

A PUBLICATION FROM
THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF SOCIAL WORK

INsight

SPRING **2025**



Graduate College of Social Work
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

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EXPLORE
Past
Episodes!



About

INSight is a Spring publication published by the Graduate College of Social Work (GCSW). This publication serves as a captivating showcase, spotlighting the remarkable achievements and contributions of our students, esteemed alumni, and dedicated faculty members. Join us on a journey through the pages of "INSight" as we celebrate the Interdisciplinary talents and impactful endeavors that define the vibrant community within the GCSW.

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Editor's Note

As we strive for excellence in our publication, we recognize the importance of maintaining accuracy and clarity in all our content. However, we understand that despite our best efforts, typos and errors may occasionally slip through the cracks. If you come across any typos, errors, or inconsistencies within our publication, we encourage you to report them to us promptly via gcswnews@uh.edu.



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A Message from Interim Dean Dr. Cynthia Warrick,



As the Interim Dean of the Graduate College of Social Work, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the second edition of **INSight**, the official publication of the Graduate College of Social Work (GCSW). This platform continues to showcase the incredible work, research, and achievements of our faculty, staff, students, and alumni—demonstrating our collective commitment to social work values and transformational change.

This edition arrives at an exciting time for the GCSW as we embark on a significant milestone: the culmination of our Dean search. As we look

ahead to identifying a leader who will build upon our strong foundation and drive our mission forward, we remain steadfast in our pursuit of excellence in social work education, research, and practice.

The future of the GCSW is bright. With each edition of **INSight**, we celebrate the depth of our scholarship, the strength of our community, and the impact of our work. I extend my sincere gratitude to all who contributed to this publication and to those who continue to shape the future of the College through their dedication and leadership.

Thank you for your ongoing support of the Graduate College of Social Work.

Best regards,

Cynthia Warrick

Interim Dean, Graduate College of Social Work
University of Houston

INVESTING

in the Future of Social Work

GCSW Launches Practicum Expense Fund to Support Future Social Work Leaders

Did you know that **99% of internships** for a master's in social work are **unpaid** † ? When coupled with the rising costs of healthcare and living expenses, including food, housing, groceries and the costs associated with practicum experiences such as new clothes, mileage, parking, meals, training, on-boarding requirements, and time away from paid work, our students are struggling to make ends meet. These constraints also make the demands of maintaining academic rigor quite challenging.

† According to Payment for Placements (P4P)

Practicum internships should provide enriching experiences for students, allowing them to explore interests, learn skills and garner a deeper understanding of the social work profession. However, having these experiences comes with a significant cost to our students and their families. Our graduate students are juggling numerous responsibilities, but it is our responsibility to assist in equipping them with the tools they need to be successful.

The Graduate College of Social Work has established the **Invest in Community Impact: GCSW Practicum Expense Fund** to support current MSW practicum students who are in good standing and demonstrate financial need. Although practicum agencies are encouraged to work with their students and help with costs associated with practicum, assistance is not a guarantee.

During the university hosted giving events (CoogsGiving, November 2024 and UH Day of Giving, March 2025) the Graduate College of Social Work raised funds that will directly impact the lives of GCSW students and the communities they serve. These gifts fuel future social work leaders to pursue their passion and make a lasting difference, despite financial barriers.



(Photo Caption: Graduate College of Social Work Practicum Department from left to right: Yvonne Mendoza, Cindy Carter, Shelly Gonzales, Charday Foster, Tamika White, Jamie Parker.)

EXAMPLES OF COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH PRACTICUM AS IDENTIFIED BY OUR STUDENTS INCLUDE, BUT ARE NOT LIMITED TO:

Purchasing Professional Clothing 	Meals 	Access to Childcare (or lack thereof) 	Technology
Onboarding Costs (immunizations, background checks, etc.) 	Agency Trainings 	Transportation Costs 	Time Away from work (or making the decision to quit a job to participate in practicum)

Faculty in Focus

Spring 2025 Faculty



29 Full-time
Faculty



36 Adjunct
Faculty

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Accomplishments

Celebrate. Recognize.

Recognizing and taking pride in the commendable accomplishments of our faculty and staff brings immense joy to the entire GCSW community. We are delighted to spotlight the earned promotions of Dr. Chiara Acquati as Associate Dean of Research and Faculty Development, Dr. Juan Barthelemy as Associate Professor with Tenure, Ginger Lucas as Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, and Dr. Quenette Walton as Associate Dean of Doctoral Education.



DR. CHIARA ACQUATI

Associate Dean of Research and Faculty Development



DR. JUAN BARTHELEMY

Associate Professor with Tenure



GINGER LUCAS

Associate Dean of Academic Affairs



DR. QUENETTE WALTON

Associate Dean of Doctoral Education



THE
ACTION RESEARCH
PODCAST

EXPLORE

Research and Practice
with Immigrant
Children and Families

Faculty in Focus

Who. We. Are.

