



SKYLINE

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Skyline

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Cover photo: Shvangi Pathak at UHD's Law Summit Photo: Nicki Evans

Inside front cover photo: Nicki Evans Right photo: Luz Castilla Hincapie



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s the University of Houston-Downtown continues in its efforts to address local needs and workforce demands, we are reminded of the importance of our people. UHD matters because people matter. In this issue of Skyline, we share snapshots and profiles of a cross section of our UHD community—current students tapping into their fullest potential; new graduates entering the workforce; alumni leaving their mark on our city; and faculty investing in the confidence, skills, and research experiences of the next generation of leaders. Within these pages, you will find a few of the hundreds, if not thousands, of

stories representative of our beloved

university and characteristic of its academic excellence.

Beyond this issue of Skyline, the UHD community is actively celebrating the outcome of a strong legislative agenda.

The University's exceptional item request has

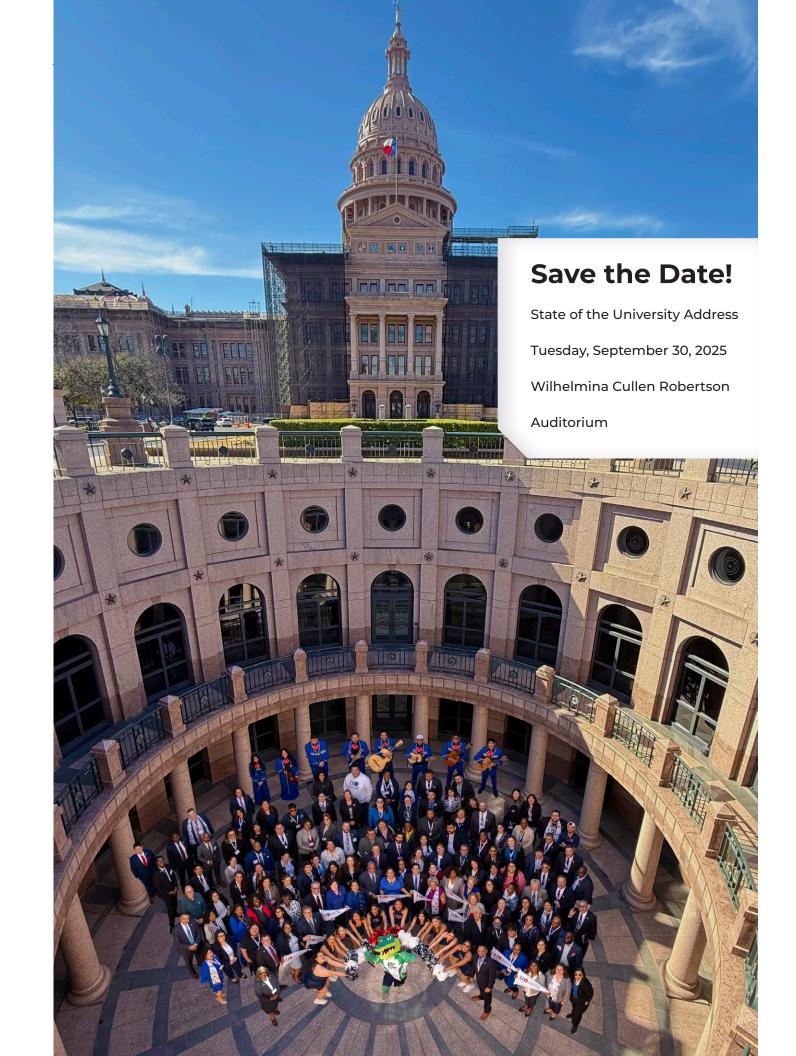
been funded. UHD will receive \$2.6M to establish the Center for Crime, Urban Research and Education (C-CURE), which will be the first center in the greater Houston area to aggregate data across multiple law enforcement and criminal justice agencies. Plans for C-CURE have involved numerous stakeholders, including UHD alumni serving as leaders in law enforcement, criminal justice, and social services, laying the groundwork for an integrative, interdisciplinary approach that will not only advance research in urban crime, victimization, and prevention but will also engage students through internships and field experiences, bridging the gap between experiential learning and practical solutions across multiple fields.

Mark your calendar now to join us for the 2025 State of the University address, at which we will celebrate the accomplishments noted here and more. As we remain laserfocused on engaging in work that benefits our city, state, and region, the impact of UHD is growing. Thank you for taking this journey of growth with us.

Loren J. Blanchard, Ph.D.

President, University of Houston-Downtown

Photo: Colt Melrose Photography Facing page photo: Craig Loper, Mitchell Loper



THE VERDICT IS IN:

UHD LAW SUMMIT

INFORMS, EMPOWERS

FUTURE ATTORNEY

Shvangi Pathak

he nature of the law, in its purest form, is to seek justice. To ascertain what is right or wrong in a given situation and administer a judgment that ensures, as much as possible, that balance is restored. It is a noble field, despite the many cultural commonplaces that depict lawyers as greedy or deceptive, or both.

Earlier this year, the Office of the Provost hosted its inaugural UHD Law Summit at UHD@1801 Main, a landmark event designed to empower those noble Gator students who wish to enter the legal field. It also served as a vital meeting place for alumni, local law schools, and law firms seeking fresh talent across various legal sectors.

The summit proved to be pivotal for one such student, aspiring attorney Shvangi Pathak, a junior and native Houstonian who transferred from Lone Star College with a 3.89 GPA in Criminal Justice and now proudly boasts a perfect 4.0 at UHD while also serving as a member of the Pre-Law Association.

