



**College of Health  
Professions**  
*Outstanding  
Student Awards*  
**2026**



**TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY**  
College of Health Professions

# Vision

The vision of Texas State University's College of Health Professions is to be recognized for educating healthcare professionals who can recognize, respond, and mitigate current and future healthcare challenges and disparities in our diverse society.



# Mission

The College of Health Professions educates and prepares healthcare professionals with innovative teaching, evidence based practice and principles, and a commitment to life-long learning in a student-centered environment. The College excels in teaching, clinical practice, scholarship, and service while responding to the diverse healthcare needs of the State of Texas, the nation, and the global community. The College unites faculty, students, communities, and consumers in coalitions to expand the body of knowledge in healthcare practice and management.



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TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

College of Health Professions

## Welcome

Dr. M. Gary Sayed, Dean

## Lunch

### Presentation of Outstanding Academic Student Awards:

Department of Communication Disorders

Dr. Farzan Irani, Chair

School of Health Administration

Dr. Cristian Lieneck, Interim Associate Dean and Director

Department of Health Informatics & Information  
Management

Dr. David Gibbs, Chair

Health Sciences

Dr. Marla Erbin-Roesemann, Interim Director

Medical Laboratory Science Program

Dr. Rodney Rohde, Chair

St. David's School of Nursing

Dr. Theresa Garcia, Director

Department of Physical Therapy

Dr. Karen Gibbs, Interim Chair

Radiation Therapy Program

Dr. Megan Trad, Chair (represented by Ms. Jessica Smith)

Department of Respiratory Care

Dr. Chris Russian, Interim Chair

Closing Remarks

Dr. M. Gary Sayed, Dean

# Outstanding Academic Undergraduate Student 2026



**Nitza Anelle Salas**  
**Communication Disorders**



During Nitza Anelle Salas's time at Texas State University, she has worked hard to maintain a strong commitment to her academics, leadership, and service in the Communication Disorders program. She has been on both the Dean's and President's Lists. Over the past two years, she has managed the commute to the Round Rock campus from San Marcos, which, along with keeping up with her studies and responsibilities, has strengthened her time management skills and helped her become more organized, responsible, and disciplined. She has learned to carefully plan her schedule to balance the travel and coursework.

She has had the privilege to serve as an officer for the National Student Speech Language Hearing Association (NSSLHA) and as the Instagram Manager for the Department of Communication Disorders, promoting student engagement and recognizing our department's excellence. She has also enjoyed volunteering at the Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Storytime events, where she modeled AAC, which is a form of communication used to support and enhance an individual's ability to communicate, rather than replace it, for individuals with communication disorders. She is passionate about pursuing a career as a Speech-Language Pathologist, working with children in the pediatric setting or in the NICU, focusing on feeding and swallowing.



# Outstanding Academic Graduate Student 2026



**Baylie Baccinelli**  
**Communication Disorders**



Baylie Baccinelli earned her undergraduate degree from Texas Lutheran University, where she majored in Psychology and minored in Statistics while also competing as a collegiate volleyball athlete. Balancing the demands of academics and athletics taught her valuable lessons in discipline, perseverance, and time management. She graduated in 2023, proud of the experiences and growth she gained both inside and outside of the classroom.

In the fall of 2023, she began the leveling program at Texas State University, which allowed her to further develop her academic foundation and prepare for graduate study. During this time, she joined Dr. Resendiz's bilingual research team. Through this experience, she worked on coding interviews conducted with autistic individuals, which strengthened her research skills and deepened her appreciation for culturally and linguistically responsive practices. Being part of this research team reinforced her passion for inclusive work and for serving diverse populations.

Alongside her academic and research experiences, she has been actively involved in student organizations and service opportunities. She is a member of the National Student Speech Language Hearing Association (NSSLHA) and SERTOMA. Through these organizations, she has enjoyed volunteering at community events and participating in service initiatives that allow her to give back while developing leadership and professional skills. These experiences have been incredibly meaningful and have contributed to her personal and professional growth.

She officially began graduate school in the fall of 2024, and it has been one of the best decisions she has ever made. At Texas State, she has been fortunate to be surrounded by an exceptional cohort and dedicated faculty who continually support and challenge her learning. Throughout her graduate studies, she has maintained a 4.0 GPA while also working as a nanny for three children who have become family. During her first year, she also had the privilege of serving as the Graduate Student Representative, a role that allowed her to advocate for her peers and contribute to a supportive and collaborative graduate community.

