

# UHD magazine

Fall/Winter 2015



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INCUBATING  
ACHIEVEMENT  
THROUGH RESEARCH

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### ON THE COVER

RACHNA SADANA, PH.D., INSTRUCTS BIOLOGY STUDENTS.



UHD students join UHD President Bill Flores, Ph.D., and First Lady Noëlle Bezette-Flores, Ph.D., at the President's Community Breakfast Oct. 30.

The University of Houston-Downtown, a “Major Opportunity” for more than 14,000 students, is celebrated for affordability, diversity and high-demand degrees. As president, I am proud that UHD gives undergraduates the ability to work alongside faculty on innovative research projects.

Our professors engage students through enriching opportunities that allow them to participate in cutting-edge research in a broad range of fields. This involvement allows UHD students to gather knowledge in the classroom and then hone and apply analytical skills in the community around them. Knowledge springs to life in exciting, hands-on research. Our students better understand the benefits of higher education and their ability to solve community-based problems for the greater good.

In the pages of this magazine, you will read how biology students in introductory classes uncover, name and submit samples of bacteriophages, viruses that attack bacteria in the soil, to a national database as part of a collaboration with Howard Hughes Medical Institute. Several students have even published their findings in an academic research journal! Another article highlights a recession forecasting model — the first of its kind — developed by a UHD finance professor who invites his students to view economics in a novel way, with implications for the global investment market. Another story shares how students learn firsthand from a psychology professor's vital mental health research on the prevention of suicide, based on her grant-winning work with patients at Houston's Menninger Clinic.

These experiences are only a sampling of the rich undergraduate research taking place at UHD — typically reserved for graduate-level degree holders.

In addition to research, UHD is setting the bar for community engagement in Houston. Over the past year, our students, faculty and staff contributed an impressive 304,000 hours of volunteer work across the city in efforts combating homelessness, hunger and other important issues. In these pages, learn how a UHD communication lecturer uses theater to address social issues and how our Gators are working as volunteers at The Beacon Day Center to provide hot meals and medical care for homeless people living on Houston streets. At UHD, the city is our classroom, where students put their knowledge into practice in real-world settings that have lasting benefits for our students and for those they reach and whose lives they touch.

UHD is changing lives and building futures. This is our promise to students, our commitment to our community and our contribution to the future of our region. UHD is Houston's Major Opportunity!

Bill Flores, Ph.D., President  
University of Houston-Downtown

"UHD is the kind of institution whose commitment ... aligns with West's. We are the kind of institution that his work exemplifies."

— DoVeanna Fulton, Ph.D.,  
Dean, College of Humanities  
& Social Sciences

A photograph of Cornel West, a Black man with a large afro, glasses, and a beard, smiling and speaking at a podium. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a white shirt and a dark tie. The podium has a white sign with the UHD logo and the text 'University of Houston DOWNTOWN'.

**UHD**  
University of Houston  
DOWNTOWN

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Professor, author and civil rights activist Cornel West, Ph.D., delivers a provocative monologue in his Nov. 6 presentation at UHD. An audience of more than 600 attended from across the city.

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# 'BE A LONG-DISTANCE RUNNER'

## CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST CORNEL WEST INSPIRES STUDENTS TO THINK CRITICALLY, FOCUS ON ACHIEVEMENT

By Brenda Gunter

Issuing a provocative call to action, author, academic and human rights activist Cornel West, Ph.D., delivered a compelling message on social justice Nov. 6 at UHD.

More than 450 students, faculty and staff members, alumni, and community members viewed the free public program in the Wilhelmina Cullen Robertson Auditorium, while another 150 watched from overflow rooms where the presentation was simulcast. UHD hosted the program as part of its participation in Citizenship Month 2015 activities. (Read more on p. 4.)

West, professor of philosophy and Christian practice at Union Theological Seminary and professor emeritus at Princeton University, addressed topics ranging from peace in the Middle East to the Black Lives Matter movement and delved into issues of local interest such as the Houston mayoral race and the city's Proposition 1 vote, concluding with an audience Q&A. UHD documented the interactive program via a live Twitter feed (#UHD CornelWest).

In his rapid-fire monologue, West praised UHD as a university where students learn to think independently. "What kind of courage did you exemplify in the short time you were here? Did you have the courage to think critically for yourself? That's the difference between high-quality education and cheap schooling. University of Houston-Downtown is not about cheap schooling. You want what the Greeks call *paideia*, that deep education, that turning of the soul."

Addressing students, West said, "Young people, it's going to be up to you. Do you have what it takes? Are you fortified to really think for yourselves? All imitation is suicide. If you're an original, you're going to have to learn to go against."

West praised educators, saying that "being a teacher is a sacred calling," and urged students to "be a long-distance runner in your education as you learn how to Socratically engage in critical reflection." He invoked the words of civil rights activists Martin Luther King Jr., Ph.D., and Malcolm X and the lyrics of Marvin Gaye, Otis Redding and Gil Scott-Heron; for good measure, he dropped a couple

of local names in references to Archie Bell & the Drells ("Tighten Up") and Beyoncé (Destiny's Child's "Say My Name").

The California native and New York resident spoke of his strong Texas connection. West's mother grew up in Orange, east of Beaumont; during his formative years, his family often visited southeast Texas relatives.

Bill Flores, Ph.D., president of UHD, gave opening remarks and acknowledgments. DoVeanna Fulton, Ph.D., dean of the College of Humanities & Social Sciences, provided the introduction. Hank Roubicek, Ed.D., professor in the Department of Arts & Humanities, gave opening remarks. Vida Robertson, Ph.D., associate professor in the Department of English and director of the Center for Critical Race Studies, closed the program.

Earlier in the day, Robertson conducted a video interview with West for the University's archives. West met with faculty and had lunch with UHD students from the Minority Male Initiative, Model UN, NAACP, STRIVE, and the College of Humanities & Social Sciences. Before the program began, West took part in a reception with UHD leaders, alumni, supporters and friends.

"It was so special for students to have the opportunity to engage with Dr. West, who offered direction on our contemporary situation, who has a deep knowledge of classical philosophy and American history with an insightful perspective," Fulton said. "Cornel West's work is instrumental for scholars and teachers in the areas of social justice, particularly critical race studies, philosophy and religious studies."



Said Fattouh, director of user support services in Information Technology, applauds as Cornel West responds to his question during the audience Q&A.

While West's career has been in the Ivy League and in institutions worldwide, Fulton said, "UHD is the kind of institution whose commitment to underrepresented students, to social justice, to community engagement aligns with West's. We are the kind of institution that his work exemplifies."

The program was sponsored by UHD's Center for Critical Race Studies; Cultural Enrichment Center; and Departments of Arts & Humanities, Social Sciences, and English in the College of Humanities & Social Sciences.



# CELEBRATING OUR DIVERSE CITY

## UHD TAKES PART IN HOUSTON CITIZENSHIP MONTH ACTIVITIES

By Brenda Gunter

Marking seven years of community engagement, UHD celebrated Houston's status as a world-class city during the many Citizenship Month 2015 events.

Citizenship Month is a series of exciting community-driven events and programs designed to raise awareness of the rights and responsibilities of being contributing members of our city by celebrating the many faces of Houston.

This effort brings to life the events and programs that encourage and enhance citizenship and civic engagement by building bridges of understanding, cooperation and awareness of Houston's unique multicultural nature and international business climate.

These events and programs are initiated by and give voice to our rich tapestry of individuals and cultural, grassroots, community, educational, business, consular and faith-based organizations.

UHD was a lead community partner and fiscal agent in Citizenship Month 2015. Bill Flores, Ph.D., president of UHD, served as co-chair of Citizenship Month 2015 and has been involved since its inception in 2009. At the time, Flores explained, "Houston was a city going through upheaval. There were hurricanes; there were many refugees coming into the city. The idea of Citizenship Month was to bring people together, to build bridges, to celebrate the diversity that is Houston."

Seven years later, Flores said, "Houston is the most diverse city in America. In working together, we are making this a city of opportunity, a city that America can look to and say, 'We got it right.' That's what Citizenship Month is about. It's an opportunity for us to give back."

Citizenship Month was co-founded by Noël Bezette-Flores, Ph.D., UHD first lady, along with a number of community leaders as Houston Citizenship Week under the leadership of Mayor Bill White. Today Kathy Hubbard, City of Houston first lady, serves as honorary co-chair of Citizenship Month, which takes place in November and also includes events in September and October. The citywide celebration has grown from one event at the Houston Public Library downtown — a kickoff for the installation of its World Language Center and International Art Exhibit — to more than 300 events.

UHD students, faculty and staff took part in numerous Citizenship Month activities, including the following sampling:

- More than 130 guests gathered at Willow Street Pump Station Sept. 21 as UHD hosted the **Seventh Annual Citizenship Month Kick-Off Luncheon**.
- The president and first lady served as host committee members and education panel presenters for the **2015 Points of Light Conference on Volunteering and Service** Oct. 18-21 at the



UHD student Eisha Khan welcomes the audience to the Citizenship Month Kick-Off Luncheon Sept. 21.



