

# COMMENCEMENT



*School of Medicine*

CLASS OF  
2024

MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN



**Michael B. Hocker, M.D., M.H.S.**  
**Dean**  
UTRGV School of Medicine  
**Senior Vice President**  
UT Health RGV

Class of 2024, congratulations on this momentous accomplishment!

As your dean and on behalf of The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley School of Medicine family, I am proud of the legacy you are building at our School. You are an incredible example of the medical professionals we are training to lead medicine here and worldwide.

As you graduate from our UTRGV School of Medicine, take pride in knowing that you are part of an extensive generation of physicians who, like you, have answered the call to serve others with dedication and compassion. Soon, you, too, will be practicing physicians inspired to make a difference in the communities you serve.

As you join other physicians in medicine, remember you have faced and overcome complex challenges with courage and humility, especially during the pandemic. That is why I am confident that you will conquer any challenges that come your way moving forward and as you establish your career as a physician.

Class of 2024, you bring so much pride to our UTRGV School of Medicine. You are a testament to our promise to train diverse and talented physician-scientists for the benefit of the Rio Grande Valley and beyond.

Each of you represents UTRGV’s commitment to providing high-quality healthcare, life-changing research, and innovative education in the Rio Grande Valley.

Congratulations to you and your friends, family, and all the champions who have helped you in your journey as a medical student.





School of Medicine

Mission

We will transform the health of the Rio Grande Valley and beyond by providing advanced academic medicine through these five pillars:

- Innovative Education
- Life-Changing Research and Discoveries
- High Quality Patient-Centered Care
- Serving our Community
- Sustainability and a Culture of Entrepreneurship

Values

In addition to the UTRGV Values of excellence; shared governance; diversity, access and inclusion; leadership; inquiry, discovery and creativity; health and well-being; and engagement and impact; the School of Medicine’s core values include:

- **Open Communication & Transparency:** Share information openly across all levels (of the school) to engrain a collaborative and trustworthy environment.
- **Community Focus:** Commitment to improving health outcomes and reducing health disparities of at-risk populations through community and population-based interventions.
- **Cultural Awareness:** Integration of knowledge, awareness, and empathy to successfully work with the diverse and unique needs of any community.
- **Empathy & Compassion:** Care for and understand others to provide support and achieve positive outcomes.
- **Good Stewardship:** Selfless service (for the common good) to promote accountability and a culture of responsibility.
- **Innovation & Transformation:** Embrace change and promote creativity to shape the future of academic medicine.
- **Integrity:** Act with honor, honesty, and truthfulness. Know and do the right thing in all undertakings – learning, discovery, patient care, service, and entrepreneurship.
- **Respect, Collegiality & Inclusive Citizenship:** Treat people with respect and kindness to create a community of inclusivity, cooperation, and connectedness.

History of Medical Education in the Valley

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley School of Medicine is the realization of the decades-long effort of community leaders, legislators, and countless supporters to establish a medical school in the Valley to provide health care to a region that historically has been burdened by health disparities.

- In **1997**, the Texas Legislature approved the creation of the Regional Academic Health Center (RAHC) under UT Health San Antonio, formerly UT Health Science Center at San Antonio, with sites in Harlingen and Edinburg.
- In **2002**, the RAHC started training third and fourth year medical students.
- In **2009**, the Texas Legislature approved for The University of Texas System Board of Regents to create a medical school, using the resources from the RAHC, for the Valley in the future.
- Three years later, The UT System Board of Regents approved the creation of a new university and medical school in the Rio Grande Valley, using resources from two universities within the UT System— The University of Texas at Brownsville and The University of Texas- Pan American—and the RAHC.
- In **2013**, the Texas Legislature authorized the formation of The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and its School of Medicine.
- In **2015**, The UTRGV School of Medicine received preliminary accreditation from the LCME, which allowed the school to recruit its first class.

The UTRGV School of Medicine welcomed its charter class of 55 medical students in the summer of 2016, which graduated in 2020.

