

UTRGV College of Health Professions
HEALTH FORWARD
CONFERENCE



April 16 & 17, 2026
Edinburg, TX

UTRGV™



UT Health
Rio Grande Valley

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College of Health Professions

Health Forward

Senior Vice President for Health Affairs and Dean of the College of Health Professions

Michael Lehker, PhD



Dr. Michael Lehker, Senior Vice President for Health Affairs and Founding Dean of the College of Health Professions, is a professor of microbiology in the Department of Health and Biomedical Sciences at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Dr. Lehker is committed to enhancing and promoting allied health professional students' education, research, and clinical practice at the College of Health Professions.

A particular focus is on innovative educational approaches in healthcare education to enhance student engagement and effectiveness and the establishment of new programs to increase participation of Rio Grande Valley students in the allied health, medical and biomedical workforce. Building research capacity is another passion of Dr. Lehker.

Why Health Forward?

Welcome to Health Forward 2026! It is the mission of the College of Health Professions to be the leading institution of excellence in health and human services, education, health care and research, producing highly skilled practitioners, educators, and researchers through high quality educational programs, meaningful experiential learning opportunities and the development of scientific and intellectual inquiry for the promotion of health equity in the Rio Grande Valley and beyond.

Health Forward brings together the South Texas Community to explore, share and motivate the health professionals and communities in the region to review current health research, disperse innovative health pedagogy techniques for all, train in the best practices of interprofessional education that leads to interprofessional practice and bring together the community to move **Health Forward!**

Keynote Speaker

Everardo Cobos, MD, FACP

Dean - UTRGV School of Medicine

Chair - Department of Medicine and Oncology



Dr. Everardo Cobos is a distinguished academic physician and clinical leader who has been appointed the Dean of the UTRGV School of Medicine. He also chairs the Department of Medicine and Oncology, a position he has held since joining UTRGV in April 2023.

Dr. Cobos also directs the cancer service line at UT Health RGV. Under his leadership, the South Texas Center of Excellence in Cancer Research, composed of nationally recognized cancer researchers, is integrated into the service line, advancing both patient care and cutting-edge oncology research.

As a practicing hematologist and oncologist, Dr. Cobos remains deeply committed to providing high-quality, compassionate care. He and his team at UTRGV and UT Health RGV develop and lead innovative clinical trials that offer new hope for patients in a medically underserved region.

Dr. Cobos earned his medical degree from the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. He completed his residency in internal medicine and fellowship training in hematology and oncology at Letterman Army Medical Center in San Francisco. Before joining UTRGV, he held academic appointments at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center and the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA.

Nationally recognized for his excellence in clinical medicine, research, education, and leadership, Dr. Cobos has received over 20 consecutive years of recognition from students, residents, and fellows for his exceptional teaching. Above all, he is most proud of his continuous, uninterrupted practice of medicine and care for patients over a span now exceeding 40 years.

Conference Agenda

Overview

Thursday, April 16, 2026

7:30 a.m.	Registration & Poster Set Up	ECESS 1.300
7:30 a.m.	Social and Light Breakfast	ECESS 1.300
8:30 a.m.	Opening Remarks Michael Lehker, PhD Senior Vice President for Health Affairs Dean College of Health Professions	ECESS 1.300
9:00 a.m.	Keynote Speaker Presentation: Everardo Cobos, MD, FACP – Dean School of Medicine	ECESS 1.300
10:30 a.m.	Research Poster Session 1	ECESS 1.300
10:30 a.m.	Innovations in Teaching and Interprofessional Education/Community Engagement Poster Session	ECESS 1.300
11:30 a.m.	Networking Lunch	ECESS 1.300
12:30 p.m.	Breakout Presentations 1 Research Teaching Innovations Interprofessional Education Student Competition	ECESS 1.117 ECESS 1.300 ECESS 1.118
1:45 p.m.	Breakout Presentations 2 Research Teaching Innovations Interprofessional Education Student Competition	ECESS 1.117 ECESS 1.300 ECESS 1.118
3:15 p.m.	Breakout Presentations 3 Research Teaching Innovations	ECESS 1.117 ECESS 1.300

