

FALL 2025

# ¡ADELANTE!

THE MAGAZINE OF TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY-SAN ANTONIO

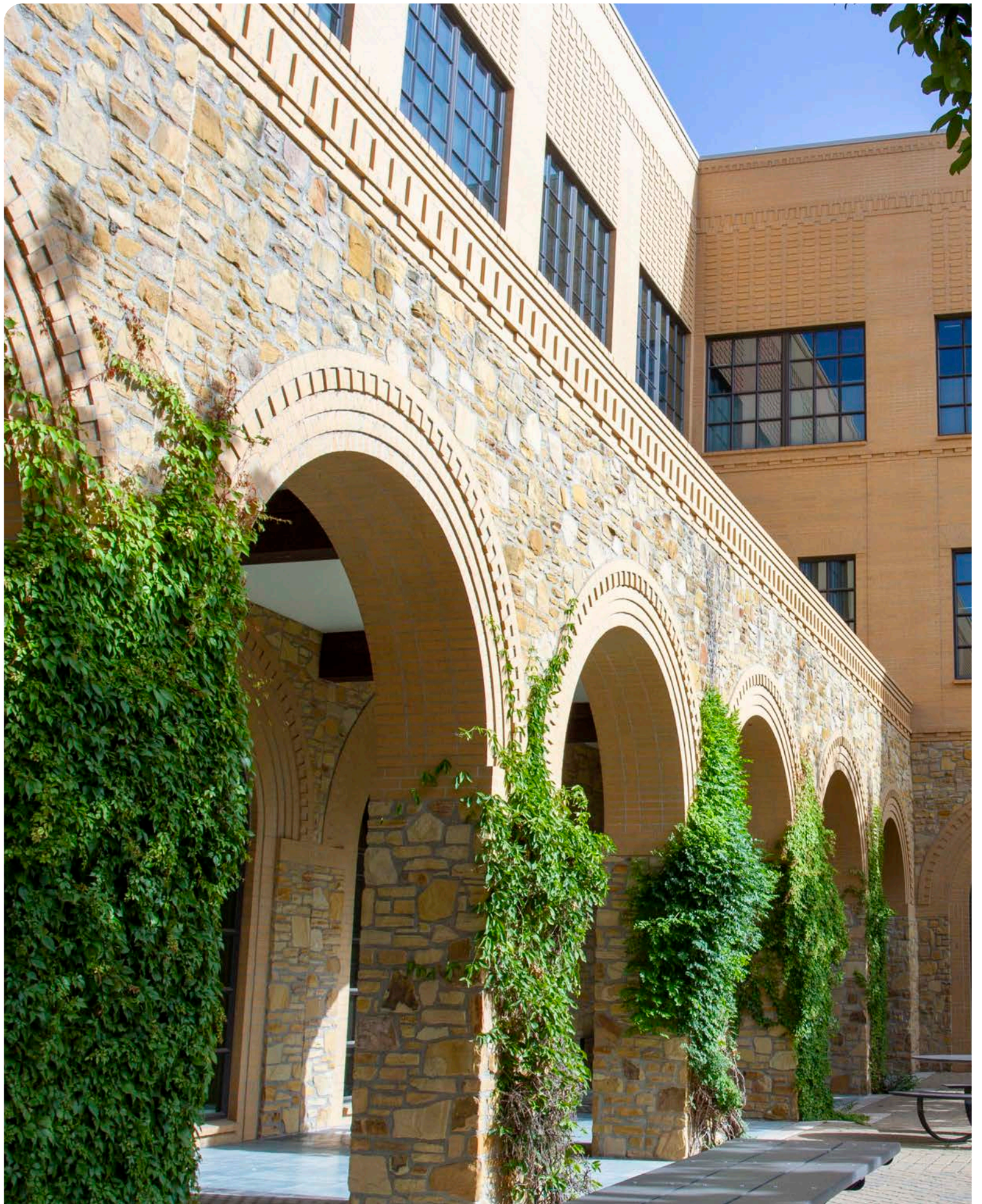


GENERAL THE JAGUAR

## ECONOMIC FIGURES

How A&M-San Antonio is fueling economic development and prosperity









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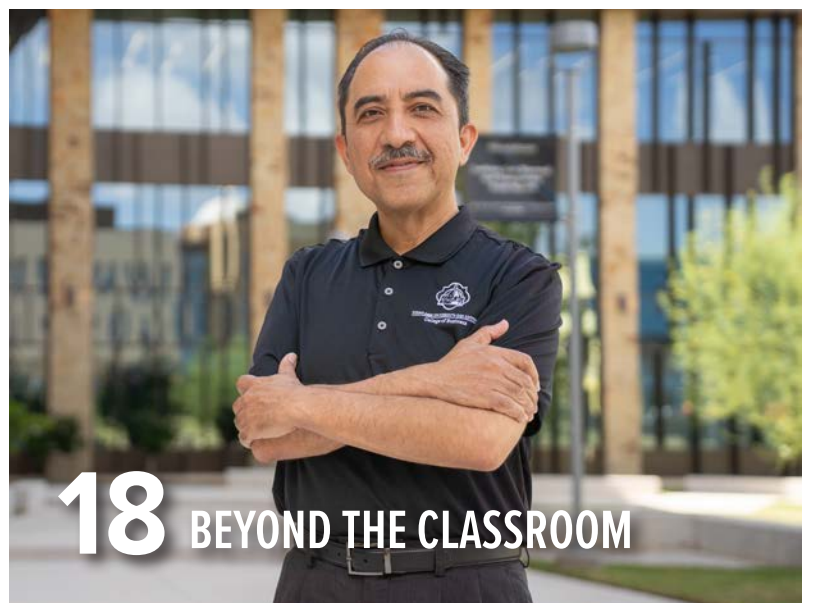
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## MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Looking back on the past academic year and all the excitement a new one brings, I'm struck by the extraordinary momentum we're building at Texas A&M University-San Antonio. Watching our students grow and succeed, and seeing our alumni remain connected and invested, fills me with pride and optimism. Our Jaguar Pride runs deep, and for good reason—we are not just talking about changing lives; we are actively transforming them.

In this edition of *¡ADELANTE!*, we're taking a deep dive into the expansive impact we have and the difference an A&M-San Antonio degree makes in the lives of our students. Throughout the years, our institution has grown from a dream that the late Sen. Frank L. Madla and other early supporters held dear, into an economic driver in South San Antonio and across greater Bexar County. We're shining a spotlight on those who are catalysts for growth and progress in our community. We're in the business of transforming lives, and that change ripples through every student, every alum, and every faculty and staff member who makes a positive difference in the community.

We're also excited to share some important milestones we've marked since our last edition, including reaching \$1 million administered to A&M-San Antonio Ready to Work participants. And our students continue to do incredible things, thanks to the mentorship and leadership of our faculty, who are helping them explore new career paths and enter the world of research.

As I shared in the last edition, our campus continues to grow at a remarkable rate, both in terms of new development and academic programs. I'm excited to report that we plan to launch our new Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership program next fall. This will be our first doctoral program and is strategically aligned with our goals, and our emphasis on academic distinction. We have an incredibly strong track record of educating future educators in San Antonio, as evident in the fact that local school districts are consistently among our top employers of alumni. It is very fitting that our first doctoral program will focus on educational leadership.

One of the things that continues to set us apart is how truly collaborative our campus is. We are working together to solve big problems and change the landscape of higher education. Our faculty are working across disciplines, from biology to computer science, to tackle big questions with even bigger data sets. These truly unique and unexpected collaborations are bringing together unlikely partners and teaching our students valuable skills that will serve them in their future careers. You can read all about it in this edition.

It comes as no surprise that we have been very busy since my last update. I am pleased to share with you all the latest news happening at A&M-San Antonio and hope to see you on campus soon.

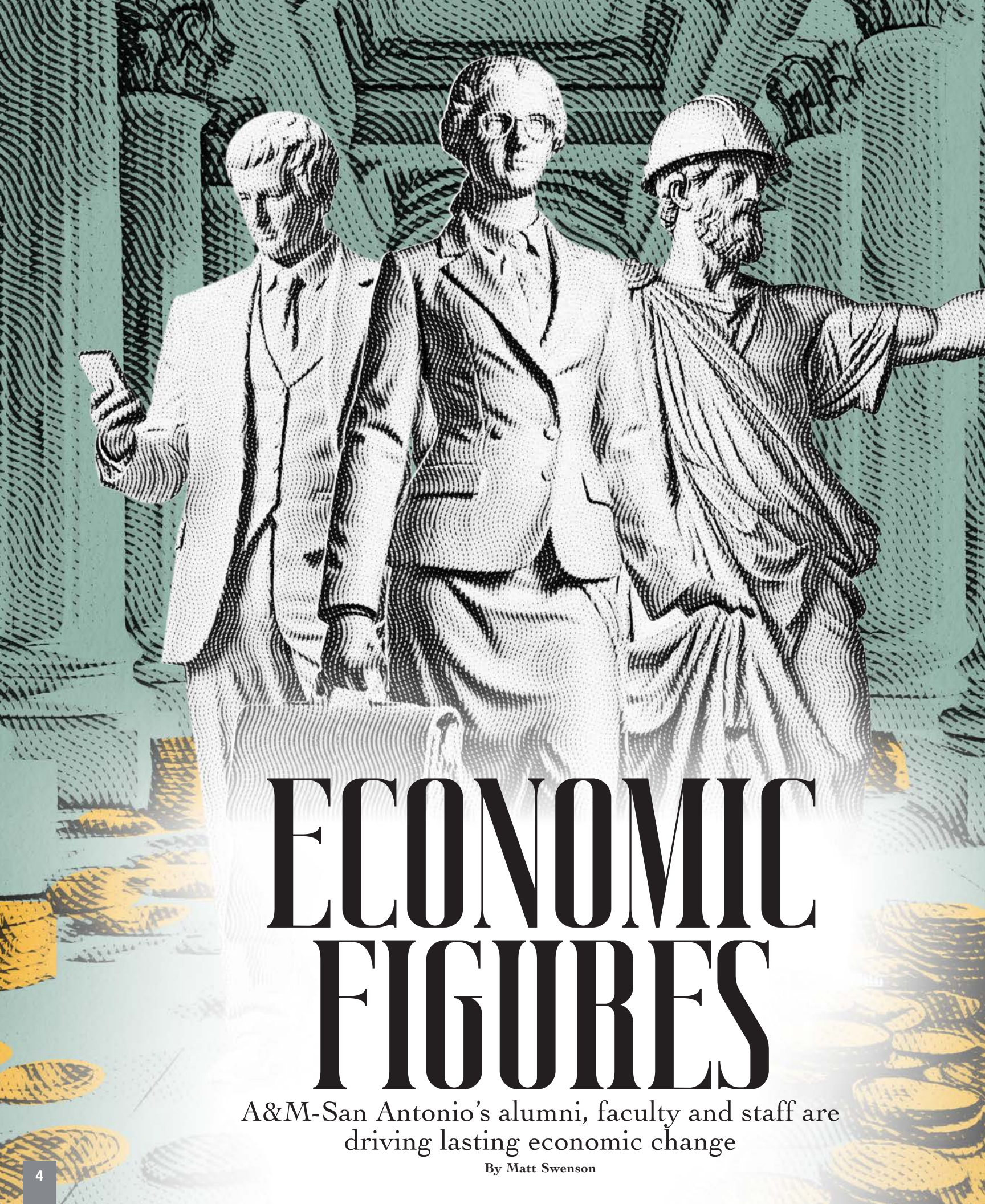
Sincerely,



Salvador Hector Ochoa, Ph.D.