Citizenship Month honorary co-chairs Bill Flores, Ph.D., and Claudia Ortega-Hogue (right) present an award from the Citizenship Month Executive Committee to honorary co-chair Kathy Hubbard at the 2015 Citizenship Month Opening Event Nov. 5.



At the President's Community Breakfast Oct. 30, UH System Regent Paula Mendoza, an alumna of UHD, introduces the president.

George R. Brown Convention Center. The president presided at the event's first Higher Education Roundtable, in which participants discussed service learning and community engagement.

- UHD hosted a program with **Cynthia Shepard Perry**, former U.S. ambassador to Sierra Leone and Burundi and renowned expert in international affairs, in the President's Ambassador Lecture Series Oct. 21. The event also marked **United Nations Day**, which is Oct. 24.
- UHD students and Houston community leaders joined Houston Mayor Annise Parker on One Main Building's South Deck Oct. 29 to celebrate **Walk 2 Vote**, an event that aims to empower voter participation and increase civic engagement. The UHD Student Government Association sponsored the event.
- Community leaders, students, faculty and staff gathered at the **President's Community Breakfast** Oct. 30 at the Junior League of Houston.
- More than 300 Houstonians gathered Nov. 5 for a celebration of culture at the **2015 Citizenship Month Opening Event** at the Asia Society Texas Center.
- Professor, author and civil rights activist **Cornel West, Ph.D.**, visited UHD Nov. 6 to deliver a program focused on social justice. An audience of more than 600 attended from across the city. (Read more on p. 2.)
- UHD took part in ceremonies commemorating the end of World War II at the **Celebrating Diversity & World Peace** event Nov. 7 at Minute Maid Park.
- The UHD Center for Public Deliberation sponsored an interactive forum, **Making Ends Meet: How Can We Spread Prosperity and Improve Opportunity?** Faculty, staff, students and community members at the Nov. 11 event discussed ways to help struggling Houstonians prosper.
- UHD co-sponsored the **Rails to Restaurants** event Nov. 17. The progressive dinner launched at the UHD rail stop.

U.S. Rep. Al Green, who presides over the Ninth District, which encompasses areas of south and west Houston, and U.S. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, who presides over the 18th District, in which UHD is located, provided commemorative proclamations honoring the University's role in Citizenship Month.

Citizenship Month 2015 executive committee members included Liza Alonzo, executive director, presidential affairs and operations, and Zeenat Mitha, communication lecturer. Steering committee members included Mark Cervenka, associate professor of art and director of UHD's O'Kane Gallery; Mitha; Julie Norton, executive director, strategic partnerships; and Vida Robertson, Ph.D., associate professor of English and director of UHD's Center for Critical Race Studies. **UHD**

More information on Citizenship Month 2015 is available at [citizenshipmonth.org](http://citizenshipmonth.org).



Cynthia Shepard Perry, retired U.S. ambassador, addresses the crowd at the President's Ambassador Lecture Series Oct. 21.



Houston Mayor Annise Parker speaks at the Walk 2 Vote event Oct. 29 on One Main Building's South Deck.



The UHD Women's Choir performs during the President's Community Breakfast Oct. 30.



Robin Davidson, Ph.D., poet laureate of Houston, and Robert Pinsky, Ph.D., former poet laureate of the United States, listen to an introduction preceding Pinsky's public reading Sept. 8 at UHD.



# CITYWIDE CLASSROOM

## AS POET LAUREATE OF HOUSTON, UHD PROFESSOR TAKES VERSE TO 'A LARGER PUBLIC SPHERE'

By Brenda Gunter

As the author of several collections of poetry, Robin Davidson, Ph.D., professor of English, seldom finds herself at a loss for words. That was the case, however, when she learned May 19 that she had been named poet laureate for the city of Houston.

"I didn't know I was going to have to write official poems," Davidson explained, laughing as she recalled the moment. "At the press conference, a reporter asked, 'So, how do you feel about that?' I looked over at the mayor and said, 'Well, to tell you the truth, I'm shaking in my shoes.' Mayor (Annise) Parker turned and looked at me, and she said, 'You can always read your own poems. You will never have to compose on demand.' And I thought, 'Wow, here's a civic leader who really gets it about public art. I'm going to love working with this woman.' But it is expected that the poet laureate will do that. So there will be times when I will write poems for the city."

During the two-year appointment, which continues through May 2017, Davidson is collaborating with the city, the mayor and Houston Public Library to develop a community outreach project for Houston's diverse neighborhoods and organizations. She will conduct workshops to educate Houstonians on the benefits of writing and reading poetry. She also will work collaboratively to develop a Favorite Poem Anthology for the City of Houston and a website that will showcase the city's working poets.

When former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, Ph.D., visited UHD in September, he and Davidson discussed collaborations between the Houston Poet Laureate program and Pinsky's Favorite Poem Project. "My vision is that a team of local poets will solicit submissions from Houstonians who send in their favorite poem and say why that poem has deep significance for them," she said. "I've also begun work with

Rich Levy and Krupa Parikh of Inprint, Houston's premier literary arts nonprofit, on strategies for documenting the diversity of poets here in Houston.

"These are things I have wanted to do for a long time that I could never have been a part of, much less spearhead, without being in this role," Davidson continued. "It is an honor to be able to serve my city, a city that I have called home for 50 years, and to work under a mayor whom I deeply admire, who herself is a poet and who has the deepest respect for the arts."

In addition, Davidson is working to promote UHD's literacy outreach across the city, including helping to integrate poetry into Houston's annual Citizenship Month, of which UHD is a co-sponsor.

As poet laureate, Davidson receives an annual honorarium of \$5,000 through the city's Initiative Grant Program of Houston Arts Alliance.

"I am both thrilled for Dr. Davidson's well-deserved recognition and humbled that one of our own valued faculty members has earned such an exemplary honor," said Bill Flores, Ph.D., president of UHD. "She is a shining example of the high caliber of faculty talent at our University and the major opportunities we are able to offer students."

Candidates for poet laureate must complete a rigorous application process. Davidson gained valuable experience at this in her first role at UHD. While working on her Ph.D. at the University of Houston Creative Writing Program, she took a professional position at UHD in 1998 as the coordinator of academic services for University College. In addition to doing academic advising, she wrote grant proposals, most notably one for \$2.1 million from the U.S. Department of Education. UHD received the grant, and she served as its project director from 2001 to August 2005. *(Continued on p. 8)*

## FROM STUDENT TO TEACHER: DAVIDSON ON PINSKY

By Brenda Gunter

When former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky spent three days in Houston in September, Robin Davidson invited her former professor to visit her poetry workshop class.

“I had him as a teacher for only one semester (in the University of Houston Creative Writing Program, where she received her master’s and doctorate degrees), but it was something I’ll never forget,” Davidson said. “The spring of 1986, he came to UH to step in for Howard Moss, the poetry editor of *The New Yorker*. One of the first things he did was to have us put together a personal Favorite Poems Anthology. I still have that anthology, and that’s what I’ve been asking my students to do for years now as a way of introducing them to poetry.”

Pinsky urged Davidson’s students to see poetry as the invitation to a shared exchange or dialogue. “He said to my students, ‘I’m not writing to hear my voice performed; I’m writing in my voice for your voice.’ ”

Davidson said, “It’s thrilling to get to tie that 1986 experience as a student to my teaching here at UH and to the poet laureate role for my city. For me, it moves poetry from its private, personal beginnings to a larger public sphere. Poetry is action. It is deeply personal, but it is also a socio-political act.”

Pinsky, who served as U.S. poet laureate from 1997 to 2000, is the author of several collections of poetry and prose, including the anthology *Americans’ Favorite Poems*, published as part of his Favorite Poem Project; *Selected Poems*, from which he read at the UH event; and *Singing School: Learning to Write (and Read) Poetry by Studying With the Masters*, an introduction to poetry.

The reading was presented as a collaboration among UH’s Cultural Enrichment Center, directed by Jane Creighton, Ph.D., professor in the Department of English; the organization Public Poetry; the Mayor’s Office Poet Laureate Program; and Houston Public Library.

More information about the Favorite Poem Project is available at [www.favoritepoem.org](http://www.favoritepoem.org).

### Poetry Collections by Robin Davidson

#### Books

- *Luminous Other: Poems* (Ashland Poetry Press, 2013)
- *The New Century: Poems* by Ewa Lipska, translated from the Polish with Ewa Elżbieta Nowakowska (Northwestern University Press, 2009)

#### Chapbooks

- *City That Ripens on the Tree of the World: Poems* (Calypso Editions, 2013)
- *Kneeling in the Dojo: Poems* (Finishing Line Press, 2013)



*(Continued from p. 7)*

In 2003, Davidson applied for and received a Fulbright grant that enabled her to serve as a visiting professor of American literature at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland, while learning Polish and researching the work of one of her favorite poets, Ewa Lipska. Together with Ewa Elżbieta Nowakowska, she wrote a translation of Lipska’s *The New Century: Poems* (Northwestern University Press, 2009).