As she looks toward the future, her goal is to work with a variety of populations across clinical settings. She is particularly interested in providing services related to feeding and dysphagia, cognition, and language. She hopes to use the knowledge and skills she gained throughout her training to support individuals with diverse needs and to make a meaningful impact on their quality of life. Outside of her academic pursuits, she enjoys expressing her creativity through crafts and spending time with friends and family.

She is incredibly grateful to accept this award and considers it a great honor. She would not be where she is today without the guidance and support of her mentors, faculty, classmates, friends, and family. This recognition motivates her to continue striving for excellence and to move forward with confidence and purpose in her academic and professional journey.

**Outstanding Academic Undergraduate Student  
2026**



**Audrie Hart**  
**Health Administration**





Audrie Hart has been named SOHA's Outstanding Undergraduate Student. She was selected by faculty in recognition of her leadership and academic excellence in the classroom. Audrie was inducted into the Upsilon Phi Delta Honor Society this past December and is also the recipient of the 2025 Mark Thomas Noone Outstanding HA Undergraduate Scholarship.

Audrie is born and raised in San Marcos, Texas. She is a non-traditional student whose academic journey is rooted in perseverance, purpose, and a strong commitment to family. She is happily married to her husband, and together they are raising their four children. After earning her Associate Degree in Health Science from Austin Community College in 2023, Audrie chose to continue her education at Texas State University, where she is currently a senior in the Bachelor of Healthcare Administration program and preparing to graduate in May 2026.

Audrie pursued Healthcare Administration out of a passion for making a meaningful and lasting impact within the healthcare system. Her professional goal is to obtain a leadership position within a long-term care facility. While long-term care settings are often viewed negatively, Audrie believes they present significant opportunities for compassionate leadership and high-quality care.

Through the education, mentorship, and support she has received from faculty and peers at Texas State University, she is confident in her ability to help reshape the perception of nursing homes by fostering environments grounded in dignity, respect, and excellence—values she has learned and observed throughout her academic journey. Audrie remains committed to continued growth, leadership, and service and looks forward to making a meaningful difference in the lives of those she serves throughout her career.



**Outstanding Academic Graduate Student  
2026**



**Melina Wenke**  
**Health Administration**





Melina Wenke has been named SOHA's Outstanding Graduate Student. She was selected by faculty in recognition of her service, leadership in the classroom, and academic performance. She is also the recipient of the 2025 Bernard and Irma Rappaport Outstanding Graduate Scholarship.

Melina is in her final year of the Master of Health Administration (MHA) program at Texas State University and is also a proud alumna of the Bachelor of Health Administration (BHA) program. Over the past six years at Texas State, Melina has developed a strong foundation in healthcare administration through rigorous coursework and the unwavering support of the School of Health Administration faculty.

