studies

“La politique culturelle du Québec aux États-Unis.” In *La relation Québec-États-Unis : dynamiques politiques, sécuritaires, économiques, environnementales et culturelles*. January 28 2026. Presses de l’Université Laval. Canada.

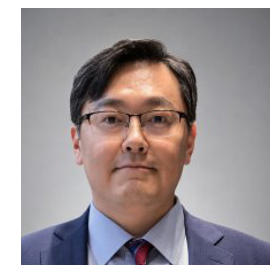
“When Governments Collide: Competition Within Nations in Québec and Catalonia.” *Routledge*. January 22 2026.

Dr. Mark J Kaswan
School of Political Science, Public Affairs, Legal & Security Studies

“‘Dirty’ Right-Wing Populist Leader: Between Moral Relativism and Cynical Practices of Leadership Authority.” *Politeja*. Editors: Monika Banaś, Małgorzata Kiwior-Filo, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 195-213, May 29 2026. Warsaw, Poland.

Dr. Justin Robert Katusak
School of Political Science, Public Affairs, Legal & Security Studies

“The Limits of the Law: Reimagining Marketplace Accessibility.” *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing/Sage Publications*. Vol. 45, No. 3, pp. 291-293, June 10 2026.



Dr. Dongkyu Kim
School of Political Science, Public Affairs, Legal & Security Studies

“A Preliminary Investigation of Research Collaboration through Scientific Paper Co-Authorship in the Gulf of Mexico.” *Estuaries and Coasts*. January 2026.

Dr. Cecilio Ortiz-Garcia
School of Political Science, Public Affairs, Legal & Security Studies

“Crises, Coloniality, and Energy Transformations in Puerto Rico.” In *Confronting Climate Coloniality*. Editors: Farhana Sultana, 2025. Earthscan from Routledge. New York, United States.



Dr. Sarah Van Perez
School of Political Science, Public Affairs, Legal & Security Studies

“Parties, Race, and Political Violence: Evaluating Whether Attitudes toward the January 6 Insurrection Vary Across Racial Groups.” *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics*. Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 382 - 408, 2026. United States.

Dr. Hanna Shin
School of Political Science, Public Affairs, Legal & Security Studies

“Sustainable water management and navigating the water challenges in East Asian cities.” In *Climate-Neutral Water Management: A guide to sustainable solutions*. 2025. IOP Publishing. Bristol, UK.



CONFERENCE PRESENTATION



Dr. Gordon Crews
Department of Criminal Justice
Dr. Jennifer Lemanski
Department of Communication

Presented their research “Policing in a Digitally Constructed World: Media Fear, Public Perception, and School Violence Response” at the International Police Executive Symposium (IPES), held in Lisbon, Portugal.



Dr. Gordon Crews
Department of Criminal Justice
Dr. Jennifer Lemanski
Department of Communication
Garrison Crews, MACJ Student

Presented their research “Analyses of Gun Violence and Mass Shootings,” at the Stockholm Criminology Symposium in Stockholm, Sweden

CONFERENCE PRESENTATION



Dr. Joe Noe
Melissa Soto, Lecturer
Briana Garcia,
Graduate Student
Department of Writing & Language Studies

Noe, Soto, & Garcia participated in the Southwest

Popular/American Culture Association Salon virtual conference on Thursday, June 25, 2026. Dr. Noe served as moderator for the panel “Graphic Novels, Comics, & Popular Culture 1: The Rhetoric of Maus: A Survivor’s Tale.”

CONFERENCE PRESENTATION

Dr. Carina Marques
Department of Anthropology

Presented co-authored research “Fixing a Broken System: Challenges and Advancements in the Development of a Human Identification Center in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV).” at the American Association of Forensic Sciences Conference in New Orleans, LA.

Also presented at the same conference, “An Evaluation of Microscopic Techniques in Cementochronology for Forensic Age-at-Death Estimation.” Co-authored with

CONFERENCE PRESENTATION

David Howard
Department of History

Presented a session titled, “Connecting College and High School History.” The session brought together college and high school administrators, dual credit facilitators, and college faculty teaching dual credit courses. After a short presentation, my co-presenter and I guided discussion to strategically elevate the dual credit experience for students and improve connections between the high school and credit granting college or university.