Eager to extend her teaching experience to UH, Davidson transitioned to UH’s Department of English as an assistant professor in fall 2005. She teaches Composition II (ENG 1302) and a range of introductory and advanced creative writing courses, as well as literary translation, and she serves as faculty advisor for *The Bayou Review*, a literary journal published by UH students. In 2013, she received the UH Faculty Award for Excellence in Scholarly/Creative Activity.

UH’s creative writing program has built considerable momentum in its five years of existence. “In the fall of 2010, we were able to implement a minor in creative writing in the Department of English, the goal being to test the interest of our student body,” Davidson said. “We had a great deal of interest. Students who are majoring in other areas often opt for the creative writing minor. The math and science professors, some of whom are writers, often send students our way for their minor.

“We decided after two years that we had enough interest to develop a bachelor’s program. We considered the idea of a BFA. We concluded that it would be better to have a creative writing concentration associated with the BA in English so that we weren’t divided against ourselves. The literature track of the BA in English is necessary to creative writers. They need to be very well read in terms of literature.”



Robert Pinsky and Robin Davidson have come full circle as teacher and student, with Pinsky visiting Davidson's poetry workshop class in September.

## Excerpt from "Kosovo, April Mornings"

Another morning. The pictures pile up, like postcards, here at my kitchen table in my American house where I imagine I am safe, and exile is a newspaper photograph. I lock the front door, leave for school, downtown. Or exile is a sign above the Main Street Fire Sale — *New losses arrive daily*. I think of my son in a different city, his voice wails out a Robert Johnson song on the tape I'm playing. I see my mother's face at sixteen in the hand-tinted photograph hung in the hallway — *He has her mouth*, my brother-in-law says of my son. Beautiful mouths. A woman's, a man's. Beautiful, vanishing mouths. But the song persists. I turn up the tape, keep driving.

— Robin Davidson

Davidson, Robin. (2013). "Kosovo, April Mornings." In *Luminous Other* (pp. 34–35). Ashland, OH: Ashland Poetry Press. Used with permission.

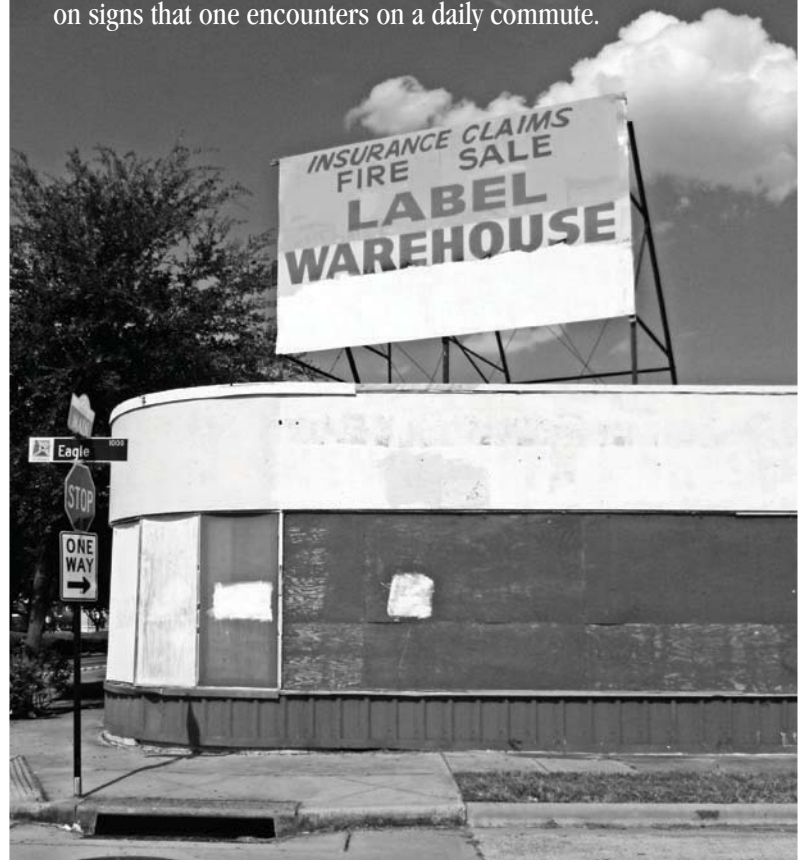
The degree gives students numerous options, Davidson said. "Many students want to pursue graduate school in creative writing. We're preparing students who wish to go on to an MFA or a PhD, which is a very competitive process." Others train as attorneys, teachers or nonprofit professionals. "If you decide at UHD to pursue a BA in English with a creative writing concentration and then go into our master's program in nonprofit management, you would have a wonderful foundation for securing a great job."

Students who take creative writing classes "have stories to tell," Davidson said. "Our creative writing students start here because they are compelled to write. We see stuff in the world, and we want to write about it. Or we hear a line in our head and we want to use that line or stanza. I tell my students all the time, collect language that you see."

"For example, years ago, when I would drive down Main to UHD, I would pass the Main Street fire sale. They used to have a huge sign that said, 'New Losses Arrive Daily.' I would read that every day and think, 'Oh, that's so true, and so depressing.' I knew it was a line that compelled me. And it finally did wind up in a poem. There's language that we find or language that we hear, or stories that have been brewing in us for years that we want to tell, and those people are writers. To have a place where you can feast on that, where you can address that hunger, is really exciting. And that's why I teach."

After being appointed poet laureate, Davidson was overwhelmed at the level of support she received from UHD colleagues. "I wouldn't have had the time to write, I wouldn't have had books published, I wouldn't have ever applied for this laureate position without UHD. I feel very indebted to my institution. This is a remarkable place." **UHD**

Robin Davidson encourages students to "collect language that you see," such as the words displayed on signs that one encounters on a daily commute.



# COMMON READER GIVES INCOMING STUDENTS SHARED FOUNDATION

By Brenda Gunter

UHD's Freshman Common Reader Program gives students who are attending college for the first time the opportunity to start their journey with a shared foundation as they progress toward the goal of graduation. The program creates an environment of inquiry to guide new students as they transition into higher education.

At new student orientation, students were given a copy of the fall 2015 common reader, *Into the Beautiful North* by Luis Alberto Urrea, and were instructed to read the book before Freshman Convocation to prepare for a discussion of its theme of bridging the borders that divide us as individuals.

"The common intellectual experience of reading and discussing a book that addresses societal issues contributes to building a community of learners," said Chris Birchak, Ph.D., dean of University College. "By analyzing the different perspectives expressed by colleagues and interacting with discussion leaders, students develop critical thinking skills."

Nearly 600 new Gators and their parents gathered in August to attend the sixth annual Freshman Convocation, with a welcome address by Bill Flores, Ph.D., president of UHD. Urrea followed with a presentation in which he shared stories of real-life individuals who inspired the characters in his book. This marked the first time a common-reader author was invited to participate in Freshman Convocation, enriching the experience by delivering a presentation and interacting with students and faculty.



Author Luis Alberto Urrea speaks to new students and their parents during Freshman Convocation in August.



*Into the Beautiful North* unfolds from the point of view of its main character, a young woman named Nayeli, who lives in the tiny Mexican village of Tres Camarones. Nayeli is troubled that her father and most of the men in her community have moved north to the United States to find work. Their absence leaves the town vulnerable to drug-dealing *bandidos*, who aim to take over. Inspired by the film *The Magnificent Seven*, Nayeli heads north to San Diego to recruit seven men, *los siete magníficos*, to defend her village. Their expectations of the United States differ significantly from the realities they encounter. As the travelers learn to navigate physical and cultural borders, they make important discoveries about themselves.

To explore the novel's themes, students took part in a contest in which they created essays and graphic interpretations of scenes from the novel. The book's focus on immigration prepared students to extend their learning through activities for Hispanic Heritage Month, Sept. 15-Oct. 15, and Citizenship Month 2015 in November. **UHD**

UHD student Luis Ayala (from left) shows author Luis Alberto Urrea and UHD President Bill Flores, Ph.D., his graphic depiction of Urrea's novel *Into the Beautiful North*.



UHD students (from left) Evelyn Rodriguez, Shaudrea Adams and Yolaine Swasey; Leigh Van Horn, Ed.D., interim dean of the College of Public Service; and Valerie Wade, archivist and oral historian, convene outside the African American Library at the Gregory School.

# PEDAL TO THE METAL

## STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT HOUSTON HISTORY ON THEIR PATH TO BECOMING TEACHERS

By Brenda Gunter

Three UHD students spent much of their summer in the library preparing for student teaching assignments in the fall. Rather than studying, however, these students put the pedal to the metal in an oral history transcribing project at the African American Library at the Gregory School.

Transcriptionists use a pedal to stop and start audio and video oral history recordings as they type spoken words. In doing this work, Shaudrea Adams, Evelyn Rodriguez and Yolaine Swasey, who are pursuing bachelor's degrees and teacher certification through the *(Continued on p. 12)*



*(Continued from p. 11)*

College of Public Service, contributed to a valuable learning resource that they plan to introduce to their future students.

