THE DIVISION OF DIVERSITY & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
ADVANCES SOCIALLY JUST LEARNING AND WORKING ENVIRONMENTS THAT FOSTER
A CULTURE OF EXCELLENCE through diverse people, ideas and perspectives.
WE ENGAGE IN DYNAMIC COMMUNITY-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS DESIGNED TO TRANSFORM OUR LIVES.
On the cover:
We love the diversity here on the Forty Acres. And not just the diverse people and ideas, but our biodiversity as well. From Waller Creek to the turtle pond, campus is home to diverse species of plants and animals like Tower Girl, our resident hawk who nests atop the tower, and the much-watched turtles and albino squirrels.

Cover illustration by Robert Harrington

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“Seeing is believing. I tell my students, ‘I'm a Black man from Hearne who went to Italy and graduated from UT. I just want you to hear my story and ask me questions.’”

—Ja'Michael Darnell, a Gateway Scholars alumnus who spent a year teaching and mentoring at-risk students in Hearne, Texas
It is an honor to serve as vice president for diversity and community engagement. During the past year as interim, I have come to appreciate how much the DDCE has accomplished over the last ten years but am also aware of the great opportunity we have to be more innovative in our work. I look forward to leading the DDCE in new directions as we continue to invest our talent and resources across the Forty Acres and in communities statewide.

We are pleased to share stories in this issue of Access & Excellence that reflect our work and the students we impact—beginning with UT Elementary School and beyond graduation from UT. The students include playwright Ja’Michael Darnell, a former Gateway Scholar in the Longhorn Center for Academic Excellence; former Lady Longhorn Imani McGee-Stafford; and recent College of Natural Sciences graduate Courtney Austin, who was co-director of Student Government’s Diversity and Inclusion Agency. These inspirational students drive our work in the DDCE and make our campus one of the most interesting in the nation.

Leonard N. Moore
Vice President for Diversity and Community Engagement,
George W. Littlefield Professor of American History
After a national search, Professor of History Leonard N. Moore has been named vice president for diversity and community engagement at The University of Texas at Austin. Moore, who served as interim vice president this year, took office on Monday, July 1.

“A faculty member at UT Austin since 2007, Moore was the senior associate vice president for diversity and community engagement from 2013 to 2017, managing about 30 programs and initiatives. He regularly teaches more than a thousand students during the fall semester in his two undergraduate classes: History of the Black Power Movement and Race in the Age of Trump. During the spring semester he teaches classes in the UT School of Law and the Texas MBA Program at the McCombs School of Business.

“I am elated to take this position on a permanent basis,” Moore stated in the announcement. “As the nation’s premier unit of its kind, the DDCE will continue to impact the campus and community through its long-standing programs, while simultaneously launching a series of new initiatives around the concept of inclusive innovation. These new programs will help us maintain a healthy campus climate and allow us to serve as a connector and incubator for leaders tackling some of our greatest social challenges.”

Moore is a native of Cleveland, Ohio. He earned his B.A. from Jackson State University in 1993 and his Ph.D. from The Ohio State University in 1998. He was a history professor at Louisiana State University from 1998 to 2007, where he also directed the African and African American Studies Program and the Pre-Doctoral Scholar’s Institute. At UT Austin, he serves as the George W. Littlefield Professor in American History. —Æ

He reaches out to people in all walks of life and builds connections with them. He is a brilliant scholar who inspires those around him, and he listens—to students, faculty members and staff members. That’s why he’s the right person for this role.”

—President Gregory L. Fenves
Giovanni Gutierrez is right at home in Austin, a city of startups and entrepreneurial visionaries. With his sights set on a corner executive office, the public relations senior is determined to follow his path to success.

“A great leader takes action,” Gutierrez says. “While at UT, I realized I should be doing more, so I started seeking opportunities and sending out applications.”

When Gutierrez learned about the DiscoverLaw.org PLUS program, he knew he had to take advantage of the opportunity to learn about the world of law. During the summer immersion course, offered by the Longhorn Center for Academic Excellence (LCAE), he and a cohort of juniors and seniors from UT Austin and Huston-Tillotson University spent five weeks preparing for challenging careers in law.

