



December 2021, Volume 8

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Editors: Nour Alia, Zaid Soomro, Mary Fuentes, Xiao “Lilac” Li, Melissa Liu, Meghan Orsak, Sharmily Roy

## SIC Salutation 2021

The Student InterCouncil's (SIC) Salutation offers an exciting event to kick off the school year. Students are able to connect with each other while gaining more information about the opportunities available at UTHealth. This event provides a welcoming and inclusive environment to everyone at UTHealth. Whether it is your first semester or you have years of experience, there is plenty to discover. UTHealth has many helpful resources, services, and contacts that are highlighted at Salutation annually.

The 23rd Annual SIC Salutation was held on October 13, 2021. The event was conducted virtually via Zoom. Eric Solberg, Senior Vice President for Academic and Research Affairs kicked off Salutation, followed by a warm welcome from SIC President, Niharika Neela. Executive Vice President and Chief Academic Officer, Dr. Michael R. Blackburn gave a

welcome, and the Deans of the six UTHealth Schools introduced themselves and spoke about their respective disciplines. Vendor breakout rooms were then opened, where everyone had the chance to stop by the rooms to learn more about services ranging from transportation and safety to academics and extracurriculars. The vendors provided informational videos, which can be found on the SIC [webpage](#), along with the agenda and a message from the SIC President.

This year was SIC's second virtual Salutation, and with repetition comes insight. The format was set up to mimic previous year's in-person events, where booths would have been set up with the opportunity to meet other students as well as staff and other influential individuals in our community. The virtual breakout rooms

allowed for this to be simulated, and many attendees were able to meet one another and discuss topics of interest. To wrap up the night, there were many raffle prizes, including parking passes and bookstore gift cards, awarded to attendees.

Salutation is a fun and interactive way to get involved and learn about UTHealth. The SIC is thankful for all who participated this year, and we look forward to another successful event in the future. If you were unable to attend this year's event and want more information visit the [SIC Salutation page](#).

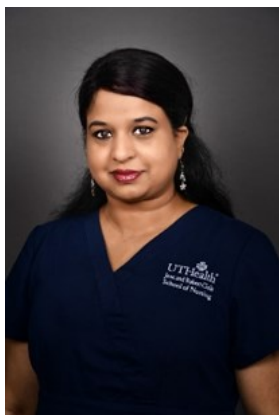
Mehgan Orsak,  
Cizik School of Nursing



2021 SIC Salutation Speakers

## Rising Above COVID-19

In a time of tremendous challenge and uncertainty, the resilience of students at UTHealth has remained a constant. Across all schools, students have worked hard to make a positive impact. The featured students in the following excerpts offer a glimpse of the accomplishments that can emerge from hardship.



Dolly Donempudi, CSON

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dolly Donempudi experienced uncertainty, as many other individuals did. Nevertheless, her commitment to being a compassionate health care professional ultimately overcame her fears. Recognizing that many were unable to make confident decisions due to misinformation, Donempudi started CHAOS (COVID-19 Help and Assistance On-call Service) to serve as a point of contact who can provide accurate and reliable information about the virus and vaccination. Donempudi committed to actively promoting vaccination

through periodic telephone calls with friends and family members in the United States and India to address their concerns. Furthermore, Donempudi volunteered at the ED COVID ward and the vaccination drive at Texas Children's Hospital-West Campus where she helped vaccinate approximately 60 children.



Natasha Cigarroa, MMS

When the opportunity to volunteer at the UTHealth vaccine hub was presented, Natasha Cigarroa thought about her two grandmothers who were anxiously waiting for the vaccine in Laredo, Texas. Cigarroa volunteered to check patients in, clean equipment, and administer vaccines. As she volunteered, she met hundreds of geriatric and immunocompromised patients, which reinforced her ultimate goal of combating COVID-19 as a community.



Alexis Mobley, GSBS

During the pandemic, Alexis Mobley became the Co-Founder, President, and Treasurer of Black in Immuno, a non-profit organization that aims to amplify, celebrate, and support Black voices in immunology. Black in Immuno is recognized nationally, but it also entails a global community that has reached immunologists on every inhabited continent. The organization has hosted two Black in Immuno Weeks while also offering accessible programming and achieving three publications in the European Journal of Immunology, Journal of Immunology, and Nature Reviews Immunology. Mobley has also been involved with hosting a COVID-19 Panel in Summer 2021 where barriers to COVID-19 vaccination and overcoming vaccine hesitancy were discussed.

You can learn more by visiting the [website](#) and following @BlackInImmuno on social media.