GRADUATE COLLEGE OF SOCIAL WORK STRENGTHENS INTERNATIONAL TIES THROUGH FACULTY AND STUDENT EXCHANGE

Last fall the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work (UH GCSW) and Kaohsiung Medical University Department of Social Work (KMU) strengthened their partnership with the signing of a new memorandum of understanding (MOU). This agreement builds upon their ongoing collaboration, emphasizing educational, professional, and inter-cultural initiatives through faculty and student exchanges.

The initial MOU, facilitated by Gerson & Sabina David Endowed Professor for Global Aging, Dr. Patrick Leung, in February 2023, laid the foundation for collaboration between the universities to enhance international experiences through research, joint programs, and exchanges. “My goal was for faculty and students from both universities to have the opportunity to work together,” Dr. Leung shared. The updated MOU solidifies this partnership by specifying tuition rates and hosting agreements for exchange students.

The new MOU focuses on three key areas of collaboration: increasing reciprocal student exchanges, enhancing faculty partnerships on research and publications, and fostering deeper engagement in international social work and cultural competency. “These efforts will foster ongoing dialogue and cultural awareness between both universities,” Dr. Leung emphasized.

“My goal was for faculty and students from both universities to have the opportunity to work together.”

— Dr. Patrick Leung



(Photo Caption: From left to right: Monit Cheung, Cynthia Warrick, Dean Piggy Lu (KMU), Dr. Shin-Feng Cho (KMU), Patrick Leung)

Under the agreement, exchange students will pay tuition at their home institution and will not be charged additional tuition by the host institution, except for certain application or program fees.

UH GCSW will also provide the necessary documentation to support exchange students’ visa applications. Reflecting on the broader impact of the MOU, Dr. Leung stated, “This collaboration envisions fostering global growth through increased student collaboration on cultural differences, higher enrollment of international students, and enhanced rankings for the GCSW. It will position both KMU and UH as leaders in international education.”

As part of the partnership, UH GCSW hosted four students from KMU’s College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Social Work during the Spring 2025 semester. Additionally, the Graduate College of Social Work will lead a study abroad trip to Kaohsiung Medical University in May 2025, further strengthening relationships among students and faculty from both institutions.

QUENETTE WALTON NAMED HUMANA ENDOWED CHAIR IN SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH FOR THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF SOCIAL WORK

The University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work proudly announces Quenette Walton, Ph.D., as the new Humana Endowed Chair in Social Determinants of Health (SDOH). This prestigious appointment highlights her dedication to advancing health equity, innovative research, and impactful education for underserved communities.

Walton brings an impressive body of work to this role, particularly her expertise in exploring how social class, gender, culture, and race intersect to influence mental health disparities. With over two decades of scholarly and clinical practice experience, she is among the few researchers in the U.S. who specifically investigate the mental health and well-being of middle-class Black women. Her work builds critical knowledge and develops culturally relevant, evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing depression and improving well-being.

“This appointment comes at the perfect time in my career,” says Walton. “I am deeply committed to fostering interprofessional teaching and training that bridges disciplines to improve health equity for marginalized, oppressed, and vulnerable populations. As the Humana endowed chair, I look forward to strengthening ties between the Graduate College of Social Work and the other Humana Chairs to advance this mission.”

The Humana Endowed Chair program is part of a broader initiative by Humana Inc. to foster high-impact research and innovative education across the university’s five health colleges. By designating funding for each college, Humana underscores its commitment to creating diverse, interdisciplinary solutions to health care challenges in under-served communities, including Houston’s Third Ward and East End.



Jonathan McCullers, M.D., Dean of the Tilman J. Fertitta Family College of Medicine & Vice President for Health Affairs, as well as a fellow Humana Endowed Dean’s Chair in Medicine, says that “the Fertitta College of Medicine is delighted to see Dr. Walton named to this prestigious Humana-backed Chair of Excellence. We look forward to collaborating with her on her important and impactful research.”

Walton’s appointment represents an exciting step forward in the Graduate College of Social Work’s commitment to addressing social determinants of health and advancing mental health equity within the university and beyond.

“As the Humana endowed chair, I look forward to strengthening ties between the Graduate College of Social Work and the other Humana Chairs to advance this mission.”

— Dr. Quenette Walton

LEADING with VISION and PURPOSE

The faculty of the Graduate College of Social Work (GCSW) is proud to introduce four dynamic leaders who are shaping the future of social work education. Ginger Lucas, Amber Mollhagen, Quenette Walton, and Chiara Acquati bring a wealth of experience, passion, and commitment to their respective roles, ensuring that GCSW remains at the forefront of innovation,

student success, and social justice. As the GCSW continues to grow, evolve, and lead in social work education, these four deans are shaping a future that is student-centered, community-driven, and innovation-focused. Their leadership will ensure that the GCSW remains a place where future social workers are empowered to create lasting change.