“It really opened up my eyes to so many things I can do within the legal field,” says Gutierrez, who participated in the 2017 cohort. The program has since been renamed College to Career: Prelaw Undergraduate Scholars Program.

While attending panel events, networking seminars and LSAT prep sessions, Gutierrez discovered an avenue of law that played right into his strengths.

“I really enjoy working with numbers, so I can see myself working for a corporate firm doing contract law,” Gutierrez adds. “I’m trying to get the most experience as I can right now so I can be like my dad and run my own business.”

No matter where his startup venture may lead, Gutierrez is determined to make a positive impact in the community. He is especially interested in immigration advocacy, an area he explored while interning at the Mexican American Legislative Caucus and the Texas House of Representatives.

“While interning at the legislative caucus, I could see how much of a difference could be made by educating these communities and bringing them together,” Gutierrez says. “Working for an organization like that opened up my eyes and helped me see the potential for change.”

Now he plans on taking all of his skills and experience to Capitol Hill during the fall 2018 semester. He is one of several outstanding undergraduates who earned an Archer Fellowship, a competitive program offered by the university that allows students to study and intern in the heart of the nation’s capital.

Gutierrez attributes his success—and his steadily-growing resume—to the sheer power of networking, a skill that he fine-tuned while meeting with lawyers and professors in the DiscoverLaw.org PLUS program. He also developed a number of contacts in Cape Town, South Africa, where he studied urban economic development as part of the LCAE’s signature Maymester program.

“The greatest thing I ever did for myself was to break out of my shell and start networking with people,” Gutierrez adds. “That’s how I found out about the Archer Fellows Program. I keep a stack of business cards and it just keeps getting thicker.” —Æ
As high-rise townhomes and trendy restaurants pop up along the narrow streets of East Austin, conversations about the adverse impact of gentrification continue to escalate. But there’s another pressing matter that dovetails with the city’s burgeoning affordability crisis: healthcare.
To delve deeper into this topic, scholars, nonprofit professionals and Austin residents came together at the Community Engagement Center’s Front Porch Gathering event last April at Austin Community College. The series of events are designed to leverage university research and resources to decrease economic disparities in the city’s underserved neighborhoods.

The featured speaker was Kristina Brown, co-founder of Counter Balance: ATX, a nonprofit that works to create positive social change through policy, community-based programs and resources.

“The connection between gentrification and access to healthcare is an important one,” Brown said to the crowd.

During her talk, Brown explained how institutionalized racism erodes standards of living in economically vulnerable neighborhoods, leaving residents exposed to long-term health risks.

“Counter Balance: ATX’s alternative is to build a sustainable structure where essential medical services are provided,” Brown explained. “Community taking care of community will be fundamental to the solution for mental health and healthcare access here in Austin.”

Audience members voiced similar concerns with healthcare access. Many of them had attended previous Front Porch Gathering events, which provide a space for them to share their individual experiences and explore potential solutions in breakout sessions. The goal of the gatherings is to empower community members to enact change in their neighborhoods.

“My background is in nursing, so I am drawn to conversations about health and health disparities,” said Elle Worsham, who has lived in Austin for three years. “There are a lot of stigmas that surround provider-patient healthcare. There’s also a snowball effect at play: someone doesn’t have access to housing, they don’t have access to food, and then they don’t have access to healthcare. My experience in the hospital plays into my wanting to become part of the conversation about how to empower people who are oppressed.”

During the event, attendees divided into small groups to discuss healthcare challenges and brainstorm ways to level public access to medical needs. Facilitators from local nonprofits and UT Austin used questions to guide conversations. Some of their questions linked healthcare access to racial demographics, life expectancies and even the school-to-prison pipeline.

“We want to talk about the infrastructure around healthcare, but also around access to mental wellness services and resources,” said Virginia Cumberbatch, director of the Community Engagement Center. “Our city is changing. With gentrification may come some resources, but are they the right resources to make sure traditionally underserved and marginalized communities are staying healthy? We want to understand how different parts of our population here in Austin are affected.”