The Gregory School library, which opened in 2009, is one of three special collections libraries in the Houston Public Library (HPL) system and the primary repository of historical information related to African-Americans in Houston. Situated west of downtown in the Freedmen's Town area, the library is located in the former Edgar M. Gregory School, built in 1926.

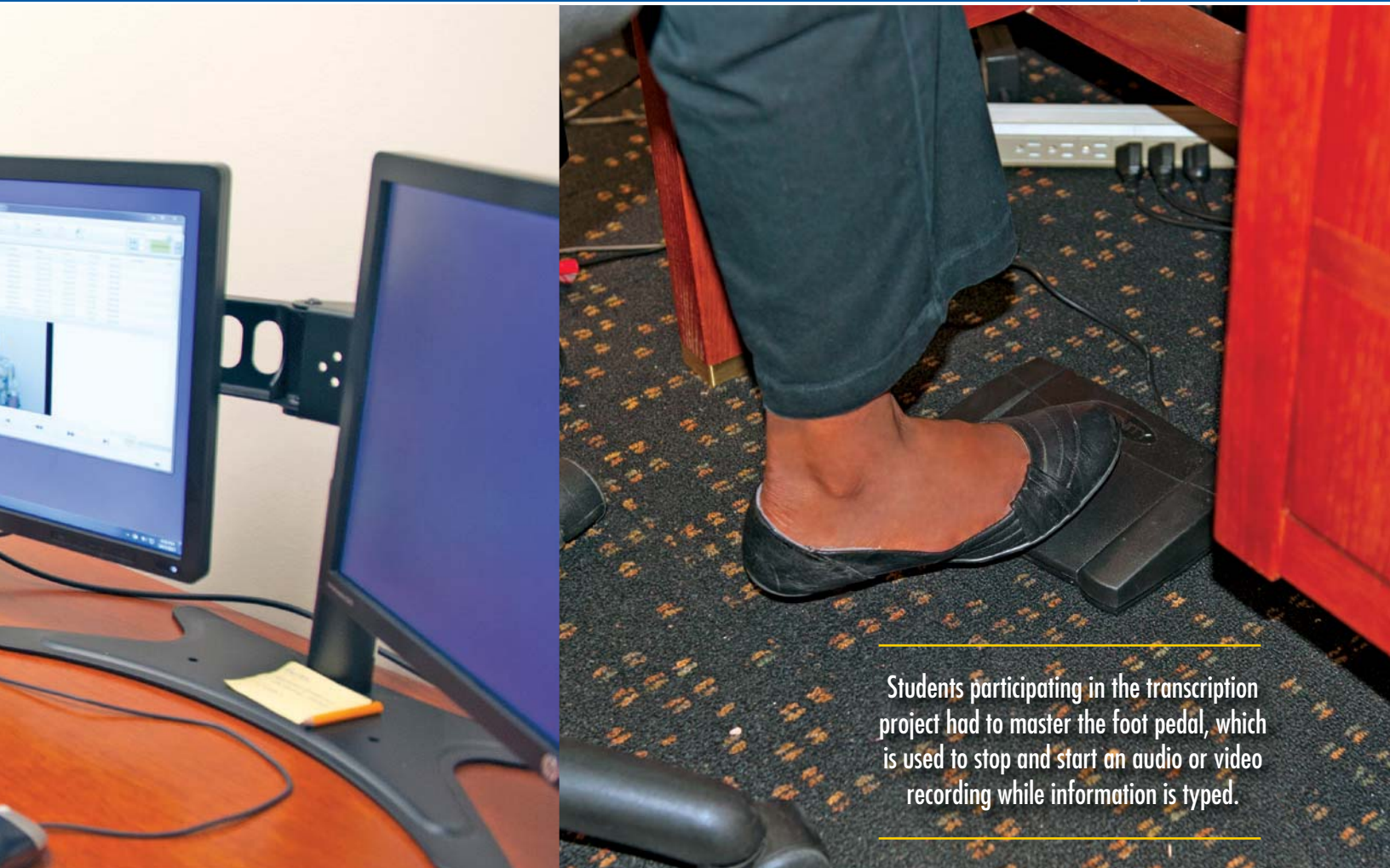
Before undertaking the project, none of the students, all interdisciplinary studies majors, knew the library existed. Swasey, who is working toward certification as an early childhood-grade 6 (EC-6) generalist teacher, said, "This library is a well-kept secret. I will be able to tell my social studies students about it, and we will use this library in our studies."

Adams plans to obtain the EC-6 generalist certification so that she can teach in a variety of areas from pre-kindergarten to sixth grade, including life skills areas. "I was excited to find out about this library," she said. "As an African-American, I'm always trying to educate myself and enrich myself on African-American culture, so finding this library was awesome."

Rodriguez plans to get certified as a bilingual EC-6 generalist teacher. "I liked the idea of tying Houston history into literature," she said. "I like the idea of being able to walk into this gallery with a classroom of kids. It will make history more fun for them."

Valerie Wade, archivist and oral historian at the Gregory School library, is eager to introduce the collection to more Houstonians. "The history of the Fourth Ward (the area in which the library is located) is changing before our eyes, and we are working to capture that," she said. "One thing that I've been wanting to do since I arrived at the Gregory School (in 2014) is to build our connections with the larger community. The benefit for us is twofold: We get to make connections with UHD and some of their students, and I am able to get some of the transcription work done so that our oral histories are accessible to more people."

Hoping to involve students in this important work, Wade contacted Leigh Van Horn, Ed.D., interim dean of the College of Public Service, in the spring. "I knew this was a phenomenal opportunity," Van Horn said. "For this initial project, I asked students who have been leaders in the courses that I have taught (while a professor in Urban Education), strong writers and strong listeners and leaders." From this group, she selected Adams, Rodriguez and Swasey, who then learned to transcribe in the restored rooms of the city's first African-American public school.



Students participating in the transcription project had to master the foot pedal, which is used to stop and start an audio or video recording while information is typed.

Sunlight streams through the sleek glass exterior walls and falls on the burnished copper panels of the LEED-certified addition that opens into a spacious interior with polished oak floors, stately banisters framing concrete stairs, tidy rows of metal lockers, a restored 1926 classroom and a well-stocked reference room. The students spent much of their time in the library's studio, which has been equipped with state-of-the-art recording and transcribing tools.

Soon the students became captivated with the stories they were transcribing. "One of my first videos to transcribe was by a professor at Texas Southern University, Dr. Thomas Freeman (founding dean of TSU's honors college and coach of its debate team)," Rodriguez said. "He is an extraordinary man. It was fascinating to find out about people like this who are from Houston."

For Rodriguez, working as a volunteer led to an opportunity to take a paid position at a time when she desperately needed it. Wade referred her to a colleague at HPL's Houston Metropolitan Research Center who needed help with a contract archiving project. Rodriguez eagerly accepted the position when it was offered. "It came at a time when I was thinking of dropping (from UHD) because I couldn't afford the tuition," she said. "That opportunity came to me, and I'm still in school because I was able to get that position. If I hadn't volunteered,

I don't know if I'd still be at UHD. I probably would have been working and saving my money and going back in a year or two."

"Working with organizations such as the Gregory School informs our teaching," said Van Horn, who received the 2012 UHD Faculty Award for Excellence in Service. "At a university where our job is teaching, service and scholarly creative activity, this is the centerpiece of our work."

Enthusiastic about the progress they have made, the students continue to volunteer as time allows. The collaboration with the library continues with a fourth student, Kelley Giles, a history major who also is working toward her teacher certification.

"We are just three people, but so many people at UHD now know about the library and that it exists," Adams said. "We're glad we were able to do this work and help get the word out."

Swasey added, "As volunteers here at the library and also as educators, we have the opportunity to share this library with our students and other educators. We are the pipeline." **UHD**

More information about the African American Library at the Gregory School is available at [www.thegregoryschool.org](http://www.thegregoryschool.org).

Rachna Sadana, Ph.D.,  
instructs student Ryan Pool  
in her biology lab.

# GROWING A CULTURE OF ACHIEVEMENT

## SOIL SAMPLES YIELD MORE THAN VIRUSES FOR STUDENT SCIENTISTS

By Brenda Gunter

On the banks of Buffalo Bayou, freshman biology students collect soil samples and cultivate their passion for science. Rachna Sadana, Ph.D., associate professor of biology and biochemistry, leads a hands-on learning lab in which classes conduct and document research in a national database and peer-reviewed journals.

The project, which spans two semesters, takes place in introductory General Biology I and II (BIOL 1101 and 1102) courses. UHD is involved with the project through a collaboration with the Howard Hughes Medical Institute Science Education Alliance (SEA).

In addition to gaining experience conducting research in a lab, students recently had the opportunity to co-author a paper in a peer-reviewed academic research journal. Sadana and five students in her classes are listed as contributors on a paper published in the open-access journal *eLife* in April 2015.

A phage, also known as a bacteriophage, is a virus that attacks bacteria and replicates, causing the bacteria to lyse, or dissolve. It consists of genetic material (DNA) surrounded by a coat of protein molecules.

