A Community of SCHOLARS

2017 Major Faculty Achievements
UT Rio Grande Valley
The University of Texas
Dear Colleagues:

Please join me in congratulating our outstanding faculty members for their achievements in 2017. With student success at the heart of UTRGV, these achievements demonstrate our faculty’s commitment to preparing and empowering students to thrive in a rigorous academic environment, contribute to a global economy, and become leaders and innovators.

A strong Community of Scholars is critical to our mission for transforming the Rio Grande Valley. On behalf of our students, university and community, thank you for your extraordinary efforts and contributions.

Guy Bailey, Ph.D.
Founding President
Dear Colleagues:

In this issue of “A Community of Scholars,” we are excited to share with you highlights of our faculty achievements during the 2017 calendar year. As demonstrated in this publication, we have excellent and world-class faculty members who are recognized for their significant contributions. These achievements reflect our faculty members’ profound commitment to student success and excellence in teaching, research/creative activities, and service.

We feature the recipients of the 2017 UTRGV Faculty Excellence Awards in the areas of Teaching, Research, Service, Student Mentoring, Sustainability Education, and Community-Engaged Scholarship. These individuals were selected through a rigorous process that began with internal nominations by peers, and subsequent reviews by the UTRGV faculty awards committee. We also recognize the recipient of the 2017 Department Excellence Award in Faculty Mentoring for demonstrated excellence in mentoring its faculty above and beyond the general expectations, with special attention to women, minorities, and junior faculty.

Moreover, this publication features four (4) recipients of The University of Texas System Board of Regents’ Outstanding Teaching Awards as well as twelve (12) individual recipients and two faculty teams of other major external awards and honors. In recognition of faculty research and/or creative activities, this publication further showcases thirteen (13) faculty who authored or co-authored scholarly books or other high-profile creative works as well as nine (9) faculty who received major grants or other external funding (approximately $500,000 or more) for new projects in 2017. Finally, we congratulate faculty for their promotions and emeriti status.

Please join us in celebrating the success of our faculty members and their exceptional efforts and contributions at all levels!

Patricia M. Alvarez McHatton, Ph.D.
Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs, Student Success, and P-16 Integration

Ala R. Qubbaj, Ph.D.
Senior Associate Vice President for Faculty Affairs & Diversity
It gives me immense pleasure to reflect upon and celebrate our faculty’s stellar accomplishments. UTRGV faculty are rapidly expanding educational opportunities for our students, building innovative community engagement programs to transform the Rio Grande Valley, and performing cutting edge research and creative activities that are paving the way for sustainable solutions to local and global challenges.

Last year faculty published extremely high impact publications and won grants, including highly competitive grants, impressively worth tens of millions of dollars. Our faculty also received a series of national and international honors for their contributions.

I am very proud of our faculty’s achievements and look forward to partnering with everyone to further expand educational opportunities, significantly increase our research enterprise, build new and transformative interdisciplinary centers and institutes, and establish impactful local and global partnerships to raise UTRGV’s national and global esteem.

Parwinder Grewal, Ph.D.
Executive Vice President for Research, Graduate Studies, and New Program Development
In just three years from the opening of UTRGV and two years from the opening of the School of Medicine, leaders in health care and biomedical sciences research and philanthropic organizations are taking notice of the excellent work of our faculty who serve in the College of Health Affairs, School of Medicine and School of Nursing.

Government agencies and nonprofit organizations have supported the research our faculty are conducting in health issues that affect the Rio Grande Valley—cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, and other related illnesses—knowing that their findings will benefit not only residents locally, but throughout the world.

Many of our faculty members have received national and international recognition in their respective fields for their stellar records in education, research, scholarship and service.

I am pleased to join UTRGV in celebrating the accomplishments of our faculty, and look forward to celebrating their future successes.

John H. Krouse, MD, Ph.D., MBA
Executive Vice President for Health Affairs
Dean, School of Medicine
ALYSSA CAVAZOS
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
DEPARTMENT OF WRITING & LANGUAGE STUDIES

Cavazos is a leader in the university’s growth toward becoming a bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate institution, cites nominator Amy Cummins, associate professor, Department of Literatures & Cultural Studies.