The **VISION**, The **VOICE** campaign celebrates the unique voices that make up the vibrant Graduate College of Social Work (GCSW) community, including our faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community members. This initiative creates a platform for our shining stars to share their stories—capturing who they are and their meaningful impact within the community’s vibrant mosaic. By illuminating these powerful narratives, the campaign seeks to elevate the individuals who embody the spirit and mission of the GCSW.

Meet the Deans

GINGER LUCAS, ASSOCIATE DEAN OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

A licensed master social worker and clinical associate professor, Ginger Lucas transitioned into her role as Associate Dean of Academic Affairs in Fall 2024. She oversees the Master of Social Work (MSW) program, focusing on curriculum development—balancing implicit components like student resources and explicit components such as classroom instruction.

“My job involves analyzing data to determine if our curriculum meets the needs of students and the community, then implementing changes to enhance it,” she explains. Beyond curriculum, Ginger is passionate about student engagement and faculty collaboration, ensuring GCSW graduates are prepared to address complex societal challenges.

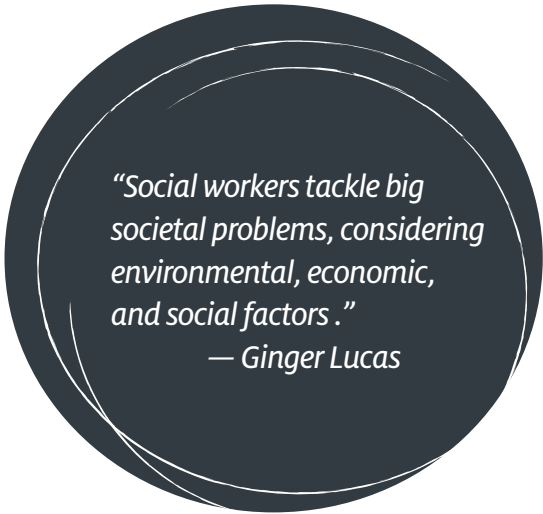
Reflecting on her journey, Ginger shares that the holistic approach of social work drew her to the field. “Social workers tackle big societal problems, considering environmental, economic, and social factors,” she notes. She is particularly committed to fostering difficult but necessary classroom discussions on oppression and systemic inequities, equipping students to be advocates for social justice.

One of Ginger’s most memorable moments at GCSW came during a virtual class, where she witnessed the deep connections students formed despite the online environment. “There were tears. That moment reassured me that meaningful relationships can be formed, no matter the distance,” she recalls.

She draws inspiration from Mary Church Terrell, a civil rights activist who addressed intersectionality long before the term was widely recognized. “Her work is still incredibly relevant today,” Ginger reflects.



Through her leadership, Ginger is committed to supporting faculty and students, ensuring the MSW program remains rigorous, inclusive, and responsive to evolving social work needs.



FACULTY IN FOCUS

AMBER MOLLHAGEN, ASSISTANT DEAN OF ADMISSIONS AND STUDENT AFFAIRS



Dr. Amber Mollhagen’s connection to GCSW runs deep—not only has she worked here for over 20 years, but she is also a proud GCSW alumna (’99). Her passion for social work began in college, where reading the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics made her feel like she had found “home.”

Now serving as the Assistant Dean for Admissions and Student Affairs, Dr. Mollhagen has dedicated her career to enhancing student experiences.

With over 500 students in the program, she emphasizes the importance of meaningful relationships. “We are using tools like Navigate Student for case management and communication, and Canvas to centralize student resources,” she explains.

Beyond students, Dr. Mollhagen is invested in staff well-being. A recent restructuring of the Admissions department reinforced the need to support faculty and staff to better serve students.

When reflecting on personal inspirations, Dr. Mollhagen highlights Betty Dots, a community advocate from Lubbock who supported those affected by HIV/AIDS in the 1990s. “She was ahead of her time. I’d love to talk to her one more time,” she shares.

Her leadership philosophy centers on one guiding question: “How can we improve the experiences of everyone in the GCSW community?” Whether through school-wide events, improved communication, or student engagement strategies, she remains committed to building an inclusive and thriving environment.

She has implemented initiatives such as:

- + **Internships** within admissions and student affairs, allowing students to gain hands-on experience
- + **Meet and Eat lunches** and professional networking events to foster community
- + **One-on-one** student-advisor connections, ensuring personalized academic and career support.

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QUENETTE WALTON, ASSOCIATE DEAN OF DOCTORAL EDUCATION



Dr. Quenette Walton steps into her role as Associate Dean of Doctoral Education during a time of transformation. A licensed clinical social worker and newly tenured Associate Professor, she is deeply committed to student success, recruitment, and program development.