The event was instrumental, Pathak said, in helping her network with other Gator students and introducing them to the benefits of the prelaw association. Crucially, the summit provided her with "valuable insights into her future professional life," and clarified the intricacies of the law school exam and application processes.

Specifically, Pathak highlighted the direct

interaction with admissions officers from institutions like South Texas College of Law Houston. The summit also connected her with practicing attorneys and members of the Houston Bar Association. As much as anything though, the summit helped Pathak further explore her deepest intellectual curiosities: the legal system, its

machinations, and how those can be changed, navigated, or leveraged to help not just her community, but the one we all share.

BY HAYDEN BERGMAN







Grand beyond

While the four spring 2025 graduates profiled here pursued different careers—ranging from accountant to artist, criminal justice educator to business manager—they all share something in common: an overarching desire to help others. Their degrees from UHD are the foundation upon which they've already built a legacy of service and upon which they'll continue to build into the future. Let's hear from these outstanding alumni in their own words.

BY SANDRA BRETTING



Graduate Defies Odds To Excel

When UHD selected **Antoinette Mosley** (BBA, Accounting) to speak at the May 2025 commencement ceremonies, the offer caught her off guard. The school's logic was simple, though: Mosley participated in eight student-led organizations and completed three internships, in addition to parenting a young daughter.

The daughter of Bahamian parents, Mosley grew up in Houston and knew she wanted to stay in town for college. What she didn't count on was the level of attention she'd receive when she chose UHD.

"One of the best things about UHD is its smaller size compared to some other schools," Mosley said. "I was able to get into student organizations, find out about scholarships, and I got to know the faculty. If I went to a bigger school, I would've been just another number."

One of those internships turned into a fulltime position, and Mosley will join the Houston accounting firm of Grant Thornton this fall. She's also studying for the CPA exam.

"I knew nothing about accounting until I went to a UHD career fair," Mosley said. "I knew I wanted to work in a team and be in a professional setting. I didn't realize external auditors consistently work in a group, which was right up my alley."

During college, some people tried to dissuade her because of her family situation and age.

"They said it would be too hard because I'm a single parent and an older student," said Mosley, who was 25 at the time. "It was disheartening, but I'm a stubborn person."

Mosley is particularly proud of serving as Vice President and President of the National Association of Black Accountants at UHD. She also served as Treasurer for the Professional Accountants Society.

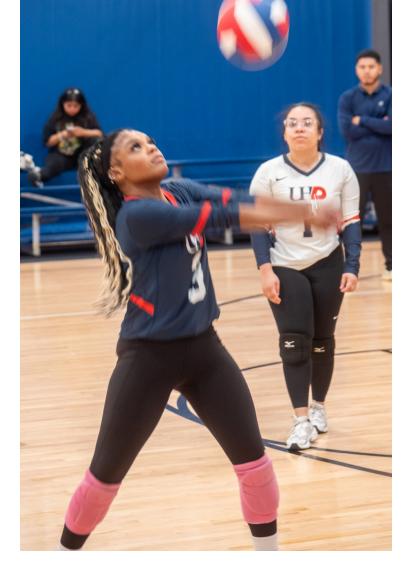
Given her many activities, Mosley shouldn't have been surprised when UHD asked her to speak at this year's commencement ceremony. More than two dozen of Mosley's relatives flew in from the Bahamas and all over the U.S. for the event.

"I was shocked," she said. "I didn't think people were noticing how much I was doing, but I guess I was wrong."

Photos: Gabriela Perez

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An Artist Redraws Her Future

Sometimes inspiration strikes in unexpected ways. For artist **Aaliyah Norfleet** (BA, Fine Arts), an unplanned detour during her sophomore year at UHD set her on a path no one—least of all, her—expected.

Norfleet began college as a marketing major in the fall of 2020, smack dab in the middle of a pandemic. She longed to take an in-person course and found one in the subject of art history. That class led to meeting the man who ended up changing her goals for college and life.

"I learned about a professor named Floyd Newsum, and I decided on a whim to take a basic painting class from him the following year," Norfleet said. "That class was life-changing. Professor Newsum was so passionate about art and how it impacts people on a global scale."

Professor Newsum co-founded Project Row Houses, a program that transformed five blocks in Houston's historic Third Ward into a place where artists, local residents, and others come together for the common good. Norfleet applied for a residency with the program in the spring of 2022 and was accepted.

Over the next six weeks, she lived and worked in an empty row house with four white walls and no restrictions. She turned that blank canvas into an art installation titled "Black Femininity Through the Seasons."

"I painted the entire house with a brush that was literally four-inches wide," Norfleet said.

In addition to her success in art, Norfleet was named UHD's Student Athlete of the Year for her role on the women's volleyball team. Like most things in her life, Norfleet dove headfirst into collegiate volleyball having never played at the high school or college level.

"If you can't tell, I'm an all-or-nothing kind of girl," Norfleet said with a smile.

Looking forward, Norfleet will enter UHD's master's program in Nonprofit Management this fall. In addition to becoming a professional artist, Norfleet plans to work in the nonprofit arena teaching art to middle- and high-school students.

"Someday, I'll start a nonprofit that works with students because I know how much of an impact art can have on a person's life."





THEY REALLY INSTILLED
IN ME A LOVE FOR A
CRIMINAL JUSTICE CAREER.

Pursuing A Passion for Justice

For **Emily Martinez** (BS, Criminal Justice), participating in public roles while a student at UHD mirrored the way she spent her personal time

A longtime community volunteer, Martinez also served in UHD's student government and completed internships with the Harris County Sheriff's Department and the Houston Police Department.