FACULTY RECOGNITION
Dr. Alex Stehn
Department of Philosophy

Dr. Stehn received the 2025 David W. Concepción Prize for Excellence in Philosophy Teaching, sponsored by the American Philosophical

Association (APA), the American Association of Philosophy Teachers (AAPT), and the Teaching Philosophy Association (TPA). This national award includes a \$1,500 prize and a plaque recognizing a philosophy teacher who has had a profound impact on the student learning of philosophy in undergraduate and/or pre-college settings.



FACULTY RECOGNITION
Dr. Álvaro J. Corral
School of Political Science, Public Affairs & Legal & Security Studies

Dr. Corral was named the recipient of the “Early Career Award” by the Latina/o Caucus of the Midwest Political Science Association. This award recognizes a Latina/o or Latino Politics (pre-tenure) scholar based upon their research accomplishments and contributions to the discipline.

FACULTY RECOGNITION

Dr. Soo Yun Kim
Department of Communication



Dr. Soo Yun Kim was selected to receive two prestigious awards from the Mass Communication & Society Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC). She received the Promising Professor Award (\$500), which honors one early-career faculty member for excellence and innovation in teaching based on instructional methods, assessments, course design, and evidence of teaching effectiveness.

She also received First Place in the Teaching Ideas Competition (\$300) for “What Is My Communication Curiosity? Mapping the Objective-Interpretive Spectrum as an Entry Point to Communication Theory.” Grounded in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, the project uses an evidence-based classroom activity to help students connect their intellectual interests with different approaches to communication theory. Dr. Kim will be recognized at the Mass Communication & Society Division Awards Luncheon during AEJMC’s national conference in New Orleans, Louisiana, on August 7, 2026.

FACULTY RECOGNITION

Dr. Milena Melo
Department of Anthropology



Dr. Melo was recently award one of two UNT Health Super Site Supervisor Awards at the 2026 Practice Day for her mentorship and supervision of UTRGV alum and current MA/ MPH graduate student Ricardo

Del Valle Carrera through the UTRGV Border Studies Archive. Ricardo is working on adding a collection on policy and immigration to the BSA based on his soon to be defended Master’s degree from UNT. Dr. Melo was recently hosted by UNT Health in Fort Worth for the awards ceremony and gave a talk titled “Centering Community Voices: Maternal Health and Inequality in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands” for the public health program’s professional development series.



Student Recognition

For Nayla Harris, 7.16 seconds was enough time to make UTRGV history.

The Criminal Justice major and Vaqueros sprinter delivered a breakthrough 2026 indoor season, becoming the first First Team All-American in the women's 60-meter dash in both UTRGV and Southland Conference history. She also became the first sprinter in program history—and only the second UTRGV woman—to qualify for the NCAA Indoor Track & Field Championships.

Harris arrived at nationals after a nearly untouchable season. She went unbeaten in the 60-meter dash through five consecutive meets, winning both preliminary and final rounds along the way. Each trip out of the blocks produced one of the 10 fastest indoor 60-meter times ever recorded by a UTRGV woman.

At the NCAA Championships, she saved her fastest race for the biggest stage, clocking 7.16 seconds in the preliminary round to set personal, program, and Southland Conference records. She advanced to the national final and finished fifth, earning First Team All-America honors.

Her season was about more than one race. At the Southland Conference Indoor Championships, Harris won gold in the 60 and added

bronze medals in the 200-meter dash and long jump, helping the Vaqueros capture the first SLC indoor team championship in program history. She was also named the 2025–26 UTRGV Female Student-Athlete of the Year.

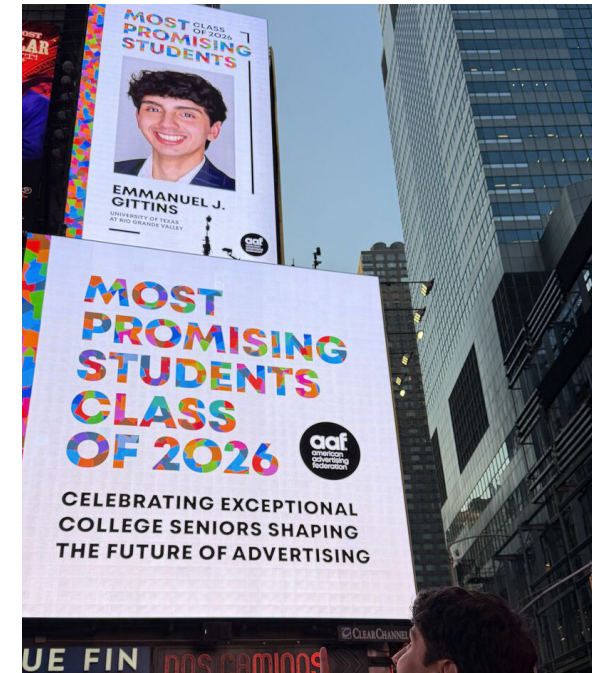
And Harris wasn't finished.