“Her efforts have already been transformative and are moving UTRGV in a positive direction regarding translingual writing instruction and border rhetorics,” Cummins said.

As part of this ongoing work, Cavazos received the UTRGV Internal Seed Research Program Grant for the project “Biliterate/Multiliterate Writing Practices in Academic and Community Discourses.”

“Outside of her traditional classrooms, Cavazos has emerged as a dedicated provider of professional development for teaching assistants and other teachers through a variety of workshops she’s designed in multilingual pedagogy, along with more traditional writing pedagogy themes,” said Colin Charlton, chair, Writing & Language Studies.

Cavazos explains her engaged pedagogy as centering on growing intellectually and spiritually with her students by creating the necessary conditions for learning in a linguistically inclusive environment where everyone develops as readers, writers, listeners, and conscious users of language.

“We are models of effective teaching for our students,” she said. “I think about this often because I have a little girl. Her name is Alyxia, and I see my students as her potential future teachers or mentors. I want to ensure I teach in a way that will one day positively impact my little girl and future generations.”

Former student Jacquelyn Ann Medina, English language arts teacher at Donna North High School, said Cavazos creates a student-centered classroom environment, which helps promote autonomous learning and higher order thinking.

“I try to model Dr. Cavazos, and often have been praised by my coaches because I was taught how to lead students into formulating ideas by asking probing questions,” Medina said.
Lozano, the Julia Beecherl Endowed Professor and founder and director of the UTRGV Nanotechnology Center of Excellence, has been with UTPA/UTRGV for 17 years.

Nominator Arturo Fuentes, associate chair, Department of Mechanical Engineering, said Lozano has been instrumental in the development of the university's engineering programs.

“Dr. Lozano’s tireless leadership and efforts in student recruitment, faculty mentoring, development of a first-class and state-of-the-art infrastructure for undergraduate and graduate research activities are producing many fruitful results that are making long-lasting contributions in the RGV community and in the scientific community,” Fuentes said.

A noted role model for women in STEM careers, Lozano has been named Engineer of the Year, Great Minds in STEM, 2015, and she received the National Science Foundation Career Award.

She has been principal investigator or highly involved in 52 funded proposals totaling $14.5 million for expanding student and faculty research development programs.

In addition, Lozano has over 45 patents/patent applications, with some of the patents – including the new technology Forc spindle® – establishing the foundation of Fiberio Technology Inc., co-founded by Lozano.

“The work Dr. Lozano has done has often been seen as foundational and it has contributed to a growth in nanotech research related to polymers, processing, composites and other nanomaterials. She stands at the top of the work done, including forced spinning and nanomanufacturing,” said Enrique V. Barrera, professor, Materials Science and NanoEngineering, Rice University George R. Brown School of Engineering.
Caruntu has rarely had a moment’s rest since joining the UTRGV mechanical engineering faculty 10 years ago.

Nominator Robert Freeman, interim chair, Department of Mechanical Engineering, cites Caruntu’s outstanding contributions to the university in service at all levels – department, college, university – as well as to the American Society of Mechanical Engineering (ASME) and the scientific community.

Caruntu’s impressive service includes holding 26 capacities at the department level in the past 10 years. He has been elected and has served, or continues to serve, as ABET (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology) coordinator and as chair for several committees, including the Annual Evaluation Committee, Dynamics and Control Curriculum Committee, Enrollment Management Committee, and Mechanical Engineering Analysis Task Force.

Through his leadership, Caruntu made significant changes to the mechanical engineering curriculum that has been implemented, including new electives and modifications in the engineering mathematics sequence.