# ECONOMIC FIGURES

A&M-San Antonio's alumni, faculty and staff are driving lasting economic change

By Matt Swenson





T

hough a relative newcomer to the higher education landscape—having celebrated its 15th anniversary last year—Texas A&M University–San Antonio has already become a powerful economic driver in Bexar County and beyond.

According to a recent economic impact analysis by Lightcast, A&M–San Antonio contributed \$292.6 million to the Bexar County economy during fiscal year 2022–23. That’s nearly double the \$166.3 million reported in FY 2018–19, highlighting the University’s rapid and substantial growth.

This economic momentum is impressive by any standard. But behind these figures are real people whose efforts and achievements bring the numbers to life. Here we look at some of the individuals helping A&M–San Antonio fuel economic development and improve the region’s quality of life.



# Alumni: A Lasting Economic Impact

*One of the most significant ways the University supports the economy is through the earning power of its graduates. Lightcast's report estimates that A&M–San Antonio students will collectively gain \$427 million in increased earnings over their careers. In FY 2022–23 alone, alumni generated \$181.8 million in additional income for the county while strengthening the regional workforce.*

Blaine Beckman, president of South Side-based Nunnelly General Contractor, is one such graduate. After starting his career in construction in Southern California and taking community college courses, Beckman moved to San Antonio in 2007. His wife, Mimi Morrison, encouraged him to enroll at A&M–San Antonio, from which she had graduated in 2011.

Beckman began his studies in 2012 while starting as a project manager at Nunnelly. He earned his bachelor's degree in business management in 2015 and his MBA in 2017. By 2016, he and partner Greg Vaughn had purchased the company, expanding it from about a dozen employees to over 50. Projects they've completed include community centers, performing arts centers, fire and police stations, and the Westside campus expansion of the San Antonio Food Bank.

"I was in the right place at the right time," said Beckman. "I may not be in ownership at this point if not for A&M–San Antonio."

Beckman has also been partnering with the University to participate in career fairs and advocating for building a curriculum with an emphasis on construction, which he describes as a high-need industry for San Antonio.

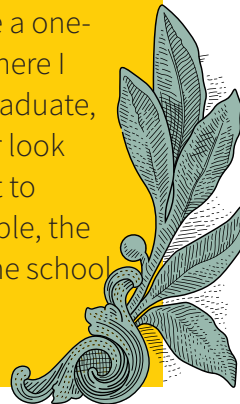
A&M–San Antonio is focused on preparing students for the workforce, and working with alumni like Beckman gives the University valuable insight into what experience students need when they graduate. Beyond strong builders, construction requires marketing, graphic design, and professional organizational experts, he said.

LeWayne Ballard '13, '14, another alumnus, entered A&M–San Antonio after a career as a technical engineer. He earned both a bachelor's in computer information systems and an MBA, which helped him rise to become chief technology officer at Linebarger Goggan Blair & Sampson, LLP, a nationwide law firm with over 1,000 employees.

”

I don't want it to be a one-way relationship where I go to the school, graduate, move on and never look back. It's important to remember the people, the organization and the school that helped you.

LeWayne Ballard



Ballard oversees the firm's IT operations and has spoken on panels about issues such as artificial intelligence in business. Grateful for the role A&M–San Antonio played in his success, Ballard gives back through donations and outreach.

"I don't want it to be a one-way relationship where I go to the school, graduate, move on and never look back," said Ballard. "It's important to remember the people, the organization, and the school that helped you."

Ballard adds it's been fulfilling to contribute to the San Antonio economy and community since graduating.

"Community is very important for society," Ballard said. "A community that works together, believes in one another and supports one another will always be the most successful."

Because many of the University's students have strong ties to San Antonio – three-quarters have a permanent address in Bexar County – A&M–San Antonio's alumni have a strong commitment to the community. Many graduates are local, lived nearby before enrolling or stay in the community after they graduate, and their contributions are concentrated on the San Antonio region.

Brandi D. Wolfe, a family law attorney, said graduating from A&M–San Antonio with a bachelor's degree in applied science was critical to starting a second career for both herself and her current husband, Dusty, a former professional wrestler who now is a history professor.

A happy and successful life was hardly a guarantee for Wolfe, who passed on a scholarship to attend West Virginia University to move to Houston with her now-former husband. Emotional and physical abuse filled the marriage, during which Wolfe ran an online marketing firm from home.

Once free from the relationship, Wolfe was inspired to not only get her undergraduate degree at A&M–San Antonio but to go on to law school, from which she graduated in 2020. "I knew that I just wanted to help people," Wolfe said.



In addition to serving as the founding partner of Brandi Wolfe Law, PLLC, which specializes in divorce and custody battle cases, she runs the Women's Empowerment Legal Center. The domestic violence nonprofit provides free legal services to survivors of domestic violence and handles between 20 and 40 civil cases annually. It also sponsors health and well-being services, such as yoga classes, at abuse victims' shelters in the region.

Her experience has taught Wolfe how education can be a lifeline for individuals regardless of circumstances. "My answer for everything is to go back to school," she said. "I feel that education and making that a part of your story and your empowerment and your change is so very important."

As Wolfe and other alumni illustrate, their impact goes well beyond just numbers and additional income. Their work—be it in the legal profession, technology, or construction—is helping strengthen the community and creating opportunities for others.

**"My answer for everything is to go back to school. I feel that education and making that a part of your story and your empowerment and your change is so very important."**

**- BRANDI D. WOLFE**



**From left to right: Blaine Beckman, Brandi D. Wolfe, LeWayne Ballard**







Dean Emma Savage-Davis with Crosspoint President Joe Shaffer (left) and Board Chairman Rick King.

## Employees: Lead with purpose — on campus and in the community

*As detailed in its recent economic impact report, A&M–San Antonio spent \$68.8 million on payroll for nearly 800 full- and part-time faculty and staff in FY 2022-2023. Much of that income was reinvested in the local economy through everyday spending—just one of the many ways the University contributes to the region. Beyond their roles in higher education, many employees are also involved in community-based organizations that drive meaningful change across San Antonio.*

One such leader is Dr. Emma Savage-Davis, who joined A&M–San Antonio in late 2023 as dean of the College of Education and Human Development. She quickly became an active board member of Crosspoint, Inc., a local nonprofit founded in 1963 that serves thousands of veterans, state hospital patients, and formerly incarcerated individuals, as well as people experiencing homelessness or mental illness.

“As a Crosspoint board member, I help advance the organization’s mission of providing second chances by leveraging my background in the College of Education and Human Development, where our work is centered on empowering people,” said Savage-Davis. “The academic and professional pathways within the College are deeply rooted in improving lives, strengthening communities and fostering long-term well-being—values that directly align with Crosspoint’s goals.”

Crosspoint has about a half-dozen programs, such as the Behavioral Health Diversion Program, which provides 24-7 residential support with outpatient treatment services for men with disorders in need of stabilization or early justice system intervention.

Other notable programs include The Esperanza Court, a transitional residential facility to support individuals enrolled in the Bexar County Human Trafficking Court, helping interrupt the devastating cycle of prostitution, arrests and addiction. There are also special outpatient and veteran programs, as well as a recovery home for pregnant and parenting women who are recovering from substance use disorders.

Savage-Davis said she supports these programs and helps promote education and wellness as catalysts for change, contributing to a healthier, more productive population and workforce. She also works to reduce long-term social costs by addressing core challenges such as mental health, poverty and education gaps, while focusing on increasing human capital and job readiness, which drives economic growth and community stability.

“Every day, Crosspoint serves more than 200 individuals,” said Savage-Davis. “Crosspoint’s mission is to build safer and stronger communities by empowering individuals to lead productive lives.”

The dean, who began her career teaching in an underserved Chicago high school, said her desire to assist underprivileged youth extends to both her University job and her role with Crosspoint.

“If we don’t embrace and support others, then it does not help our society go forward,” she said. “We need to help elevate populations that may not be able to go to college or have the support that they need. You have to really look at how you impact the community that you’re sitting in.”







Dr. Vanessa Quiroga (left) with San Antonio Education Partnership CEO Ana Acevedo.

Dr. Vanessa Quiroga, executive director of Community Partnerships and Campus Visit Experience, serves on the board for the San Antonio Education Partnership (SAEP). The nonprofit helps youth and adults navigate their path to higher education through college advising, application assistance, SAT/ACT prep and financial aid guidance.

SAEP also awards scholarships to students enrolling at partner institutions—including A&M–San Antonio—helping remove financial barriers to college access.

"A&M–San Antonio's mission closely aligns with SAEP's work to create equitable pathways to college and career success," Quiroga said. "Our shared impact is generational. When more students go to college and complete a degree, it doesn't just change one life. It strengthens the social fabric of our city. Investing in college opportunities is really investing in the future of San Antonio."

Dr. Amy Lewis, a professor of management and interim dean of the College of Business, has also made community service a cornerstone of her work. Since 2018, she has served on the Goodwill San Antonio Board of Directors.

While many associate Goodwill with its thrift stores, the organization's true mission lies in workforce development. Goodwill helps individuals find meaningful employment through free career coaching, job training, vocational certifications and digital literacy programs—especially those transitioning from military service or facing barriers to employment. The nonprofit also provides guidance for youth by creating career or education plans. Lewis said these initiatives align closely with the University's broader purpose.

"Our workforce development initiatives help some of our most vulnerable community members find a fast path to a living wage career," said Lewis.

As a board member, Lewis said that over the years, her service has focused on different aspects of Goodwill's mission, including advocating for living wage jobs, both for retail store employees and for the broader community. She is also serving on several Goodwill committees that are pursuing opening new retail store locations and training facilities, including in Boerne.

"One of the reasons I chose higher education as a vocation—and why I serve with nonprofits—is because I believe in empowering people to fulfill their potential. The University is located on the South Side for a reason, and that's to be a catalyst for this underserved part of San Antonio," she said, adding that the University is an important neighborhood anchor, as real estate developers as well as companies like Toyota and TJ Maxx are investing in the area.

"We're starting to get the types of businesses that we need in order to support the South Side community," she said.



Dr. Amy Lewis (right) with Goodwill San Antonio President Carlos J. Contreras.



As chief of staff and vice president for strategic communications at A&M–San Antonio, Jessica Loudermilk is uniquely positioned to understand how the University's achievements influence the region. Her perspective is further enriched by her role as chairwoman of the board for the South Texas Business Partnership (SoTX), where she partners with its President and CEO Rebecca Viagran. SoTX is an organization dedicated to bringing leaders together and promoting regional economic prosperity through advocacy and collaboration.

"While SoTX serves the business community, there's a perfect alignment between my role on the board and my work at A&M–San Antonio, because what's good for South Texas is good for the University, our students and their families," said Loudermilk.

Under her leadership, the board's theme for 2025 is "South Texas Renaissance," which highlights the remarkable growth and development occurring in South San Antonio and more broadly, in South Texas.

"We wanted to counter the narrative that South San Antonio and South Texas are somehow problems to be solved," Loudermilk said. "There is a lot to be celebrated—millions of dollars of investment in what has emerged as a region rich with opportunities."

She points to new development and companies in the immediate vicinity of the University, including Toyota, JCB, the University Health hospital and medical complex being built, as well the expansive VIDA development off 410 on either side of University Way.

"Looking in any direction from the campus, you see signs of development. The energy is palpable. And that's the case not only in

South San Antonio, but in South Texas at large."

Helping fuel that energy is the University, which Loudermilk says provides talent and skilled workers for area companies.

"The city, the state and the region need the University to grow to meet workforce needs of the very near future," Loudermilk said. "It's critically important that we understand what industry needs and that we are ensuring that the students we're graduating are the students that they want to hire."

Loudermilk identifies with the University's student body, many of whom have overcome financial and personal obstacles to earn a

degree when they are in their late-20s or older. She was the first member of her family to graduate from college – at age 29.