This summer, Harris carried that momentum onto an even bigger stage at the 2026 Toyota USA Track & Field Outdoor and Para National Championships in New York. Running unattached, Harris posted a personal-best 11.04 in the 100-meter semifinal to earn a place in the national final.

There, competing in a field that included Olympic silver medalist Sha'Carri Richardson, Harris ran 11.06 and finished sixth in the country. ■

“Having Nayla finish fifth in the 60 and earn First Team All-America honors was a huge moment.”

Shareese Hicks
Women's Track &
Field Coach



Student Recognition

Most Promising. Most Definitely.

When Emmanuel Gittins graduated from UTRGV in May, he left with more than a degree in mass communication. He also carried a distinction shared by only 24 other students nationwide: American Advertising Federation Most Promising Student.

Gittins, who concentrated in advertising and public relations, was selected for the AAF's 2026 Most Promising Class (MPS), a national program connecting outstanding college seniors with leaders in advertising, marketing, media, and technology. Just 25 students representing 18 universities were selected.

“I still can't believe it,” Gittins said when the selections were announced. “I got picked as one of 25 students across the nation to be part of this program. It feels surreal.”

Gittins had known about the program since his freshman year but questioned whether he could compete nationally.

“My professor, Dr. Kimberley Selber, messaged me on LinkedIn and said, ‘I really think you should apply for this,’” he said.

He applied as a strategist, focusing on his experience and his interest in advertising that reflects people and culture authentically.

“I think it's very important now more than ever

to be true to ourselves and show who we are in media,” he said.

Selection also brought access to the industry. After weather postponed the program's February trip, Gittins joined the other Most Promising students in New York in March for agency visits, mentoring, networking, workshops, and a team competition.

“It's not just one event and it's done,” he said. “It's a community you build.”

That experience helped bridge college and career. After graduating, Gittins returned to Dallas, where he is finishing a strategy internship with Dieste, following an earlier internship with AT&T.

Gittins joins a two decade legacy of UTRGV/UTPA Most Promising Students: Dr. Lynda Laurin ('06) CEO Pollux Castor Creative; Brenda Hernandez ('07) Creative Director AirBnB; Christopher Ramirez ('09) Google Labs; Carlos Luna ('24) Copywriter, Dieste. ■

“We're young. We have time,” he said. “Be open. Be curious. Talk to people. Experience things. That's how you learn who you are and what you want to bring to the world.”

Emmanuel Gittins



CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE, STUDENTS

Dr. Alberto Rodriguez

Department of Literatures and Cultural Studies

Dr. Stephanie Marie Alvarez

Department of Literatures and Cultural Studies

Professor Emmy Pérez

Department of Creative Writing

The NACCS (The National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies) Tejas Foco is a regional confer-

ence that attends to community and academic interests around issues that affect Chicanx in the state of Texas. It is an interdisciplinary conference that brings together community leaders, K-12 teachers, undergraduate and graduate students, and college faculty and staff. The participants who attend the NACCS Tejas Foco not only reflect the racial/ethnic diversity of Texas, but they also represent multiple rural and urban points from across the state. The NACCS Tejas Foco provides college and K-12 administrators, faculty, and students to connect with outstanding faculty and community leaders from across the state.

CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE, STUDENTS

Dr. Carina Marques

Department of Anthropology

Forensic Anthropology Research Lab (FAR Lab)

Dr. Marques and her students participated in the AAFS (American Association of Forensic Sciences) conference, Feb 10-15, 2026, in New Orleans, Louisiana. This is the largest international conference on Forensic Sciences. Master Students of the FAR Lab and MAIS in Anthropology and MSc in Biology attended the conference, presented and served as student volunteers of the AAFS. Student Attendees: Aracely Balderras (Anthropology) Olga Ibarra-Sanchez (Anthropology) Amando Montalvo (SIBCS) and Victoria Rosas (SIBCS).



CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE, STUDENTS



Dr. Carina Marques' Students

Department of Anthropology

Attended the 3rd Annual Paleopathology Association Meeting, Denver, CO.

Rose-Ann Bigué PhD Candidate

Awarded best student presentation (runner up) for Bigué, R.-A., Marques, M. P. M., Matos, V. M. J., Batista de Carvalho, L. A. E., Buikstra, J., Wescott, D., Navega, D., Rosas, V., Parsons, J., & Marques, C. (2026). Large-scale biochemical characterization of neoplastic lesions in individuals from the Texas State Donated Skeletal Collection.

Ibarra-Sanchez, O., Bertrand, B., & Marques, C. (2026). Assessing pathological impact on cementochronological season-of-death: Insights from the Texas State Donated Skeletal Collection.

Rosas, V., Bigué, R.-A., Buikstra, J., Wescott, D., Parsons, J., & Marques, C. (2026). Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy analysis of gout in human skeletal remains from the Texas State Donated Skeletal Collection.



CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE, STUDENTS

Eric Gonzalez

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

Presented a paper at the Southern Political Science Association (SPSA) Conference in New Orleans based on his thesis research, which analyzes how voters' perceptions of a candidate's personal wealth shape political judgments and influence decision-making at the ballot box.

CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE, STUDENTS

Celeste Medrano, Julissa Peña,

and Kirsten Razo

Department of Anthropology

Undergraduate students who work under Dr. Milena Melo and with the Border Studies Archive presented their research at the UTRGV STEM Research Conference. Their presentation titled "Understanding Maternal Health Disparities in the Rio Grande Valley Borderlands: A Bilingual and Bicultural Community Based-Study of Mexican and Mexican American Women" was awarded the best undergraduate oral presentation for health sciences and the best undergraduate oral presentation for B3.





**Collections Manager,
Brownsville Historical
Society**

Aubrey Nielsen
History
BA '14

“History is not just research and studying. There’s so many things that you can do.”

Aubrey Nielsen, MA, has turned her Valley roots and love of history into a career built around preserving the past, serving her community, and helping the next generation find its place in the field.

Born in McAllen, Nielsen attended Edinburg CISD schools before graduating from La Feria High School. Family trips to national parks, museums, Native American powwows, and cultural attractions helped spark her interest in history. “My mom was really an advocate for taking us to these things and being able to experience them. She thought that was really important.” A high school WWII military history class further convinced her that history was the path she wanted to pursue.

Nielsen earned her BA in History from the University of Texas at Brownsville in 2014, drawn in part to a campus itself steeped in history through its connection to Fort Brown. After graduation, she worked as a facilities manager before beginning the University of Oklahoma’s graduate program in Museum Studies in 2016.

At the same time, she joined the Brownsville Historical Association as a museum assistant, greeting visitors and guiding them through exhibits by day while completing her graduate coursework online after hours. She earned her MA in 2018 and has since moved through several roles at the association, including programs and event coordinator, before becoming collections manager.

Her connection to UTRGV continues. Nielsen regularly works with former professors, including Dr. David Fisher and Dr. Philip Samponaro, and since 2018 has supervised UTRGV students through the Rudy de la Garza scholarship.

“They come to the museum and we learn how collections and museums play an integral role in our communities. They learn about the operation side of museums as non-profits but also through the curatorial side and connecting history.”

Nielsen also serves on the board of the Texas Association of Museums and has helped develop its Relic Wranglers service initiative, which assists museums with collections projects.

“I know that every step I do is not just for myself, but for other women of color.”

Leann Castillo, MA, grew up in Edinburg and Mission, where her parents instilled the expectation that college was in her future — and, from an early age, she suspected archaeology was too.

“When I was 12, my dad took me to the [Rio Grande Delta International] Archaeology Fair that happens every October. I met an archaeologist there, and I realized that I wanted to do this for the rest of my life.”