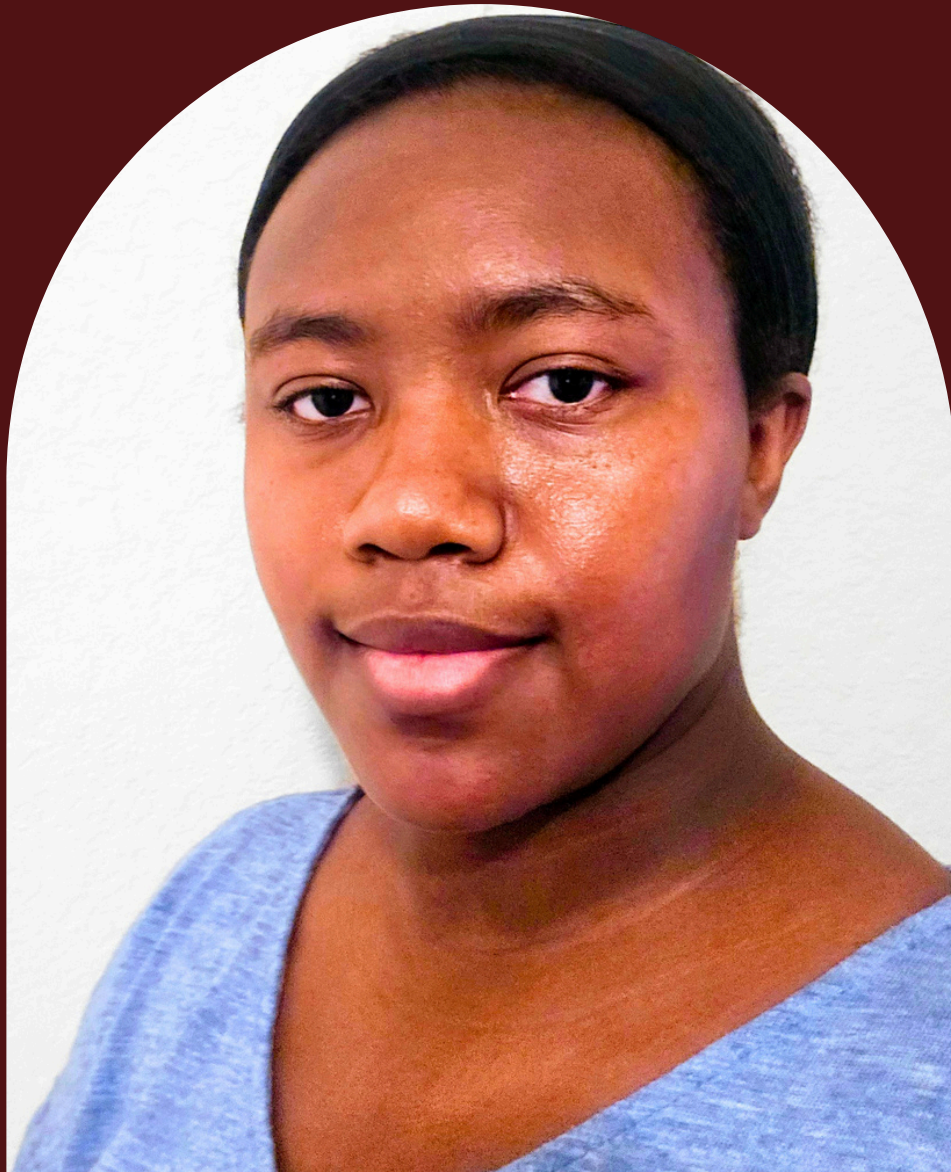
Continuing her education at Texas State after completing her undergraduate degree was an easy decision, as the dedication and commitment of her professors consistently exceeded expectations. She credits much of her academic success and perseverance to the faculty and staff who continually go above and beyond for their students. Melina remains committed to academic excellence, maintaining an overall GPA of 3.64.

As she prepares for graduation in May 2026, Melina is completing her final semester through a professional field placement at Ageless Men's Health, where she currently serves as a Clinic Manager. In this role, she oversees daily clinic operations, revenue cycle processes, and compliance initiatives while supporting patient-centered care. Following graduation, she plans to remain with the organization and continue growing in her managerial role, with a strong interest in expanding her expertise in healthcare marketing and operations.

She looks forward to working closely with organizational leadership to support long-term growth and success while applying the knowledge gained through the MHA program.



**Outstanding Academic Undergraduate Student  
2026**



**Le'chele Price**  
**Health Informatics & Information Management**





Le'chele Ce'aria Price is currently a senior at Texas State University pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Health Information Management (HIM). She is expected to graduate in May 2026. Throughout her time at Texas State, she has developed a strong interest in how healthcare organizations manage, protect, and use patient information to support quality care. Health information management combines technology, healthcare, and data, and she enjoys learning how these areas work together to keep healthcare systems running efficiently and securely.

During her studies, she has gained knowledge in several areas of health information management, including electronic health records (EHR), healthcare data quality, medical coding principles, and patient privacy regulations. One of the most important things she has learned is how essential accurate and secure health records are for both healthcare providers and patients. Health information professionals play a key role behind the scenes, making sure information is organized, protected, and accessible when it is needed for patient care.



As part of her degree program, Le'chele completed a Professional Practice Experience (PPE) internship with Ascension Seton Healthcare. This internship gave her the opportunity to see how the concepts she learned in class are applied in a real healthcare setting. She observed how medical records are managed and how HIM professionals work to maintain the integrity and confidentiality of patient information. Being able to learn from professionals in the field helped her better understand the day-to-day responsibilities of a health information department and strengthened her interest in pursuing this career.

Outside of school, she currently works part-time as a Level 1 Security Officer at a food production facility. In this role, she helps monitor the safety of the facility, observe security systems, and respond to potential safety concerns. While this job is not directly in healthcare, it has helped her build skills that are very important in health information management, such as responsibility, attention to detail, and the ability to remain calm in different situations. These skills are especially valuable when working with sensitive information that must remain private and protected.

Looking ahead, she plans to continue building her professional qualifications after graduating. One of her goals is to take the Registered Health Information Administrator (RHIA) exam to become certified. She also plans to continue her education in Fall 2026 by pursuing a master's degree in Health Information Security. As healthcare systems rely more heavily on digital records and technology, protecting patient data from security threats has become increasingly important.

Le'chele's long-term goal is to work in healthcare cybersecurity and eventually move into leadership roles where she can help organizations strengthen their information security strategies. She believes that protecting patient information is a critical part of maintaining trust between healthcare providers and the communities they serve.