Sadana gestures to two phage samples encased in petri dishes as she explains how phages make their way from soil to the national database. "Students go out and collect soil samples," she said. "There are phages in the soil. The phage has to live with the bacteria, wherever the bacteria is. The purification of a phage and isolation of its DNA take almost 12 weeks. The phage DNA is then sent to an off-site lab for sequencing to analyze its novelty, or its uniqueness."

Sadana continued, "Before we send them to be processed, we choose them based on their morphology, how they look, determined by electron microscopy. Phages have a head and a tail. In 2014, students isolated one very



unique phage whose head was too big, and the tail was very small. So we sent that one for sequencing.”


Students get to name their phages. “The names always have an interesting story behind them,” Sadana said. “One was named Bigswole. There are clearings on the plate where the virus causes the bacteria to break up and form plaque. The clearings are usually very small, but the clearings on the student’s plate were like big clouds. One team named theirs Duelemucho, a Spanish term that means it hurts a lot. It means they had to work really hard to get to their phage because there are a lot of failures students have to face in this project-based lab.”

As of fall 2015, UHD students had discovered a total of 23 novel bacteriophages, which are documented on The Actinobacteriophage Database. To access UHD’s webpage on the database, visit [phagesdb.org/institutions/HOUS](http://phagesdb.org/institutions/HOUS).

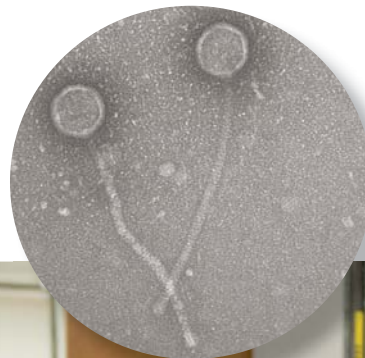
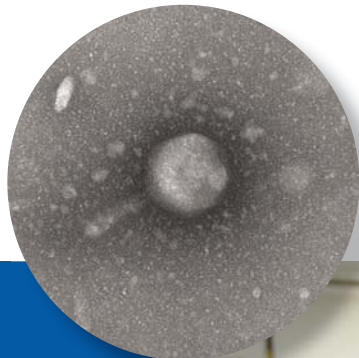
Sadana, who received the 2015 UHD Faculty Award for Excellence in Teaching, sees the classes as a tool to recruit students into the sciences.

“This is the first biology class students take as freshmen,” she said. “Studies have shown that the quality of the lab curriculum plays an important role in retaining students and engaging them in science. That is why we incorporated this project in the freshman classes.”

Training in the lab allows students to experience the impact that research can make on fighting real-world pathogens. “The type of mycobacteria we are using as a host is a garden variety that does not cause disease,” Sadana said, “but it is a cousin of bacteria that causes tuberculosis (TB).”

Ultimately, Sadana said, the goal is to train students as scientists and familiarize them with projects that involve critical thinking. “Students get to critically analyze their data and decide what to do next on a daily basis,” she said. “It’s not like a cookbook lab where they go in and they just follow a procedure, and they know what the outcome will be. It’s a real project, and there are lots of unknowns. UHD students are contributing to real research.” 

The Actinobacteriophage Database includes 23 phages UHD biology students submitted, including (from left) Bigswole, Duchess-Dung and GreedyLawyer.



### UHD Students Get Published

Five UHD students are listed as co-authors in a paper published in the open-access journal *eLife* in April 2015:

- Rush Alexander
- Pilgrim Benjamin
- Linus Klingler
- Kimberly Menendez
- Aziz Sidra

Also listed as co-authors are UHD faculty members Rachna Sadana, Ph.D., and Akif Uzman, Ph.D., dean of the College of Sciences & Technology.

The paper, titled “Whole Genome Comparison of a Large Collection of Mycobacteriophages Reveals a Continuum of Phage Genetic Diversity,” is available at [elifesciences.org/content/4/e06416](http://elifesciences.org/content/4/e06416).

Five of Rachna Sadana’s biology students, including Linus Klingler, had a paper published in the academic journal *eLife*.



# PELÁEZ FINDS A 'NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK'

## PROFESSOR TEACHES FINANCE FUNDAMENTALS WHILE DISCOVERING 'DNA' OF RECESSION FORECASTING

By Brenda Gunter

In an introductory Business Finance class, students furiously punch numbers into their calculators while pondering a question posed by their professor, Rolando Peláez, Ph.D.

"Would you have more money if you took the cash from Column A ...?" More than half of the students hesitantly raise their hands. "... or the loan from Column B?" A few students choose this option as Peláez takes an informal count.

As Peláez writes algebraic equations on the whiteboard and gives students perhaps their first lesson in compounding interest, faces light up.

Making money is a concept that piques students' interest. Students who take this course, required of all potential business majors, learn through real-world examples about acquiring and investing business funds. They also receive an introduction to international business practices.

In this class (FIN 3302) and a second foundation course, Money, Markets and Institutions (FIN 3305), Peláez, professor of finance, hopes to spark students' interest in finance and influence them to consider majoring in the field.

While his classroom lectures may be highly accessible, Peláez hopes to engage fellow economists' interest in a far more complex topic: an economic model that reliably predicts recessions, which he characterizes as "finding a needle in a haystack."

After years of compiling and analyzing economic data spanning 45 years (180 quarters), from 1970 to 2014, Peláez published three articles in 2015 supporting his theory of a sustainable recession forecasting model that allows a period of declining economic activity to be predicted one quarter (three months) or more before it occurs.

"Now here is a model with a 45-year record of reliable forecasts for 180 consecutive quarters. The model forecasts one quarter ahead using data available prior to the event. It's very difficult to get lucky 180 times," Peláez said.

"The predictive powers of these models seem to suggest that Dr. Peláez may have found the DNA for the U.S. business cycles," said Mike Fields, Ph.D., dean of the College of Business. "These papers are expected to have a significant impact on policy making, investment decisions and subsequent research in this important area."

The following articles describe Peláez's recession forecasting theory:

**"A Recession-and-State Forecasting Model," *Southern Economic Journal* (April 2015):** Peláez's model forecasts the probability that a recession will begin or end within the next quarter. The quarterly model correctly predicts every recession since 1973. The forecasts are significantly more accurate than those in The Conference Board Leading Economic Index, considered the gold standard in business cycle forecasting.

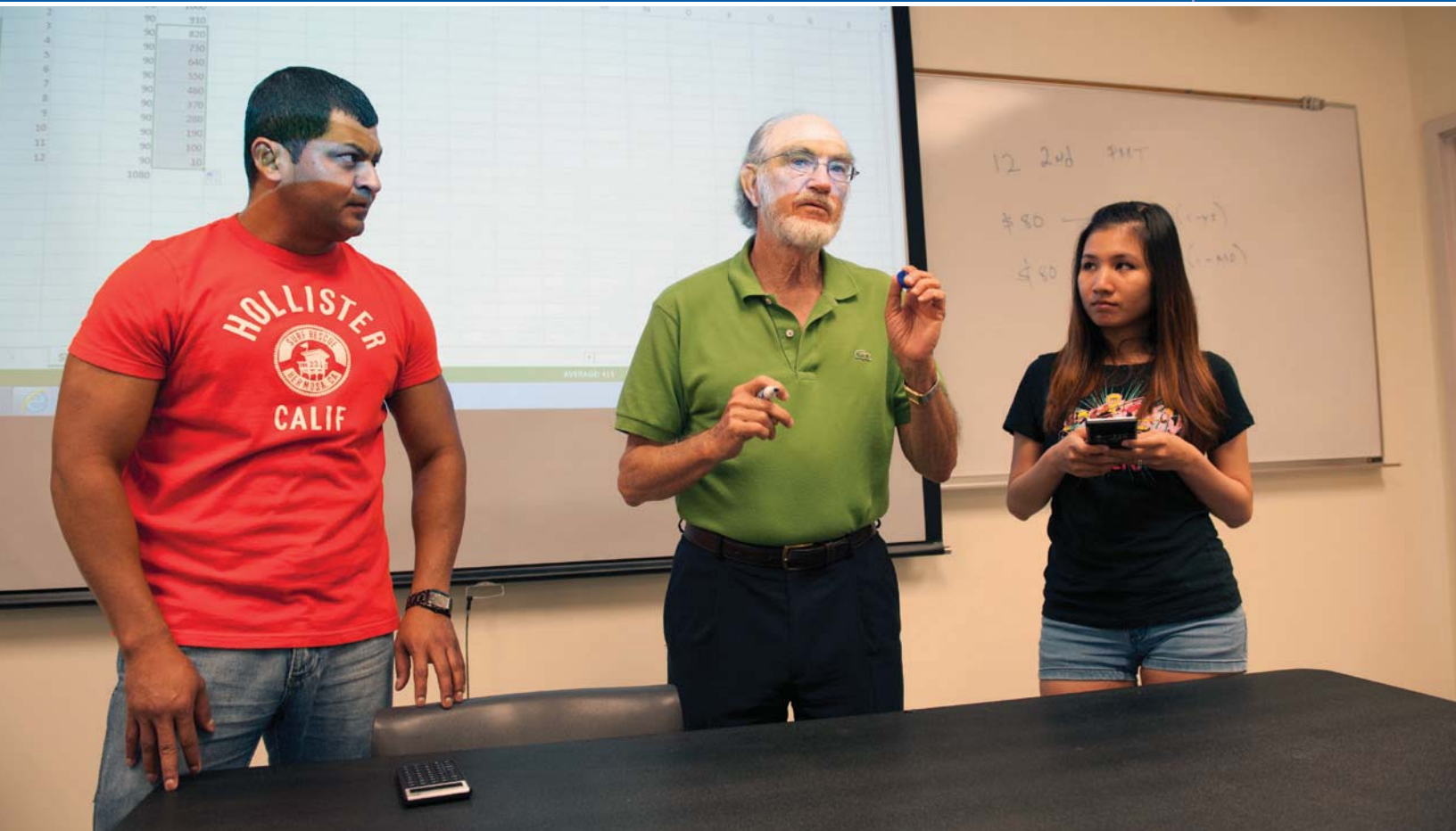
**"Market-Timing the Business Cycle," *Review of Financial Economics* (September 2015):** The quarterly model correctly predicts all recessions since 1970. In addition, the paper demonstrates that portfolio managers would benefit from moving from equities (stocks) to U.S. Treasury bills (T-bills) during periods when the model signals that a recession is imminent.