"We're really meeting a need for students that would otherwise not be met," she said. "In its relatively short existence, A&M–San Antonio has made an enormous impact on the region and helped thousands of people become active and contributing members of the community."

At its core, A&M–San Antonio's growing economic footprint is powered by people—graduates who turn opportunity into

enterprise, faculty who lead with purpose and staff who extend their expertise far beyond campus.

The University is not only educating students but also cultivating leaders, changemakers and collaborators. As it continues to evolve and expand its influence, A&M–San Antonio remains steadfast in shaping a brighter future for San Antonio and beyond, demonstrating that education and community engagement are pivotal to the region's economic growth and success.

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Looking in any direction from the campus, you see signs of development. The energy is palpable. And that's the case not only in South San Antonio, but in South Texas at large.

Jessica Loudermilk

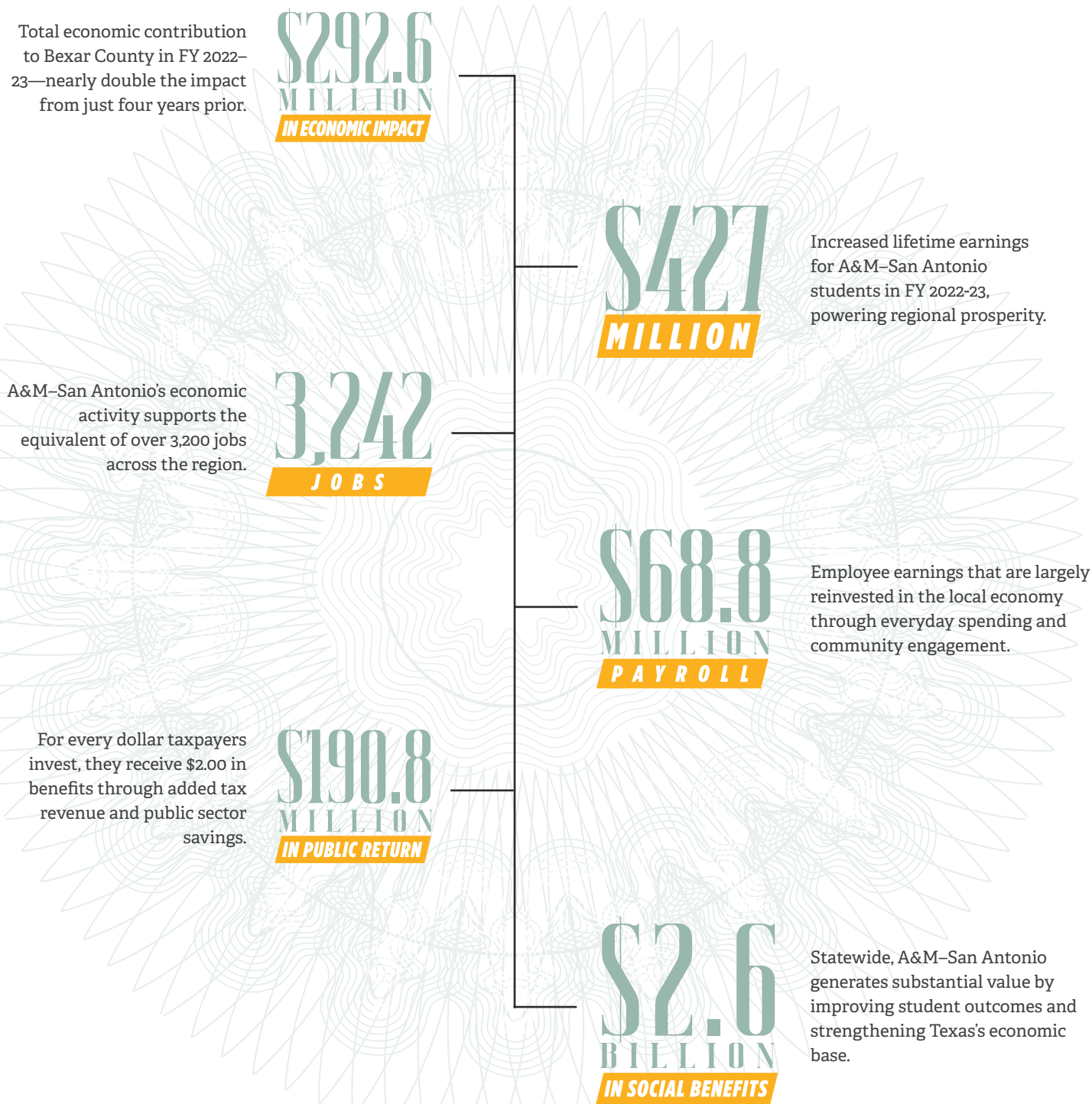


Jessica Loudermilk (left) with South Texas Business Partnership President/CEO Rebecca Viagran.

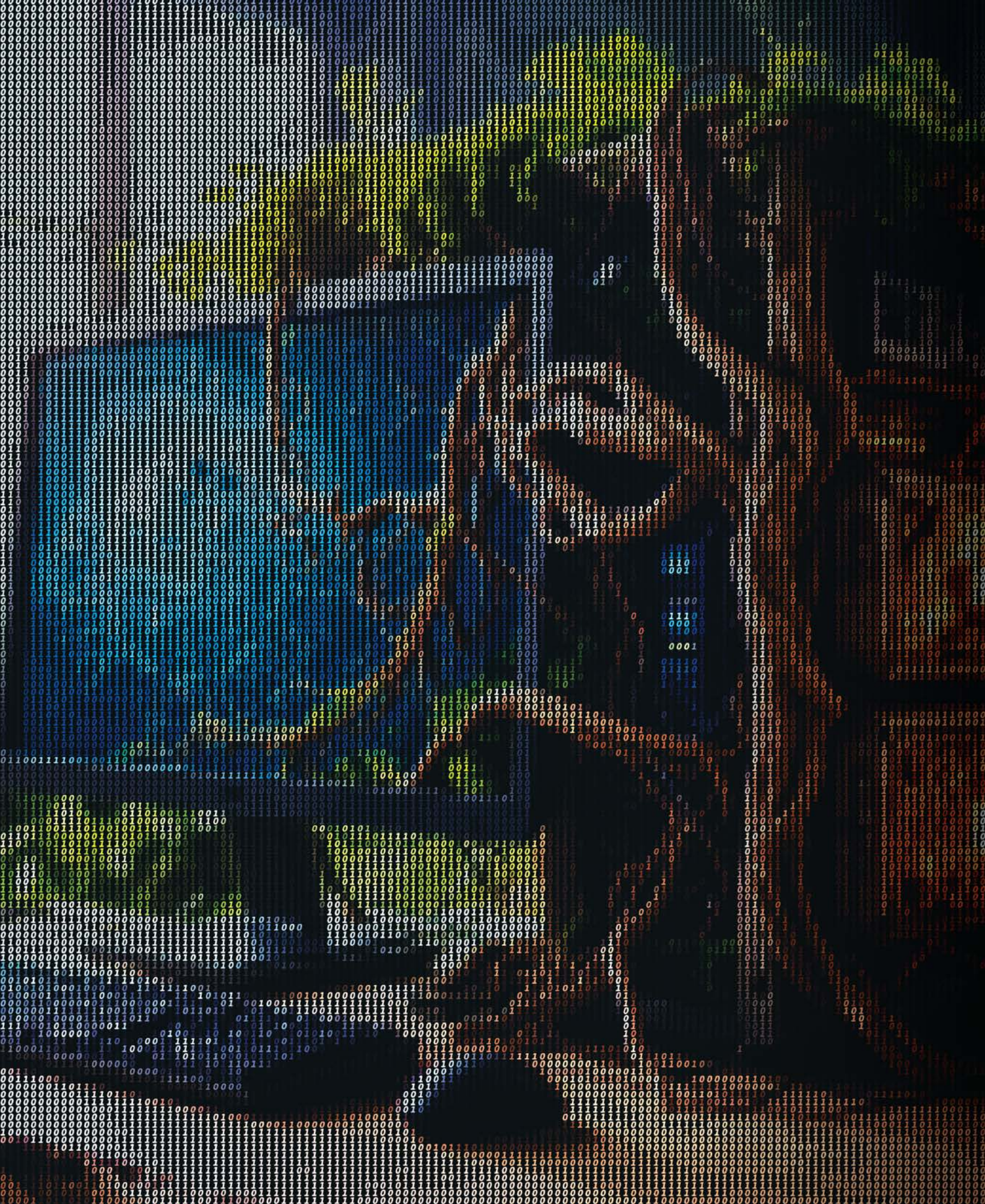


# A&M–San Antonio’s Economic Footprint at a Glance

Here's how the University's growing influence is creating powerful returns for students, taxpayers and society









# FROM <BYTES> TO [BREAKTHROUGHS]

By Sam Boykin

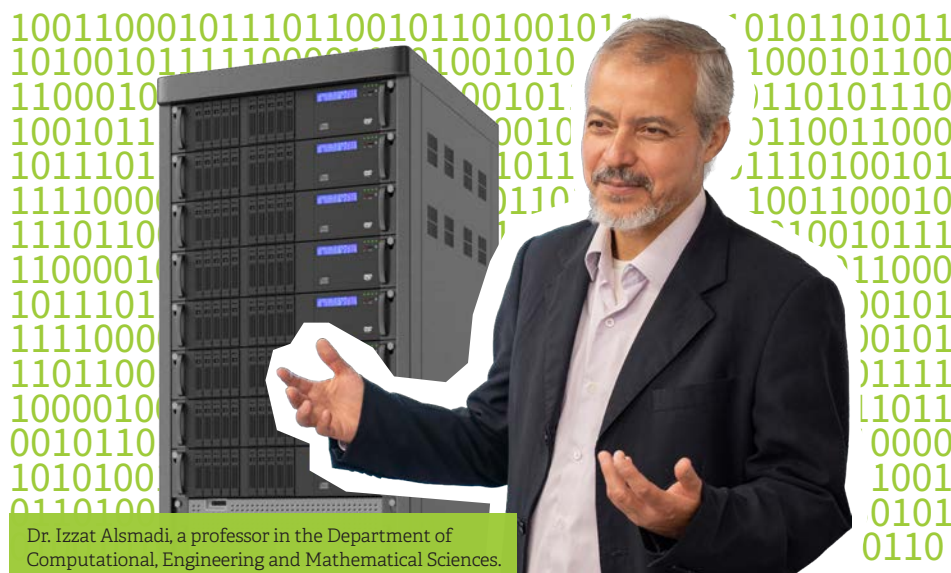
**A powerful new computing resource is fueling  
University collaboration and research**

Texas A&M University-San Antonio is developing an innovative new resource designed to enhance cutting-edge research initiatives and foster departmental collaboration.

The High-Performance Computing Research Center (HPCRC) will equip researchers and students with the right tools to carry out scientific studies utilizing massive data sets and substantial computational power.

The center will also enable users to connect and collaborate with other researchers on a broad range of projects. As part of this effort, students have the opportunity to learn marketable skills like statistical analysis and coding, while earning degrees in the natural and life sciences, among many other fields.





Dr. Izzat Alsmadi, a professor in the Department of Computational, Engineering and Mathematical Sciences.

Dr. Izzat Alsmadi, a professor in the Department of Computational, Engineering and Mathematical Sciences, is the project's principal investigator. He and members of his team are organizing a series of HPCRC workshops and training sessions.

Last spring, Alsmadi and Dr. Donna Lehman, a professor of human genomics in the Department of Health and Behavioral Sciences, co-hosted a cross-disciplinary workshop that featured faculty and researchers from various colleges discussing research computing needs and use cases.