Overall, she is excited to begin her career in health information management and contribute to the future of healthcare information systems. Le'chele looks forward to continuing to learn, grow professionally, and help ensure that healthcare data remains accurate, secure, and accessible for those who rely on it.



**Outstanding Academic Graduate Student  
2026**



**Trizzie Nguyen**  
**Health Informatics & Information Management**





Trizzie Nguyen's healthcare career was shaped by personal challenges that led her to pursue a career in healthcare operations. Not only did those challenges strengthen her resilience, but they also inspired her to pursue her love of education. During her third year of college, she was diagnosed with lupus nephritis. Over time, the disease affected her kidneys, caused her kidneys to fail, and ultimately led her to have a kidney transplant. That life-changing experience caused her to step away from pursuing a pharmacy degree and rethink how she could still use her background in biology to make a meaningful impact on patients.

During her time as a patient, Trizzie noticed the vast amount of services and charges billed for her treatment. She reviewed her billing statements and realized they were filled with unfamiliar letters and numbers; she did not fully understand what those items or descriptions meant. She became curious about how those codes translated into the services that she received. What was this seemingly foreign language? Her curiosity led her to apply to a medical coding program at a community college, where she learned how to code and understand the importance of accurate billing and documentation. It also opened the door to a career in medical coding and billing.

Trizzie is now a healthcare professional with over 13 years of experience in medical coding auditing, billing compliance, and provider education across multiple healthcare settings. She currently works as a Senior Revenue Integrity Educator at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. In this role, she supports the revenue integrity medicine team by researching complex coding, documentation, and reimbursement inquiries from physicians and clinical departments. She also performs quality assurance reviews to ensure medical record documentation appropriately supports diagnoses, procedures, and services rendered, and that billing practices remain accurate and compliant with payer policies and government regulations.

In addition to her quality assurance work, Trizzie is passionate about education and collaboration. She develops and delivers training for physicians and clinical departments across a wide range of specialties, including Internal Medicine, Emergency Medicine, Radiology, Neurology, Pediatrics, and Psychiatry. She also partners with the compliance team to identify documentation risks and help develop practical solutions and action plans, which may include updated workflows and targeted education.



Earlier in her career, Trizzie worked as an Investigator Auditor with Blue Cross Blue Shield of Texas, where she audited inpatient and outpatient medical records to evaluate medical necessity and investigated potential improper billing practices. That experience working with both commercial and government payers, along with provider-facing work, helped her develop a well-rounded, real-world understanding of revenue cycle operations and healthcare compliance.

Trizzie holds a bachelor's degree in biology from the University of Texas at Austin and is currently pursuing a Master of Health Informatics at Texas State University. She is also a member of two National College Honor Societies, Alpha Chi and Phi Kappa Phi. She's especially interested in how data and technology can improve healthcare operations, and her goal is expanding her career in revenue cycle management by combining her coding expertise with informatics and analytics to support more strategic, data-driven decision-making.

Outside of work and school, Trizzie enjoys golf and boxing; these hobbies bring balance to her life, helping her recharge physically and mentally. Trizzie also loves traveling to explore new places and try new local foods whenever she goes.



**Outstanding Academic Undergraduate  
Student  
2026**



**Omar Enrique Gomez  
Health Sciences**



Growing up in Laredo, Texas, a primarily Hispanic border town, taught Omar Gomez the importance of culture, family, empathy, and *fuerza* while exposing him to the health disparities that shaped his community. Listening to his father, a firefighter/EMS, describe how the limited healthcare structure affected public health gave him a purpose rooted in humility and service.

When Omar began his studies in Health Sciences at Texas State University, he was excited to learn the realities of healthcare, yet as a first-generation student adjusting to an unfamiliar environment, he also wrestled with doubt about his place and possibilities for careers in healthcare.

Although Omar was not sure of his path, he took advantage of opportunities that allowed him to explore health professions and devoted himself to his studies and service to others. He currently serves as President of MedLife, a student organization dedicated to providing medicine, education, and sustainable development initiatives to underserved communities around the world. He has coordinated fundraising events, engaged students in service opportunities, and actively worked to expand awareness and participation within the organization.

According to Dr. Michael Kumura, who nominated Omar for this award, he has consistently demonstrated strong academic performance, thoughtful engagement in class discussions, and professionalism in all interactions. He is prepared, inquisitive, and takes clear ownership of his learning both in and outside the classroom. Omar supports his peers, fosters collaboration, and represents the Health Sciences program with integrity and professionalism.