At the heart of her leadership is a simple but powerful belief: students’ success and legacy are vital to GCSW. “When we pour into them, they return as alumni to mentor and uplift future generations,” she explains.

Dr. Walton’s path to social work was deeply personal. With experience in school social work, child welfare, and community-based mental health, she felt a natural connection to the field. “When I pursued my master’s, it just felt right—and even more so with my PhD,” she shares.

Her leadership is guided by personal milestones, including the birth of her daughter, which reinforced the importance of work-life balance, and achieving tenure, which she credits to a strong network of support.

Dr. Walton recognizes the barriers to Ph.D. education, particularly lack of access and resources. She is committed to breaking down these barriers so that all students—regardless of background—can thrive and lead in the field of social work.

Her inspiration comes from her grandmother and mother, whose resilience and wisdom laid the foundation for her leadership. “I stand on their shoulders,” she says with deep gratitude.

When asked what she would say to prospective students, Dr. Walton answers with a warm smile:

“Come here. There’s opportunity.”

With her vision, passion for student success , and commitment to access and equity, Dr. Walton is set to lead the next generation of doctoral students into a transformative future. She believes that by reimagining the future together and working collectively, meaningful change can happen—both within GCSW and beyond.

As she reimagines the future of doctoral education, Dr. Walton sees endless opportunities:

- + **Recruitment & Retention** – Expanding pathways for students to enter and complete the PhD program.
- + **Financial & Academic Support** – Increasing funding and mentorship opportunities.
- + **Redefining Social Work’s Role** – Addressing pressing social issues with innovative research.

CHIARA ACQUATI, ASSOCIATE DEAN OF RESEARCH AND FACULTY DEVELOPMENT



Dr. Chiara Acquati has been an invaluable member of our faculty since 2016, making significant contributions to our academic community through her research, mentorship, and leadership. Her program of research examines interpersonal processes that shape the mental health, coping, and well-being of cancer patients and their partners, with a strong emphasis on translational findings that inform interventions. A recognized expert in dyadic health research and psychosocial oncology, Dr. Acquati has authored over 50 peer-reviewed articles, multiple books and book chapters, and has secured funding from leading institutions, including the American Cancer Society and the National Cancer Institute.

She directs the Dyadic Approaches to Cancer Assessment, Research, and Education (DYADICARE) Lab, which is dedicated to understanding the profound impact of cancer on patients and their close support networks. The lab advances research and interventions that promote well-being by: (1) investigating the emotional, psychological, and relational effects of cancer on dyads, (2) developing evidence-based interventions to enhance communication, decision-making, and mutual support, (3) offering specialized training and education to students, community organizations, and research professionals, and (4) fostering community and institutional collaborations that translate research findings into policies prioritizing person-centered care.

In addition, Dr. Acquati is actively involved with the Hub for Engaged Action Research (H.E.A.R) Lab, which builds the capacity of scholars to create and disseminate collaborative, accessible, and nondiscriminatory research that centers community voices and fuels social change. Through its mission to cultivate critical reflection, connect scholars and community experts, and amplify research findings to broader audiences, the HEAR Lab fosters impactful and equity-driven scholarship.

Beyond her research, Dr. Acquati has played a key role in curricular development and interprofessional education, developing and teaching research courses in both the master's and doctoral programs. She is deeply engaged in interdisciplinary collaboration, holding faculty appointments in the UH Fertitta Family College of Medicine and MD Anderson Cancer Center's Department of Health Disparities Research. She also extends her expertise to nonprofit organizations and professional societies, previously serving as Research Director for the Association of Oncology Social Work and co-chairing the Health Track for the Society for Social Work and Research Conference.

As Associate Dean for Research and Faculty Development, Dr. Acquati plays a pivotal role in advancing the college's research enterprise, fostering faculty scholarship, and shaping strategic initiatives that strengthen research capacity-building. She facilitates monthly research roundtables, provides mentorship to faculty in their scholarly pursuits, and facilitates interdisciplinary collaborations to elevate the Graduate College of Social Work's contributions to impactful, community-driven research.



EXPLORE
Dr. Acquati's
Latest Publications

RESEARCH
IN Action

Active Research Centers

4

Active Projects in Progress
(Externally Funded)

24

Active Projects
(Estimate Based on FY 24-25 Expenditures)

\$612K



EXPLORE
Social Work
through Research

The H.E.A.R Lab, advised by Associate Dean of Research, Dr. Chiara Acquati, focuses on building the capacity of scholars to create and disseminate collaborative, accessible, nondiscriminatory research that centers community and fuels social change through cultivation, connection and the amplification of scholarly work.



A LEGACY IN the Making

Pursuing Purpose Together

A mother-daughter duo pursues their dreams—hand in hand—as they work toward their Master of Social Work degrees at the Graduate College of Social Work.