- **December 2019** - The School of Medicine submitted the briefing book for the limited survey visit to the LCME.
- **February 2020** - Limited survey visit conducted by the LCME at the School of Medicine.
- **March 2021** - School of Medicine submits status report to the LCME.
- **June 2021** - Provisional accreditation granted by the LCME for the School of Medicine.
- **February 2023** - First full LCME accreditation survey visit took place at the School of Medicine.

The UTRGV School of Medicine now has more than **220 medical students** and over **and over 145 medical residents** serving in 8 hospital-based training programs throughout the Valley, with more training programs on the horizon.





KEYNOTE SPEAKER



Amelie G. Ramirez, Dr.P.H., M.P.H.  
Chair and Professor  
Population Health Sciences

Director  
The Institute for Health Promotion  
Research at UT Health San Antonio

Professor  
Epidemiology & Biostatistics

Amelie G. Ramirez, Dr.P.H., M.P.H. is an internationally recognized cancer and chronic disease health disparities researcher at UT Health San Antonio who has uplifted the Latino voice in health care, research, training, and outreach for over three decades.

She serves as chair and professor of population health sciences at UT Health San Antonio, a Hispanic-Serving Institute, where she also is founding director of the Institute for Health Promotion Research and associate director of community outreach and engagement at the Mays Cancer Center at UT Health San Antonio, an NCI-designated Cancer Center.

Dr. Ramirez has directed over 100 research studies and communication programs that have reduced Latino health disparities, increased participation of underrepresented groups in cancer screening and clinical trials, and helped people quit smoking. Dr. Ramirez has led two national research networks, one on Latino cancer (Redes En Acción) and one promoting community change for Latino health equity (Salud America!; @SaludAmerica). Today, Salud America! has a network of 500,000+ community leaders, parents, and healthcare professionals who are fueled with educational content and tools to advocate for equitable changes in policies and systems in Latino communities. Exposure to Salud America! content is correlated with a high degree of personal engagement in advocacy actions and is linked to increases in self-efficacy to advocate for healthy system and policy change, according to survey data.

Dr. Ramirez also has led studies using the latest technologies—mobile phone apps, text messaging programs, and social media innovations, etc.—to improve health behaviors among Latinos, covering smoking cessation to breast cancer treatment adherence. She also leads the Avanzando Caminos study to unpack the Latino cancer survivorship journey, and she founded the Avanzando Equidad de Salud: Latino Cancer Health Equity Research Center at UT Health San Antonio to address social determinants of health in South Texas.

Dr. Ramirez also understands the great need for mentorship programs and representation in the healthcare workforce. She has personally trained and/or mentored over 300 Latino undergraduates, pre- and post-doctoral students, and early-career faculty members, instructing about research design, methods, data analysis, and career development. Many of her trainees have achieved high-profile and broad-reaching independent success. She also directed the Éxito! Latino Cancer Research Leadership Training program to encourage Latino master’s-level professionals to pursue a doctoral degree and cancer research career. Of 175 Éxito! grads since 2011, over 35% have applied to, been accepted in, or completed a doctoral program. Dr. Ramirez also united over 800 Latino cancer disparities researchers to collaborate on Latino cancer at her biennial “Advancing the Science of Cancer in Latinos” conferences in 2018, 2020, 2022, and 2024. Learn about the conference series at [www.LatinoCancer.org](http://www.LatinoCancer.org).

Dr. Ramirez has authored many peer-reviewed articles, is an editorial board member on several prestigious journals, including Health Education Research, and is frequently invited to speak at scientific meetings. She has been recognized for her work to improve Latino health and advance Latinos in medicine, public health, and behavioral sciences across the U.S., including: 2023 selection for the San Antonio Women’s Hall of Fame; 2022 selection by Oprah Winfrey as a “Cycle Breaker” for health equity; 2019 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Society of Behavioral Medicine; 2014 Everett M. Rogers Public Health Communication Award from APHA; 2014 Making a Difference Award from Latinas Contra Cancer; 2011 White House “Champion of Change” from the Obama Administration; 2009 Health Care Hero from the San Antonio Business Journal; 2007 election to the National Academy of Medicine (formerly the Institute of Medicine); and 2007 Professor of Survivorship from Susan G. Komen For the Cure.