"The HPCRC creates opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration in fields such as business, cybersecurity, biology and education," said Alsmadi. "This reflects a deliberate push toward building collaborative, cross-college research projects that leverage shared high-performance computing infrastructure to support diverse scholarly work."

"We've needed this resource for a long time," Lehman added. "I am looking forward to connecting with other faculty through this resource to initiate new approaches to analyzing data."

Drs. Yulun Han and Utpal Smart, both assistant professors in the Department of Natural Sciences, attended the spring workshop and said they're eager to utilize the full resources that the HPCRC will offer.

"As an evolutionary biologist, I work with very large sets of salamander genomics data," said Smart. "An HPC will enable me to better analyze this information."

Han's research focuses on computational simulations of light-matter interactions. His projects can generate terabytes of data and require advanced quantum chemistry methods that demand substantial computing power.

**”** We've needed this resource for a long time. I am looking forward to connecting with other faculty through this resource to initiate new approaches to analyzing data.

**Dr. Donna Lehman**

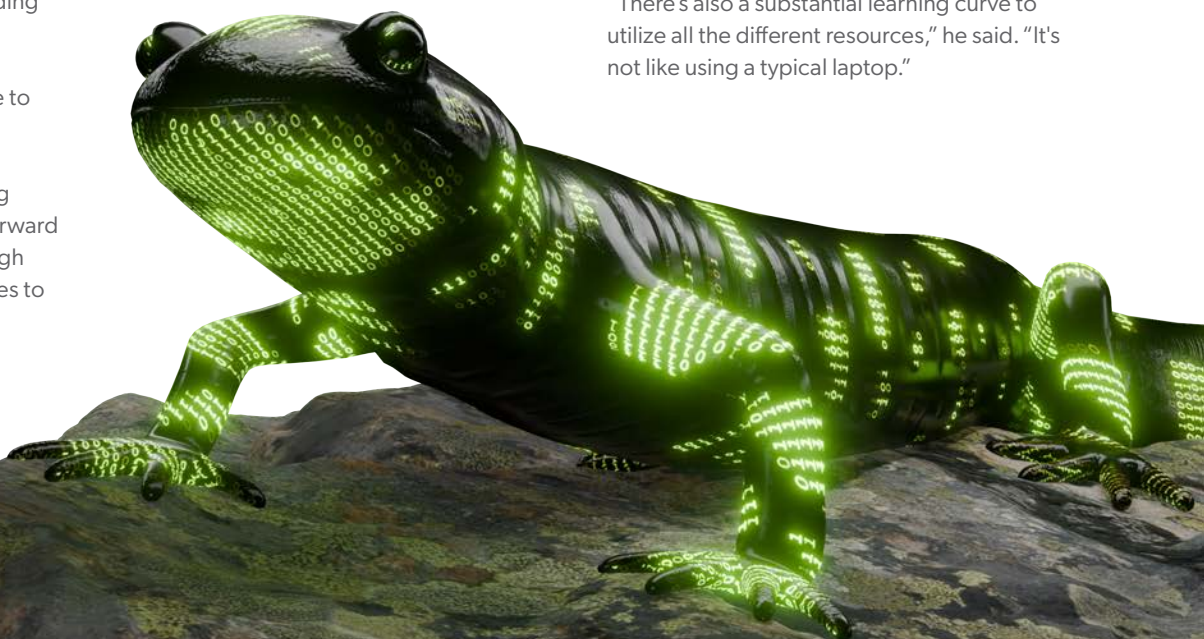
"To carry out my research, I rely heavily on HPC resources, including computer nodes capable of handling large-scale, parallel simulations, as well as storage systems that can support terabyte-scale data," he said. "The continued investment in and development of our HPC capabilities will be essential for my work."

Dr. Burak Aksoylu, an associate professor of mathematics in the Department of Computational, Engineering and Mathematical Sciences, was a panelist at the spring workshop. He said he is planning to use HPC resources for his research on domain decomposition methods, which involves dividing a complex problem's domain into smaller, more manageable sub-domains.

"This will bring a lot of savings in computational time and resources," he said.

Alsmadi stresses the project is still a work in progress and fully developing this new computer infrastructure will take time and campus-wide coordination.

"There's also a substantial learning curve to utilize all the different resources," he said. "It's not like using a typical laptop."





The HPCRC is supported through a \$500,000 startup fund from Texas A&M University System Chancellor's Research Initiative, as well as a \$100,000 grant from the National Science Foundation's Campus Cyberinfrastructure program, which invests in campus-level cyberinfrastructure improvements and innovations.

With training now underway, Alsmadi said the project will be developed in multiple phases, as he and his team will next work with other faculty members to develop strategies for implementation and campus-wide use.

The University's HPCRC—essentially a collection of sophisticated servers—is currently located in the Central Academic Building. A small number of faculty and students are using the center, with more expected as training progresses. Alsmadi said there are also plans to develop a more expansive center in one of the new campus buildings scheduled to open in the coming years.

Alsmadi explains that rather than a standard central processing unit, the HPCRC uses powerful computers that have a graphics processing unit, which is designed to handle complex mathematical calculations along with graphics, video and images.

"A process that would take days to complete with a normal laptop can be done in hours or even minutes with an HPC," he said.

Lehman, who is the project's co-principal investigator, explains that as a professor of human genomics, she has many ongoing studies that generate and analyze extremely large datasets.

"We have 30 years' worth of clinical data from thousands of individuals that we have to keep stored in a safe, compliant way," she said. "We have to be able to access that data and run intensive programs to analyze it. We're going to be relying on the HPCRC to do that kind of work. I think it's going to be pretty astounding."

She noted that the key to moving the project forward is to engage faculty and other potential users, including students, to get their perspectives on what they need.

Lehman indicated that data science is used in nearly every field nowadays, and the HPCRC innovations can be used to pique students' interest in research and develop peer-teaching opportunities.

"Field students from genomics, biology or chemistry

will work with computer science students and teach each others," she said. "And these students can then introduce faculty to each other, who can start their own collaborative projects. It's a bottom-up approach and a different level of learning."

Like Lehman, Dr. Davida Smyth, a professor of biology in the Department of Natural Sciences, is also excited about the HPCRC's potential. She said she needs access to enhanced storage and capacity for her research and classes, including virology and bacteriology courses in which the students generate and analyze microbiome data.

"We're building the capacity to do this kind of work at a centralized campus location," she said. "It's going to be really amazing."

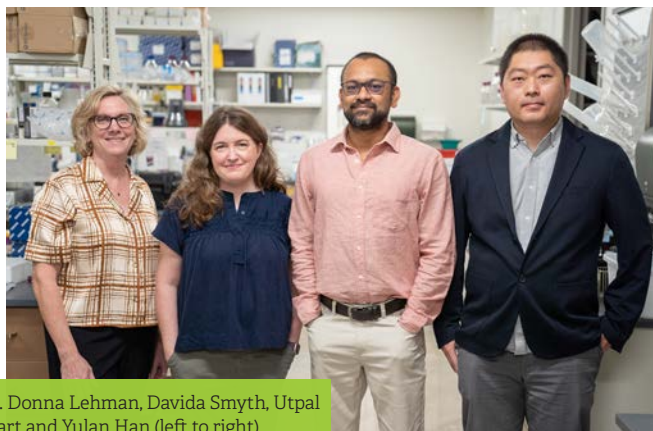
Smyth said as the HPCRC training continues, it's critical to identify potential users' specific needs.

"With an initiative like this, we need to identify the platforms and capabilities that people are looking for," she said. "I think it's a remarkable opportunity for us to show a common need across campus and across disciplines. By working together, we can be more strategic and less wasteful in terms of time and resources."

Moreover, it's an opportunity to better serve students as the University builds on existing programs in AI, cybersecurity and machine learning.

"Now we can integrate high-performance computing into biology, chemistry and other fields," she said. "As we consider the entire educational pipeline, from K-12 up to when our students are ready to graduate, the HPCRC will help build critical skills over time and better prepare our students to enter the workforce."

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Drs. Donna Lehman, Davida Smyth, Utpal Smart and Yulan Han (left to right)







In just a few years, Texas A&M University-San Antonio's esports program has evolved from a modest initiative into a dynamic, career-shaping experience that redefines college gaming. Established in 2020, the program offers students hands-on experience in leadership, media production and teamwork — skills that extend far beyond the screen.

"The biggest thing is transfer of ownership," said Aaron Jagers, head esports coach. "We've built robust structures and traditions, and now it's about giving students the reins."

# LEVELING UP

By Kevin Castro

**How the University's esports program fuels confidence, connection and career readiness**

Events like fall boot camps, barbecues and team competitions provide students with opportunities to build community, take initiative and apply their skills in real-world settings. Students also learn from their mistakes and grow into roles mirroring those in professional settings.

"That supportive culture makes this program unique," Jagers said.

The program's student-led structure means Jaguars are not just competitors — they're strategists, content creators and managers. Student volunteers organize and manage meetings and events, social media campaigns and business operations efforts across seven teams, building a fully functioning ecosystem.



Hope Trinidad, a senior double-majoring in marketing and management, didn't originally join as a gamer. Instead, she stepped in to support marketing and quickly became a key player and team leader.

"Every day I'm designing graphics, writing emails, analyzing social media data. It's muscle memory now," Trinidad said. "The cool part is I was able to apply those skills directly to my coursework and internships. This program gave me the space to grow into the professional I want to be."

Sophomore Michelle Gervais, a criminal justice major, gained unique experience through the esports content team.

"I had no media experience, but now I manage video editing, graphic design and social content," she said. "I've traveled with the team, gone to conventions and worked with industry pros. It's opened doors I never expected."

Eli Campos, a senior majoring in cybersecurity and captain of the University's esports chess team, said being part of the program helped him come out of his shell.

"I'm more confident now talking to teammates and coaching," he said. "Being part of this community has helped me grow in ways I didn't expect — not just as a player, but as a leader."

That kind of personal and professional growth is exactly what Jagers hopes for. Success isn't defined by the win-loss column, he stresses, but

rather in the confidence students gain as they perform key functions like planning recruitment campaigns and organizing tournaments, which require many of the skills they'll carry into the workforce.

**”** I'm more confident now talking to teammates and coaching. Being part of this community has helped me grow in ways I didn't expect — not just as a player, but as a leader.

**Eli Campos**

"I've helped students advocate for themselves and navigate tough situations," he said. "We're teaching them how to show up for each other and for themselves."

Jagers said the teams are excited about upcoming events, including The Texas A&M System Showdown, which brings together players from other A&M universities to compete in games like Super Smash Bros. Ultimate and Overwatch. This past February, A&M-San Antonio Esports helped organize the largest in-person esports matchup to date among university teams. The competition was held at the Boeing Center at Tech Port and included teams representing Texas A&M campuses

in College Station, Corpus Christi, Texarkana and Commerce.

Another big event is the annual National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) Conference, which was held in July at the University of Texas at Dallas.

"NACE is where the future of esports in higher education is happening," Jagers said. "Being there gives our students a chance to showcase their talents and network with the best teams in the country."

The esports program's community-first approach continues to draw new students as well, many of whom had never considered esports as anything more than a hobby. Gervais encourages anyone curious to take the first step.

"Just show up," Gervais said. "It's flexible and welcoming. You'll find your community here. It's like building your own family."

The confidence students gain through esports doesn't end with graduation. Jagers points to alumni like Joey Murillo, one of the University's first student employees with the esports program who served as the content crew manager and event coordinator. He was able to leverage his experience into an internship with the San Antonio Museum of Science and Technology and now works as a broadcast engineer for Nelco Media.

Another success story is Anna Deleon. She worked as an esports graduate assistant while earning her MBA at the University. After she graduated in 2022, she started as a gaming associate at the Boeing Center at Tech Port. She's now the event manager at the state-of-the-art facility.