Texas State has allowed Omar to grow through exposure to a variety of experiences and learn more about himself in the process. Now, as his time at Texas State ends, Omar has decided that his calling is in the field of nursing. A nursing degree will allow him to protect humanity by serving those who are unable to serve themselves. In the fall, he will continue his healthcare education journey and enter the accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing program at UT Health Sciences in Houston and a Master of Science in Nursing program at Johns Hopkins University.



**Outstanding Academic Undergraduate Student  
2026**



**Skyler Jade Ramdeen  
Medical Laboratory Science**





Skyler Jade Ramdeen came to Texas State University in 2022 as an international student from Trinidad and Tobago to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Medical Laboratory Science. Leaving home to study in the United States was both a courageous and purposeful decision, rooted in her passion for science and her desire to contribute meaningfully to healthcare.

In Trinidad and Tobago, there is no established Medical Laboratory Sciences (MLS) degree pathway equivalent to the one offered in the United States. Skyler recognized this gap in advanced laboratory education and thus strengthened her decision to attend Texas State University. By earning her MLS degree, Skyler hopes not only to advance her career but also to advocate for greater recognition, development, and expansion of the profession in her home country.

Skyler currently serves as President of Texas State Society of Medical Laboratory Science (SMLS). She was the first junior in the MLS program's history to be entrusted with the senior officer position as Social Media Chair. She also served as Vice President of the Texas State Microbiology Club and previously held the role of social media officer. In these positions, she has organized meetings, promoted professional development, and actively advocated for the MLS profession at outreach events such as Bobcat Days. Her leadership reflects her commitment to increasing awareness and recognition of laboratory professionals.

As an international student, she understood the challenges of adapting to a new country and its academic system. She strives to support, encourage, and welcome other international students by sharing her experiences and offering guidance in their journey. She proudly and continuously represented Trinidad and Tobago in international flag day parades hosted by TXST International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS), carrying her country's flag as a celebration of culture and identity.

Skyler served as a former Instructional Assistant for Principles of Microbiology where she taught laboratory fundamentals and aided students in understanding real-world applications of microbiology. She also served as a research student under the Texas State MLS program. Research, led by Dr. Adeyemi Olanrewaju, on Dengue virus therapeutics has earned multiple awards, including first place at the 2025 TXST STEM Conference, first place at the Texas Association for Clinical Laboratory Science (TACLS) 2025 Annual Meeting and third place at the College of Health Professions (CHP) Research Forum.

This research granted various publications in scientific journals. Coming from a country where Dengue fever is prevalent, she has witnessed firsthand how infectious diseases impact families and communities, which strengthened her desire to contribute to accurate diagnostics and meaningful research.

Skyler holds honorary memberships with Alpha Chi National Honor Society and The National Society of Collegiate Scholars (NSCS). She is a consistent Dean's List honoree and was also awarded the Cardinal Health Scholarship, Texas State Distinguished Scholarship and Good Neighbor Scholarship.

Skyler is deeply grateful to her family in Trinidad and Tobago for their unwavering support and sacrifices, which have made her educational journey possible. She also extends her heartfelt appreciation to her professors and mentors at Texas State for their guidance and encouragement. After graduation, she plans to earn her American Society for Clinical Pathology (ASCP)



**Outstanding Academic Undergraduate Student  
2026**



**Christian Brown**  
**Nursing**





Throughout his nursing program, Christian Brown has demonstrated remarkable growth, resilience, and commitment to clinical excellence. Entering the program with limited healthcare experience aside from his phlebotomy certification, Christian was aware that he faced a significant learning curve. Instead of being discouraged, he approached this challenge with determination, discipline, and a strong desire to evolve into a competent and compassionate nurse. Through late-night studying, early-morning clinical preparation, and the additional experience gained as a nurse extern, Christian has not only met but exceeded his own expectations for professional development.

Christian has developed a strong understanding of what it means to progress from novice to competent practitioner. More importantly, he has cultivated a practice grounded in human dignity, mutual respect, and genuine care—values that extend far beyond clinical obligation. He consistently works to understand patients holistically, listening attentively and communicating effectively to identify their needs and intervene appropriately. His ability to remain present, engaged, and patient-focused has strengthened his relationships with both patients and interdisciplinary team members.

One of Christian's most notable strengths is his capacity to anticipate clinical deterioration before it escalates into a crisis. This ability reflects a high level of situational awareness, critical thinking, and confidence at the bedside. Through hands-on practice and mentorship from experienced nurses, Christian has learned to recognize subtle changes in patient condition, respond quickly, and advocate appropriately. These qualities will serve him exceptionally well as he transitions into critical care nursing. He has demonstrated the readiness, clinical judgment, and dedication necessary to contribute meaningfully to positive patient outcomes in high-acuity settings.