She also is a 2018 Susan G. Komen Scholar and a member of the National Advisory Council on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NACMHD) of the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD). In Texas, Dr. Ramirez is on the San Antonio Mayor’s Fitness Council and is Past Board President of The Academy of Medicine, Engineering and Science of Texas. Dr. Ramirez is a native of Laredo, Texas. She received a B.S. from The University of Houston and M.P.H. and Dr.P.H. degrees from The University of Texas Health Science Center.





ORDER OF EXERCISES

Introduction to Ceremony ..... Leonel Vela, M.D., M.P.H., Senior Associate Dean for Educational Resources; Division Chief, Population Health; Chief Physician, Community Health Partnerships & Outreach; and Professor, Family and Preventative Medicine

National Anthem ..... Bethany Woolman, Class of 2027, School of Medicine

COMMENCEMENT EXERCISE

Presiding ..... Michael B. Hocker, M.D., M.H.S., Dean, School of Medicine and Senior Vice President, UT Health Rio Grande Valley

Dean’s Greeting and Address ..... Michael B. Hocker, M.D., M.H.S., Dean, School of Medicine and Senior Vice President, UT Health Rio Grande Valley

Presidential Remarks ..... Guy Bailey, Ph.D., President

Keynote Speaker ..... Amelie G. Ramirez, Dr.PH., M.P.H., Chair and Professor, Population Health Sciences; Director, Institute for Health Promotion Research at UT Health San Antonio; and Professor of Epidemiology & Biostatistics

Presentation of Candidates for Doctor of Medicine Degree ..... Jeremy Gibson, M.D., Vice Dean, Educational Affairs

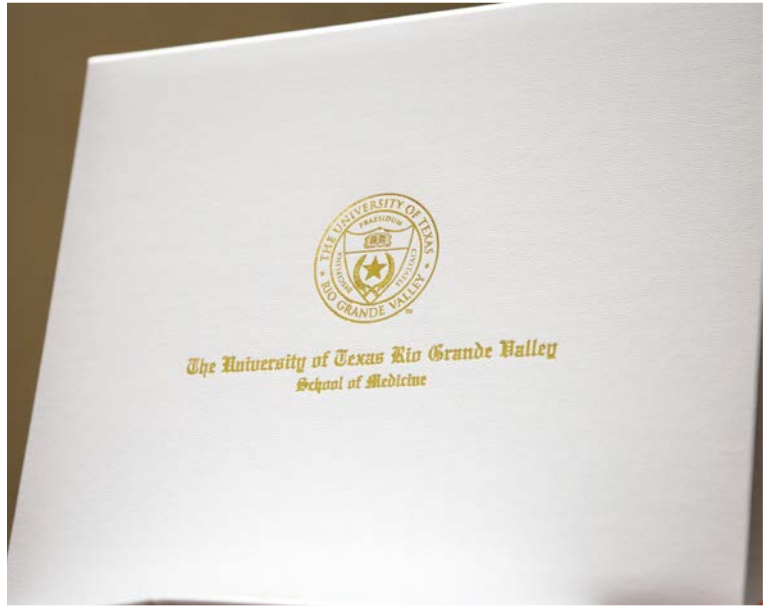
Conferring of Degrees ..... Michael B. Hocker, M.D., M.H.S., Dean, School of Medicine and Senior Vice President, UT Health Rio Grande Valley

Hooding of Candidates and Presentation of Diploma

Recitation of Physician’s Oath ..... Breanna Janell Jones, Class of 2024, School of Medicine

Ringling of the Bell ..... Ramiro Oquita Saenz, Class of 2024, School of Medicine

Closing Remarks ..... Michael B. Hocker, M.D., M.H.S., Dean, School of Medicine and Senior Vice President, UT Health Rio Grande Valley