One of her most meaningful experiences at UHD involved working with UHD's Career Center for three years, initially as a student assistant and later promoted to career peer advisor.

"One of the things I thought about when applying to UHD's Criminal Justice program was how much of an advantage the school has because of its downtown location," Martinez says. "I knew I'd need the courts, jails, police—everything, really—to be nearby if I hoped to get internships or a position later."

Martinez's choice of UHD paid off. She secured a position with Crime Stoppers as an education specialist almost immediately after graduation.

"I was at commencement and subtly checking my phone for word on whether or not I'd gotten the job," Martinez says. "The next day, they offered me the position of education specialist."

In addition to the school's downtown location, Martinez credits her professors for giving her a leg up when it came to landing a job in her field.

"They really instilled in me a love for a criminal justice career," Martinez says. "And the professors are very dedicated to giving students an overall picture of what the criminal justice system looks like. It's not perfect, but our criminal justice system determines how society as a whole works."

In her new role, Martinez will educate community members on how to prevent becoming a victim of crime, as she also brings awareness to the issues that affect communities.

"I'll be able to apply what I learned during my time at UHD in my new role," Martinez says. "All my internships, my degree, my leadership roles it all works together so I can contribute to my community and make a difference."





A Soldier's Story

Whether serving as a sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps, mentoring employees in the private sector, or earning an MBA in Finance at UHD, **Ever Alvarado** cites leadership as the common denominator.

"What the world needs right now isn't more government or more money—it's more pure leadership," Alvarado said. "I pursued my MBA to inspire, lead by example, and help others develop and elevate their goals."

The child of Hispanic immigrants, Alvarado credits his parents for instilling in him a strong work ethic. Starting at the age of 13, he worked for an uncle in the construction business. That work ethic paid off when Alvarado enlisted in the Marines and rose to the rank of sergeant in only two-and-a-half years.

"I served two tours of duty in Iraq and Kuwait," Alvarado said. "It was difficult, but I did the best I could every day."

When he returned stateside, Alvarado went back to college and earned an undergraduate degree in Accounting from UHD after spending countless hours with tutors to catch up on his studies.

"I had to get back to basics and relearn how to study, read, and take notes," Alvarado said. "I was working full time while supporting a family, but I was determined to succeed and become a role model for my kids. I also knew that advancing in my career would give me a greater voice and impact on the lives of others."

Today, Alvarado is the Senior Operations and Finance Manager for a Houston distribution and trading company in the plastics industry, where his leadership principles and practices have helped the company increase sales and revenue by 40% over the previous year. In addition to mentoring his direct reports, customers often ask him for leadership advice or to provide training to their employees.

"In my life, I've watched people with so much potential waste it," Alvarado said. "They were misled, misguided, or too scared to try. That's why I care so deeply about leadership: I want to help others find their potential, believe in it, and achieve things they never thought possible."

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IN YOUR FUTURE?

BY DEBRA MCGAUGHEY

ou've mulled the idea of going to graduate school for a while, but vou're not sure the time is right. Creeping into your thoughts are all the work,

family, and financial obligations you have. Then come more-fundamental questions: Can I do graduate-level work? Is graduate school even worth it?

Neil Orts has heard all these concerns and questions and understands.

As UHD's Graduate Admissions Coordinator, he calmly cuts to the chase with anyone wondering if getting an advanced degree should be their next move. His answer: A resounding "yes."

"Graduate school is not like getting your bachelor's degree. You actually get to focus on the thing you went to school for," Orts said. "That's the beauty of it. You really don't have to worry about core classes. Graduate degrees are designed give you real-world environments and opportunities."

UHD offers 12 graduate-level degree programs, which are delivered through flexible evening and weekend classes for working students. UHD's most popular and largest graduate degree its MBA program—has a long tradition of success, with concentrations in such areas as accounting, international business, and leadership. The biggest question MBA prospects ask? Which concentration to pursue, said Orts.

UHD's two STEM-related graduate degrees—the Master of Science in Data Analytics and the Master of Science in Artificial Intelligence—also are garnering high interest, Orts said. "We get a lot of inquiries from international students for these."

Yet what makes all of UHD's graduate programs especially desirable is UHD's faculty. They are determined, Orts and recent graduates believe, to see students succeed.

"My professor was very involved,

and I got real-time feedback. That was very important to me," said Michelle Duvall, who earned her M.A. degree in Strategic Communications last May and works as the social media manager for Harris County Commissioner Lesley Briones. "I was able to apply the skills I learned through UHD's graduate program to my job with the City of Houston."

Duvall was one of two students who last year received her college's Community Engagement and Leadership Award, which celebrated her work with the city and as a peer mentor. "It's really important to help fellow students because UHD helped me," said Duvall. "If I can give back to UHD at any point in time that's the first thing I will do."

Felicity Tutu, 27, who also earned a master's degree in Strategic Communications last May and a Community Engagement and Leadership Award, said her graduate school professors made all the difference. "They taught us to think in practical ways instead of just conceptual ways. They were very supportive and kept checking on our progress."

Graduate school is not for everyone, Orts said, but many people reach a point in their lives when they question the value of their current career path. Going to graduate school, he suggests, can help improve it.