## Rising Above COVID-19



Mary Keckeisen, SBMI

As an ICU nurse at the Parkland Hospital in Dallas, Mary Keckeisen had one of the most direct experiences with treating patients diagnosed with COVID-19. She recently transitioned to the Rapid Assessment Team (RAT), a group of ICU nurses who help with a variety of emergencies in the hospital. With code blue survival rates being low and the pandemic reiterating that fact, she joined RAT to optimize data collection and is now involved with the electronic transition of code blue documentation.



Rakhee Bajaj, GSBS

Realizing how much waste is generated by the research community, Rakhee Bajaj founded

and continues to chair the Environmental Sustainability Student Committee at GSBS. The committee aims to make research sustainable by providing ways to safely and sustainably use, recycle, or discard research material. Bajaj works with UTHealth and MDA GSBS to educate the researchers on how to reduce the use of energy and to recycle lab materials appropriately. To learn more about the committee's progress and how to reduce research waste, follow @GreenGloves on social media.



Clara Kohlmetz, UTSD

In February 2021, Clara Kohlmetz was awarded the American Student Dental Association (ASDA) District 9 Delegate of the Year, an award granted by the district trustee for significant accomplishments in the mentorship of its delegates. During the pandemic, Kohlmetz found it difficult to know if her efforts had any impact, therefore it was a gratifying moment to know that her efforts to adapt

the organization to a virtual environment did not go unnoticed. She is motivated to continue serving as a leader at the local, district, and national levels and plans to run for District 9 trustee in February 2022.



Jarod Yap, SPH

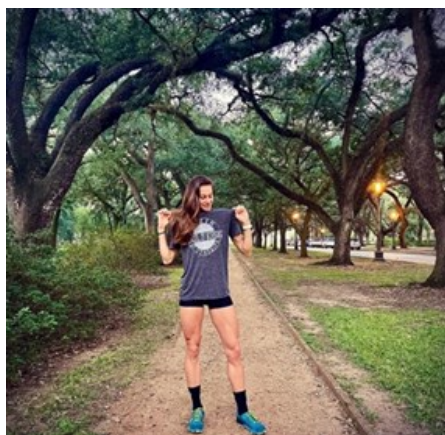
Jarod Yap is the CEO of Vision Possible, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Along with his friend, David Danjul, and cousin, Rachel Yap, he organized the Vision Possible Virtual Music Marathon and raised \$1,000 for Direct Relief, a non-profit organization supporting frontline workers during the pandemic. More than 50 musicians from 13 countries submitted video performances, thank-you messages, and comforting messages to unite and strengthen communities. The organization holds charitable events and conducts a scholarship competition in support of a musician's education and personal development. To learn more, visit the [website](#).

Click [here](#) to read interviews with each featured student.

Xiao "Lilac" Li, SPH  
& Mary Fuentes, GSBS

## Wellness Week 2021

During the week of November 8-13, SIC hosted Wellness Week virtually once again to encourage physical and mental well-being amid a hectic semester. The Student Activities Committee with myself and Ruchira Gundlapally as Committee Chairs planned and implemented fun-filled events and incentivized UTHealth students to participate with exciting prizes.



Belle MacFarlane, winner of the women's 5K, reps her UTHealth Cizik School of Nursing shirt.

In an effort to promote exercise, SIC organized a virtual 5K competition where students were able to document and upload their time entries to an online form so we could select the fastest male and female winners. The winners of their respective categories did not take the 5K lightly and absolutely blew us away with their times which were 17:33 and 19:10 (min and secs) for male and female, respectively. Thirty participants of the 5K were gifted

\$50 UTHealth Bookstore gift cards for their participation and the fastest runners were gifted an additional \$50 Adidas gift card.

In addition to physical challenges, students could partake in the “Let’s Get Cooking” challenge by cooking a power bowl and posting it to their social media accounts — thereby boosting SIC’s online social media presence. Featured below is one of the colorful bowls recreated by students, some even adding their unique twists with sushi and fruit. One lucky winner, Abhi Rashiwala, received an Air Fryer for their participation!



Likewise, to cater to all members of the UTHealth community, we also hosted a Photo Scavenger Hunt, which allowed individuals to take pictures of themselves repping UTH gear with their friends and pets. Many of these photos can be seen on our Instagram page @UTHealthSIC! Thanks to SIC’s Public Relations team, headed by Nour Alia, all Wellness Week events and many of its participants

were highlighted on Instagram, increasing our interactions and engagement all week! Through this channel and our emails, students excitedly expressed their satisfaction and enjoyment of all of the events.