Conference Agenda

Overview

Friday, April 17, 2026

7:30 a.m.	Registration & Poster Set Up	ECESS 1.300
7:30 a.m.	Social and Light Breakfast	ECESS 1.300
8:00 a.m.	Research Poster Session	ECESS 1.300
9:00 a.m.	Breakout Presentations 4	
	Research	ECESS 1.117
	Teaching Innovations	ECESS 1.300
	Interprofessional Education	ECESS 1.118
10:30 a.m.	Breakout Presentations 5	
	Research	ECESS 1.117
	Teaching Innovations	ECESS 1.300
	Interprofessional Education	ECESS 1.118
11:45 p.m.	Student Awards and Networking Lunch	ECESS 1.300
1:45 p.m.	Closing Session	ECESS 1.300

Conference Map

UTRGV Edinburg Community Engagement and Student Success Building (E-CCESS) Room 1.300; 1407
E. Freddy Gonzalez Drive; Edinburg, Texas 78539



Conference Agenda

Research Sessions

April 16, 2026

10:30 a.m.

Research Poster Session

ECESS 1.300

Enhancing PA Student Competency in Sports PPEs Through Video-Based Modules Christina Gonzales, Angelica R. Urbina

Assessing Age Friendly Community Environment in Rio Grande Valley: Results From Pilot Study Sudershan Pasupuleti

Optimizing a Biodegradable Branched Polycationic Polymer For Non-Viral Gene Delivery Gabriella Madrigal, Victoria Delgado, Serenade Trevino, Trey Zepeda, Shizue Mito, Sue Anne Chew

10:30 a.m.

Student Research Poster Session

ECESS 1.300

Beyond Pitch: Exploring Satisfaction and Identity Outcomes in Gender-Affirming Voice Therapy in Trans Women Brenda P Villafranca, Brianette Peña

The Development of Minocycline-Loaded Microparticles and Injectable Alginate Scaffolds Composites to Prolong Release for The Treatment of Glioblastoma. Samantha Davila, Dorina A. Madrid, Florestella Rivera, Serenade Trevino, Jorge De Leon, Sebastian Flores, Sue Anne Chew

Combination of miRNA-379-5p and miRNA-125a-3p for the treatment of platinum-resistant ovarian cancer Trey Zepeda

An Integrated MRI-Biomarker-Cognitive Deep Learning Model for Alzheimer disease detection Bonna Akter, Deepa Roy, Upal Roy

Hindlimb Unloading and Its Effects of Neuroinflammatory Responses in Rat Angel Rodriguez, Aragon Gutierrez, Lizbeth Caballero, Mario Gil, Khaled Y. Kamal, John Lawler, Deepa Roy, Upal Roy

Conference Agenda

Research Sessions

April 16, 2026

10:30 a.m.

Student Research Poster Session

ECESS 1.300

OECT-based biosensors for detection of HER2+ as a breast cancer biomarker Jatziry Luna, Makayla Garcia, Amber Hernandez, Abner Renteria, Abijeet Mehta

Maternal Nutritional Deficiencies During Pregnancy and Risk of Autism Spectrum Disorders in Offspring: A Systematic Adda Sofia Zarate Cantu, Adda Zarate

Effects of dietary intake on the development of childhood obesity in low-income households: a systematic review Andrea Delgado

The Effects of Intermittent Fasting Compared to a Standard Diet on Glycemic Control in Adults with Type 2 Diabetes: A Systematic Review Andrea Delgado

Combined Assessment of Dietary Intake and Metabolic Flexibility as a Surrogate Measure of Cardiometabolic Risk: A Systematic Review Gabriel Figueroa

Effects of Ashwagandha Supplementation on Cortisol Levels in Adults Experiencing Chronic Stress: A Systematic Review Arianna Garcia

Do Seed Oils Promote Inflammation? A Systematic Review of n-6 PUFA Substitution for Saturated Fats on LDL-C and CRP Levels Jacob Martinez