As Fiamma Villagrana-Ocasio prepares for life outside the Graduate College of Social Work (GCSW), she has an ally – and a classmate – in her mother Lourdes Ocasio. The two women began their MSW journey together in 2023, though their shared interests in social services bonded them much earlier.

A MOTHER’S LOVE

When Lourdes first arrived in the United States from Puerto Rico in 1999, she lived as a stay-at-home mother. Throughout the years, Lourdes considered returning to school but chose to focus on her three children.

Little did she know that she was waiting for the right time, the right MSW program, and as it turned out – the right person to join her on the journey.

Upon returning to work in the mid-2000s, she began working with immigrant communities as an educator. Her dedication to her clients led her to experiences that reaffirmed her desire to return to school in pursuit of her master’s degree.

“In 2019, I met this family, a single mother and twins. When COVID happened, the [twins’] teacher called and told me, ‘Miss Ocasio, we cannot find these students. We cannot find this family.’ The main barrier was language – when I followed up with them, they were totally lost because they didn’t speak English. The school didn’t ask me to do that, but I felt that this community was invisible. For me, it was not acceptable, we needed to do something about it. I advocated as much as I could.”

After graduation, Lourdes intends to pursue social work opportunities in primary education. At the same time, she is open to learning new ways to apply her skillset, now with an advanced degree.

THE APPLE NEVER FALLS FAR FROM THE TREE

After graduating from Texas Women’s University in Denton, Texas with a degree in Political Science, Fiamma worked professionally before deciding to take steps towards furthering her education.

While she has yet to start her professional social work career, her aspirations were

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always rooted in her desire to create an impact. After witnessing her mother Lourdes devotion to her family, serving the community, and young students, she decided to follow the path of social work.

“All of that has pushed me to want to find other ways to make an impact. My mom is Puerto Rican, and my dad is Mexican. In the culture I come from, I see the impacts of colonization on my family. I’m always remembering where I can make an impact.”



After graduating with her MSW this May, Fiamma will be walking in her mom’s footsteps as she pursues social work opportunities in primary education, “My priority right now is just getting as much experience as I can. I want to understand like the day-to-day experience and how we see the faults in the system playing out in the lives of students.”

A BOND, CHANGED FOREVER

Lourdes and Fiamma entered the GCSW with a strong foundation as mother and daughter, but their time as classmates deepened their connection in meaningful new ways—as peers, collaborators, and future social work practitioners, “Because we have a new understanding about therapy and human behavior, we can practice what we learn on our relationship,” Lourdes reflected, “Before, I acted as a mom, listening and giving advice to Fiamma. Now, we are on the same level. We share this new information that we have been learning and understanding. We have deep conversations together and at the same time feel

comfortable being vulnerable or making mistakes and being open to new ideas.”

They’ve also come to rely on each other when one of them needs time to finish their schoolwork. Last semester, the two carpooled on a regular basis.

“There were times that we were behind with the readings or the podcast that we were supposed to be listening to,” Lourdes laughed, “One of us would say, ‘You drive this time because I need to finish my paper!’ It’s cute that we can support each other like that.”

HOMETOWN HEROES

When asked who her social work hero is, Lourdes highlighted a fellow Puerto Rican woman who once worked in youth detention before starting an organization called Jovenes de Puerto Rico en Riesgo, or Puerto Rican Youth at Risk.

“I met Mercedes Cintron before moving to the United States,” she said, “Her organization helps students get jobs, finish high school and college, or gaining more opportunities. She used a lot of our culture to empower them.”

When asked the same question, Fiamma said with a smile, “My hero is my mom.”

The Graduate College of Social Work is honored to have the opportunity to highlight our graduates and their compelling stories. Congratulations Lourdes and Fiamma on a job well done. We can’t wait to witness the many wonderful things you will achieve!



Student Success



(Photo Caption: Umariya Khan, GCSW Ph.D. Student Ambassador)

Spring 2025 Enrollment

533 MSW Students



35 Ph.D. Students



MSW Student Awards and Honors

At the Graduate College of Social Work, we take great pride in the accomplishments of our MSW and Doctoral students. Their success serves as a catalyst for justice. When students thrive academically and professionally, they become empowered advocates, driving systemic change in their communities. By providing knowledge, resources, and opportunities, we amplify justice—ensuring the next generation of social work leaders can challenge inequities and build a more equitable, inclusive society. Join us as we celebrate and honor their achievements.



MONICA MARTINEZ

"I'm always seeking connections with other social workers, counselors, doctors, and professionals, whether their interests align with mine or differ. There's so much we can learn from each other, and working across disciplines strengthens our skills as social workers."

Monica Martinez, an MSW student, received the 2024-2025 Consuelo W. Gosnell Memorial Scholarship. This prestigious NASW Foundation award honors master's degree candidates in social work who have shown a strong commitment to serving public or voluntary nonprofit agencies, grassroots groups in the United States, or who have a special connection with American Indian/Alaska Native and Hispanic/Latino communities.