Christian's leadership extends beyond the clinical environment and into meaningful service within the nursing community. As the Vice President of the Black Healthcare Association (BHA), he played a vital role in transforming ideas into action. Christian collaborated closely with organizational leaders to maintain strict oversight of finances, ensuring responsible use of funds and alignment with the organization's mission. His leadership style is grounded in humility, coachability, and collaboration. Christian recognizes the importance of delegating responsibility when appropriate, supporting teammates, and maintaining open lines of communication. His approachable nature and willingness to receive and implement feedback have made him an effective and respected student leader.

During his time in BHA leadership, Christian helped coordinate major events, including Black History Month programming, community 5K volunteer efforts, and local food drive participation. These contributions strengthened the organization's presence on campus and helped create opportunities for cultural engagement, service, and connection among healthcare students. Christian's leadership is rooted in a genuine commitment to uplifting others, promoting inclusivity, and contributing to a strong, supportive community.

Christian's commitment to service is evident both within and beyond the academic setting. He has consistently participated in community outreach events that promote health, wellness, and support for underserved populations. His volunteer efforts through the Black Healthcare Association, including local food drives and charity 5K events, demonstrate a sincere dedication to meeting community needs and promoting wellness in practical and meaningful ways. Christian also understands the impact of service within the nursing program itself. By supporting peers through shared study strategies, group collaboration, and encouragement, he contributes to a positive and uplifting learning environment for fellow nursing students. His efforts to strengthen the academic and emotional well-being of those around him reflect the true spirit of service and professional integrity.

Overall, Christian Brown embodies the qualities of an emerging nurse leader: compassionate, driven, reflective, and deeply committed to improving the lives of others. His clinical development, leadership experiences, and community involvement illustrate a forward-thinking professional who is prepared not only to excel in his nursing practice but also to meaningfully impact the patients, colleagues, and communities he will serve.



**Outstanding Academic Graduate Student  
2026**



**Dyniesha Bennett**  
**Nursing**





Dyniesha Bennett, BSN, RN, is a graduate student in the Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP) program at St. David's School of Nursing. She began her nursing career as a Licensed Vocational Nurse, progressively advancing her education from an associate degree to a Bachelor of Science in Nursing, ultimately becoming a Registered Nurse. She is now poised to transition into the Family Nurse Practitioner role upon completion of her Master of Science in Nursing (MSN), exemplifying perseverance, professional growth, and a strong commitment to lifelong learning.

Dyniesha has demonstrated high academic achievement throughout her graduate program, reflecting consistent excellence in scholarship and professional performance. In recognition of these accomplishments, she was inducted into Sigma, the international nursing honor society dedicated to advancing nursing research and developing global nurse leaders.

Her MSN Capstone project, Preventing Depression in Chronically Ill Pediatric Patients by Establishing Protocol: A Systematic Review, focused on identifying evidence-based interventions to support early identification and prevention of depression in chronically ill pediatric populations. Through a systematic review of the literature, her work emphasizes the importance of standardized protocols to improve mental health outcomes in this vulnerable group.

Throughout her time at Texas State University, Dyniesha served as a Faculty Student Governance Family Nurse Practitioner (FSG FNP) Student Representative, acting as a liaison between students and program leadership while advocating for student engagement and program improvement. In this role, she led fundraising initiatives and faculty award nominations, contributing to recognition and support within the program. Additionally, she developed a collaborative relationship with the TXST Music Department to provide ongoing support for the School of Nursing Hooding and Pinning Ceremony, demonstrating initiative, cross-departmental collaboration, and a commitment to enhancing an important academic milestone for graduating students.

Dyniesha is also a Texas Nurse Practitioners (TNP) student member, actively engaging with the state's professional organization whose mission is to empower nurse practitioners to advance the profession and improve the health of all Texans. Through TNP, she participated in the Health Policy Summit in Austin, where she met with legislative aides to discuss health policy priorities, further demonstrating her commitment to professional advocacy and informed civic engagement. She accomplished these academic, leadership, and service contributions while working as a Registered Nurse and House Supervisor within the CHRISTUS Health system, providing both administrative and clinical oversight.

In this role, she monitors operating room efficiency, oversees regulatory compliance and patient safety, serves as an escalation point for clinical, operational, and staffing concerns, participates in direct patient care, and leads rapid decision-making in high acuity and emergency situations.