"At A&M-San Antonio, esports isn't the end goal, it's the starting point for something much bigger," said Jagers. "We're not just helping students play the game. We're helping them realize they belong in the room, behind the camera, on the stage, in the meeting. Once they see that, everything changes."





# BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

## MENTORSHIP PROGRAM EXPANDS HORIZONS FOR STUDENTS

By Sam Boykin

**S**tarting college can be both thrilling and overwhelming for first-year students, who face new people, environments and challenges. This is especially true at A&M-San Antonio, where more than 70 percent of students are the first in their family to attend college. To help ease this transition, the College of Business has introduced a dynamic mentorship program designed to foster personal connections, professional growth and global awareness.

While intended primarily for freshmen interested in business, the program is open to all students, emphasizing personal interactions and tailored guidance. It pairs participants with faculty mentors and offers a range of learning experiences, from local company visits to international excursions, helping students broaden their horizons beyond the classroom.

Dr. Robert Bethuel Vinaja, an instructional assistant professor in the Department of Accounting and Finance, oversees the mentorship program. He explains that since the program launched last year, nearly 300 students have participated.

Students are assigned to a faculty member based on their interests, forming about 10 mentorship groups that cover areas

**While intended primarily for freshmen interested in business, the mentorship program is open to all students, emphasizing personal interactions and tailored guidance.**

from accounting and investment to entrepreneurship and data analytics.

"The mentors decide how often their group meets and what kind of activities they do," said Vinaja. "They're given the flexibility to decide what works best for their mentees."

Dr. Josephine Sosa-Fey, a professor in the Department of Management and Marketing, oversees the entrepreneurship group.

"We have about 30 members," she said. "We primarily focus on having entrepreneurs from the community come to speak to the membership about their businesses and how they achieved success."

Dr. Volkan Ozbek, an assistant professor of management in the Department of Management and Marketing, serves as mentor for the international business club. He stresses that the clubs are not only great educational tools, but they also serve as a way for students to step out of their comfort zone.

"Club members will be learning about other cultures and their business practices along with distinct communication styles so that they can become true global citizens," he said. "Understanding other cultures is key to interpreting the world and doing business overseas."

Looking ahead to the program's second year, Vinaja aims to increase student participation through collaborations with other departments, including the Mays Center for Experiential Learning and Community Engagement.

Clarissa Tejeda, director of employer relations and community outreach at the Mays Center, plays a critical role by coordinating employer site visits for first-year students. The process starts during JagX, an orientation program to help students transition to college. The Mays Center helps students choose from a variety of potential employers to visit.





"It's open to all majors, but we are intentional about including College of Business students so they can get a head start on the site visit requirement for the year," Tejeda said.

Companies that students have visited over the past year include Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Texas, Inc., Amazon, J.P. Morgan Securities, LLC, Clear Channel Outdoor-San Antonio and Randolph Brooks.

”

The mentorship program is a wonderful opportunity for students. It gives them pride to be a Jaguar and inspires loyalty to the University.

**Dr. Robert Bethuel Vinaja**

Jose D. Ramos, talent development leader at J.P. Morgan Securities, LLC, commended the program's impact on student engagement during site visits.

"I believe in maintaining a strong industry leader partnership with A&M-San Antonio to create awareness of the career paths and opportunities within the San Antonio, national and global market," said Ramos. "I love seeing the engagement and enthusiasm the Jaguars

demonstrate when meeting with various leaders during their site visit."

As part of the program, mentors also support students academically, providing coaching and guidance, including connecting students with services like tutoring and financial aid.

Vinaja added that as part of the mentorship program, they're planning a trip to Portugal and Spain in 2026. Students will have the opportunity to immerse themselves in the culture of the European countries and visit a variety of companies to learn how they operate.

"The mentorship program is a wonderful opportunity for students," Vinaja said. "It gives them pride to be a Jaguar and inspires loyalty to the University."







# RESEARCH IN MOTION

**EMPOWERING STUDENTS THROUGH  
COLLABORATION AND HANDS-ON RESEARCH**

By Sam Boykin

From left to right: Carlos Tamayo, Kassady Salazar, Dr. John Smith, Adriana Oviedo and Byron Ledbetter



“

**WHY WAIT UNTIL A  
DOCTORATE PROGRAM  
TO PROVIDE STUDENTS  
WITH REAL HANDS-ON  
EXPERIENCES? MY  
APPROACH HAS  
ALWAYS BEEN TO GET  
STUDENTS INVOLVED IN  
RESEARCH AS SOON AS  
POSSIBLE.**

**Dr. John Smith**



While wrist-worn fitness trackers have become hugely popular with people interested in monitoring their health, there has been relatively little research done on their accuracy. That presented a unique opportunity for alumnus Byron Ledbetter, who for the past decade has owned and operated B-Better Performance, which provides fitness and personal training services.

As a fitness-focused business owner, Ledbetter decided to pursue a kinesiology degree at A&M-San Antonio to more effectively serve his clients.

"I recognized that there is a group of people who are about applied knowledge, and a group of people who are about educational knowledge," he said. "I wanted to appeal to both types of people when it came to providing physical education, training and conditioning."

It was fortuitous for Ledbetter that one of his classes was taught by Dr. John Smith, a professor in the Department of Counseling, Health and Kinesiology, who is well-known for engaging undergraduates in research.

Together, Ledbetter and Smith worked on a research project on how skin tone affects the accuracy of wrist-worn fitness trackers. The pair recruited about 20 students as test subjects. While their findings indicated there was no relationship between wrist monitor errors and skin tone while resting, walking and jogging, there were errors during stationary cycling and circuit training.



"I'm a gym rat and was not the kind of guy to be all into the data," said Ledbetter, who graduated in May at the age of 50. "But working with Dr. Smith on this project was eye-opening for me. It taught me to embrace the educational and scientific aspects of health and fitness. It really changed my viewpoint."

Smith's own journey into academia took a pivotal turn during his second year at Texas A&M University-Kingsville, where he pursued a master's degree in kinesiology. It was then that a new professor arrived, marking a significant departure from the traditional lecture-based approach. His professor actively engaged with students, fostering a more participatory learning environment.

"I really enjoyed it," said Smith. "It was my first meaningful educational experience."

Inspired by this early mentorship, Smith was determined to adopt a similar approach when he started at A&M-San Antonio in 2008.

"My philosophy is: I have this opportunity, why wait until a doctorate program to provide students with real hands-on experiences?" he said. "My approach has always been to get students involved in research as soon as possible."

Each year, Smith oversees approximately 10 collaborative research projects with undergraduates, covering a wide range of topics, such as abdominal strength, muscle soreness and the impact of leg pneumatic compression therapy on blood pressure.

"The students really like and benefit from the experience," he said.

Smith said that in a typical scenario, he and a student will have an initial brainstorming session to determine what research to pursue. The project is sometimes based on a student's personal interest or an idea that Smith suggests.

He instructs the student to research the topic to see what's already been published. From there, they decide on a specific angle or area of focus, and he trains them how to do different tests and collect data.

"I'm with them for the first few sessions, and then when they feel confident, they're on their own," Smith said.

Smith shared one of the things he enjoys most when it comes to working with students is seeing their transformation over time. "When they first start a research project, most of them are really nervous. But by the end of the project, when they give a presentation, their confidence has really grown."

Adriana Oviedo, for example, said she was a little intimidated when she started working on a research project with Smith about the effect of "unweighting" on energy expenditure during treadmill walking. Oviedo explained that she and Smith would "unweight" test subjects using different body lift straps, which are similar to bungee cords, to vary the subject's weight or load on the treadmill.

"We're trying to quantify how much energy expenditure is reduced by unloading, and what kind of changes in gait there are," said Oviedo. "This kind of data may be important for people who are using treadmills for rehabilitation or injury prevention."

Oviedo, who graduates in May 2026 with a bachelor's degree in kinesiology, plans to pursue a career in physical therapy.

"I just love learning about the human body and how it moves and what causes movements to be hindered," said Oviedo, who also interned with the local nonprofit Kinetic Kids, which helps enrich the lives of children with special needs through sports, fine arts and educational programs.

Oviedo plans to present her findings next spring at the Texas Academy of Kinesiology and Nutrition Conference, which focuses on kinesiology, sports medicine, and nutritional science.

"I take so much pride in being a kinesiology major, and the research project has made it that much more meaningful," she said. "I was so nervous at first, but Dr. Smith was so welcoming and caring. He's such a good mentor."





# FROM VISION TO REALITY

University introduces doctoral  
pathway in educational leadership  
BY MARIAH GONZALEZ

Texas A&M University-San Antonio is set to launch its inaugural doctoral program, a Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in Educational Leadership, in fall 2026. This marks the culmination of years of preparation and planning that went into developing the doctorate. This new program aims to cultivate leaders in education who are grounded in equity, ethics and practical skills.

Behind the development of the Ed.D., the motivation is deeply personal for the team involved.

"Our team has been working on this for many years, and to actually have it come to fruition is so rewarding," said Dr. Elisabeth Krimbill, an associate professor in the Department of Educator and Leadership Preparation. "We all are committed to supporting scholar practitioners who take educational theories and the work of others and put them into practical applications in schools."

Dr. Emma Savage-Davis, dean of the College of Education and Human Development, said the new doctoral program marks a transformative moment for both the University and the region.

"With a bold focus on leadership across the entire PK-12 spectrum, this degree redefines what it means to lead in education. From classroom teachers to district administrators, this program empowers every educator to see themselves as change-makers by equipping them with the knowledge, vision and skills to inspire progress at every level."

The Ed.D. in Educational Leadership program, informed by feedback from alumni and community partners, will offer five distinct "strands," or specializations: District Leadership, Multidisciplinary Approaches to Leadership, Special Education Leadership, Early Childhood Leadership, and Bilingual Education Leadership. They will also have the option to earn a Texas Superintendency certification along the way.

” With a bold focus on leadership across the entire PK-12 spectrum, this degree redefines what it means to lead in education."

Dr. Emma Savage-Davis

Each specialization will maintain a cohort of 15-20 students, ensuring personalized attention and strong faculty support. Only one cohort will be admitted per year to ensure the program grows intentionally. All students must hold a master's degree to apply.

In developing the focus areas, A&M-San Antonio worked with the ASPIRE Partnership, a collaboration the University has with seven South Bexar County Independent School Districts to develop educational programs and services for local students. The ASPIRE school superintendents helped

identify the type of educational leaders the community needs. The program prepares students for various leadership roles within schools and districts, including principals, superintendents, curriculum leaders, and parent and community engagement.

Designed to be accessible yet rigorous, all courses will be delivered online in a synchronous format, allowing full-time educators and district professionals to participate in evening or weekend classes without disrupting their careers. While initially targeting educators from ASPIRE districts, the online format will also attract participants from across Texas.

Throughout the program, students will engage in in-person symposiums and collaborative events, gaining practical experience through partnerships with school superintendents. The curriculum will also integrate emerging technologies, most notably artificial intelligence, emphasizing its ethical application as a critical thinking tool.

"This is an innovative new doctoral program that will help prepare our students for critical leadership roles in educational settings," said University Provost and Vice President Mohamed Abdelrahman. "The program is part of the University's overall mission to support the community through engagement and collaboration and to help maximize educational opportunities for everyone."



A burgeoning art minor at Texas A&M University-San Antonio is helping students foster creativity, nurture their talents and explore career pathways within the local arts community.

The Creative Arts and Performance Studies (CAPS) minor, housed in the Department of Language, Literature and Arts, provides students with immersive and educational experiences in creative writing, music, theatre and visual arts both on campus and in collaboration with the broader San Antonio arts community.

Brittany Ham, coordinator of the CAPS program and lecturer in the Department of Language, Literature and Arts, said CAPS fulfills a need for A&M-San Antonio students who are interested in creative arts.