Although it will take some time, Cumberbatch believes these city-wide conversations will lead to sustainable changes.

“We think it’s critical to work alongside the community to identify resources and pursue systemic change together,” Cumberbatch adds. “Without a community voice informed by lived experiences, we miss the opportunity to build intentional, comprehensive and sustainable change. We hope efforts like the Front Porch Gatherings will spark more dynamic dialogue and strategic solution building.” —Æ
“I see a lot of familiar faces, but I also see people from the neighborhoods walking the gardens with their dogs and enjoying the peaceful atmosphere,” says Hughes, a member of the church and of the steering committee for the Labyrinth Community Garden in North Austin. “We’re in a very diverse area so I’m happy the garden is starting to reflect that diversity.”

A civil engineer by trade and a lifelong gardener, Hughes saw so much potential in the five acres of empty fields. So in 2014, he and several members of the steering committee launched a community garden to bring both churchgoers and North Austin residents together in an organic way.

“You don’t have to be affiliated with the church,” Hughes says. “The garden is open to the entire community. Part of the intent was to provide a meditative, contemplative space for everyone to enjoy.”

Early into the project, Hughes and his colleagues realized they were entering a labyrinth of astronomical expenses, grant writing and municipal red tape. To give an example, Hughes pointed to a basic $400 gardening bed.

“The wood alone costs $300, then you have to buy the screws and the dirt,” he says while walking alongside

While mowing the vast fields surrounding St. John’s Episcopal Church, Hal Hughes often smiles to himself when he sees someone strolling along the spiraling pathway within the labyrinth garden.
rows of wooden beds filled with fresh soil. “It starts adding up, but when we get the grants in, little by little, we’re able to make it happen.”

Anyone who chats with Hughes about the costs of spigots and water utilities may have a newfound appreciation for those who create these communal green spaces. Half the battle, Hughes notes, was working with the city of Austin to waive water tap fees, which amounted to roughly $1,500 in savings. This involved stacks of paperwork and countless follow-up phone calls.

“The phone calls and forms went on for months,” Hughes adds. “And then we had years of grant writing ahead of us to bring the garden into fruition.”

The next challenge was securing grant money for the still-growing garden. Thanks to a referral from the Sustainable Food Center, Hughes and his committee members discovered the Texas Grants Resource Center (TGRC), a hub of grant-writing resources within the DDCE’s Community Engagement Center.

With help from TGRC director Ellen Moutos-Lee, Hughes and his fellow committee member Heather Stettler searched for the best grant opportunities, saving themselves a great deal of time and
effort in the process. Since 1962 the TGRC has been serving as a bridge between the grant-seeking and grant-making communities, offering one-on-one guidance from experienced professionals. The center also offers professional development workshops and seminars throughout the year.

“Ellen has been helping me this whole time,” Hughes says. “She’s familiar with grants, so she can tell me which ones to invest my time and energy in applying for. There are so many grants out there, so to have someone help me sift through it all was an enormous help.”

Not long after submitting their first proposal in the fall of 2014, Hughes and Stettler received their first $500 grant from ScottsMiracle-Gro. More grants and donations came through, allowing the garden to launch in 2017. Now with 25 beds rented out and newly planted trees provided by Tree Folks, the garden is in full working order. The idea, Hughes says, is to provide a space where both plants and friendships can grow.

“It’s a way to break down barriers,” Hughes says. “The best way to know people is to work with them. At church you can sit next to someone in a pew and never interact with them. But in the garden, you’re out there together digging and setting fence posts while talking and building relationships.”

The next big development will be a gazebo, where growers can gather for gardening classes and barbecue parties. A bee apiary has been recently added and the group hopes to hold beekeeping seminars in the near future.

“It would be wonderful to have a focal point in the garden where we can share a cold drink on a hot day or have an educational session on organic gardening or beekeeping,” says Stettler, who has been working alongside Hughes and other committee members on bringing the garden to life.

Unlike Hughes, who is well known for his colorful yard of ornamental flowers and trickling water fountains, Stettler has no place to garden in her condo complex. She—and many of her fellow community gardeners—enjoy having a dedicated space to connect with nature.