"Ever since COVID, a lot of people are thinking about what they're doing with their lives and asking if they're where they want to be," said Orts. "I believe in following your bliss; not following the money. Graduate school helps you follow your bliss." \ \frac{1}{2}

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

College of Sciences and Technology

of Business

Opposite page, left to right: Felicity Tutu and Michelle Duvall

Photo: Luz Castilla Hincapie

Beyond the Classroom

WHERE MENTORSHIPS, INTERNSHIPS AND UNDERGRAD RESEARCH CREATE LEADERS

BY MARIE JACINTO

or students who want to get the most out of their undergraduate experience, scores of UHD faculty and staff work tirelessly to provide research and internship opportunities. Timothy Redl, Ph.D., Professor of Mathematics and Chair of the Department of Mathematics and Statistics, is one of them. During his two decades at UHD, he has served as a faculty research advisor for senior projects for 37 students.

UHD is unique among teaching universities in its emphasis on undergraduate research. That's because as a teaching institution, UHD sees the importance of learning through research. "As faculty, it's made clear to us that teaching is our main goal," said Redl. "The senior projects we advise are counted as teaching in our evaluations and annual reports."

The opportunity for undergrads to do meaningful research is just one of the many offerings across the UHD campus designed to empower academically exceptional students. Read on for just four of the many programs helping Gators become leaders and excel in their careers.

SCHOLARS ACADEMY

"As we grow 'belongingness' among our students, we increase retention rates," said Mary Jo Parker, Ed.D., Executive Director of UHD's Scholars Academy.

Creating a culture imbued with belongingness is one of the many goals of the Scholars Academy (SA), an academically competitive program for undergrads in the College of Sciences and Technology.

Parker and her colleagues take a tiered-approach in mentoring undergraduates, including peer-to-peer mentorships, in which SA members mentor other SA members; peer-mentor trainers, who help prepare the peer mentors; expert-to-peer, which is faculty mentorship through small, discipline-based learning communities; and faculty research mentoring.

"Professor Mitsue Nakamura and I also act as mentors to the entire Scholars Academy. For example, we take the peer mentors on a wilderness adventure retreat with individual and team-building challenges," said Parker. "Our students grow in self-acknowledgement through peer-leadership training. They are able to say to themselves, 'I have the capacity to be a leader.' Leadership and mentorship go hand in hand," said Parker.





Top, Jessica Gonzalez and Dr. Mary Jo Parker Bottom, Brett Hobby and Valerie Parada

Photos: Craig Loper

Computer Science major Jessica Gonzalez shines as a Scholar Academy success story although she admits that as a freshman, she was completely unaware of what UHD had to offer. During her sophomore year, she came across the Scholars Academy. "I thought, oh, I'll just apply and see if I can get in. And I got in," said Gonzalez. "I told my peer mentor from the beginning that I wanted to be more involved." He nominated her to be a peer mentor; she mentored 11 students ranging from freshmen to seniors, ultimately becoming a senior peer mentor and overseeing all the peer mentors.

Her first SA seminar on writing an abstract led to doing research with Ling Xu, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Computer Science and Engineering Technology, and going to the Great Minds in STEM Conference in Pasadena, California. It was an eye-opening experience. "I was prepared for the research poster presentation but unprepared for everything else, like the career fair." By her third national conference, she and her research partner received third place for their faster verification of higher-dimensional algebraic structures research.

If you think Gonzalez sounds like someone who isn't afraid to be challenged, you are right. This past summer, she lived on her own in Warner Robins, Georgia, for a prestigious internship with Northrop Grumman, a pioneer in U.S. defense technologies.

"I thought, oh, I'll just apply and see if I can get in.
And I got in. – JESSICA GONZALEZ

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

A native of Vietnam, Thomas Duong attended Houston Community College before transferring to UHD in 2023 and joining the Scholars Academy. A lot of hard work and one important research project later, Duong graduated from UHD in May and is pursuing a Master in Statistics degree at Rice University.

After having taught Duong and serving as his Scholar Academy mentor, Dr. Timothy Redl knew of Duong's interests in statistics and education. When Duong approached Redl last fall to be his senior project advisor, "I thought about Thomas' interests," said Redl. "I knew that UHD did not accept AP statistics for credit, and the university was thinking of revising some of its AP policies. So, I suggested to Thomas, 'Why don't you look at this exam and get some data on it?" A research project was born: AP Statistics Analysis for College Admission.

"I talked with UHD Admissions and reached out to the Texas Education Agency," said Duong, whose research also included area school districts, state, and U.S. data. He looked at the exam's content, how many students pass it each year, and what AP credits local universities and community colleges accepted.

With data on his side, Duong recommended that UHD accept AP statistics with a score of three or higher on the exam. Enrollment Management accepted his recommendation beginning this fall.

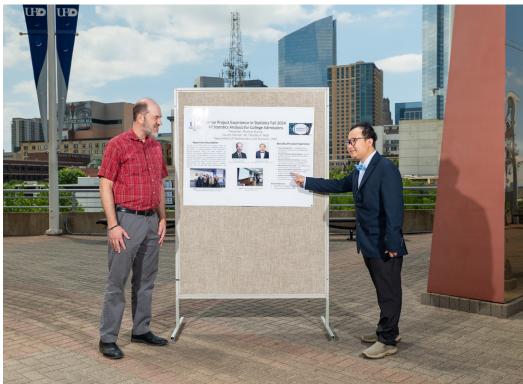
The real icing on the cake: Duong's paper was accepted for publication in the Princeton Journal of Interdisciplinary Research with the two as coauthors.