“Caruntu’s vita details his impressive service record,” said Alexander Domijan, former dean, College of Engineering and Computer Science. “What the vita does not convey, though, is the fact that Micky Caruntu is a servant leader who contributes to his students, his department, his college, the university, his discipline, and the community because he cares. He wants to make a difference in the lives of others. He truly believes in the mission of the university and our students.”
SCOTT ROEDER
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
SCHOOL OF MUSIC

“Going the extra mile” seems to be all in a day’s work for Roeder, associate professor of music, who has proven himself to be not only a professor of tuba/euphonium but also a mentor, coach, advisor, guide, travel and booking agent, fundraiser and role model.

Nominator Krista Jobson, assistant professor of flute, said she sees an energy in Roeder’s students that she attributes to his ability to connect – encouraging students to reach further and hone their art as they prepare for national and international competitions.

“The tuba/euphonium ensemble that he leads is among the most traveled university ensembles in the country,” Jobson said. “I estimate that Dr. Roeder has helped secure close to $50,000 since 2012 to help his students perform at all these events.”

Abel Ocanas, a former student and now assistant band director for Nikki Rowe High School in McAllen, said he was able to travel to a competition in Austria. “By exposing me to so much talent in the United States and Europe, Dr. Roeder changed my life.”

Former students also say their professor was always available, approachable, and remains a source of support as they pursue their careers in music education.

“A great way to mentor is to listen, and get to know your students – get to understand where they’re coming from, what’s going on in their lives – if you can see into their lives, you have a better avenue to help guide them to get to them where they want to go,” Roeder said.
Nominations for the Sustainability Education Award were based on the candidate’s incorporation of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and their contributions to the areas of teaching, research, and service.

Mercado, a National Register of Health Service Psychologist, provides psychological services to children, adolescents and adults, including individual therapy, specialized group therapies, and conducts psychological evaluations.

He has directed his latest research to documenting the effectiveness of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) within the Latino population. DBT is first-line treatment for Borderline Personality Disorder and other complex clinical disorders.

Graduate students in clinical psychology co-facilitate group therapy with Mercado on a weekly basis for 17 weeks at a time.

“You don’t usually get to participate in this environment until you have graduated,” said Yvette Hinojosa, a graduate student in clinical psychology and one of Dr. Mercado’s students. “Being able to learn about this therapy and to co-facilitate a group is an amazing opportunity. You can really see how you can make a difference in people’s lives.”

Mercado is pleased to see his students accepted into master’s and doctoral programs upon graduation. Many students continue to help him in this research and writing, and many have presented at local, state, and national conferences or have published in peer-reviewed psychology journals.

In addition to his professional career, Mercado serves his community in several capacities. He is a trustee for the Texas Psychological Association where he also serves as the Diversity Division chair, is an active member of the American Psychological Association, a board member at the South Texas Psychological Association, and works with two other nonprofit organizations in the Rio Grande Valley.

In the summer of 2017, he and psychiatry residents from the UTRGV School of Medicine provided a culturally adapted DBT treatment program to the Rio Grande State Center Medical Outpatient Clinic in Cameron County.
Through a nationally unique course on environmental and public health concerns that affect the Rio Grande Valley, the South Texas Environmental Education and Research (STEER) Program engages, educates, and empowers current and future health professionals through community-based learning. Since 2004, this program has brought the reality of the region to literally hundreds of students in medical, dental, nursing, health, and public health fields as well as health professionals. These types of transformative learning encounters, including working with residents of colonias, cannot be found in textbooks nor duplicated in traditional classrooms.

Moreover, with its focus on a preventative-based paradigm (as opposed to a treatment-based one), STEER reunites medicine and public health. Its ultimate goal is to foster health professionals to create and sustain healthy and resilient communities through the recognition, reduction and/or elimination of environmental and public health threats. As such, STEER exemplifies this Excellence Award because it generates research that impacts the region, provides experiential learning opportunities for students, and fosters invaluable reciprocal community partnerships.

In light of its impact, it is not surprising that the response and feedback from participants has been overwhelmingly positive. “I think programs like STEER should be a requirement for graduation because without experiencing firsthand the unique aspects of medically underserved communities it is unlikely that we can attract medical professionals that are needed,” one participant noted.