Lastly, SIC was able to book three instructors to teach virtual workout classes which included yoga, bodyweight circuits, and Doonya/ Bollywood dancing. In the midst of a hectic semester and school, it’s easy to put exercise on the back burner, but flexible online fitness classes have been a great way to incorporate fitness into our routines.

Together these events allowed ample participation across all six UTHealth schools and gave people an opportunity to refocus themselves around health and wellness. One of our winners of the Apple AirPods, Sydney Pham, DS2, “really enjoyed the flexibility and multitude of opportunities to participate in Wellness Week and hopes that the event can be in person next year!” SIC is hoping the same and for more people to join in on the fun next year!

Melissa Liu, School of Dentistry

## SIC Sponsored Event: HIC's "So You Think You Can Innovate?"

At this time of year, the executive team and directors of the Healthcare Innovation Collaborative (HIC) are typically finalizing a case for the Healthcare Innovation Challenge or finding the next influential leader for the speaker series. However, Amber Chen, HIC Director and former executive Co-President, and Niharika Neela, HIC Co-Founder and Director, sought to introduce students to the annual Healthcare Innovation Challenge by hosting a new event with similar challenges under different conditions. "So You Think You Can Innovate?" was presented as a no-prep, fast-paced, casual competition that allows participants to work in interprofessional teams with students from different UTHealth schools.

SIC sponsored the inaugural fall event, and it took place on September 25th, 2021. Teams were presented with a case and challenged to create an innovative solution. After presenting their solutions, participants completed an additional three rounds

where they had to configure a plan to overcome real-world obstacles, such as budget constraints and achieving sustainability. Teams had the opportunity to win prizes in each round by audience choice voting.

Shane Reader, a Ph.D. student at the School of Public Health considers the HIC events unlike any other at UTHealth. Reader found that students have the opportunity to "think quick, exercise problem-solving skills, and associate theoretical concepts from class with true-to-life challenges." Reader conducts research in health policy that eventually impacts healthcare downstream. Since he is expected to work with multidisciplinary stakeholders, he considered HIC's event great practice.

Danna Ghafir is a third-year medical student at McGovern. Before the fall event, Ghafir had limited opportu-

nities to brainstorm solutions to systemic problems with students at other UTHealth schools. She found that the challenge provided "space for students to practice working through the implementation of novel ideas." Ghafir had the opportunity to work with Timothy Joya, a BSN student at Cizik School of Nursing. Together with their team, Ghafir and Joya proposed a school-based community outreach program aimed to address gaps in health literacy and access to healthcare. Joya described developing the proposal as "pulling from the unique life experiences of the individual team members" rather than solely the philosophy of their schools.

Click [here](#) to read the full interviews with Shane, Danna, and Timothy.

To get involved with HIC, fill out the [interest form](#) to be notified of future events. [Registration](#) is currently open for the annual Healthcare Innovation Challenge in the spring. Please note that the event requires a one-month commitment before the competition takes place on February 19th, 2022.

Nour Alia, SBMI



Shane Reader (SPH), Danna Ghafir (MMS), & Timothy Joya (CSON) participated in the inaugural fall event.



## Insight to Change: UTHealth Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Council

The ongoing pandemic brought on many challenges across the world. Additionally, a series of tragic socio-political events across the country during the summer of 2020 shed light on the need for racial justice, solidarity, and change- even within the structures of academia and healthcare. Thus, UTHealth administration, faculty, and students united to ensure that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts occurred within all six UTHealth schools through the generation of the UTHealth DEI Council, with its first meeting that same year. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion encompass policies and programs that promote the representation of different groups of individuals with diverse backgrounds- including people from different races and ethnicities, ages, abilities and disabilities, genders, religions, cultures, and sexual orientations. Dr. Elda Ramirez, RN, Assistant Dean for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Cizik School of Nursing is the first elected chair of the DEI Council. Dr. Ramirez describes the formation of this council as “a UTHealth-wide entity with a solid infrastructure, providing accountability and a safe space for all students and faculty.” For Dr. Ramirez, future DEI efforts must stem from strong initiatives that focus on the recruitment and retention of faculty and staff, implementing educational DEI and cultural curricula

across all UTHealth schools, and identifying ways to have the training offered at all schools relate and reflect the communities outside of the Health Science Center. Taylor Halsey, M.S., a fourth-year Ph.D. Candidate at MD Anderson UTHealth Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences (GSBS) is a GSBS representative and a member of the DEI Council. Halsey describes her experience in this council as an exciting one, as she can “promote DEI efforts and advocate for students of color at GSBS at a system-wide level.” Halsey states that “the joining of UTHealth's six schools for the creation of this council is a step in the right direction. I am eager to contribute to new ideas and improve upon existing policies that keep students of color safe, highlight their unique experiences, and celebrate the cultures that make us who we are. I know that using my voice in this way not only helps me but hopefully future generations of underrepresented minorities at these institutions.”