HONORS PROGRAM

During his first semester, Finance major and May 2025 graduate Iker Pelcastre felt like he was getting lost in the shuffle. "You may meet people in your intro classes, but as you progress into higher-level classes, you don't see them again because they are in different majors than yours," said Pelcastre.

That all changed when Pelcastre joined the Honors Program that spring, thanks to Catherine Howard, Ph.D., Interim Honors Program Director and Senior Lecturer of English. "She helped guide me and gave me the opportunity to join 'Honors.' In the Honors Program, you get to see the same





Top: Dr. Dean Kostantaras and Iker Pelcastre Photo: Craig Loper

Bottom: Dr. Timothy Redl and Thomas Duong Photo: Luz Castilla Hincapie

"I always say our job is to create opportunities for our students to be great. — DEAN KOSTANTARAS

people throughout your four years and that fosters close friendships." Pelcastre also enjoyed the required volunteerism, including mentoring students and being a team leader.

He served on the search committee for the new Honors Program Director, Dean Kostantaras, Ph.D., Associate Professor of History, who started in the position during the summer of 2024 and already has big plans for the program, including increasing its size and visibility.

"The Honors Program is for students who are seeking to get the most out of their undergraduate education," said Kostantaras. "It really offers special opportunities and encouragement for students in every discipline to cultivate their skills and interests."

Kostantaras has his eye on elevating student research within the Honors Program by providing opportunities for more interaction with UHD's exceptional faculty coupled with presenting research at conferences. "An Honors Program benefits from being very outward looking and developing connections with other institutions," adds Kostantaras, "including opportunities for our students to work with their peers in other parts of the country and the world."

He is particularly excited about the connection made with the University Honors Program of Tilburg University in the Netherlands as well as plans for a study away opportunity in Spain with an internship option.

"I always say our job is to create opportunities for our students to be great," said Kostantaras. "That means providing them with lots of new and novel ways to grow as scholars, innovators, and community leaders. It is truly the most rewarding part of my job."

THE PROGRESSIVE LEADER PROGRAM

As former Director of the Marilyn Davies College of Business (MDCOB) Career Center, Brett

Hobby was always on the lookout for internship and career opportunities for undergrad and graduate students alike. The key to his success was strong, strategic partnerships, so he welcomed the suggestion of MDCOB partner Ivette Mayo, Founder & CEO of Power on Heels Fund, Inc., to help facilitate a new program at the college: the Progressive Leader Program (PLP).

A seven-month program, PLP unfolds in three phases: professional leadership development, training through one-on-one mentoring, and internships. This three-stage approach allows students to identify and master different competencies before moving into the mentoring phase.

The participants are required to attend classes during the professional leadership development phase. "Ivette gave us such a great foundation," said Bauer Scholar and PLP participant Valerie Parada, a senior Finance major, "helping us gain confidence because she knew we had leadership skills within us. I found I have a natural instinct to lead, and I learned to embrace it." Topics ranged from how to interact with colleagues to public speaking skills. "Each class was something different. We would have homework to bring to the next class, and then we would speak on it," said Parada.

During this time, Parada was interviewing for internships, and she found that PLP had prepared her to interview better. She landed an internship with Metrix Vibration, followed by a paid summer internship with Memorial Hermann Health System.

For the second phase of the program, Mayo worked with United Airlines and Hobby secured several UHD alumni from different industries as mentors. "We find that mentors provide our students with someone to turn to. It can be a safe space to share goals and dreams," said Hobby. "But at the same time, a mentor provides guidance. Especially for our students who are first generation and whose family may question why they are going to school instead of working."

Now Hobby has stepped into the role of Executive Director of the new Center for Career and Professional Development, bringing his penchant for strategic partnerships and the possibilities they create to the entire university.

BY MARIE JACINTO

Ithough Kevin Barksdale, Ph.D., passed away a little more than three years ago, he is fondly remembered by the faculty, staff, and hundreds of graduates of the Marilyn Davies College of Business for his passion for the MBA program and his tireless efforts on behalf of its students. UHD's recent addition of a completely online MBA, making the master's program even more accessible for working professionals, is further evidence of his lasting legacy.

"Kevin Barksdale led the way in creating opportunity for MBA students," said MDCOB Dean Jonathan Davis. "He made compassionate, careful admissions decisions that prioritized looking at the whole student, their life circumstances, their growth, and, most importantly, their potential. He could have made his work easier by setting rules for entry that were firm and

The Legacy of Dr. Kevin Barksdale



Dr. Barksdale presenting on UHD's MBA program at the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, April 2018

Photos: Belinda Hernandez

based only on numbers, but he viewed students as his calling and worked overtime to give every applicant their full chance."

Dr. Barksdale not only saw the potential in would-be MBA candidates, but also in students enrolled in the program, as he worked diligently with those who struggled with life challenges and found ways to help them continue and complete.

A full professor, Dr. Barksdale served as Associate Dean and later as Faculty MBA Director. He came to UHD after leading the Ken Blanchard College of Business at Grand Canyon University in Arizona and later heading the MS in Human Resource Management at Houston Baptist University. He earned his Ph.D. with a concentration in personnel and employment relations from Georgia State University.

A scholarship was established in

his name, and donations continue to be accepted to create a permanent endowment. The Kevin Barksdale Memorial Scholarship is a fitting tribute to a man who gave so much of himself to benefit UHD's students.

"Through this dedication, he changed hundreds of lives for the better, and I continue to hear the stories about Dr. Barksdale from grateful graduates I run into around the city," said Davis. "His impact is so visible and real to so many, and we should all aspire to have Kevin Barksdale's level of impact in our careers."