**"A Biannual Recession-Forecasting Model," *Journal of Macroeconomics* (September 2015):** A semiannual model forecasts changes in the U.S. business cycle six months in advance, which can be more useful than a quarterly model for policy makers and business organizations.

Economists have employed yield spread, or the difference between yields calculated using different debt instruments, to predict recessions. In the *Journal of Macroeconomics* article, Peláez demonstrates that while yield spread is useful, "It predicted three out of seven periods of recession and missed four out of seven. My model gets all seven right, and there are no false alarms, meaning that the model does not predict recessions that do not occur."

Chu Nguyen, Ph.D., chair of the Department of Finance, Accounting & Enterprise Information Systems, calls this work unprecedented. "Each of these papers contributes significantly to empirical macroeconomics and empirical finance and places UH's name in these internationally recognized journals for the first time ever. It is an incredible achievement for Dr. Peláez, for our department and for UH."

Peláez says that despite its potential effect in the world of finance, the information is not yet widely known because portfolio managers and other financial professionals tend to follow industry-focused publications



Rolando Peláez, Ph.D., works through a calculation with students Jose Umaña and Anh Huynh in his Business Finance class.



The predictive powers of these models seem to suggest that Dr. Peláez may have found the DNA for the U.S. business cycles.

—Mike Fields, Ph.D.,  
Dean, College of Business



rather than academic journals. “It will take some time for the information to filter down.”

Back in the classroom, Peláez focuses on giving students real-world economic tools that they can use throughout their lives. “These classes empower you to make more informed financial decisions,” he said. “We try to show the usefulness of knowing how to manage your money. If you are going to college and you are borrowing money, how do you know that this is a good investment? What is the rate of return on money that you’re borrowing?”

Many of Peláez’s students come to the table with unique challenges. “Some of them are the first person in their family to attend college. Every semester, I tell my students, don’t base your perception of your talent on what your parents and grandparents did or did not do. Yours is a different story. Whatever they told you, if one day you were growing up and someone said, ‘He’ll never amount to anything,’ throw all of that out of the window. You are you today.”

Peláez values making a difference in the lives of students. “Many of our students work full time,” he said. “They don’t have a lot of discretionary time. They are highly motivated and very deserving of the education they get at UHD. They inspire me.” **UFD**

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## Rufino Receives Hogg Foundation Grant to Continue Studies on Suicide Prevention

By Claire Caton

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UHD professors clearly make an impact on the campus. But many students may not realize those same professors are changing lives through their research in the community, which directly enhances their efficacy behind a classroom podium.

Katrina Rufino, Ph.D., assistant professor of psychology, proves this point well. The Hogg Foundation for Mental Health recently awarded Rufino with one of 10 statewide grants to conduct innovative mental health research.

The goals for these 15-month grants — capped at \$19,250 each — are to increase the pool of junior faculty doing quality mental health research and to encourage the dissemination of research findings to fellow researchers, policymakers and service providers through presentations at state and national conferences.

The foundation selected Rufino's project from a pool of proposals submitted by tenure-track assistant professors in Texas.

"As a foundation, we are dedicated to doing our part to make sound, evidence-based treatments for mental health conditions the norm in our society," said Octavio N. Martinez Jr., M.D., executive director of the Hogg Foundation and associate vice president for diversity and community engagement at The University of Texas at Austin. "Expanding the evidence base for the interventions we use to alleviate suffering, or to develop new ones, is what all of these excellent research projects have in common."

Rufino, who co-facilitated a suicide resilience group with inpatients at Houston's Menninger Clinic during a two-year postdoctoral fellowship, will continue research activities at the clinic through the Hogg Foundation grant. Specifically, she will test predictions from two psychological theories — cognitive behavioral and psychodynamic — regarding suicide risk and determine elements of each theory that most effectively predict how suicidal patients fare following their discharge from the hospital.



**Katrina Rufino, Ph.D., is continuing her research into suicide prevention after receiving a grant from the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health.**

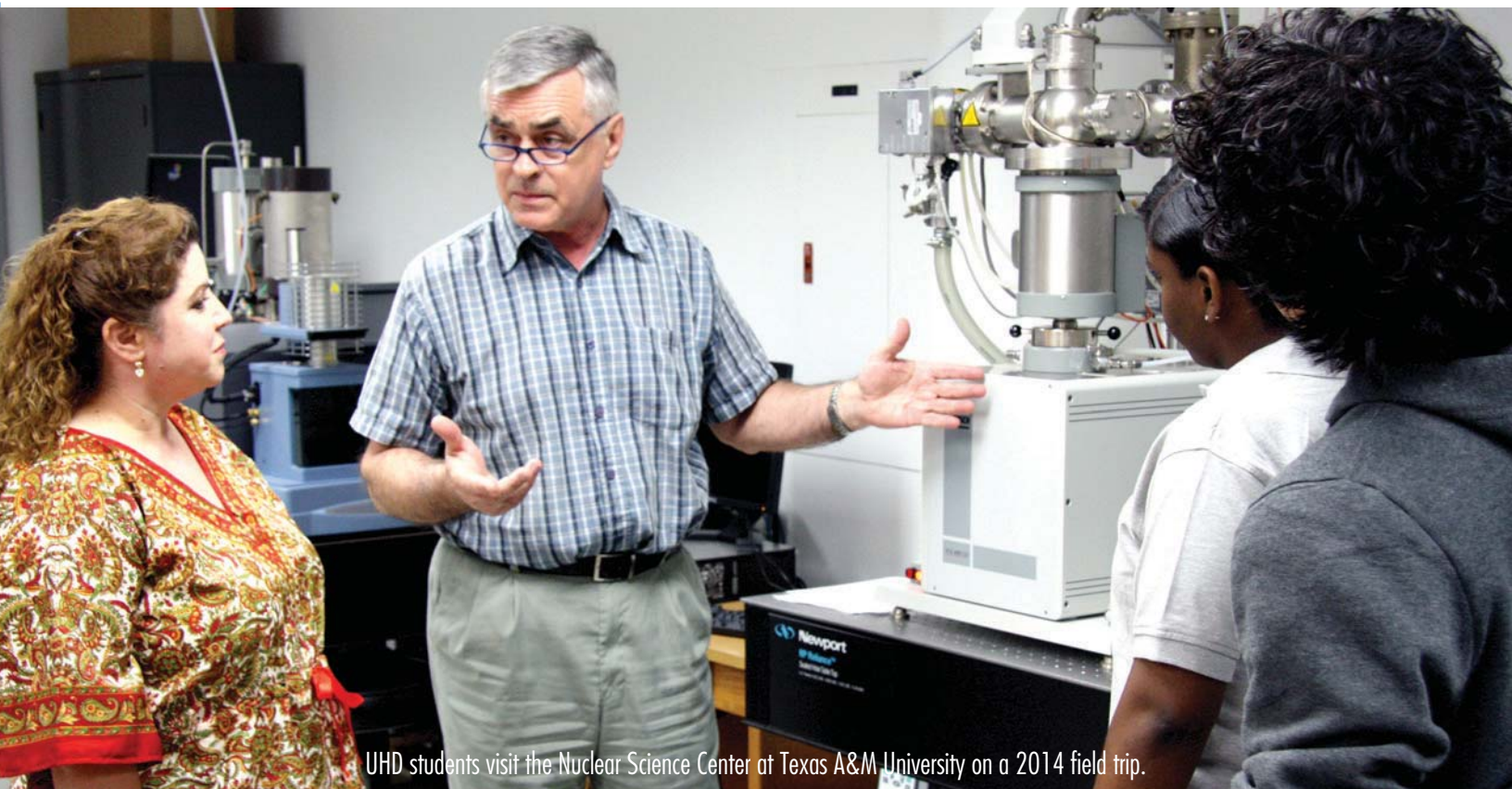
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"We know that we can treat suicidal patients effectively, but the goal in this research is to identify elements from each of these theories that might be leveraged to optimize treatment," Rufino said. "While some elements may lead to better short-term improvement, others may prove more effective over the long term. Ultimately, I am interested in determining and applying the treatment methodology that provides patients with the very best resources to succeed following discharge."