The Effect of Consuming Fermented Foods on the Gut Microbiome in Adults with Chronic Illness: A Systematic Review Megan Howard

The Impact of Excess Saturated Fat on Cardiovascular Disease Risk: A Systematic Review Daniella Rios

Influence of Titanium Surface Modifications on Pre-Osteoblast Commitment via Runx2 Expression Estephania Kumpf-Garcia, Peter Elvin, Amayrani Sanchez, Anthony Reyes, Krishna Rajesh Prajapati, Danieli C. Rodrigues, Bhuvana Lakkasetter Chandrashekar, Claudia C. Biguetti

Cultural Barriers and Stigma: Understanding Disability Awareness and Perceived Support in Hispanic Families Amy Martinez

How does short-term bite block use or training affect speech intelligibility and articulatory control in adults with motor speech disorders? Eliza Yvonne Tapia, Sydney O'Donnell

Food for Thought: Why Nutrition Matters for a Child's Brain; A Multicultural Perspective Lizbeth Perez, Carolina Talancon

Do Sensory Integration Strategies Help Children with ADHD Improve Regulation for Greater Therapeutic Outcomes? Kimberly Galvan, Amanda Lopez

Are pragmatic language differences more valid indicators than vocabulary delays for early identification of ASD in children? Andria Suarez, Janeth Luevanos

The Role of Speech Therapy in Stroke Recovery: A Focus on Broca's Aphasia Vanessa Gil, Arely Garza

Conference Agenda

Research Sessions

April 16, 2026

11:30 a.m.	Networking Lunch	ECESS 1.300
12:30 p.m.	Research Breakout 1 Exploring Anatomy Preparedness Among Graduate Occupational Therapy and Physical Therapy Students in the Rio Grande Valley: An Interdisciplinary Research Proposal Thelma Ochoa	ECESS 1.117
1:45 p.m.	Research Breakout 2 Mediation and Moderation Pathways Linking Social Participation to Health-Related Quality of Life in Autistic Kayi Ntinda Examining Factors Associated with Caregiving Burden among Men with Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder Victor Stephen, Rebecca Gonzalez	ECESS 1.117
3:15 p.m.	Research Breakout 3 Impact of High-Intensity Rest-Pause and Blood Flow Restriction Training on Strength and Cardiovascular Adaptations in Women Rebekah Schlatter, Dr. Murat Karabulut OECT-based biosensors for detection of myocardial infarction biomarkers Gustavo Gonzalez, Javier Soliz	ECESS 1.117

Conference Agenda

Research Sessions

April 17, 2026

8:00 a.m.

Student Research Poster Session

ECESS 1.300

Spaceflight exposure activates inflammasome-associated signaling in the mouse cerebellum from Rodent Research-18
Lizbeth Caballero, Aragon Gutierrez, Angel Rodriguez, Deep Roy, Josh Alwood, Xiao Mao, Juan Pablo de Rivero

Developing Dialect-Sensitive Expressive Language Supports for Spanish-Speaking Families in the Rio Grande Valley
Edessa Reyes

Systematic Literature Review of Feeding Progression in Premature Infants Across Levels of Prematurity Jennifer Rodriguez, Adriana Garza, Jennifer Rodriguez

BuOE Attenuates Spaceflight-Associated Cerebellar Inflammasome Activation in RR-18 Mice Aragon Gutierrez, Lizbeth Caballero, Angel Rodriguez, Josh Alwood, Deepa Roy, Xiao W. Mao, JuanPablo de Rivero Vaccari, Upal Roy

Digital Mental Health Tools and Applications: The Impact on Service Utilization Patricia Lerma

OECT-Based Biosensors for the Detection of Amyloid-Beta 42 as a Biomarker for Alzheimer's Disease Marco Yerena, Joshua Figarola, Leslie Martinez, Marco Javier Yerena

Spaced Retrieval Training in Early Dementia: Effects on Memory, Safety Skills, and Quality of Life Julissa Araiza, Natalie Garcia

Barriers and Benefits: Examining Early Intervention Access and Outcomes in the Hispanic Population Anissa Amaya, Miranda Pena