Please scan this QR code to make a contribution to the Kevin Barksdale Memorial Scholarship fund.



Dr. Rachna Sadana Cultivates Minds, Confronts Cancer-Cell Growth

BY HAYDEN BERGMAN

For Dr. Rachna Sadana, a Professor of Biology and Department Chair in the Natural Sciences department, life and work revolve around two core principles: cultivation and growth. Whether she's developing the research skills of her students; pursuing personal interests like yoga, dance classes, and tennis; or overseeing faculty career development within the department, she is driven by a passion for helping others thrive. Yet, there is one area where her expertise is singularly focused on halting growth: the progression of cancer cells.

In her lab, Sadana and her students focus on the initial stages of anti-cancer drug discovery, a process that is complex and can take decades to go from a promising synthesized compound to an FDA-approved medication. Her work takes place early in that process: rigorously testing new compounds supplied by collaborating chemists for their ability to inhibit or kill cancer cells. "I train students in laboratory methods to screen compounds for cytotoxicity and study cell death mechanisms, while primarily fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills through troubleshooting experimentstransferable skills valued by employers." This work has also benefited UHD financially, with Sadana securing several externally funded grants as a Co-Principal Investigator (PI) and a \$75K grant as PI from The Welch Foundations for lab equipment.

What sets her approach apart, however, is the commitment to undergraduate involvement.

Over the last decade and a half, she has personally mentored more than 140 students and published 21 journal articles, out of which 16 undergraduates Gators have co-authored.

"For a lot of them, even some of them who were struggling academically, this hands-on experience sparked a light in them."

Aviation, Culture and the Making of Modern Latin America

BY HAYDEN BERGMAN

Picture this: A select group of private and governmental technocrats present their respective technologies as evidence that a better, more perfect future is inevitable, as long as, of course, the future looks the way they think it should. No, I don't mean those of today. I'm talking about those of 20th century Latin America who used aviation not just as a means to build a national industry, but a culture as well.

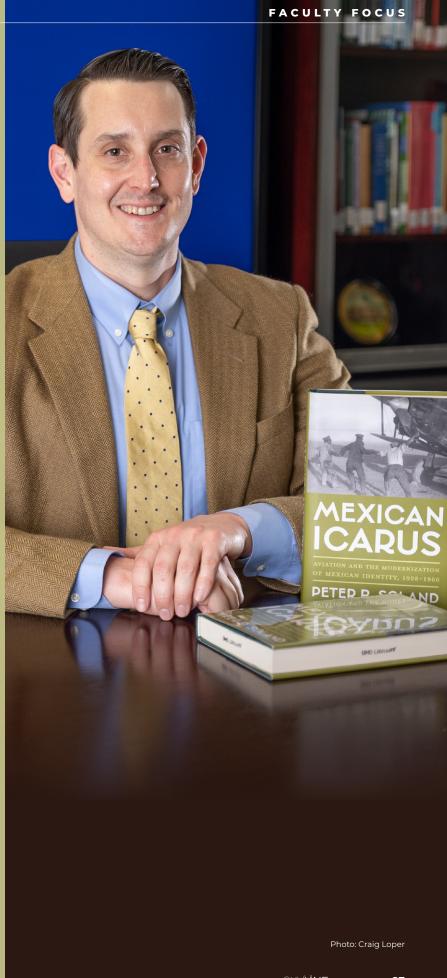
With Dr. Peter Soland

As part of NASA's "Aerospace Latin America: A History" seminar series, UHD's Dr. Peter Soland, Assistant Professor of History, Humanities and Languages, shared some of his latest research on how the technology, culture, and politics of aviation reshaped the Latin American world in a lecture titled "A God's Eye View: Aviators and the Re-Conquest of Latin America."

In his presentation, Soland explored how early aviation pioneers, such as the iconic Brazilian Alberto Santos-Dumont, captured the imagination of Latin American societies. These figures were often seen as symbols of progress and national ambition and were critical to the development of modern societies with clear national identities.

Using his wealth of knowledge from years of research, including that gained while working on his recent monograph, "Mexican Icarus: Aviation and the Modernization of Mexican Identity" (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023), Soland used magazines, films, press coverage, and government documents to show that "politicians, industrialists, and cultural tastemakers...molded the aviator into an archetype of modern citizenship that represented cosmopolitanism, individualism, and technological proficiency."

Soland's participation in this prestigious NASA seminar series and his research publication serve as proof that having one's head in the clouds isn't as impractical as it may seem.



Honoring Exceptional Teaching, Research, and Service:

THE2025 FACULTY AWARDS

UHD is renowned as a teaching university, and that teaching often extends far beyond the classroom, as our exceptional faculty can often be found working with students on research, service projects in the community, or even cultural explorations in other countries.

It's no wonder that excellence in teaching, research, and service are the hallmarks of UHD faculty. The annual Faculty Awards on April 15, 2025, merely amplified the scholarship, creativity, pedagogy, and community engagement of UHD's esteemed faculty.

DISTINGUISHED FACULTY AWARD

Godwin Agboka, Ph.D. English

OUTSTANDING ADJUNCT

Carlos Cantu, Ph.D. History, Humanities, and Languages

OUTSTANDING LECTURER

Vaishali Chaubal, Ph.D.
Natural Sciences

EXCELLENCE IN SERVICE

Krista Gehring, Ph.D. Criminal Justice

EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

John Rountree, Ph.D.
Arts and Communication

EXCELLENCE IN SCHOLARLY/ CREATIVE ACTIVITY

Ashwini Tiwari, Ph.D. Urban Education

In addition, 24 UHD faculty members received Organized Research and Creative Activities Awards for a stunning breadth of areas of study—from using gamification to improve student achievement (Dr. Kit Cho) to "Generative AI in the Classroom: An Integrative Literature Review" (Dr. Saveena Veeramoothoo). Development Awards went to 32 faculty members for continuation of studies, travel to conferences, software tools, and more.