DOCTOR OF MEDICINE

Kevin Mark Abraham <i>Mission, TX</i>	Miguel Angel Garza <i>McAllen, TX</i>	Ramiro Oquita Saenz <i>Brownsville, TX</i>
Faiza Ahmad <i>Richardson, TX</i>	Aishwarya Gatiganti <i>Houston, TX</i>	Kevin Jossue Orellana <i>Pflugerville, TX</i>
Elizabeth E. Akpan-Smart <i>Richmond, TX</i>	Alexandria Nicole Gonzalez <i>Mission, TX</i>	Kanisha Patel <i>Richmond, TX</i>
Valentine Sampson Alia <i>Harlingen, TX</i>	Shiv Yogesh Govindji <i>Frisco, TX</i>	Alberto Peña Jr. <i>Pharr, TX</i>
Ed Wong Alvarado <i>McAllen, TX</i>	Huzeifa M. Gulamhusein <i>Houston, TX</i>	Allison Nicole Podsednik Gardner <i>Houston, TX</i>
Samuel Alvarez Jr. <i>Dallas, TX</i>	Carra Grace Honderich <i>Magnolia, TX</i>	Bill Douglas Pope III <i>McAllen, TX</i>
Nazaneen Amjadi <i>Harlingen, TX</i>	Jennifer Omone Inofomoh <i>Grand Prairie, TX</i>	Christopher G. Reid-Gordon <i>Houston, TX</i>
Roger Banda Jr. <i>McAllen, TX</i>	Prakhar Jain <i>McAllen, TX</i>	Sidney Charm De Guzman Reyes <i>Edinburg, TX</i>
Rodney Kipruto Boit <i>Amarillo, TX</i>	Shuchita V. Jhaveri <i>Harlingen, TX</i>	Hector Sebastian Rivera-Marrero <i>Brownsville, TX</i>
Ruayda Bouls <i>Harlingen, TX</i>	Breanna Janell Jones <i>Murphy, TX</i>	Cecilia Salinas Domene <i>Brownsville, TX</i>
Andrés Mauricio Burbano <i>Downers Grove, IL</i>	Zooha Khan <i>Mission, TX</i>	César Augusto Sevilla Jr. <i>McAllen, TX</i>
Molly R. Chapman <i>Boerne, TX</i>	Mark Daniel Lavering <i>Edinburg, TX</i>	Aarón Silva <i>Mission, TX</i>
Victoria Cuello <i>Harlingen, TX</i>	Vanessa Elena Lopez <i>Edinburg, TX</i>	Andrea Soto Abarca <i>Cypress, TX</i>
Aaron Daniel De La Cruz <i>Edinburg, TX</i>	Alberto de Jesús López Juárez <i>Mission, TX</i>	Safiya Syed <i>Austin, TX</i>
Jordan Duran <i>Deer Park, TX</i>	Joshua Ishmael Membreno <i>Mesquite, TX</i>	Alyssa Judith Villanueva <i>Pharr, TX</i>
Jessy Feng <i>Harlingen, TX</i>	Michael Francis Meriano <i>Houston, TX</i>	Xoraida Yvette Zuñiga <i>San Juan, TX</i>
Simita Gaglani <i>Austin, TX</i>	Kohlson Taylor Moore <i>Edinburg, TX</i>	
Aryana Garza <i>Brownsville, TX</i>	Johnny Quoc Nguyen <i>Houston, TX</i>	

Future Leaders in Medicine,  
Research, and Patient Care





# Hippocratic Oath

I do solemnly swear, by whatever I hold most sacred: That I will be loyal to the profession of medicine and just and generous to its members. That I will lead my life and practice my profession in uprightness and honor.

That into whatsoever house I shall enter, it shall be for the good of the sick to the utmost of my power, holding myself far aloof from wrong, from corruption, from the tempting of others to vice. That I will exercise my profession solely for the cure of my patients, and will give no drug, perform no operation for a criminal purpose, even if solicited; far less suggest it. That whatsoever I shall see or hear of the lives of all persons which is not fitting to be spoken, I will keep inviolably secret.