While the development of this council is a success, it is also important to highlight that in its starting year, the council has achieved many milestones and accomplishments. The council has de-

veloped an educational infrastructure through LinkedIn Learning, providing the opportunity for students, faculty, and employees to build professional skills and learn about diversity and inclusion, the DEI Speaker Series, highlighting health disparities many minority communities face and potential solutions, and large events highlighting awareness and cultures, such as the UTHealth Dine With Pride, Pride Parade, and Dia de Los Muertos.

Dr. Ramirez states that building the groundwork for this council has been a labor of love. While these new initiatives increase awareness and cultural competence to all six UTHealth schools, students now have representatives at each school to discuss any concerns and have a champion at the UT system level. Many projects lie ahead for the UTHealth DEI Council with the goal of advancing the health, well-being, and equitable representation of all diverse communities across campus.

For more information about the UTHealth DEI Council, please visit the [webpage](#).

Mary Fuentes, GSBS

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## SIC's Inaugural Speaker Series

Every year a new cohort of members that comprise the SIC and represent all six schools of UTHealth brainstorm creative new and meaningful projects and events to offer the UTHealth community. After multiple discussions, we recognized a popular demand voiced by many students to invite experts from different disciplines to speak and share their knowledge on a specific topic. The SIC has started a new SIC Speaker Series to fulfill this demand. The inaugural series of these interdisciplinary sessions will begin in the Spring 2022 semester.

A Speaker Series committee has also been established within SIC to organize and execute this innovative lecture series. Jayanta Mondal, Sharmeen Hamid, and Sonia Patel will lead this new committee. This group, comprised of nine SIC members from all six schools, is responsible for the vital task of identifying topics and inviting prospective national and local leaders to participate in the new speaker series. The talks will be interdisciplinary, relevant to the mission, values, and disciplines taught at UTHealth.

We hope that this will serve as a platform that offers us all an opportunity to learn, reflect, appreciate, and promote the diversity at UTHealth. Look out for updates about this exciting new series in the new year.

Zaid Soomro, SBMI

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## SIC's Community Outreach Events

The holiday season is a special time of the year. We all enjoy the season in our own ways. For SIC, the holidays serve as an opportunity to rest, reflect, show appreciation to those we cherish, and extend help to those in our community who need our support. In this spirit of giving and sharing joy, the SIC Outreach Committee has planned to contribute to our local community in the following ways in December 2021:

### **UTPD Toy Drive**

Play is what children do. Continuing in the annual SIC tradition of contributing to UT Police Department's Annual Children's Toy Drive, the SIC Community Outreach Committee will purchase and deliver toys, arts, and craft supplies to the children at Lyndon B. Johnson Hospital, CE Odom Pediatric, and Adolescent Health Center, and Harris County Psychiatric Center.

### **Sponsor a Household**

Working in collaboration with our partner, Casa De Esperanza, the SIC Community Outreach Committee will donate items such as sheets, blankets, and kitchen appliances to a household. This local non-profit organization provides residential and family support programs to provide safety, hope, and a home to children affected by domestic violence, substance abuse, poverty, homelessness, and mental illness.

Zaid Soomro, SBMI



## Things to Know: Upcoming Events at UTHealth

### HEALTHCARE INNOVATION CHALLENGE 2022



**HEALTHCARE INNOVATION CHALLENGE 2022**  
**EDUCATE. COLLABORATE. INNOVATE.**

Registrations Starts on 1st of December @6PM 2021  
 Event occurs on FEBURARY 19th, 2022

**CREATE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS ISSUES IN OUR HEALTHCARE PROMPT THROUGH INTERPROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION. OVER \$2,000 IN PRIZES WILL BE AWARDED. PLEASE JOIN US ON BRINGING INNOVATION TO LIFE & CREATING SOLUTIONS TO THE FUTURE OF HEALTHCARE.**

OPEN TO UT HEALTH STUDENTS ONLY  
 REGISTER ONLINE @  
<https://forms.gle/dFA5bGHs887dLepCA>  
 or scan QR code



For information on past events access:  
<https://www.txhic.com/>

Registration is now open for the annual Healthcare Innovation Challenge (HIC) taking place on **Saturday, February 19, 2022**, at the Cooley Center or via Webex if a virtual format is needed. HIC is a competition that resembles a hackathon and requires teamwork to solve systemic issues in healthcare.