As part of her research, Rufino will assess patients using measures such as the Suicide Cognition Scale and the Working Alliance Inventory, both upon admission to the clinic and every two weeks during hospitalization. These instruments were specifically selected to provide insight into cognitive vulnerabilities to suicide and the role of patients' relationships with their therapists in promoting therapeutic change.

"We know that the post-discharge time frame for suicidal patients is a critical one," Rufino said. "Because these individuals are transitioning from a highly structured environment to what is often a more stressful home environment, it is important that we employ the interventions that will best ensure their continued improvement over the short and long term."

Rufino plans to present her findings in the spring at the annual conference of the American Association of Suicidology. 



UHD students visit the Nuclear Science Center at Texas A&M University on a 2014 field trip.

## PREPARING NUCLEAR SCIENTISTS

### NRC GRANT ENSURES SCHOLARSHIPS, RESEARCH TO SUPPORT STEM PIPELINE

By Claire Caton

A new five-year, \$850,000 grant from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) will do more than ensure scholarships and state-of-the-art research for minorities — it will help propel Houston's future nuclear scientists.

The grant, "Preparing Minorities for Nuclear-Related Jobs Through Research and Certification," will provide undergraduates with extensive exposure to nuclear-related jobs through field trips and seminars, in addition to mentored nuclear-related research experiences in radiochemistry, control and instrumentation, math, physics, and material sciences.

The grant will support more than 50 students in UHD's Scholars Academy, an academically competitive program in the College of Sciences & Technology that promotes scholarship and success for undergraduates majoring in STEM fields. The grant also will fund students' completion of the five-course Texas A&M Nuclear Power Institute (NPI) online certificate program, which will enhance their qualifications to enter nuclear power plant jobs and nuclear engineering studies following graduation.

In exchange for this specialized study, participating students will

commit to working in nuclear-related STEM jobs for six months per year of their grant-supported training.

In addition to NPI, UHD will continue its close working relationship with Texas A&M University's Nuclear Engineering Department, The University of Texas Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences at Houston, the South Texas Project Nuclear Operating Company and the Comanche Peak Nuclear Power Plant as partners on the grant.

Mary Jo Parker, Ed.D., executive director of Scholars Academy at UHD, will direct the program and serve as its principal investigator, with UHD professors Mian Jiang, Ph.D., Maria Benavides, Ph.D., Weining Feng, Ph.D., and Katarina Jegdic, Ph.D., serving as co-principal investigators.

"This NRC grant award provides invaluable opportunities for students to learn from doctorate-level UHD and Texas A&M professors and experience firsthand the emerging field of nuclear science, while also bolstering Houston's pipeline of future nuclear science leaders," Parker said. "From the study of computational chemistry, nanosensors and radiation therapy to the modeling of radioactive elements in the laboratory, the knowledge and skills our students will gain through this NRC award will help to pave their scientific and engineering futures." **UHD**

# A BEACON OF HOPE

## UHD PROFESSOR LEADS STUDENTS IN SERVING HOUSTON'S HOMELESS

By Amanda Jackson

It is 6 a.m. on a Friday morning in September, and downtown Houston is beginning to awaken as corporate executives, construction workers and public defenders make their way into position for the day. On Prairie Street, dozens of the city's homeless are lined up outside The Beacon Day Center, waiting for the doors to open with the sunrise. I enter the center through the volunteer entrance at the back of the building, sign in at the desk and take a quick tour before the doors open at 6:30.

When that moment arrives, the crowd files in to check in at the front desk, providing a name and last four digits of their Social Security number or birthdate, whichever they can recall. The group is made up largely of men, but there are many women and young children among them as well. One gentleman walks in with the assistance of two friends who say his wheelchair was stolen overnight.

Inside they line up again to use the showers, go to the restroom and turn in their laundry. While they wait for lunch to be served, some rest their eyes while others enjoy a cup of coffee, chat with a neighbor or prop open a book.

"This is often the only safe opportunity they have to sleep," says Paul Mandell, Ph.D., assistant professor of Spanish and co-founder of the

center. "On the streets, you can't close your eyes. If you do, you run the risk of someone stealing what little belongings you have. Our clients know this is a safe space and a friendly community, so they seize the chance to rest their bodies."

In January 2004, Mandell was the director of mission and outreach at Christ Church Cathedral. The church was running a capital campaign to raise funds

for a number of new initiatives. As with all of its capital campaigns, Christ Church Cathedral included an outreach opportunity as one of the new initiatives.

"Originally we wanted to find out how to best serve the street community by augmenting the services already available to them," Mandell says.

The church held panel discussions with other homeless service organizations, which identified a need for medical services. Attendees determined that people living on the streets are more likely to seek medical

attention when paired with services they perceive as more urgent, like food and showers.

The Beacon followed through to meet those needs and began operation in January 2007. The center now offers laundry services, private showers and lavatories, hot meals, and case management services for more than 600 people daily, five days a week. Led by acclaimed chef Mike Puccio,



Wallace Wilson (clockwise from left); Amanda Jackson; Eisha Khan; Thomas Canny; Paul Mandell, Ph.D.; Katy De La O; and Eduardo Abrams prepare for an early-morning shift at The Beacon Day Center.

the industrial kitchen serves a nutritious lunch each day, including a choice of two hot entrees, fresh vegetables, fruit or garden salad, and bread baked in-house. Today, members of the Military Veteran Peer Network are preparing a beef roast and chopping vegetables for lunchtime.

With only eight paid staff members, the center relies heavily on volunteers, and the community has responded faithfully. In fact, there is a waiting list for corporations and civic organizations seeking to serve on the weekend shifts. The 6:30 a.m. weekday shift is the most challenging to fill, but the core of regular morning volunteers is growing, thanks in part to Mandell. He has encouraged and recruited many of his students to participate in the important work happening at The Beacon. Sophomore Eisha Khan learned about the center as a freshman.

“I was trying to find new ways to plug in and get involved at UHD,” Khan says as we fold a pile of white towels in the laundry room. “Dr. Mandell introduced me to The Beacon, and I just fell in love with this place and all that it represents. I knew I had to get more and more people involved in this work.”

Khan, who is active in several student organizations on campus, followed through with her promise. Now she and her peers from the United Nations Association (UNA) chapter at UHD serve every Friday morning, folding laundry or prepping food in the kitchen. The UNA-UHD chapter writes reports about the organizations for which they volunteer so they might bring global attention to these local efforts and, in turn, create opportunities for networking, expansion and funding.

In the spring, the UNA officers will travel to Turkey to participate in Model UN debates, volunteer with several organizations and write similar reports. The trip is sponsored in part by a grant that Khan and her peers secured from the Raindrop Foundation, an organization whose mission is to introduce Turkish culture into American society, cultivate friendship and promote the understanding of diverse cultures through its unique services to the community.

This morning, I’m joining the UNA team as they collect mesh bags of clothing, undergarments, socks and blankets from clients to be washed



On the streets, you can’t close your eyes. If you do, you run the risk of someone stealing what little belongings you have. Our clients know this is a safe space and a friendly community, so they seize the chance to rest their bodies.

— Paul Mandell, Ph.D.,  
assistant professor of Spanish



I was trying to find new ways to plug in and get involved at UHD. Dr. Mandell introduced me to The Beacon, and I just fell in love with this place and all that it represents. I knew I had to get more and more people involved in this work.

— Eisha Khan, sophomore



in the industrial laundry room. Flo Hargrove Ray, one of The Beacon’s longest-serving volunteers, shows me the ropes.

“Each client is limited to an 8-pound bag,” Ray says. “The washing machine can handle about 40 pounds per load, which we weigh on the scale next to the folding table. We won’t be able to take as many loads today because we’re down to one washer.”


The Beacon can typically process laundry for more than 100 clients each day, but today will be limited because two of three washing machines are out of order. A sign taped to the side indicates they are waiting for new parts to come in. One of the dryers is also in disrepair. The flame above the cylinder goes out every few minutes, and we have to open and shut the door to restart it.

These are typical challenges for a nonprofit, but things are looking up, as the center recently secured significant grant funds for facilities management. Volunteer coordinator Zachary Hubenak says crucial repairs and more will be made when the center shuts down for renovation next week.

“We’ll be closed for three weeks to replace and repair some broken equipment, even out some imperfections in the foundation, and move the front entrance to another street,” Hubenak says.

Apparently, some of the neighboring businesses have complained about the crowds forming outside the building.

“These changes are important to improving the quality of service we can provide,” Hubenak says. “But I worry about where they will all go while we’re closed. These are resourceful people, though. I’m hopeful they’ll make their way.”