“When my parents were younger, they had a different set of institutions that created social cohesion and a sense of community,” Stettler adds. “These community gardens are replacing some of those shared spaces that have faded away over time, providing a sense of place and home.” —Æ
Paying homage to one of its earliest Black students, UT Austin has purchased an historic commercial building designed by John Saunders Chase to serve as a community engagement center. Chase was the first African American to attend the university’s School of Architecture and the first licensed Black architect in the state.
The 1,510-square-foot building, located at 1191 Navasota St. in East Austin, is thought to be Chase’s first commercial building design. It was built in 1952 to serve as the headquarters for the Colored Teachers State Association of Texas and is on the National Register of Historic Places. The Association was instrumental in advancing many changes in the battle for equality for Black teachers and students. Since the late 1960s until its recent purchase by the university, the building served as the House of Elegance Beauty Salon, an iconic East Austin business with many notable customers including Barbara Jordan.

Few alterations have been made to the building, which has been described as a design that expresses the transition from International Style with Post-War machine age detailing to the streamlined mid-century modern vernacular.

Architectural historian and Rice University professor Stephen Fox summarized Chase’s genius as an architect. He told the Daily Texan in 2013, “Chase mobilized modern architecture as a democratic process, and his buildings embraced the future that was determined to be better than the past and the present.”

The university has hired the East Austin firm Carter Design Associates, led by Donna Carter, to help develop plans for remodeling the building in collaboration with the UT Austin Planning Management and Construction Services group.

“Chase’s architecture has left an indelible mark on communities in Austin and throughout Texas,” says UT Austin President Gregory L. Fenves. “By preserving this historic building, the university can commemorate Chase’s influence as an architect, especially in the East Austin community, and his legacy as one of UT’s first African American students.”

The Community Engagement Center was previously housed on East 11th Street in the Marvin C. Griffin Building for nearly ten years and is currently located in the Centennial Towers Building off of Airport Boulevard.

“With a commitment to helping address issues concerning access and equity through the lenses of health, education, housing and law, the Community Engagement Center serves as the front porch of the university,” says Leonard N. Moore, vice president for diversity and community engagement. “We are excited to build that front porch in a community we value, on a building that was designed by Longhorn family and that served Black educators across the state for many years.” —Æ
While studying theater arts at UT Austin, Ja’Michael Darnell wrote a play about a young woman who was stuck in a town called “Lostland.” With some help from a mystical woman, she realizes her intrinsic power and begins to chart her own destiny.
“She’s introduced to the Electric Lady who tells her, ‘You have the power in you—change your mindset and be who you want to be,’” says Darnell, who graduated in 2014 from the College of Fine Arts.

Not too long after writing that play, Darnell set forth on his own journey of self-discovery—from Austin to Italy to New York. He has performed in a number of plays, landed a role in a foreign horror film and studied Italian culture, art and performance in Florence. He has since made a return trip to Italy, where he studied physical theatre on a Fulbright scholarship.

Looking back at his past accomplishments, Darnell says he never would have made it this far without the Electric Ladies—and men—who kept moving him forward.

“Now I’m paying homage to the people who helped me change my perspective in life,” he adds.

Growing up in the small town of Hearne, Texas, Darnell watched many of his peers wandering down the wrong path. At times, he felt stuck in the “Lostland” and wondered if he’d survive once he made it out.

“Jail seems like a rite of passage for many people after high school,” Darnell says. “Some get caught up with the wrong crowd, make bad decisions, and eventually end up in prison. Sometimes I’d wonder if this would be my course in life and whether I was even cut out for college.”

Galvanized by his grandparents’ support, Darnell graduated in the top 10 percent of his class and made it into his dream school. Yet when he arrived on the overwhelmingly large campus, that familiar sense of self-doubt crept back in.

“Even though I graduated at the top of my class, I felt like I was falling behind everyone else,” Darnell recalls. “Again, I started wondering if I could make it at a school like UT.”