"Students are really hungry for creative arts programming," Ham said. "They want to take these art and music courses. They're interested in creative writing, poetry, theater and film studies. There was a great need on campus for this program and we're very enthusiastic and excited to fulfill that need."

Since its launch in fall 2022, the CAPS minor has attracted about 80 students, offering them an opportunity to explore diverse art forms.

"Something that's really cool about the minor is that it's an interdisciplinary arts minor," said Dr. Katherine Gillen, an English professor and chair of the Department of Language, Literature and Arts. "Students aren't necessarily getting a minor in music or visual art or theatre itself, but it's really a combined degree, so they're able to explore their interests in different art forms and the whole program emphasizes art in the community."

The CAPS program also enriches student experiences through University programs, activities and partnerships. Students have the opportunity to write, edit and produce visual art for the student literary magazine, Mosaic. They can also participate in the University's annual Arts Expo, which showcases student exhibitions, poetry readings and performances from student groups, including University Voices choir and Mariachi Los Jaguares del Sur.

In addition, each semester, the University hosts its Visiting Writer Series, where high-profile creative writers are invited to give a public reading and conduct workshops for students.

Through a University partnership, students pursuing a CAPS minor also have the chance to participate in workshops and plays at Teatro Audaz, a theater in San Antonio. The collaboration is part of the Borderlands Shakespeare Colectiva, a group of scholars, educators, artists and activists who focus on Shakespeare adaptations that are set and reflect the lived realities of the U.S. - Mexico Borderlands.

Gillen, along with Dr. Adrianna Santos, an English

# Empowering CREATIVITY

**Bridging arts, community engagement  
and career development** By David Dekunder

associate professor at A&M-San Antonio, and Dr. Kathryn Vomero Santos, an English associate professor at Trinity University started Borderlands Shakespeare Colectiva in 2019. They have since published multiple anthologies reimagining Shakespeare's plays. The Colectiva partnered with the theater company last year to produce "I-DJ," which explores the queer Chicano/Chicana experience.

Gillen said the skills students gain through these types of experiences and other CAPS offerings will help prepare them for careers in the arts field, whether it's as a writer, artist, musician, performer, editor, graphic designer or arts educator.

"We're thinking about how students can be art practitioners but also translate their interests into very marketable skills that also help enrich the community," said Gillen.





# ONE MILLION STRONG: Ready to Work Reaches Major Milestone

By Sarah McBride

**What does \$1 million look like?** In the hands of Texas A&M University-San Antonio Ready to Work participants, it looks like opportunity. It looks like a prosperous future, and a city that believes in its people.

Since San Antonio Ready to Work started at A&M-San Antonio in October 2022, the program, funded by a 1/8 cent sales tax approved by voters, has awarded over \$1 million in tuition assistance to participants pursuing a certificate or bachelor's degree. It's a remarkable accomplishment that builds a stronger, more skilled workforce and helps boost the local economy.

"What an incredible milestone to reach \$1 million given to A&M-San Antonio participants. It serves as proof that our program is doing exactly what it set out to do – remove barriers and create opportunities," shared Adriana

Contreras, associate vice president and executive director of the Mays Center for Experiential Learning and Community Engagement. "We are so thankful to the City of San Antonio and its people for investing in themselves, as every student who comes through this program is a reminder that when we invest in our students, we invest in the future of San Antonio."

The San Antonio Ready to Work team sees day in and day out the difference these funds make in students' lives. They may, within a single week, help a student who has a past due balance and can't enroll in a program at any institution find a way to finish their degree at A&M-San Antonio. Later, they'll provide emergency funding to a student who needs help covering their light bill

or has a flat tire and doesn't have the funds to cover those expenses and buy groceries. And over the course of the program, they'll help over 350 Jaguars pay for their degree and set them on a path to land high-demand roles in San Antonio.

Students and participants in the San Antonio Ready to Work program experience firsthand how the support provided can mitigate challenges, restore hope and keep them moving toward their educational and career goals. With nearly 70 percent who are the first in their family to go to college, these students are blazing a new path for themselves and their families.

those from low-income backgrounds, complete their degrees and build brighter futures. By aligning academic pathways with workforce demands, TAMUSA is not only helping students succeed in the classroom, but also in the career fields that sustain our economy and strengthen our communities."

What does that \$1 million look like in action? A&M-San Antonio graduates go on to great things after they complete the program. Nearly 200 San Antonio Ready to Work students have graduated from A&M-San Antonio. They now work throughout the city as elementary

teachers, cybersecurity managers, bank fraud analysts, accountants and more.

It's not just A&M-San Antonio staff making this program run, but alumni are also making a big difference. Rose Hilt '12 is the workforce manager for the

City of San Antonio Ready to Work program, leading the employer partnership team.

"As a proud graduate of Texas A&M-San Antonio and workforce manager for the SA Ready to Work program, it's incredibly meaningful to witness the direct impact our efforts are having on fellow Jaguars. The collaboration between TAMUSA and SA Ready to Work isn't just about employment, it's about empowering our students with the skills, confidence and support they need to thrive in a competitive workforce," shared Hilt. "We're not just building careers; we're transforming lives and strengthening the future of San Antonio."



“What an incredible milestone to reach \$1 million given to A&M-San Antonio participants. It serves as proof that our program is doing exactly what it set out to do – remove barriers and create opportunities.

Adriana Contreras

"Reaching the \$1 million milestone in tuition reimbursements for Ready to Work participants at Texas A&M University-San Antonio is a powerful testament to what strong partnerships can achieve," shared Mike Ramsey, executive director of workforce development for the City of San Antonio. "TAMUSA has been an essential partner in helping San Antonians, particularly





## Educare San Antonio

**New campus facility to offer much-needed childcare and family support**

A&M-San Antonio hosted a special groundbreaking in April for Educare San Antonio, which will be the first facility of its kind in Texas. In partnership with the Educare Network, the 26,000-square-foot, multifaceted facility will offer quality early learning and care for children from birth to age five while enhancing the early childhood education landscape in Bexar County. Scheduled to open by the summer of 2026, Educare will serve a vital need on the South Side, which has a severe deficit of accessible, high-quality early education options. An initiative of the College of Education and Human Development, Educare San Antonio will include infant, toddler, preschool and kindergarten facilities.







## Finding Your Purpose

### Student turns passion for water conservation into full-time career

Student Angelica Canizalez landed a competitive internship last summer at the San Antonio River Authority, which manages nearly 4,000 square miles and over 40 dams and flood control structures. Canizalez, who's scheduled to graduate in December 2025 with a Master of Science in Water Resources Science and Technology, recently parlayed the year-long internship into a full-time job as a water quality specialist, helping protect the region's waterways and natural habitats.



## Bonding and Building Independence

### TU CASA program hosts unique summer camp

A&M–San Antonio welcomed back a notable group of alumni this summer for the first-ever camp designed specifically for graduates of the Transition University for Career Advancement and Successful Adulthood (TU CASA) program. TU CASA provides a true college experience to students with intellectual disabilities and equips them with the skills needed to transition into independent adulthood. The campers participated in a variety of educational and social activities, including a field trip to nearby auto parts manufacturer Toyotetsu Texas Inc. that offers a job training program for people with disabilities.







### Taking the Plunge

#### University offers new scientific scuba diving course

A&M-San Antonio rolled out a unique new course this summer that enables students to venture outside the classroom and explore the murky depths of area lakes. The Scientific Diving Course, which is part of the University's biology program, teaches students the theoretical and practical skills required to safely conduct biological and hydrological research utilizing scuba techniques. In addition to learning about scuba diving physics and regulations, students go diving at nearby lakes, which provide a variety of conditions and opportunities to practice research techniques. The skills taught in the class can be applied to careers in biology, criminology and water research.



### University Leadership

#### New staff members oversee finances and student affairs



Adriana Rojas started in July as A&M-San Antonio's new vice president for finance and administration and chief financial officer. In her role, Rojas oversees finance, facilities, administrative operations and business affairs. Rojas previously served as the associate vice chancellor of auxiliaries and fiscal innovation at the University of California, Merced. Prior to UC Merced, Rojas served in various roles at the University of Texas at Austin for nearly 25 years. Her educational background includes a bachelor's degree in business administration from Texas A&M University.



Dr. Kimberly Rottet is A&M-San Antonio's inaugural associate vice president for Student Affairs Campus Services. She joined A&M-San Antonio in June from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, where she served as director of university recreation, overseeing three campus locations. With over 20 years of experience in student affairs and auxiliary services, Rottet oversees dining, the bookstore, housing and recreational sports. It's an important new role for fast-growing A&M-San Antonio, as the University plans to open a third residence hall and an additional dining facility by 2028.



# A Beloved Tradition

## Festival de Cascarones Closes Out Fiesta

Nearly 7,000 people gathered at A&M-San Antonio in May for the 13th annual Festival de Cascarones, a fun-filled end to the Fiesta season. Guests at the free, family- and pet-friendly event enjoyed live music, including headliner Grupo Solido, along with games, carnival rides and delicious food, from mini tacos to chicken-on-a-stick. "We are excited to bring the San Antonio community together on our campus for this long-standing, beloved tradition," said President Salvador Hector Ochoa. "This is a special event for the South Side, and one that will continue to grow as the University grows."







## Educating the Educators

University advances teacher preparation with enhanced certification approval

A&M-San Antonio has been selected as one of the first universities approved to offer the Texas Teacher Residency Preparation Route (TTRPR). The year-long residency, which begins in fall 2025, provides a structured pathway for teacher candidates to gain experience through mentorship and integrated coursework, leading to an Enhanced Standard Certificate by the Texas Education Agency. The TTRPR program, which is part of the College of Education and Human Development, is designed to address teacher retention and effectiveness. The expanded training offers an in-depth approach to development, strengthening the teacher pipeline and producing role models and future leaders.



Dr. Emma Savage-Davis, dean of the College of Education and Human Development.





### Harnessing Brain Data

Using AI innovations to improve worker safety and retention

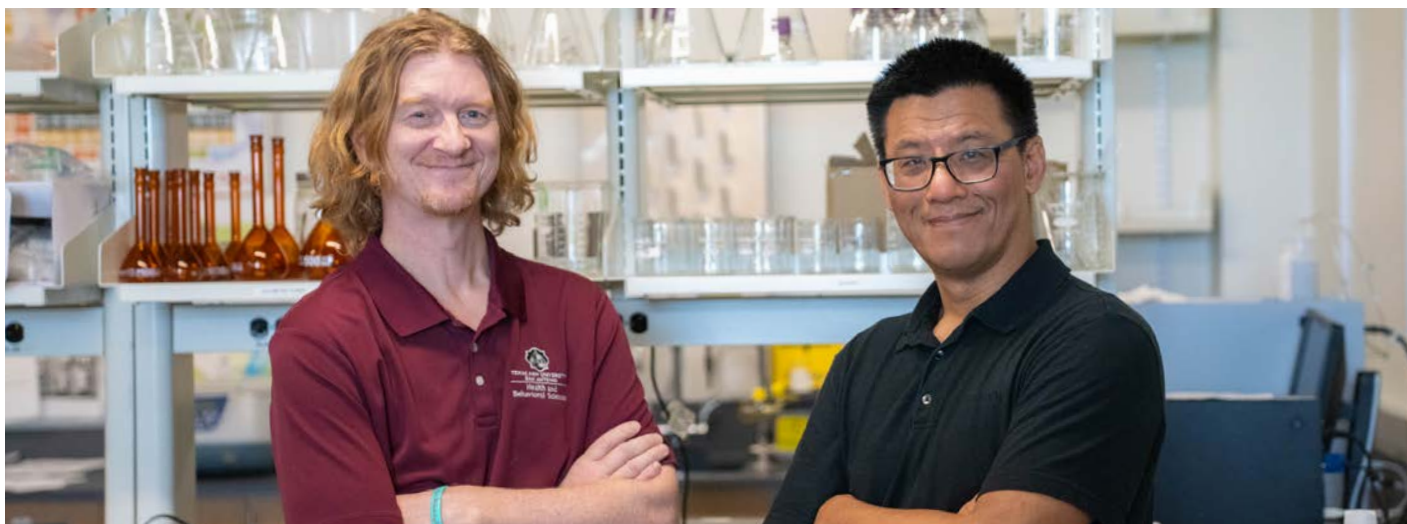
Dr. Vipul Garg, assistant professor of supply chain management, is implementing artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in a new research project that aims to use brain data to improve worker safety and retention rates. Through a grant from the University's Office of Research and Health Sciences, Garg has purchased headsets that use AI-enabled software to measure and analyze brain activity. Garg plans to outfit local forklift operators with the headsets, enabling him to measure the mental effort required to process information as they perform labor-intensive tasks in a high-stakes, quota-driven environment. The study is intended to help decrease stress, prevent injuries and improve the retention rate of employees within warehouse settings.