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NOHEMY GONZALEZ ROJAS

"I believe emotional literacy and the destigmatization of mental health is an essential step on the road towards community healing. By emphasizing an inter sectional lens in community awareness of mental health, we can create new systems that equitably address our community's needs."

MSW Student Nohemy Gonzalez Rojas received the 2024 Ima Hogg Scholarship by The Hogg Foundation for Mental Health. Nohemy was selected to receive this award based on her commitment to strengthening the well-being of communities as professionals in the Texas mental health workforce.



CHELSEA SANCHEZ, LCSW

"As an Afro-Latina woman and first-generation college graduate, I aspire to provide leadership in teaching because I recognize the importance of diversity and representation in higher education. I hope to serve as a role model for racially and ethnically diverse students who have been historically excluded from post-secondary education."

GCSW doctoral student and adjunct faculty Chelsea Sanchez, LCSW was awarded the very prestigious and competitive CSWE Minority Fellowship Program (MFP) award.

Ph.D. Student Awards and Honors

A special congratulatory tribute to those earning their Ph.D.'s from the GCSW this Spring. Your dedication, hard work, and scholarly achievements have not only earned you a well-deserved doctoral degree but have also contributed significantly to the academic excellence of the GCSW.



JOHN BICKEL



SEAN BURR



ALBERTO CABRERA



HOLLY DAVIES



ALEXANDRA HOOD



ELENA IONESCU



LIMOR SMITH

TRAILBLAZERS IN TRAINING

At the GCSW, our students are more than learners—they are changemakers. Through bold action, everyday advocacy, and a deep commitment to justice, they are shaping the future of social work. Whether organizing within their cohorts, championing campus initiatives, or standing up for equity in Austin, these student trailblazers remind us that meaningful change often begins with a single voice—and grows through collective action.

Mobilizing for Change: Students Lead with Purpose at SWAD

Graduate College of Social Work (GCSW) students never miss a chance to advocate and voice their passion for ongoing social issues—even if it means catching a bus before the sun rises.

At this year's **Social Work Advocacy Day (SWAD)** in Austin, Texas, students walked alongside faculty and staff to join hundreds of social work students to make a statement on the urgent need for improved mental health resources, fair payment for practicum roles, relaxed licensure requirements, among others.

The National Association of Social Workers Texas (NASW Texas), the event organizers, anchored the tone of this year's SWAD to the theme of "Serving All Texans: Unity Through Social Action." Students had an opportunity to attend sessions led by social workers, Capitol staffers, and changemakers in the advocacy space. Some approached state legislators to discuss bills or topics of interest. For Advanced Standing student Rea'ianna Winston, that's Texas Senate Bill 153, which advocates for a social work recruitment and retention program. It was Winston's first time in a pre-arranged meeting with legislator staff, but it did not hold her back from welcoming the experience.

"My biggest takeaway was getting comfortable talking to legislators," She noted, "That process was inspirational. I would tell [future SWAD attendees] to not be afraid to meet with your legislators. You deserve a chance to have your voice heard." Winston also spoke on behalf of Payment 4 Placement, connecting with fellow students to discuss practicum payment rights.

Students also heard from GCSW alumni like Tsion Amare, Devan Daniel, Savannah Lee, and Stefanie Page, who touched on topics such as food insecurity,

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domestic violence, and immigration, during panels held throughout the day. SWAD attendees were also invited to speak on issues of interest on the steps of the Capitol. When GCSW first-year student Anu Sathyanarayanan stepped on to the stage with a microphone in hand, she shifted the energy to bring attention to a topic different from the rest: epilepsy awareness. General awareness of epilepsy is important to Sathyanarayanan, but her speech became more than a call to action.

"What really got me going was that towards the end, I noticed how comfortable we were with each other. I felt like I was with my people. It reminded me of how much I wanted to be part of this [social work world]."

For many GCSW students, it was their first time repping the cougar red on Capitol grounds. The positive experience led some to already set their intentions to attend SWAD 2026. And despite the extensive preparation needed before the event, they believe that it's worth showing up and out for the causes they care for.



(Photo Caption: Advanced standing GCSW students discuss Texas Senate Bill 153 with legislator staff)

Social Work Advocacy Day

GCSW students participated in **Social Work Advocacy Day (SWAD)** in Austin to amplify the voices of mental health care professionals and social work students. The focus was on addressing pay disparities for all mental health professionals offering psychotherapy and ensuring financial support for social work practicum placements. This support is championed by Pay For Placements (P4P), a national movement dedicated to providing payments or stipends for social work practicum placements, with a specific emphasis on assisting students with financial need.