Anti-GP2-Functionalized Pluronic Nanoparticles for Targeted Antiretroviral Delivery to GALT Juan Herrera, Deepa Roy, Matthew Haney, Jason Parsons, Shizue Mito, Alexandar Kabanov, Upal Roy

A Comparative Review of Outcomes for Rapid Syllable Transition Treatment (ReST) and Dynamic Temporal and Tactile Cueing (DTTC) in Children with Childhood Apraxia of Speech (CAS) Ricardo Garcia, Destiny Coronado

The Development of Electrosprayed Minocycline-loaded PLGA Nanoparticles for the Treatment of Glioblastoma Jorge De Leon, Florestella Rivera, Sebastian Flores, Sue Anne Chew

Sleep Duration Effects Analyzed on the InBody 770 viewing Body Compositions and Sleep Tracking Allan Benavides Isabella Landeros, Aaron Garcia

Conference Agenda

Research Sessions

April 17, 2026

8:00 a.m.

Student Research Poster Session

ECESS 1.300

The Effect of Real-Time HRV Biofeedback via Apple Watch on Flexibility and Autonomic Regulation During Yoga Training Dreida Villegas, Ava Castillo, Brianna Solis

Body Weight and Psychological Stress in Hispanic Students Camila Calderon, Jacqueline Cantu, Cassandra Guzman, Liliana Salazar

Stress and Diet Habits Ismael Garcia, Evelyn Balboa carlos, Keren Fuentes, Sadie Valdez, Aaron Choa

Glucose Metabolism and Chronic Stress Cesar Betancourt, Stefany Estrada, Mia Quintanilla, Adrian Avalos, Cesar Bentancourt

Perceived Barriers to Employment Among Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities Lilia Zavala

Integrating Instrumented Rehabilitation Technology to Enhance Performance and Reduce Injury Risk in Collegiate Dancers Justin Garcia, Fernando Mora, Diego Sanchez

Exploring the Adverse Challenges of Families with Members Facing Substance Use: A Qualitative Investigation of Online Support Groups Miguel Reyes, Kayi Ntinda, Noreem Graf

Stigma-Related Attitudes and Perceived Treatment Barriers for Substance Use Disorder Among Hispanics in the Rio Grande Valley Jordan Cottrell

Evaluating the Impact of Footwear on Human Gait Through 3D Motion Analysis Joshua Lopez, Alexander Lomas, Anthony Guerra

Elevated Blood Urea Nitrogen as a Potential Metabolic Link Between Type 2 Diabetes and Alzheimer's Disease Araisa Cardoza, Chun Xu

Does a Low-Carbohydrate Diet Have an Impact on Females with PCOS in Comparison to a Standard Diet: A Systemic Review Lizbeth Trevino

Establishing a High-Fat Diet-Induced Obesity and Type 2 Diabetes Model in C57BL/6J Mice for Wound Healing Studies Ramiro Cisneros, Estephania Garcia, Marco Hernandez, Joshus Wu, Nidhin John, Bhuvana Lakkasetter Chandrashekar, Claudia Biguetti

Ethnicity-Associated Variation in Serum Potassium Among Patients with Comorbid Alzheimer's Disease and Type 2 Diabetes Valeria Ramos, Arely Solis, Marzieh Ayati, Belinda Alvarado, Kesheng Wang, Gladys Maestre

Development and Refinement of 3D-Printed Eye Models for Accurate Muscle Movement Simulation Andruw Lopez, Josiah Mendoza, Isaac Choutapalli

Synergistic Effects of Niclosamide and Camptothecin Combination Therapy in Glioblastoma Relapse Prevention Mickey Herrera-Toscano, Megan W. Szobody, Araely Ruiz, Eunseo Yang, Brianna Morin, Andruw Lopez, Josue Fonseca, Ryanna Quintero, Reanne Garcia, John-Beloved Osho, Raquel Lara, Andrew Tsin, iaoqian Fang

Conference Agenda

Research Sessions

April 17, 2026

9:00 a.m.