The Beacon’s clients will have a challenging few weeks ahead of them, but I believe they will find peace in knowing that this bright light in downtown Houston will be out only temporarily. 

Learn more about the work of The Beacon and get involved by visiting [www.beaconhomeless.org](http://www.beaconhomeless.org).



Students rehearse for a Driven Theater Company production. Rachel Dickson developed the company to examine trends and empower change.

## DRIVEN THEATER COMPANY

### COMMUNICATION LECTURER USES DRAMA TO GIVE A VOICE TO HOUSTON'S YOUTH

By Amanda Jackson

**W**ith a Master of Social Work and a Master of Fine Arts, UHD Communication Lecturer Rachel Dickson has found a way to marry the creative with the scholarly in her study and in the community.

An actor, director and writer, Dickson performed children's theater in Chicago before moving to Houston. As she studied the theater scene in her new city, she saw a void that she was confident she could fill.

"To my knowledge, there wasn't a youth program that was using theater to examine the specific issues faced by young people today," Dickson said.

In 2010, Dickson responded by establishing the 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization Driven Theater Company. Her vision was to develop a space where young people and adults could use the power of theater to examine trends found in statistical data, address social issues, and empower change in their own lives and the lives of others.

"When we're producing a show, my No. 1 priority is to challenge all the parts — from the writers and actors to the designers and audience — to dig deep and access the things that are otherwise difficult to discuss: things that hurt, that are uncomfortable, or even just boring," Dickson said.

The first presentation was *Fragmentations*, a series of vignettes written by teen dramatists that explores issues such as relationships, alcoholism, domestic violence, overmedication and death.

After some examination, Dickson determined that her service would be a benefit to other nonprofit and professional organizations, and she moved Driven to a primarily conference-based model. Businesses and institutions hire the company either to mount a piece addressing the topics to be covered during a conference or to present an original theatrical work developed directly from information gathered during the conference.



UHD First Lady Noël Bezette-Flores, Ph.D., and lecturer Rachel Dickson gather with students in the Texan French Alliance's *From a Space to a Place* program after their art performances at Discovery Green park.

Students in Driven Theater Company's summer intensive program play with props before a show.



Dickson's clients have included social service organizations, youth summer programs and juvenile justice conferences.

During summer 2015, Driven partnered with Change Happens and the Texan French Alliance for the Arts' *From a Space to a Place* program, which focuses on integrating art into the learning process during the summer camp experience. The high school participants created poems using newspaper articles on relevant topics, which they then developed into performance art pieces with direction from Dickson and the team of artists.

In Driven Theater Company's summer intensive program, a small troupe of actors ages 11-15 participate in master classes with professional dancers, playwrights and singers. Throughout this guided experience, youths create a theatrical performance that speaks to their personal truths and perform the play for other young people.

No matter the audience, theater has a way of bringing people together. "I don't think we as human beings get enough opportunities in the world to be on the same page," Dickson said. "So many things in our lives can be polarizing. But when a group unites to create something, they have one shared interest in that moment. From there, they often find they have a lot of other things in common, too."

Dickson plans to expand the program to create high-impact learning experiences for her students at UHD. Several of her students joined her team of professional actors and performers at UHD's Big Read community literary event in 2014, where they presented a series of vignettes that explored the racial and social issues in the novel *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines.

"The real impact of the program was the reaction of the young audience," UHD senior Paula Oliveira said. "Theater is a powerful means by which we can raise awareness about real issues in our community and make a difference." **UFD**

Learn more about Driven Theater Company at [www.driventheater.org](http://www.driventheater.org).

# UHD JOINS HOUSTON INSTITUTIONS IN WHITE HOUSE INITIATIVE FOR HISPANICS

By Amanda Jackson

The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, which was established by President George H. W. Bush in 1990 to address the educational disparities faced by the Hispanic community, marked its 25th anniversary in September. In commemoration of this milestone, the Department of Education launched the campaign “Anniversary Year of Action: Fulfilling America’s Future,” encouraging private and public institutions and service organizations to make individual commitments to invest in the creation or expansion of quality educational programming for Hispanics throughout the nation.

UHD was among the leading Houston institutions that answered the call. Together the organizations announced several commitments totaling more than \$11 million to further support and advance the educational attainment of Houston’s Hispanic community.

“The commitments announced by Houston’s public and private leaders will help us tackle the critical education challenges Hispanics face from cradle to career,” said Alejandra Ceja, the initiative’s executive director. “Investing in our Latino students is not only the smart thing to do, but it is also the right thing to do to strengthen our country’s economy and global competitiveness. In order to continue leveling the playing field for Latinos and ensure our nation’s vitality, we must continue to invest in their educational advancement.”

UHD has committed more than \$1.5 million to train future bilingual elementary educators in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects. Led by Poonam Gulati, Ph.D., associate professor of natural sciences, and Maria Bhattacharjee, Ed.D., associate professor of urban education, the UHD initiative has committed to developing 200 high-quality Hispanic STEM teachers over the next five years.

## Additional Collaborations

In addition to the STEM partnership, UHD is participating in five other commitments in the initiative. Gene Preuss, Ph.D., special assistant to the president and associate professor of history, is facilitating the following collaborations between UHD and other organizations:

- Youth Leadership Institute, in collaboration with the Houston National Hispanic Professional Organization, which has committed \$4.2 million

- Parent and Student Alliance (PASA), in collaboration with the Tejano Center for Community Concerns/Raul Yzaguirre School for Success, which has committed more than \$500,000
- Latino Education Summit, in collaboration with the American Latino Center for Research, Education & Justice, which has committed \$1.2 million
- Mi Familia Mi Futuro, in collaboration with Lone Star College, which has committed \$710,000
- Art Evolution Afterschool Program, in collaboration with Youth Genesis Consulting Inc., which has committed \$350,000

In October, Bill Flores, Ph.D., president of UHD, and Preuss attended an event at the White House commemorating the initiative’s 25th anniversary. UHD was one of 150 institutions to receive recognition at the ceremony, which featured U.S. President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden.



Gene Preuss, Ph.D., is facilitating collaborations between UHD and other organizations as part of the White House Initiative.

# WHITE HOUSE INITIATIVE on EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE FOR HISPANICS



Poonam Gulati (from left), Ph.D., associate professor of natural sciences; Alexandra Ceja, executive director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics; Jaqueline Cortez Wang, senior advisor with the initiative; and Maria Bhattacharjee, Ed.D., associate professor of urban education, represent UHD at the opening ceremony for the initiative.

## Investing in the Future

As Hispanics rapidly become the ethnic majority in Texas and Houston, Flores believes that investing in and helping to educate future Hispanic scientists, engineers and health professionals will help keep Houston's economy strong and growing.

"As a federally designated Hispanic Serving Institution — with more than 40 percent of our student population being Hispanic — it is important that we support this critical White House Initiative and lead by example," Flores said. "Along with our community partners, UHD is involved in several White House Initiative efforts throughout Houston, and we are proud that our STEM program was selected to support the initiative."

Through the proposed program, UHD science students will work alongside Hispanic pre-service teachers (PSTs) to help them improve their confidence in the use of inquiry-based teaching techniques and scientific methodology in the classroom. Participants in the program will use these methods to teach two hours of science lessons weekly at either Crockett Elementary or Braeburn Elementary, both of which have a 95 percent Hispanic student population. In addition to weekly lessons, UHD students will lead the development of science clubs at each of the elementary schools.

The project aims to improve the science teaching methodology of elementary school teachers in training and help science majors develop a deeper understanding of scientific concepts through teaching while encouraging both to commit to serving the community. As a result, the commitment leaders believe that students at Crockett and Braeburn will demonstrate an increased interest in science and STEM-related careers. Each of these outcomes will be measured by pre- and post-program surveys.

"Our initiative will prepare children to be proactive in solving problems — such as food security, nutrition and obesity — that affect their daily lives," Bhattacharjee said. "We can no longer wait for the government to rescue the Hispanic community. We have to find ways to increase capacity and be active agents in seeking solutions to our challenges. I hope that UHD will be a leader in providing students with opportunities to apply their skills to build a community that we all can be proud of. Working together, we can create a better future for our children and our country."

To further support these goals, the program plans to secure grant funds to establish the Summer STEM Institute to educate and train future and current teachers and peer leaders in STEM-focused methodology. **UHD**

For more information about the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, visit [sites.ed.gov/hispanic-initiative](https://sites.ed.gov/hispanic-initiative).

## The Future Starts Here

Opening new doors of opportunity, UHD completed work in December on a new 26,000-square-foot Welcome Center/Student Services Center. As the entry point for students, families and visitors, the 15,000-square-foot Welcome Center offers a sweeping view of the Houston skyline and rooms for tours and meetings. The adjacent 11,000-square foot Student Services Center includes Academic Admissions, Testing Services, Disabled

Student Services and Veterans Services, further establishing Level 3 of this and two adjoining buildings as a one-stop services center supporting prospective and current students. UHD's O'Kane Gallery also will relocate into a larger space within this new area. The University of Houston System Board of Regents and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board approved the project in 2013.