Her path was not entirely direct. Unsure how to pursue archaeology, Castillo initially declared nursing as her major. She soon knew it was not the right fit. “If I don’t want to go to class, that’s a good sign that this degree isn’t for me!”

She returned to archaeology, where mentors Dr. Sarah Rowe and Dr. Margaret Graham helped her find her direction. “Those two women changed my life.”

At UTRGV, Castillo paired classroom study with hands-on experience. A field school in Ecuador with Dr. Rowe and Dr. Guy Duke gave her valuable professional experience and strengthened her interest in graduate school. She was also active in the anthropology club, where she made lifelong friends and found opportunities to serve. Among them was volunteering at the same archaeology fair she had attended as a child — and reconnecting with the archaeologist who had first inspired her.

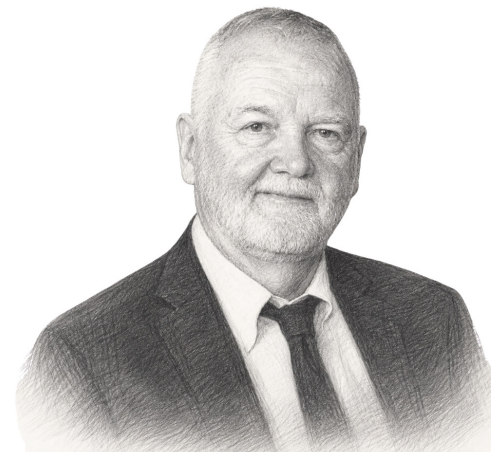
Castillo earned her master’s degree in archaeology, with a focus in bioarchaeology, from Texas Tech University in 2023. Today, she is a Senior Project Archeologist with AmaTerra, a division of Environmental Research Group in Austin. Working with archeologists, biologists, historians, and geospatial experts, she helps clients identify and protect cultural and historic resources before development begins. Her projects have taken her across Texas and to other states.

Castillo encourages students to volunteer, build relationships with faculty, and take advantage of opportunities beyond the classroom. She continues to do the same, including serving as Student Liaison and Volunteer Coordinator for the Texas Archeological Society Conference when it was held in the Rio Grande Valley.



**Senior Project Archeologist
for AmaTerra**

Leann Castillo
Anthropology
BA '20



IN MEMORIUM

Dr. Milo Kearney Department of History

For more than half a century, Dr. Milo Kearney taught history, wrote about it, traveled in search of it, and made sure the stories of the Rio Grande Valley were not lost.

Kearney, professor emeritus of history, died April 2, 2026, at the age of 88.

A Woodrow Wilson Scholar, Kearney earned his Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley, and joined Pan American University in 1970. He continued to teach as the University became part of the UT System, later serving at UT Brownsville and, eventually, UTRGV.

Along the way, he became a much-loved teacher. He was the first professor at the University to receive the Minnie Stevens Piper Teaching Award and was selected as a Fulbright Scholar in 1992–1993. Generations of students knew him for the depth of his knowledge, particularly of borderlands history, and for a curiosity that seemed to have few boundaries.

Kearney wrote dozens of books on history, poetry, art, and juvenile literature. He also helped preserve the history of South Texas through the TSC-UTRGV Regional History Series, a project he edited for many years. He also wrote Redbeard of the Rio Grande, a history-themed musical performed by the Bravo Opera Company in Brownsville.

He spoke five languages fluently and could read several more. That allowed him to work with historical texts in their original languages and reflected his desire to understand other people and cultures.

His interest in people extended well beyond the University. A devout Christian and humanitarian, Kearney helped fund the construction of a men's and women's shelter in Brownsville. He often asked others to explain their beliefs and views while saying surprisingly little about his own.

And Milo never really stopped being a professor.

His grandsons remember sitting with him as he pulled out old teaching scrapbooks and offered impromptu history lessons. If they paid attention, there was sometimes an Altoid waiting at the end. It was a small reward, but one they still remember.

Years ago, Kearney described what drove him as “a love of creativity and of new patterns of thought and expression.” He wrote of his faith, his love of world cultures, and the ways those cultures interact.

That curiosity stayed with him throughout his life. So did the instinct to teach.

He is survived by Vivian; his daughter, Kathleen; his son, Sean; and five grandsons, Benjamin, Elijah, Ian, Jeremy, and Collin.

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.



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