Research Breakout 4

ECESS 1.117

Beyond Clinical Expertise: Sources of Power in Clinical Practice Dora Vargas-Bustos

AI Based Counseling: Impact on Mental Health Service Delivery from the Perspectives of Educators and Students Patricia Lerma

10:30 a.m.

Research Breakout 5

ECESS 1.117

Student Research

The Influence of Music and Social Interaction on Physiological Responses and Perceived Enjoyment During HIIT and BFR Performance Martha Villanueva, Gabriela Segura, Francisco Almaguer, Marco Arriaga, Ulku Karabulut, Dr. Sue Anne Chew, Dr. Murat Karabulut

Testing the Accuracy of Commercial Wrist-Wearable Activity Trackers at Different Exercise Intensities Jabeth Azpeitia, Dr. Murat Karabulut, Andrea Sanchez, Sarah Gomez, Alayna Ramos, Aldo Guzman, Rebekah D. Schlatter, Guillermo Perez, Ulku Karabulut

11:45 a.m.

Student Awards and Networking Lunch

ECESS 1.300

Conference Agenda

Teaching Innovations Sessions

April 16, 2026

10:30 a.m.

Teaching Innovations Poster Session

ECESS 1.300

Gamified Team Based Learning Using the “Addams Family Challenge” to Enhance Clinical Reasoning in PA Education Nathalie Chacon, Christina Gonzales, Ashley E. Peña

Gamified Learning Using an Interactive Bingo Lotería Review Tool for Cardiovascular Pathophysiology in PA Education: A Pilot Evaluation of Learner Perceptions Nathalie Chacon, Christina Gonzales , Hilda Baesa

Barriers to AAC Device Accessibility for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Scoping Review Yaneisi Arriaga, Amanda Manriquez, Dr. Mengxuan Wu

Unlocking Critical Thinking: A Retrospective Analysis of Digital Escape Rooms Across the PA Didactic Year Curriculum Heather Davis-Lopez, Dr. Angelica Urbina, Dr. Christina Gonzales

Addressing Professionalism Through Video Educational Modules *George Vera Jr., Cassandra Whetstone*

11:30 a.m.

Networking Lunch

ECESS 1.300

12:30 p.m.

Teaching Innovations Breakout 1

ECESS 1.300

A Modular Active-Learning Toolkit for Health Professions Education: Enhancing Engagement and Clinical Reasoning Through Team-Based Strategies Virginia Mata-Miller,

Combining Technology into the Teaching Practice to Train Pre-Service Physical Education Ezequiel Benavides, Dr. Lin Wang

Kahoot in the Classroom: The use of Team Mode Patricia Longoria

Conference Agenda

Teaching Innovations Sessions

April 16, 2026

1:45 p.m.

Teaching Innovations Breakout 2

ECESS 1.300

Utilizing Virtual Simulations to Explore Social Determinants of Health(SDOH) in Health Professions Education Dr. Diana Paz, Dr. John Luna

Reducing Hallucinations in AI Tutoring: Reliable Knowledge Boundaries and Teaching Protocols
Robert Salazar

3:15 p.m.

Teaching Innovations Breakout 3

ECESS 1.300

Hands-On Human Research in Biomedical Science Education: A Model for Engaging Future Health Professionals and Researchers Chun Xu, Arely Solis, Samantha Arevalo, Araiza Cardoza, Ayati, Kesheng Wang, Gladys Maestre

Point-of-Care Ultrasound (POCUS) As A Teaching Tool To Integrate Knee Anatomy With Physical Examination During Patient Encounters And Clerkship in PA Education Nathalie Chacon, Hilda Baesa, Daniel Gomez, Julio Valdez

Conference Agenda

Teaching Innovations Sessions

April 17, 2026

9:00 a.m.

Teaching Innovations Breakout 4

ECESS 1.300

UnlockED: A Hands-On Workshop for Designing Educational Escape Rooms in Higher Education Christina Gonzales, Angelica R. Urbina, Dr. Nathalie Chacon

Beyond the Microscope: Digital Tools That Strengthen Hematology Education Cristal Villarreal

10:30 p.m.