Kudos to our 2025 Faculty Award recipients!





Bold Steps TO THE Bench

BY MONALISA SAENZ

When the writer George Eliot said, "It's never too late to be what you might have been," she could have been describing the extraordinary lives of three UHD alumni now serving in the Houston court system. This trio of female judges first shared their inspiring stories as part of UHD's President's Lecture Series in March—and we couldn't help but put them back in the spotlight.

JUDGE SONYA HEATH ('04)

To an outside observer, Sonya Heath's life might seem picture-perfect, the culmination of one success after another. In reality, Heath's story is about triumph over early struggles. It's also a reminder that, in life, the only timeline that matters is our own.

Born and raised outside of Beaumont, Texas, Heath was just two years old when her parents divorced. At 16, she moved from her family home due to her father's "inappropriate" behavior. Fortunately, Heath found safety in the home of her high school boyfriend. Today, she credits his family with providing unconditional love and stability.

Heath, who married and became a mom while still a teenager, did not graduate from high school—but that did not stop her from pursuing a career. She was hired as a secretary for the Polk County Judge in Livingston, an experience that sparked an interest in law, and later went on to work for two Houston law firms.

After earning her GED at 36, Heath enrolled at UHD, where she earned two bachelor's degrees—one in accounting and another in administrative management. She describes her college years as rewarding but "challenging," and a certain algebra class remains fresh in her memory.

"I struggled through that course multiple times, spending countless hours in UHD's math lab trying to relearn concepts that had long faded," Heath said. "But on my third attempt, I finally found a professor who 'spoke my language.'

That experience taught me that perseverance—

paired with the right support—can lead to breakthroughs."

After UHD, Heath entered Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University (TSU) and graduated when she was 45 years old. As an attorney, she practiced family law and, in 2018, she was elected to the 310th Family District Court in Harris County.

Today, Heath's message to others is heartening. "Take short steps. Don't be afraid to start over. It is never too late to pursue your dreams through education and service. The journey may not look traditional—and that's okay. Let your experiences shape you, not stop you. Believe in yourself and surround yourself with people who remind you that you can do hard things."

"

Below:

I thought it would be cool to be in a college, a place

I never thought I would attend. — Judge fransheneka "fran" watson ('05)

JUDGE FRANSHENEKA "FRAN" WATSON ('05)

Fate shows up in the unlikeliest of places, and that was certainly true for a young Fran Watson. Watson, who grew up in Kashmere Gardens in Northeast Houston and on the city's southwest side, was an employee in a barbecue restaurant when she learned a promotion to manager would be unlikely without a high school diploma.

Sadly, Watson was a teenager when she lost her mother to substance abuse, and she quickly assumed the caregiver role at home. The added responsibility led to chronic absenteeism, and she was eventually expelled from high school.

Judges Heath, Maldonado, and Watson at UHD@1801 Main Right:

Judge Fransheneka "Fran" Watson

Photos: Luz Castilla Hincapie



Luckily, a coworker explained that the manager position was within reach with a GED. Intrigued, Watson decided to pursue the GED route—a decision that would change the course of her life.

Watson chose UHD as her exam site, explaining, "I thought it would be cool to be in a college, a place I never thought I would attend." Her score was so impressive that a testing agent immediately walked her to the registration office and three months later she was sitting in UHD's Intro to Psychology class. She graduated magna cum laude with a degree in Psychology in 2005.

From UHD, Watson enrolled in Thurgood Marshall School of Law at TSU, from which she graduated magna cum laude in 2009. In 2019, after years in private practice, she was appointed by then-mayor Sylvester Turner to serve as Municipal Court Judge and was reappointed in 2021. In 2023, she became Staff Attorney for Harris County Probate Court Two. She is currently Presiding Judge for Harris County Probate Court Five. (Fun fact: Watson's chambers provide a clear view of Main Street, a constant reminder of her alma mater.)

When asked what advice she would give her younger self, Watson had some uplifting words to share.

"You do not have to know what is going to happen. But good things will happen if you hold on and keep taking steps forward. Sometimes, you are going to feel like the steps are so heavy that you cannot take them. But you can, and you will."



JUDGE JULIA MALDONADO ('95)

Many of us consider our teen years to be the apex of mischief and frivolity. But Julia Maldonado was hardly your typical teenager.

Born in Mexico, Maldonado immigrated to the United States with her parents and seven siblings when she was 11 years old. By 13, she was working as a baker at Fiesta Mart. A year later, Maldonado's parents returned to Mexico, leaving her behind and in charge of two younger brothers. (Her parents returned monthly to check on her and her siblings.)

Reflecting on her past, Maldonado said, "When I spoke to my mom many years later, she realized that the times when she grew up and I grew up had been different, but she did what she thought best."

Maldonado, who lived in the Northside neighborhood and, later, in The Heights, went on to graduate from Reagan High School (now Heights High School) and enrolled at UHD but dropped out when a complicated pregnancy required bed rest. While working as an accountant for Marek Brothers, she took advantage of the company's

education reimbursement program, a move that allowed her to re-enroll at UHD years later.