The Positivity Project

Spreading Sunshine, One Note at a Time

For first-year, Cohort 2, MSW students — Elisabeth Adams, Ashlyn Bimmerle, Elizabeth Chirko, and Alina Syed, affectionately known as “The Sunshine Crew”—cultivating a culture of genuine connection, encouragement, stability, and calm is vital to the well-being of the Graduate College of Social Work. As the spring semester draws to a close, burnout and fatigue have become increasingly prevalent.

“Our program is rooted in positivity, empowerment, growth, and community—but we weren’t experiencing that within our own cohort,” shared Sunshine Crew member Elizabeth Chirko. In response, the group sprang into action, brainstorming simple yet impactful ways to uplift their peers and spread encouragement throughout the college. Ashlyn proposed the “Positivity Project” to the Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, who enthusiastically endorsed it as a timely and thoughtful approach to easing stress, combating negativity, and softening the “weird vibes” often felt at the semester’s end.

The Positivity Project is a student-driven effort aimed at creating a ripple effect of encouragement across every corner of the GCSW. From affirming sticky notes to larger wellness-focused initiatives, the project centers on honoring the humanity, resilience, and compassion that unite this community of future social workers.



(Photo Caption from L to R: Ashlyn Bimmerle, Elisabeth Adams, Alina Syed, Elizabeth Chirko)

GCSW Accolades

Uplifting our Community’s Achievements and Contributions



AWARDS

- + **Dr. Susan P. Robbins** received the NASW Social Work Pioneer Award from the NASW Foundation and the 1914 Distinguished Alumni Award in Academia and Research from Tulane School of Social Work (2024)
- + **Dr. Robin Gearing** was named a 2025 Distinguished Fellow of the National Academies of Practice, Social Work Academy by The National Academies of Practice (NAP) Distinguished Scholar Fellow
- + **Dr. Robin Gearing** received the Global Faculty Award and Global Faculty Development Fund by the Institute for Global Engagement at the University of Houston (2024)



ACHIEVEMENTS

- + **Allison Akard**, an MSW Advanced Standing student in the Clinical Online Program, has accepted employment this spring semester with Communities In Schools in New Braunfels, TX—where she also completed her practicum placement.
- + **Erin Pearson**, an MSW student in the Online Generalist Program, has accepted employment this spring semester with The Beacon in Houston, Texas—where she also completed her practicum placement.
- + **Dr. Susan P. Robbins** retires after 45 years of dedicated service (August 2025)

- + **Ann Liberman**, Director, Center for Career & Professional Development was elected to the Board of Directors as Membership Chair for the Consortium for Career Development in Social Work Education.
- + **Congratulations to the 2024-2026 GCSW Alumni Board of Directors:** Juliet London, President; Doris McCoy, Vice-President; Deshara Goss, Secretary; Steve Cochran, Treasurer; Directors: Jheri Bashen, Christian Capo, Ashley Cummings, Michael Daley, Carley Exiga, Angie Goins, Evangelina Hammonds, George Henry, Kiki Jackson, DeJuana Jernigan, Shitonda Johnson, Ursela Whetstone Knox, Frances Biba Lee, Joy Malbrough, Lindsey Pollock, Nancy Sanger, Harriet Smith, Laura Zelaya
- + **Tamika White, LMSW** Named Top 40 Under 40 Award, by Dillard University (October 2024)
- + **Dr. Christina Miyawaki** received the 2025 University of Houston Memory Test (CHAIN) Recognition Award by Vietnamese American Nurses Association.
- + **Dr. Patrick Leung** appointed as the Governing Board Chair of the American College of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine.
- + **Dr. Robin Gearing** became a Full Member, Sigma Xi, The Scientific Research Honor Society, Chapter Affiliation: University of Houston, United States (2025).



EXPLORE
GCSW Presentations
and Publications

Social Work Spotlight

The faculty of the Graduate College of Social Work (GCSW) are the driving force behind shaping the future of social work, equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and critical perspectives needed to make a meaningful impact. Through their teaching, research, and leadership, GCSW faculty foster a deep commitment to social work values, advocacy, and community engagement. Their dedication not only

shapes the next generation of social workers but also contributes to groundbreaking advancements in the field.

Social Work Spotlight highlights the voices, work, and collective achievements of the educators who are leading transformative change in social work and beyond.



(Photo Caption: Susan Robbins, NASW Social Work Pioneer Recipient)

Susan P. Robbins, PhD, MSW, LCSW joined the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work in 1980. Over the course of her 40+ year tenure she has been a highly productive scholar and researcher. After joining the faculty at the University of Houston in 1980 as an assistant professor, Dr. Robbins was promoted to associate professor and granted tenure in 1986. In 2014, she was promoted to professor and in 2022 she was named the Cele S. and Samuel D. Keeper Endowed Professor in Social Justice. Robbins served as Associate Dean of Academic Affairs from 1998 to 2000 and Associate Dean of Doctoral Education from 2019 to 2022. Dr. Robbins is nationally recognized for her service to a variety of organizations and communities and was recently named NASW Pioneer by the National Association of Social Workers Foundation.