### Addressing Health Disparities

Researchers probe environmental factors influencing chronic illnesses

Drs. Bryan Bayles, assistant professor of community health (left), and Walter Den, professor and director of the Institute for Water Resources Science and Technology (right), are partnering with researchers from Texas A&M University in College Station to investigate if certain pollutants in the local environment and food supply contribute to obesity and other chronic illnesses. The research project, funded by the Baptist Health Foundation, is studying the prevalence of polyfluoroalkyl substances

and micro/nanoplastics. A growing body of scientific evidence indicates that exposure to these pollutants via food and water can increase the rate of obesity, type 2 diabetes and other metabolic disorders that are dangerously prevalent in San Antonio. Plans call for the study's findings to be shared with local organizations like the San Antonio Food Bank and the city's Food Policy Council to help craft food education programs and policy initiatives.







## Supporting High-Poverty Schools

University hosts symposium on how to best support high-poverty schools

A&M-San Antonio hosted its eighth "Best of Both Worlds" symposium in April, featuring educational, community and government leaders who discussed how to develop school and community partnerships to support high-poverty schools. It's a critical issue in San Antonio, which is one of the nation's most economically segregated cities. Studies show there is a direct correlation between poverty and a lack of education—in San Antonio, 64.6 percent of residents experiencing poverty don't have any college education. Presented by the College of Education and Human Development, Best of Both Worlds is an ongoing annual series at A&M-San Antonio that tackles issues that impact the community.

## Paws to the Polls

University designated a voter-friendly campus

A&M-San Antonio was named a Voter-Friendly Campus by Fair Elections Center's Campus Vote Project and NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. The initiative recognizes institutions that have planned and implemented practices that help students overcome barriers to participating in the political process. This is the fifth time the University has received the prestigious designation. A&M-San Antonio was evaluated on the University's on-campus voter engagement efforts in 2024, which included securing an on-campus presidential election early voting and election day polling site and welcoming over 4,000 voters—a new record.







## Community Impact

### New VIDA park named after Professor Megan Wise de Valdez

When Southstar, the developer behind VIDA, reached out via social media to ask who it should name one of the community's new parks after, the overwhelming response was in support of beloved faculty member Dr. Megan Wise de Valdez, chair of the Department of Natural Science and professor of biology. To celebrate the new park, Southstar and A&M-San Antonio hosted a dedication ceremony, where faculty, students and staff showed their support and appreciation. Wise de Valdez started her career at the University in 2010 as the first biology faculty member.

## Safety Measures

### Research project delves into growing anti-government movement

Dr. Sarah Harper, assistant professor of criminology, has launched a Department of Homeland Security-funded research project that explores frontline interactions with "sovereign citizens," individuals who believe the government has no authority or jurisdiction over them, and anti-government extremists. Across the country, there's a growing number of instances in which people are challenging the authority and legitimacy of government officials and laws. This has led to an increasing number of confrontational interactions with police and other public officials. The research, which includes reviewing court transcripts and interviewing officers and judges, aims to equip first responders and other officials with effective strategies for identifying and mitigating threats.







## We're No. 1!

### A&M-San Antonio voted top local university

For the second year in a row, A&M-San Antonio was voted the Best Local University in the annual YourSA Readers' Choice Awards. Hosted by the San Antonio Express-News, this year's awards recognized winners in a number of categories, including business, community, restaurants, health and education. "Our growth and evolution reflect the University's ongoing dedication to the San Antonio community and beyond," said President Salvador Hector Ochoa. "It is very gratifying to see the University receive this recognition, which is a testament to our hard-working faculty, staff and students."

## San Antonio Zoo Ring Day

### University honors students during fun and beloved ceremony

A&M-San Antonio continued its cherished tradition of A&M Zoo Ring Day, celebrating the achievements of students receiving their University rings. More than 200 ring boxes were placed inside San Antonio Zoo's jaguar enclosure, which was watched over by B'alam, one of the zoo's most beloved residents. University leadership and students gathered at the event to honor the students' accomplishments. This unique ceremony, launched in fall 2022, brings together tradition, education and community engagement. "Zoo Ring Day adds a special element of pride and community spirit," said President Salvador Hector Ochoa. "It's an honor to celebrate our students in such a meaningful way."







## Golf

The men's golf team had an impressive season, finishing fourth in the Red River Athletic Conference (RRAC), which was held at the Golf Club of Texas in San Antonio. Earlier in the season, the team finished the second round of the University of the Southwest Fall Invitational at two

under, which is a school record for the lowest round ever.

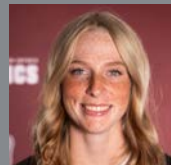
Jacob Pena finished atop the leaderboard of the RRAC Men's Golf Championship, going one under par for the 54-hole tournament, becoming the first individual conference champion in the University's history. For his efforts, Pena was also named as the RRAC Golfer of the Year.

"I am extremely proud of Jacob and all he has accomplished as a student and athlete at Texas A&M- San Antonio," said Head Coach Chisti Cano. "He's worked extremely hard for us his whole career and it was only fitting that he be the first Red River Conference Champion for Texas A&M-San Antonio Athletics."

For the RRAC tournament, the team shot 38 over par placing two individuals in the top five, Pena and David Rodriguez, both of whom were named to the All-Conference Team.

## Softball

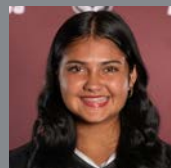
For the fourth time in five seasons, the University's softball team advanced to the Red River Athletic Conference Softball Tournament, having finished the 2025 regular season in fifth place. The Jaguars, led by Head Coach Nicole Dame, had a great run in the conference tournament, making it to the semifinals.



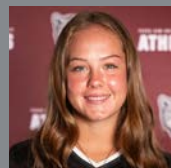
**Kaylee Barlow**, named First Team All-Conference and First Team All-Region



**Samara Aguilera**, named Second Team All-Conference and Second Team All-Region



**Kristiana Luera**, named Second Team All-Conference and Second Team All-Region



**Ashlyn Weinert**, named Honorable Mention All-Conference

## A&M-San Antonio Earns Back-to-Back RRAC Sportsmanship Awards

A&M-San Antonio received the Red River Athletic Conference Sportsmanship Award for the 2024-25 season, marking its second consecutive year of recognition. Launching its first athletic season in the 2020-21 academic year, the University is the youngest program in the RRAC.

The RRAC Sportsmanship Award is given annually to the member institution that exemplifies the highest level of sportsmanship throughout its athletic program during the most recent academic year. This includes teamwork, fair play, respect for the game and conduct in competition. The school's sportsmanship must be apparent across multiple sports, on and off the field, and in interaction with other RRAC member schools.

"At Texas A&M-San Antonio, we believe that how we show up matters just as much as the final score," said Dr. Darnell Smith, director of athletics. "We strive to always pursue the right way to play—with integrity, respect and a servant heart."



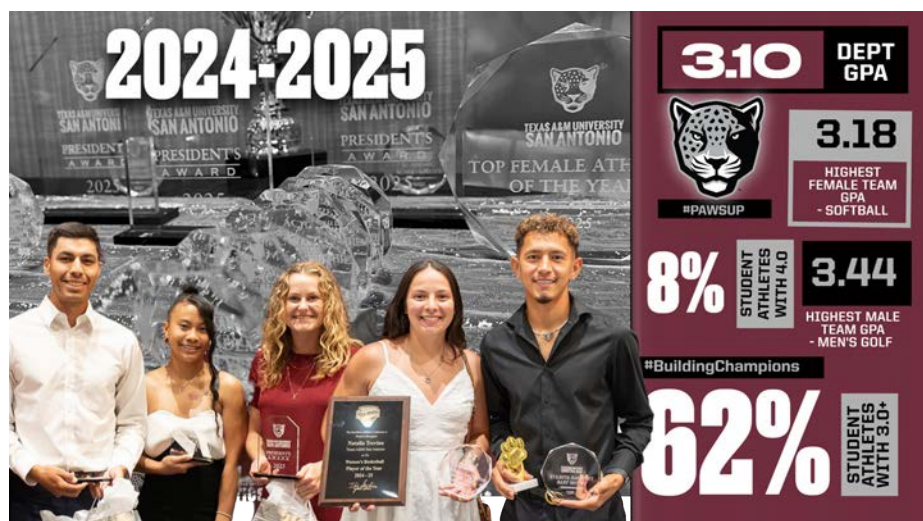


## Excelling on the court and in the classroom

Showcasing how A&M-San Antonio student-athletes excel both on the field and in the classroom, the athletics department finished with a solid 3.10 GPA for the 2024-2025 academic year. This marks the highest department GPA for an academic year in the relatively short history of athletics at Texas A&M-San Antonio.

The men's golf team finished with the highest team GPA, 3.44, while softball had the highest women's team GPA, 3.18. In total, five of the six athletic teams finished with GPAs above 3.00.

"When we started things off, we made it a goal to be above 3.00 for an academic year," said Dr. Darnell Smith, director of athletics. "Being at 3.10 for the year shows that our student-athletes are committed to being their very best. I am pleased we are making positive gains academically, and we will continue to strive to be even better."



### Alumnus donates to burgeoning basketball program

A&M-San Antonio alumnus Ryan Bergmann '09, a longtime sports fan, was excited to see the Jaguar basketball program begin in fall 2024. As a way to give back and support Jaguar Athletics, he became one of the first-ever donors to the program.

Bergmann graduated with honors and a degree in business administration. Now a successful attorney and the founder of Bergmann Law Firm PLLC, Bergmann is proud to contribute to the University's growth and success.

"Being able to write checks, not for personal gain, but to support other students, is a testament to the success of our University," Bergmann said. "It's an awesome feeling to be able to come back and make those contributions."

Bergmann's gift will directly impact student-athletes by providing financial support for various program needs, including travel, equipment and much more as the program grows. His donation is particularly meaningful as A&M-San Antonio continues to expand its athletic programs, fostering a competitive and enriching environment for student-athletes.

"Ryan's commitment to the future of Jaguar Athletics is truly inspiring," said A&M-San Antonio Athletic Director Darnell Smith. "His generosity ensures that our student-athletes have the resources they need to compete at a high level while excelling academically. This type of alumni support plays a crucial role in the continued growth of our athletic programs."





# Community CHAMPION

## **Dr. David Schmidt's impact on A&M-San Antonio Athletics**

*By Sam Boykin*

Dr. David Schmidt grew up about 75 miles north of San Antonio on his family's ranch near Harper, Texas. Surrounded by animals in a rural setting, he initially dreamed of becoming a veterinarian. But a high school chemistry teacher encouraged him to consider medicine instead. Then came football—his love for the game and firsthand experience with sports injuries would ultimately steer him toward orthopedic surgery and sports medicine.