Teaching Innovations Breakout 5

ECESS 1.300

Group Case-Based Learning: Preparing Health Professions Students for Collaborative Clinical Practice Daniela Gill

Effective Peer Observation of Teaching: Going from Summative to Formative Evaluation Saraswathy Nair, Sue Anne Chew, Lorena Lopez, Lisa Salinas

11:45 p.m.

Student Awards and Networking Lunch

ECESS 1.300

Conference Agenda

Interprofessional Education/ Community Engagement Sessions

April 16, 2026

12:30 p.m.

**Interprofessional Education/ Community Engagement
Breakout 1**

ECESS 1.118

Workshop

**Hear Together South Texas: An Interprofessional,
School-Based Hearing Screening Practicum to Improve
Early Identification and Referral Support** Rocio
Cavazos-Guajardo

1:45 p.m.

**Interprofessional Education/ Community Engagement
Breakout 2**

ECESS 1.118

**Predicting Body Weight Using Multivariable
Anthropometry in Adult Women: A Pilot Study in AHEC
clinics** Juan Lopez-Alvarenga, Maricarmen Marroquin, Efe
Martins, Divya Nagireddy, Aribah Tahir, Marilyn Anirak,
Siddarth Vyas, Isadora Costa-Motta, Veronica O'Brien,
Alissa Lopez

Conference Agenda

Interprofessional Education/ Community Engagement Sessions

April 17, 2026

9:00 a.m.	Interprofessional Education/ Community Engagement Breakout 4 Interprofessional Training in Action: AHEC Scholar MSSW Trainee Strengthens Community Health and Education Angela Villarreal, LuBeth Perez	ECESS 1.118
10:30 a.m.	Interprofessional Education/ Community Engagement Breakout 5 Legislation Helping Grassroots (Education, Community Service, Practitioners) Make Significant Change Phillip Conatser	ECESS 1.118
11:45 p.m.	Student Awards and Networking Lunch	ECESS 1.300

Conference Planning Committees

Planning Committee

Michael Lehker – Sr VP Health Affairs & Dean
Christopher Ledingham – Senior Associate Dean
Rene Gonzalez – Associate Dean
Murat Karabulut – Associate Dean
Diana Paz – Associate Dean
Lin Wang – Associate Dean
Sandra Guajardo – College Administrator
Victoria Hernandez – Administrative Associate
Dominga Delgado – Administrative Assistant I
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Romeo Ortega – Administrative Assistant I

College of Health Professions Office of the Dean

Edinburg - Health Affairs Building West - EHABW 2.230
Brownsville - Biomedical Research & Health Building - BBRHB
2.101

Email: cohpinfo@utrgv.edu

Phone: 956-665-2291 (Edinburg campus)

Phone Alt: 956-882-5000 (Brownsville campus)

Research Abstract Reviewers

Jijumon A S	Thelma Ochoa
Nathalie Chacon	Laiju Prabhakarankutty
Wen-Pin Chang	Upal Roy
Batholomew Chireh	Chun Xu
Sonio Garcia	Hiba Zwiya
Corey Hawes	

Student Research Abstract Reviewers

Jijumon A S	Sonio Garcia
Batholomew Chireh	Dora Vargas-Bustos
Diana Paz	Nathalie Chacon
Hiba Zwiya	Corey Hawes
Chelsea Alamilla	Russell Wendt
Ivan Figueroa	Wen-Pin Chang
Upal Roy	Thelma Ochoa
Rocio Cavazos	Chun Xu

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Maria Castaneda	Melissa Gonzalez	Guillermo Perez
Nathalie Chacon	Lisa Kuhn	Esmeralda Rivera
Shyam Chirravoori	Fidencio Mercado	Shad Smith
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Sonio Garcia	Shad Smith	
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UTRGV College of Health Professions
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College of Health Professions

The College of Health Professions prepares students to contribute to improving the health and well-being of the Rio Grande Valley, the state, the nation, and the world.

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