Dyniesha Bennett exemplifies dedication, leadership, and service within the nursing profession. Her academic excellence, professional growth, and commitment to her peers and community reflect the values we celebrate today. As she prepares to transition into the Family Nurse Practitioner role, the St. David's School of Nursing faculty are proud to recognize her achievements and confident that Dyneisha will continue to make a positive impact.



# Outstanding Academic Doctoral Student 2026



**Albert Mercado**  
**Physical Therapy**



Albert Mercado entered the Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) program at Texas State University - Round Rock in 2023 after getting his undergraduate degree at Texas A&M University in College Station. He came to us with a strong background in physical therapy and patient care, with work experience as a physical therapy technician and as a home healthcare provider. This background laid a good foundation for Albert and helped him develop into a dedicated, patient-centered clinician over his three years in the physical therapy program. Now, as a third-year student, Albert is scheduled to graduate in May.

During his time in the DPT program, Albert excelled in the areas of scholarship, service, research, and clinical performance. In addition to being an exceptional all-around student and being formally recognized for excellence in academic performance, Albert exhibited high levels of professionalism, maturity, and leadership throughout the program, while working multiple jobs to support himself. Albert served as one of the Doctoral Instructional Assistants for the Texas State Physical Therapy Clinic, reliably taking on whatever tasks he was asked to perform. His strong work ethic and selflessness were routinely demonstrated in the Clinic through his interactions with clients as well as his work behind the scenes as he supported other Doctoral Instructional Assistants, students treating patients, and faculty working in the Clinic.

Albert routinely goes above and beyond in service to the department, his classmates, and the community. One specific example of this was his involvement in supporting the Pura Vida 5K fundraiser in support of the program's study abroad trip. Albert brought his own lawnmower from home to help set up the running course without even being asked! This kind of extra effort without expectation of recognition is indicative of how Albert operates with an emphasis on serving others.

Albert was also active in research during his time at Texas State. His student research group presented their findings at one state conference and one national conference, another example of him going above and beyond expectations.

During the past year, Albert has been working to complete his off-site, full-time clinical experiences. He chose to do his clinicals across several clinical settings – inpatient pediatric acute care, outpatient orthopedics and sports, inpatient adult rehabilitation, and outpatient pediatrics. In each setting, Albert was impressive, with his clinical instructors commenting on his knowledge, hands-on skill, compassion for others, and his overall dedication to the well-being of his patients. Even though he excelled in all these settings, Albert's heart is in pediatric care, having been inspired to become a physical therapist when his sister was born with MECP2 Duplication Syndrome, a rare neurodevelopmental disorder.

This experience exposed him early on to the power of compassionate, individualized, and highly skilled care. Albert has dedicated himself to exhibiting those same values as a DPT student. Because of all these reasons, the faculty of the Department of Physical Therapy are happy to name Albert Mercado as their Outstanding Student for 2026. They are very proud of Albert and know he will go out into the world and do great things!



**Outstanding Academic Undergraduate  
Student  
2026**



**Avery D'Nae Lozano  
Radiation Therapy**





Avery Lozano was born and raised in Nederland, Texas. Avery has always excelled in the classroom and has a passion for helping others. Throughout her life, she has dealt with many obstacles, including family cancer diagnoses. During her freshman year of high school, she learned her grandmother was diagnosed with lung cancer. Her grandmother courageously underwent treatment and now lives in remission with one less lung.

A few years later, and prior to the start of her senior year of high school, her mother began having health issues. She learned later that she had a mass on her ovary and was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Her mother, who is here with her today, successfully beat her diagnosis and lives in remission. Avery realizes how lucky she is to still have these important women in her life today, but she also recognizes that not everyone is as fortunate. Early in her education, she knew she wanted to go into healthcare like her mom and help others during a difficult time in their lives. Avery found it fitting to pursue a specialty that is near and dear to her heart.

Once she got to Texas State, she began working towards her goal of gaining a spot in the Radiation Therapy Program while also working in the Vice President of Information Technology (VPIT)'s office for her two years on the San Marcos campus. During this time, she received the Student Employee of the Year Honorable Mention award.

Once she received the exciting news of her admission to the radiation program, she moved to Round Rock and has worked diligently in the classroom and clinic to become an exceptional radiation therapist while also maintaining a spot on the President's list for all four years of her college education.

She has turned her experiences with cancer into compassion and empathy for patients as a healthcare worker while working through her clinical rotations and meeting patients from all walks of life. She has also served as the 2026 class president by promoting a sense of camaraderie amongst her classmates and coordinating student organization meetings.