When Maldonado returned to college, this time as a 28-year-old working mother, she faced several new challenges. Life, as she described it, was a bit of a juggling act, and she often attended weekend classes and evening study sessions with her young son in tow.

She graduated from UHD in 1995 and from Thurgood Marshall School of Law at TSU in 1998. After becoming a licensed attorney, Maldonado was in private practice for 18 years.

In 2016, she was elected Judge of the 507th Family District Court, an office she held for eight years. She is currently a visiting judge, mediator, and arbitrator.

The message Maldonado has for young women who'd like to follow in her footsteps?

"I would tell them that they can achieve anything they set their mind to and never think that completing college or going to law school is out of their reach."

I would tell them that they can achieve anything they set their mind to and never think that completing college or going to law school is out of their reach.

— JUDGE JULIA MALDONADO ('95)

Judge Julia Maldonado Photo: Luz Castilla Hincapie





hat do the 2024 Staff Award recipients share in common?
They are all the crème de la crème, the top of the heap, the head of the list, A-No.1. They all demonstrate their loyalty to the University of Houston-Downtown every single day, giving their work their all and making student success their priority.

And three of these staffers share one other very important accomplishment: They are alums of UHD! That's right—there's Gator grit in their DNA and determination in their blood. Erica Morales ('04, Business Administration), Gladis Moya ('15, Business Administration), and Shiya Rawls ('20, Interdisciplinary Studies) are Gators through and through, seeking the very best outcomes for their alma mater and all current and future Gators.

Congratulations to the 2024 UHD Staff Award recipients!













Photos: Luz Castilla Hincapie

In this edition of Skyline, we celebrate our May 2025 graduates. Leading up to their commencement ceremony were a host of events and university achievements throughout the spring semester. Here are but a few...

Entangled and Ingested: How Ocean Trash Threatens Marine Life

Katharine Owens, Ph.D., a National Geographic Explorer Fulbright Nehru fellow and Professor and Chair of the Department of Politics, Economics, and International Studies at the University of Hartford, shared her eye-opening research on the impact of plastic waste on our oceans and marine animals on April 23 in

recognition of Earth Month for the President's Lecture Series.

Following the lecture, UHD Gators joined Owens for a hands-on workshop, contributing to a life-size portrait of the largest artwork Owens has created to date, the 80-foot Fin Whale—one of the hundreds of animals harmed by plastic. This unique project allowed the campus community to contribute to a collaborative artwork, fostering a deeper connection to the ocean and its challenges.





Searching for Black Ancestors in the American West

For the Black History Month edition of the 2025 President's Lecture Series on February 18, African diaspora archeologist and UH professor Alicia Odewale, Ph.D., asked, "How can we use archaeology as a tool to help us find Black ancestors in the American West when Black towns and freedom colonies have been lost, burned down, abandoned, or built over and forgotten?"

"The search for Black ancestors requires unearthing buried histories, and seeing with new eyes the complex landscapes of Black heritage that have been erased from the map."

Photo, top left: Lorenzo Morales Photos: Gabriela Perez

Rooted in Resilience: A Grandson's Reflections on the Gondo Legacy

In celebration of Asian
American and Pacific
Islander Heritage Month,
the President's Lecture Series
invited ABC13's Miya Shay
to interview Robert Gondo,
President of Tokyo Gardens
Company, about his family's
legacy on May 29. Gondo's
grandparents, Eugene and
Hisako Gondo, overcame

internment during World War II to introduce Japanese cuisine and culture to Texas, opening the state's first sushi bar. Their Houston restaurant, Tokyo Gardens, was a cultural landmark from 1966 to 1998. Today, their legacy lives

on through Tokyo Gardens Catering, which supplies sushi to hundreds of H-E-B locations across the state. A true Houston legend!

Congratulations to UHD's RN to BSN Program!

UHD's Registered Nurse to BS in Nursing (RN to BSN) Completion Program was granted the maximum 10-year accreditation by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE), a nationally recognized mark of quality, affirming that UHD's program meets the highest standards in baccalaureate nursing education. This prestigious achievement reflects UHD's unwavering commitment to excellence in nursing education and is a testament to the strength of our program and the dedication of our faculty and staff.

Pictured are the happy spring 2025 class of RN to BSN graduates following their Pinning Ceremony.

Ribbon Cutting at UHD@1801 Main

UHD's 17,000-square-foot expansion at the Amegy Bank Building was celebrated on Mardi Gras 2025 (Tuesday, March 4) with king cake, a ribbon cutting, and optimism for UHD's future and the future of downtown Houston.

President Loren J. Blanchard emphasized the strategic importance of the space, noting how it increases access to professional and academic services for alumni and students. In addition, the Center for Crime, Urban Research, and Education (C-CURE), to be housed at UHD@1801 Main, will work to address complex urban challenges through research, education, and collaboration.

Photo, top: Gabriela Perez Photo, right: Marie Jacinto

Allen Douglas, Chief Operating Officer of the Downtown Houston+ Redevelopment Authority, also spoke at the ceremony, saying that UHD@1801 Main will enhance the vibrancy

of downtown and serve as yet another example of the university's commitment to downtown and Houston's urban core.

One Main Event

This year's casino-themed student award ceremony was truly a night to remember with its games, music, and a hint of glitz. "The annual One Main Event is designed to be a unifying experience, showcasing the vibrant life of our campus and strengthening the bonds within the UHD family," said Tremaine Kwasikpui, Director of UHD Student Leadership and Involvement. "Our student leaders are simply amazing, and this night allows us to celebrate them."





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