These things do I swear. While I continue to keep this Oath unviolated, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and the practice of the art, respected by all, in all times. But should I trespass and violate this Oath, may the reverse be my lot!

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Leonel Vela, M.D., M.P.H. ....	Senior Associate Dean for Educational Resources; Division Chief, Population Health; Chief Physician for Community Health Partnerships & Outreach; and Professor, Family and Preventative Medicine
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Jeremy Gibson, M.D. ....	Chair, Department of Primary and Community Care
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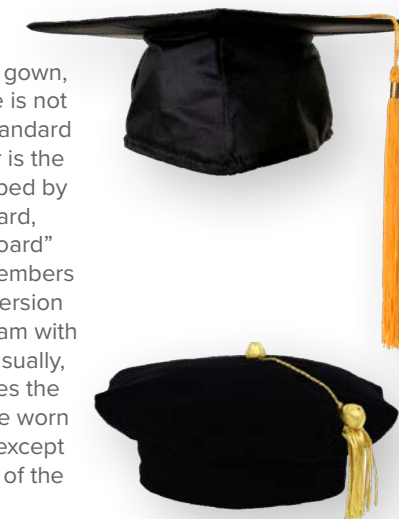


## COSTUMES AND CUSTOMS OF COMMENCEMENT

The colorful costumes and traditional customs of college commencements trace their beginnings back to the origins of the modern university in medieval Europe. Modern American colleges and universities carry on many traditions that began at Oxford and Cambridge to demonstrate the continuity of learning over the centuries and to emphasize the importance attached to commencement exercises. Academic regalia refer to the distinctive attire worn by students, faculty and other university officials at commencement. The origins of academic dress date back to the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, when universities were taking form. The ordinary dress of the scholar, whether student or teacher, was the dress of a cleric. Though the custom of wearing academic dress was brought to America in colonial times, it was not until 1895 that a standardized code of academic dress was established and followed by most colleges and universities. The gown, hood, cap and additional ornaments are the main categories of academic regalia and are distinctive for each degree.

### CAPS

Headwear is an important component of the cap and gown, and the academic costume is not complete without it. The standard commencement headwear is the Oxford cap, a skullcap topped by a square cloth-covered board, the reason for its “mortarboard” nickname. Some faculty members wear a softer Cambridge version of the cap that is a velvet tam with four, six or eight corners. Usually, the color of the cap matches the color of the gown. Caps are worn throughout the ceremony except for men during the singing of the national anthem.



### HOODS

The hood is derived from the cowls worn by clerics in the Middle Ages for warmth. Today they are worn symbolically, hanging down the back. Master's hoods are 3 1/2 feet in length and have a velvet trim along the edge. Doctoral hoods are 4 feet in length and have a wider velvet trim. The satin lining of the hood, worn so that it can be seen, reflects the colors of the degree-granting institution.



### TASSEL

The tassel is attached to a button on the top of the cap and hangs down to the right for bachelor's candidates until their degree is conferred. Many universities ceremoniously have graduates move their tassel from the right to the left. Both master's and doctoral candidates tassels often begin and remain on the left.

### GOWNS

The doctoral degree gown is the most elaborate of academic regalia. The doctoral degree gown is faced down the front and usually black. Three bars of velveteen are used across the sleeves. These facings and crossbars may be of the color distinctive for the degree, or the institution's colors. The color associated with the medical discipline is green. In addition, the hood worn for the doctoral degree should only have panels at the sides.



### ADDITIONAL ORNAMENTS

Some participants in the commencement ceremony will wear additional ornaments such as colored cords, medallions, stoles, or sashes. These ornaments signify the wearer's membership in an honor society or special group.



CHAIN OF OFFICE AND  
PRESIDENTIAL MEDALLION

The presidential medallion is the official insignia of the university president and is worn at commencement and other ceremonial occasions. Like many academic traditions, the display of a heavy “chain of office” comes from medieval regalia and represents the weight of responsibility for the wearer.