“The issues facing South Texas are in large measure those facing the nation and, more importantly, the planet,” another participant stated. “I wish that all my colleagues, indeed all Americans, could have this kind of experience.”
In her nomination letter, Dr. Karen Lozano, Julia Beecherl Endowed Professor and Director of the Nanotechnology Center, praised the department for being a “shining example in going above and beyond mentoring its junior faculty.” She cites the faculty success stories in research, teaching, and service as proof of the department’s effectiveness.

“The success of the faculty is evident by the numerous awards including national awards received by individual faculty, and worth mentioning are the many University Faculty Excellence Awards in teaching, research, and service as well as nine Regent’s Outstanding Teaching Awards,” Lozano said.

She, along with other faculty who wrote letters of support for the nomination, commended the department for its formal mentoring program for new faculty members. Senior faculty actively work with junior faculty on research proposals and projects. Moreover, senior faculty ensure that their mentees continue to advance in the areas of teaching and service, such as through conducting peer observations of teaching and sharing teaching strategies, as well as involving them in rewarding service activities like the Community Day during the Hispanic Engineering, Science, and Technology (HESTEC) week.

Assistant professor Dr. Thuy Vu expressed appreciation for her colleagues in the department. “It seems as though mentoring and support for junior faculty is simply a natural part of the department,” she wrote in her letter of support. “I immediately felt welcomed, and that feeling has not left…I will always feel a close connection to those who were so helpful to me.”
EXTERNAL AWARDS & HONORS
MOUNIR BEN GHALIA
PROFESSOR
Department of Electrical Engineering
REGENTS’ OUTSTANDING TEACHING AWARD

MATTHEW BENACQUISTA
PROFESSOR
Department of Physics & Astronomy
NSF PROGRAM DIRECTOR FOR ASTRONOMY

GRANT BENHAM
PROFESSOR
Department of Psychological Science
FLORENCE L. DENMARK FACULTY ADVISOR AWARD — PSI CHI INTERNATIONAL HONOR SOCIETY IN PSYCHOLOGY

ART BROWNLOW
PROFESSOR
School of Music
UT SYSTEM ACADEMY OF DISTINGUISHED TEACHERS
ALYSSA CAVAZOS
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
Department of Writing & Language Studies
REGENTS’ OUTSTANDING TEACHING AWARD

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ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
Department of Teaching & Learning
GREATER TEXAS FOUNDATION FELLOWSHIP

MATTHEW CHRISTENSEN
PROFESSOR
Department of Literatures & Cultural Studies
AMERICAN COUNCIL OF LEARNED SOCIETIES FELLOWSHIP

VERONICA ESTRADA
PROFESSOR
Department of Teaching & Learning
MCGRAW HILL DISTINGUISHED SCHOLARS AWARD
ANDREW HOLLINGER
LECTURER II
Department of Writing & Language Studies
REGENTS’ OUTSTANDING TEACHING AWARD

KAREN LOZANO
JULIA BEECHERL ENDOWED PROFESSOR
Department of Mechanical Engineering
INSPIRING LEADERS IN STEM AWARD – INSIGHT INTO DIVERSITY

NELDA MARTINEZ
CLINICAL PROFESSOR
School of Nursing
AMERICAN ACADEMY OF NURSING FELLOWSHIP

MARIE T. MORA
PROFESSOR
Department of Economics & Finance
INSPIRING LEADERS IN STEM AWARD – INSIGHT INTO DIVERSITY
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Department of Chemistry
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Department of Sociology & Anthropology
FULBRIGHT SCHOLAR

ELOISA TAMEZ
PROFESSOR
School of Nursing
LATINO LEGACY AWARD –
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF HISPANIC NURSES

AMY WEIMER
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
Department of Psychological Science
REGENTS’ OUTSTANDING TEACHING AWARD
COMMUNITY HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT WITH SCHOOLS (CHAPS)

DANIEL G. ROBERTS AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY — SOCIETY FOR HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

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(Also co-authored with H. Rodríguez)

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