Avery is immensely grateful to receive this award, as she has worked tirelessly to be the best student and radiation therapist she can be. Avery looks forward to applying her knowledge and skills to her career in the radiation oncology field. She hopes to provide a sense of light and comfort in her patients' lives as they take on their battle against cancer.



**Outstanding Academic Undergraduate  
Student  
2026**



**Alexis Juarez**  
**Respiratory Care**





Alexis Juarez was born in Magnolia, Texas, and spent most of her childhood in Cypress, a large suburb of Houston. During her sophomore year of high school, she was accidentally placed in a health science class that ended up changing her path. Through a career exploration assignment, she discovered respiratory therapy. At the time, she had no clear direction for her future, but the field quietly stayed in the back of her mind. During her junior year, when COVID-19 emerged, she witnessed the growing recognition of respiratory care and began to feel it might be the right fit for her.

As she applied to colleges, Texas State University always caught her attention because of its beautiful campus. When she learned it offered a bachelor's degree in respiratory care, she knew she had found the place where she belonged.

Her time at Texas State University has been wonderful. She was moved by the magical environment and the extraordinary friends, classmates, and professors she met along the way. More importantly, she figured out what she valued most. She once approached education with half-hearted effort, but after many late nights of studying, anticipatory moments waiting for an exam grade release, and tears shed over difficult material, she found a deep reverence for higher education.



Her love for working in healthcare did not blossom until after her first clinical rotation, following her acceptance into the respiratory therapy program. Since then, she has had the privilege to complete rotations in all different types and levels of respiratory care. She even worked as a respiratory therapy assistant at Dell Seton Medical Center, where she acquired valuable experience while still being a student. She fell in love with the neonatal pediatric world of respiratory care after completing an externship in the NICU at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta in Atlanta, Georgia, last December.

Recently, she accepted a full-time position after graduation at this remarkable hospital and will be moving to Atlanta in June. She is absolutely elated to have the opportunity to work with kids and is eternally grateful to the amazing program for giving her all the means she needed to succeed.

Due to her passion for education and healthcare, becoming a respiratory therapist will be her first step toward becoming a healthcare professional. During her first few years of working as a respiratory therapist, she will also be working on prerequisites to apply to physician assistant school to become a neonatal/pediatric physician assistant.

She would not be where she is today without the constant love and support of her parents. Their unwavering belief in her has shaped who she is and given her the strength to pursue her goals. She is also deeply thankful for the professors in the respiratory care program who have not only guided her academically but have also inspired her to grow into a compassionate and dedicated respiratory therapist. As she continues her education, she will carry their lessons wherever she goes.



Outstanding Academic Graduate Student  
2026



Emily Rushing  
Respiratory Care





Emily Rushing lives in Houston, TX, and is a registered respiratory therapist working at Texas Children's Hospital in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit. Beginning her career in a pediatric setting has been both humbling and inspiring. Each day, she has the privilege of caring for children and supporting their families during some of the most vulnerable moments of their lives. This responsibility has strengthened not only her clinical skills but also her compassion, resilience, and commitment to excellence in patient care.

She earned her Bachelor of Science in Respiratory Care last May and will complete her Master of Science in Respiratory Care (MSRC) this December. Choosing to continue her education soon after her undergraduate studies reflects her commitment to personal and professional growth. She believes that respiratory care is a constantly evolving field, and advanced education allows her to stay informed, think critically, and practice with confidence. Through her graduate studies, she has gained a broader understanding of evidence-based practice, leadership, research principles, and the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in healthcare.

Her goal is to use the knowledge and skills she has developed throughout the MSRC program to become a stronger, more effective respiratory therapist. She strives to combine clinical competence with empathy, ensuring that every patient receives not only high-quality care but also kindness and reassurance. Working in a fast-paced, high-acuity environment has reinforced the importance of adaptability, teamwork, and lifelong learning. She is motivated to continually refine her abilities so that she can provide the safest and most effective care possible.

In the future, she plans to use her degree as a steppingstone to explore new opportunities within the respiratory care profession. She is interested in expanding her role beyond bedside care and discovering ways to contribute through leadership, education, research, or specialized practice. She is drawn to opportunities that allow her to mentor others, advocate for the profession, and participate in initiatives that improve patient outcomes.

She views her career as a journey of continuous growth. She is passionate about respiratory care and the meaningful impact it has on patients and families. Her education has given her a strong foundation, but she understands that true expertise comes from experience, curiosity, and a willingness to keep learning. As she continues to develop professionally, her goal remains the same: to provide compassionate, evidence-based care while contributing positively to the advancement of respiratory care as a whole.