The UTRGV medallion and chain was designed in 2015 and executed by the jewelry students, jewelry faculty, and craftsman Lino Guiza in the UTRGV School of Art. The medallion is made up of two parts – the seal of The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley surrounded by an abstract sunburst created with a brick and mortar design. The cactus flowers on the outer edges of the seal are placed at the four cardinal points with the largest flower pointing south. The counter weight to the medallion is a representation of the native sabal palm. The Chain of Office is a circlet of art deco-inspired links representing the past, while revealing an infrastructure of bridges, aqueducts and gears that speak to the importance of our solid foundation, water, and movement into the future. The chain features many aspects of the Rio Grande Valley that aid our growth and commitment to higher education:

- Arches  
Water  
Turbine  
Neuron Tree  
Circuit Board
- Abacus  
Bone  
Binary Code  
Leaves/Quills  
Butterfly
- Tortoise  
Finger Print  
Road Junction  
Satellite



BELL

Our stately bronze bell, circa 1850, lives on the Brownsville campus. It is rung during commencement to symbolize a rite of passage and proclaims that a worthy and well-qualified individual has passed from one station in their life to a loftier one. Our bell is also the icon for the Bell Scholarship Endowment. One outstanding student is selected to ring the bell at commencement.



MEMORY STOLE

When students graduate from UTRGV they know they did not make the journey alone. The Memory Stole, a symbol of appreciation, is worn by graduates during the commencement ceremony. Following the ceremony they are encouraged to present the stole to a special family member, professor, or friend as a symbol of gratitude and appreciation for their support, inspiration or mentorship.

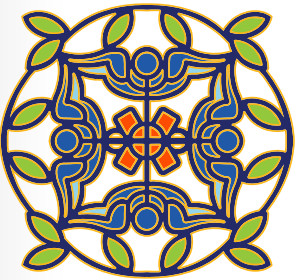
UTRGV SCHOOL OF MEDICINE’S GONFALON

The college gonfalon—or banner—with roots in the Middle Ages, was a symbol of units or family groups. Today, gonfalons are used at official university ceremonies as heraldic devices and are frequently carried during processionals at commencement. At UTRGV, each college has a custom-designed banner signifying its academic unit. Each flag is rich in unique symbolism while also showing unity through size, shape, and color. The swoop at the bottom of each gonfalon represents the border of Texas, and the field of blue with gold stars of Texas represents the distributed nature of UTRGV—from Rio Grande City to South Padre Island.



SYMBOLS

The central pattern intertwines the caduceus — a symbol for medical practice — with the tree of life.



This pattern is surrounded by a DNA helix — the foundation for all living beings — and roots, which connect the human condition with all forms of creation.

COLORS

Blue for healing, green for earth, and white for air.

CEREMONIAL MACE

In Medieval Times, the mace was a symbol of authority and carried before or set near a high official when ceremonies or sessions were being conducted. Today, the mace symbolizes the university’s governing authority and signifies the proceedings are officially sanctioned. Traditionally, the chair of the Faculty Senate acting as the Grand Marshal carries the mace to lead the academic procession at commencement and other special ceremonies.

The UTRGV 47” ceremonial mace was designed in 2016 by students in the School of Art and a committee of faculty from anthropology, archeology, geology, history, communication and art. The head and seals of the mace were 3D printed and cast at the UTRGV School of Art. The mace is intricately imbued with historical, cultural and architectural meaning.

The handles of the mace are made of mesquite wood locally sourced in the Rio Grande Valley and engraved with a decorative pattern of the state’s official turtle, the Ridley, and wind turbines.

The helix, between the handles, represents the coming together of the legacy institutions. The helix is made of petrified palm, the official stone of Texas.

The base is crafted from mesquite and inlaid with blue selenite, thought to be associated with mental clarity, truth and honesty, and to represent the Rio Grande River.

The tip of the mace is made of El Sauz Chert excavated and donated by Dr. Juan L. Gonzalez.







*School of Medicine*