With a career spanning nearly four decades, Schmidt is dedicated to giving back to the community. He holds the distinction of being the first person to give a financial gift to A&M-San Antonio's fast-growing Jaguar Athletics.

After Schmidt graduated from Harper High School, he attended the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio (now, UT Health San Antonio), where he completed his residency in orthopedic surgery. He then completed fellowships in knee surgery

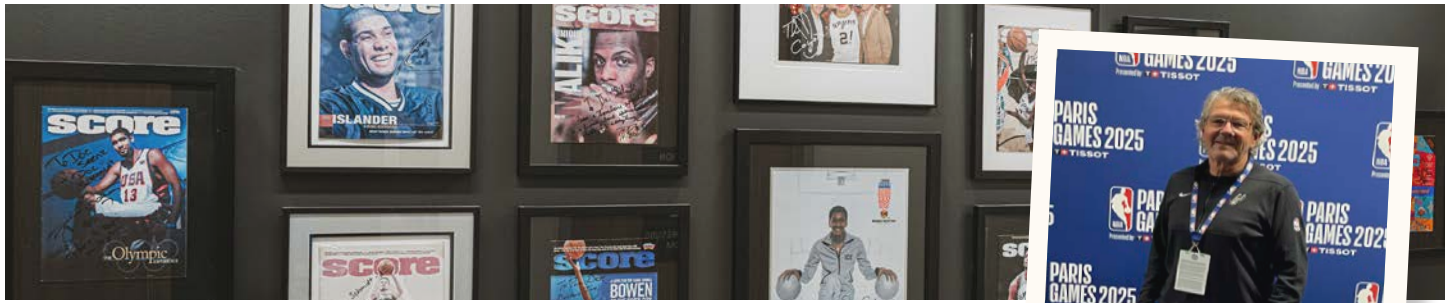
and sports medicine in Sydney, Australia and Auckland, New Zealand.

In 1986, Schmidt returned to San Antonio and joined the practice of Dr. Jack Henry, the longtime team doctor for the San Antonio Spurs. In 1993, Schmidt succeeded Henry in that role, serving as the Spurs' team physician for 31 years. His career highlights also include serving as a physician at the 1993 U.S. Olympic Festival and the 1996 Olympic Games, as well as leading the NBA Physicians Association as its president.

Schmidt opened Sports Medicine Associates of San Antonio in 2004, serving athletes and schools throughout the city. When he learned in 2020 that A&M-San Antonio had launched an athletics program, he reached out to the University's Athletic Director Darnell Smith.







"I called Darnell out of the blue and just said, 'Hey, we'd love to help.' We struck up a friendship, and we've been supporting the athletics program ever since."

Schmidt shared that he pledged to donate \$10,000 annually to A&M-San Antonio Jaguar Athletics for five years.

"Obviously I'm passionate about sports and sports medicine, but I'm also passionate about our community, because San Antonio has been a great place to practice and raise a family," Schmidt said. "Giving to A&M-San Antonio Athletics was a no-brainer. It's amazing how the program has grown in such a short time."

Smith said Schmidt's financial support provides flexibility, enabling the University to address immediate needs and invest in long-term priorities without limitations.

"Dr. David Schmidt's generosity has had a profound and lasting impact on both our campus and our athletics department,"

Smith said. "From the very beginning of our program, his support has been instrumental in helping us remain competitive, invest in student-athlete scholarships and development and meet the operational needs of a growing department. We are truly grateful for his continued commitment and the transformative difference he makes across our entire community."



## Endowments

**Advance Your Values. Empower Future Generations. Leave a Legacy.**

At Texas A&M University-San Antonio, your vision for the future can live on through the power of an endowed gift. With a minimum gift commitment starting at \$25,000, you can create a permanent source of support for scholarships, research and academic programs, athletics, distinguished professorships or endowed chairs that attract top faculty.

An endowed gift is more than a donation — it's a lasting investment in excellence. Your generosity is preserved in perpetuity, with annual distributions supporting the University's mission year after year. Whether you want to honor a loved one, celebrate a passion or simply give back, an endowed fund allows you to shape the future of A&M-San Antonio while advancing the values you hold dear.

Your legacy begins today.

**Contact Gwen Notestine, vice president for University Advancement, at [gnotestine@tamusa.edu](mailto:gnotestine@tamusa.edu) to learn how you can make a meaningful and lasting impact through an endowment.**







## 2005

**Jamie Goodwin '05, '10, '13** started her own education consulting business, Baxter Educational, which supports school districts from district to campus level.

## 2011



**Leonard F. Humes, Jr.,** after earning an MBA, joined organizations that manufacture components for the defense industry, including parts for the

F-35. He also worked for companies that make components for the gas and oil industry, and large battery assemblies for the forklift industry. Humes has also joined the University as an adjunct professor in the College of Business.

## 2012



**Sonya Bryant '12, '16** serves as a workforce manager for the City of San Antonio, where she oversees a U.S. Department of Labor grant supporting

registered apprenticeship programs. Bryant and her team recently organized a National Registered Apprenticeship Day event at Patriots' Casa. The event aimed to educate local employers on the value and advantages of participating in registered apprenticeship programs.

## 2013

**Naomi R. Adams** has been teaching special education in Northside Independent School District since 2013, working with students who have a variety of disabilities. As a teacher, Adams' goal is to always help and encourage her students to reach independence and do all they can do. In 2024, she received awards for Educator of the Year and Middle School Educator of the Year. She is the mother of a 9-year-old.

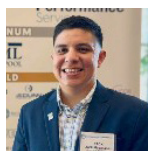
**Michael L. Persyn** recently accepted a position as senior commercial title examiner for Charter Title.

## 2014

**Heriberto Chavez** serves as a government solutions manager at HaulHub Technologies, a leader in digital innovation and public-sector technology. In his role, Chavez works closely with Departments of Transportation across the country to modernize workflows and implement digital solutions like e-ticketing and AI-driven reporting. He takes great pride in helping improve work-zone safety that protects both job site crews and motorists, making the roads safer for everyone.



**Lynsey M. Kelly** acquired her Licensed Master Social Worker degree from Our Lady of the Lake in 2020. She's currently a social worker at Family Service in San Antonio.



**Zack Magallanez** received a scholarship from the Urban Management Association of South Texas to attend the Texas City Management Association Conference in

June. He gained a deeper understanding of the city management profession, particularly within the unique context of Texas cities and their evolving political landscape.

## 2015



**Cristina M. Lopez** started a new position in June as a clinical assistant professor in the College of Education and Human Development at A&M-San Antonio.



**Alicja Sieczynska '15** has earned a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Education, with a concentration in adult education, social innovation and entrepreneurship from the University of the Incarnate Word.

## 2016

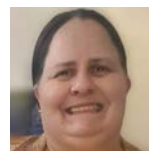
**Louis M. Palacios** has a grandson on the way, due in late August or early September.

## 2017



**Nadia Gomez** recently started as the new Fort Sam Houston Elementary (FSHE) assistant principal. Gomez previously served in a variety of roles across

other districts, including paraprofessional, teacher, instructional coach, and assistant principal. Most recently, she served as FSHE'S response to intervention coordinator.



**Amy Klassen** is an insurance advisor with Futurity First and committed to helping individuals and families protect what matters most. Outside of work, she is a

proud wife, mom of two amazing daughters and a lifelong sci-fi fan.

**Linh N. Ly '17, '21** After she earned an MBA from A&M-San Antonio, she started working at Domingo Vara Chevrolet and now serves as a controller.

## 2018



**Kathleen R. Isaac** recently received a first-of-its-kind award through City Education Partners, which has launched a new initiative to honor

the educators who are driving academic excellence. The inaugural San Antonio Math Excellence Teacher Awards celebrates extraordinary math teachers—one from nearly every City Council District. Isaac was recognized for her work at Gillette Elementary and Harlandale Independent School District in District 3.



**Chyntia D. Johnson** recently purchased her first home.



## 2019

**Destiny Monique A. Bonds** gave birth to a beautiful baby girl in 2022. She is entering her ninth year of teaching.



**Rachel L. Todd** has been a successful teacher in Colorado for six years, including as a special education teacher and a third-grade teacher. She graduated with a Master's in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in Special Education from Southern New Hampshire University in 2024. She gave birth to a son in 2020.

**Cindy Trinh** is running her first marathon at the Chicago Marathon in October.

## 2020

**David D. Dries** completed his MBA in logistics and supply chain management within 16 months. He served as a government employee at Misawa Air Base in Northern Japan from 2022 to 2024. He then moved to Dayton, Ohio, and is currently working for General Dynamics IT on Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in support of the Fighters and Advanced Aircraft Directorate.

**Amber Nolan** is going into her fourth year teaching special ed at Kitty Hawk Middle School in the Judson Independent School District. This fall she is returning to A&M-San Antonio to pursue a Master's in Special Education. She has three kids, two of whom are in the same high school she attended and one at the same middle school.

## 2021



**Laura De León** earned a Master's Degree in Healthcare Management from Texas A&M International University in May 2025.

**Paul J. Strickland** is a sixth-grade social studies teacher and middle school basketball coach at Leadership Prep School in Frisco, Texas.

**Jason C. Tharp** is the new communications director for Fulshear Simonton Fire Department.



**Jorge S. Alvarez '19** was recognized with the Male Teachers of Color Collaborative (MTOCC) Mentorship Award and named MTOCC Educator of the Year 2025 for San Antonio and the surrounding areas.

Interdisciplinary Studies in Dec. 2022. She is a first-generation college graduate who was inspired to go back to school because of her mother, who did not complete high school.



**Michael M. Villa** is a senior building operations coordinator with Spurs Sports & Entertainment. Villa and his fiancée, Jasmine Martinez, are getting married in January 2026.

## 2022



**Isaiah J. Alonso** currently serves as an eighth-grade U.S. history teacher at La Vernia Junior High School, where he also leads the Introduction to Technology Department for sixth and seventh graders. In May 2024, Alonso was accepted into the graduate program at Louisiana State University, where he is pursuing a Master of Education in Educational Leadership. A proud five-generation resident of the La Vernia area, he is passionate about giving back to his community through education. In addition to education, Alonso serves as a pastor and worship leader at The Promised Land Church in San Antonio.



**Evelyn J. Campos** recently celebrated her one-year work anniversary at Alamo Colleges Foundation as a Foundation Scholarship Coordinator. She and her husband are expecting their first baby in December. The couple also celebrated their seventh wedding anniversary in June.



**Leatre Yan Cooper '22, '25** earned a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction from A&M-San Antonio in May 2025 and her Bachelor of Science in



**Brenda Reyes** is teaching third grade at San Antonio Independent School District. This past school year her student Sebastian Luna, after receiving a "Does Not Meet" grade level in his reading assessments, received a "Masters" in reading and math in his STAAR assessments. The district recognized Luna and 30 other students in a special award ceremony. Also this past year, all but one of her students passed the math STAAR and all but four passed the reading. Next school year she will be teaching fifth grade at a new campus which is an international baccalaureate school within San Antonio Independent School District.

## 2023



**Kelli A. Arguello** completed her 30th year at Southwest Independent School District and her first year as a special education teacher in May. She was a paraprofessional for 29 years before she became a teacher.

## 2024



**Vivian Salazar** graduated magna cum laude in 2024 with a bachelor's in biology. She began attending physician's assistant school at Arcadia University in Delaware in May 2025. Her interests currently lie in dermatology, orthopedics and plastic surgery.

**Zachery R. Salazar** is offering summer and fall virtual tutoring sessions for kindergarten through eighth-grade students. Both one-on-one and group sessions are available.





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