Winning teams have the chance to win up to **\$1,200!** The event relies on the multidisciplinary contributions of students; therefore, students across all schools at UTHealth Houston are encouraged to register prior to the deadline on January 17, 2022.

After the competition concludes, participants are encouraged to apply to join the executive team, a leadership opportunity where students are responsible for planning the next challenge.

Please note that the event requires a one-month commitment before the competition takes place on February 19, 2022. To stay updated with HIC, join the [listserv](#).

### SIC ANNUAL CRAWFISH BOIL

The much anticipated annual Crawfish Boil is tentatively planned to take place in Spring 2022.

With the exception of the past two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Auxiliary Enterprises and SIC host the university-wide crawfish boil annually for students and their guests across all six UTHealth schools. Mark your calendars for **Friday, April 15, 2022**.

For more information, check out our [webpage](#).



# Apply for SIC Project Funding!

- Are you interested in receiving funding from SIC? Each year SIC helps make student-driven ideas come to life.
- SIC provides up to \$500 of funding for interprofessional ideas at UTHealth.
- Selected projects must benefit the student body and should be educational in nature. Projects should aim to enhance students' knowledge, educational experience and/or promote cultural exchange.



[Click to apply](#) or use the QR Code:



## 2021-2022 SIC Officers



**President**  
Niharika Neela,  
McGovern Medical School



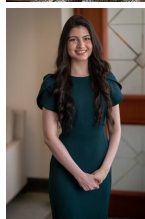
**Secretary**  
Jayanta Mondal  
Graduate School of  
Biomedical Sciences



**Treasurer**  
Katherine Wall,  
School of Public Health



**Vice President**  
Sonia Patel,  
Graduate School of  
Biomedical Sciences



**Historian**  
Nour Alia,  
School of Biomedical  
Informatics

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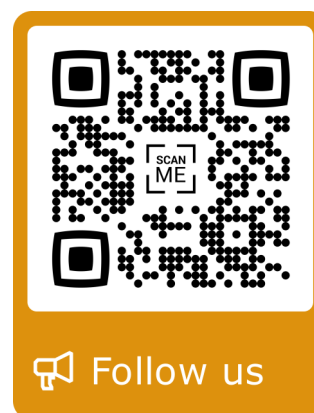
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[@UTHSIC](#)



## What is the Student InterCouncil?

The Student InterCouncil (SIC) is the official UTHealth student governance organization. It is a recognized forum of student opinion and the primary vehicle for student participation in the governance of UTHealth. The organization is comprised of three representatives from each of the six UTHealth schools, three representatives from underrepresented student groups, and three representatives from international student constituencies.

The SIC contributes to student life at UTHealth by participating in developing and implementing policies and procedures affecting students. SIC also provides funds to support other UTHealth registered student organizations' special projects and represent student interests on external and internal committees. The SIC promotes communication and collaboration among the UTHealth schools by the publication of the official SIC newsletter- *Student Pulse*, facilitating planning, and implementing activities that encompass all students across UTHealth.

We are here to be your voice, so feel free to contact us anytime at [sicgov@uth.tmc.edu](mailto:sicgov@uth.tmc.edu).

### 2021-2022 SIC Representatives

**2021-2022 Officers:**

Niharika Neela (President)  
 Sonia Patel (Vice President)  
 Jayanta Mondal (Secretary)  
 Katherine Wall (Treasurer)  
 Nour Alia (Historian)

**McGovern Medical School:**

Clayton Culp  
 Niharika Neela  
 Jordan Swan

**School of Dentistry:**

Logan Bliss  
 Ruchira Gundlapally  
 Melissa Liu

**Members at Large Representatives:**

Amber Chen  
 Mabel Perez-Oquendo  
 Katherine Wall

**Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences:**

Mary Fuentes  
 Swati Mohapatra  
 Sonia Patel

**International Student Representatives:**

Cem Dede  
 Sharmeen Hamid  
 Jayanta Mondal

**School of Public Health:**

Xiao "Lilac" Li  
 Ruchika Mahala  
 Sharmily Roy

**School of Biomedical Informatics:**

Nour Alia  
 Angela Hayes  
 Zaid Soomro

**School of Nursing:**

Elia Macha  
 Alexis Conley (Spring 2022)  
 Lia Olim (Fall 2021)  
 Meghan Orsak