SPRING 2025

Leadership. Scholarship.

Susan P. Robbins, the Cele S. and Samuel D. Keeper Endowed Professor in Social Justice and former Associate Dean of Doctoral Education at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, has been named an NASW Pioneer by the National Association of Social Workers Foundation.

Dr. Robbins has been recognized for her leadership and scholarship through her appointments to the Executive Board of the American Board of Forensic Social Workers, the American College of Forensic Examiners, and several editorial boards of leading journals. Her consultation and training for Children's Protective Services in Texas, New Mexico, and Oklahoma led to numerous invited conference presentations nationally, regionally, and locally.

Nationally known for her scholarship focused on critical analysis and socially constructed power, Dr. Robbins has applied these perspectives to human behavior theories, practice methods, pedagogical issues in social work education, and epistemological methodologies. She is renowned for her authored textbook *Comparative Human Behavior Theory: A Critical Perspective for Social Work Practice* and for critically examining the now discredited recovered memory movement. As Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Social Work Education* (2013-2016), her editorials received widespread acclaim and high readership.



Dr. Robbins' accolades include the National Faculty Excellence Award for Outstanding Contribution to Distance Education (University Continuing Education Association, 1998); the Outstanding Faculty Award (University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, 1988, 1993, and 2005); the Sol Gothard Lifetime Achievement Award (National Organization of Forensic Social Work, 2016); the Hamline University Alumni Award for Making the World a Better Place, 2019); and the 1914 Distinguished Alumni Award in Academia and Research (Tulane University School of Social Work, 2024.)



(Photo Caption: 2024 Social Work Pioneer Award Recipients)

FOCUS ON TEXAS Bills

The 89th Texas Legislature convened on January 14, 2025 and is set to adjourn on June 2, 2025. A total of almost 9,000 bills were filed for consideration this legislative session, including numerous ones related to higher education that would affect social work education. As social workers and advocates, we encourage you to stay informed on the legislative and policy-making process, including the implementation of any passed legislation and the effects of these on social work education and practice.

Texas Senate Bill 17 passed during the 88th Texas Legislative Session and eliminated diversity, equity, and inclusion offices and initiatives at public institutions of higher education. This legislation became effective on January 1, 2024.

Although the list provided below is not a complete synopsis of related bills, proposed legislation currently being considered by the 89th Texas Legislature include the following:

- + **Increasing** state oversight of public institutions of higher education, including allowing governing boards to create committees to assist with general education curriculum review, oversee course curricula, have discretionary authority over hiring decisions for leadership roles, and establish faculty councils or senates.
- + **Requiring** the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board Office of the Ombudsman to receive and investigate reports that a public institution of higher education has broken state laws or policies.
- + **Expanding** college accreditation options for the state’s public universities.
- + **Prohibiting** public institutions of higher education from requiring students to enroll in courses, as part of any program or degree requirement, that include topics such as social justice, intersectionality, gender identity, systemic or structural bias, gender identity, systemic racism, and other related issues.
- + **Prohibiting** public institutions of higher education from offering courses and/or certificate or degree programs in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer studies.

SPRING 2025

At the time of printing, the legislative proposals referenced were not yet passed out of the Texas Legislature. Because of the fast-paced nature of the legislative session and the sheer volume of bills filed, the movement of proposed legislation speeds up as the session continues so additional updates may be available at this time on these and other filed bills.

We encourage you to stay up to date on legislation being considered by visiting <https://www.legis.texas.gov> to look up bills and see their progress through the legislative process.

You will also find links to information on the Texas House of Representatives and Texas Senate, including options to view live and recorded committee hearings as well as live and recorded broadcasts from the floor of the Texas House of Representatives and the Texas Senate. Listings of and contact information for members of the Texas House of Representatives and Texas Senate are also available.

Austin Legislative Interns

The Graduate College of Social Work’s Austin Legislative Internship Project offers MSW students a unique, full-time opportunity to work directly in the Texas Legislature during its biennial session. This block placement requires relocation to Austin from January through May of odd-numbered years and provides academic credit. Interns serve as legislative staffers—either with the Legislative Study Group or in lawmakers’ offices—gaining first-hand experience in the policymaking process.



ALIRMA DAVIS



ALEXANDRIA FLORES



WILL HENDERSON



SYDNEY MEDINA



KWI MYERS



JANAY PRINCE



MEET
our 2025 Austin
Legislative Interns





Graduate College of Social Work
UNIVERSITY OF **HOUSTON**



SAVE THE DATE

Commencement 2025

Wednesday, May 7, 2025

Ceremony: 7:00 p.m. CST

Fertitta Center 3422 Cullen Blvd, Houston, TX 77204

*Reception immediately following in
the Graduate College of Social Work building.*