Darnell soon found his way to the Longhorn Center for Academic Excellence (LCAE), a hub of free student success resources including academic advising, tutoring, mentoring, study abroad opportunities and more. The most valuable resource, he notes, was the team of supporters who helped him realize his full potential.

Inspired by his personal champions, Darnell decided to return to his hometown and pay it forward.

“I’m currently finishing up my year as a long-term substitute teacher at my old high school,” Darnell says. “I don’t have any desire to become a teacher, but this job allows me to motivate students to fight for their dreams.”

He hopes to help them see that graduating from college—and even studying abroad—is indeed possible.

“I want them to know that I fought for myself to achieve this dream,” Darnell says. “I ask them, ‘If you don’t fight for it now, when is it going to happen?’”

During his year-long sojourn, Darnell has brought several students to his alma mater for campus tours. The goal, he says, is to get them to see a world outside of their own.
“I want them to see that there are so many resources at UT that help students feel safe, supported and uplifted.”

While giving his students a tour, he makes sure to introduce them to DDCE Associate Vice President Aileen Bumphus, who helped him come into his own as an actor and playwright.

“Dr. Bumphus was in my play, ‘The Electric Lady,’ and she doesn’t even know it,” Darnell says, smiling. “She was always there for me and gave me encouragement when I needed it the most.”

Tiffany Tillis, director of the Gateway Scholars program within the LCAE, saw his potential and recommended he join the center’s Gateway Scholars, a student success program that offers signature courses, study abroad opportunities, mentoring and more.

“Gateway made UT feel like a small community,” Darnell says. “It was great meeting so many people and seeing so many friendly faces walking around campus. I still keep in touch with most of my friends in that program.”

Now he wants to keep up the momentum by empowering more at-risk students to chase their burnt orange—or perhaps maroon—dreams. When he’s not bringing aspiring Longhorns to UT Austin, he’s organizing leadership retreats at his hometown, where students can meet with successful college graduates who, like themselves, came from humble backgrounds.

“Seeing is believing,” Darnell says. “I tell them, I’m a Black man from Hearne who went to Italy and graduated from UT. I just want you to hear my story and ask me questions.”

Unlike most up-and-coming actors, Darnell’s ultimate dream isn’t limited to the silver screen or the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

“It would be a dream come true if one of my students got into UT,” he says. “Ever since I came to UT, I was dying to get people to come with me. There’s so many opportunities here.”

After wrapping up his substitute teaching stint, Darnell plans to move to New York City to pursue his acting career and audition for graduate programs. No matter where his career takes him, he will always plan on making return trips to Hearne, where he aspires to open a community theater.

“Currently there aren’t that many opportunities for kids to continue learning after school,” Darnell adds. “Theater provides a safe space where you can be yourself. I don’t want any child to not have an opportunity to perform, dance, write and open up their minds to other cultures and beliefs.”

Whether he’ll be strutting down the red carpet with A-list celebrities or taking the stage at a sold-out Broadway show, Darnell will always stay true to his roots.

“It’s about being humble and keeping where you come from close to heart,” Darnell says. “Like Lena Horne as Glinda the Good Witch said, ‘Think of home.’” —Æ
First-generation Longhorns were invited to a special campus event featuring students, faculty, staff and professionals who were the first in their families to earn a college degree. Keynote speaker Carmel Fenves, first lady of UT Austin, shared her own academic journey as a first-generation college student, inspiring students to keep moving forward and make the most out of their college experience. The event was hosted by the Vice President for Diversity and Community Engagement and the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs.

Last June, more than 20 students interned and studied in Costa Rica, where they learned leadership skills while working with environmental conservation groups. Pictured here is the first cohort of students who participated in the inaugural study abroad program offered by the Longhorn Center for Academic Excellence.

More than 80 undergraduates—many first-generation college students—experienced a trip of a lifetime in Cape Town, South Africa for four weeks in May and June. Offered by the Longhorn Center for Academic Excellence and the International Office, the study abroad course is the largest of its kind at UT Austin. Led by Leonard N. Moore, vice president for diversity and community engagement, the program offered internships at firms and NGOs specializing in business, entrepreneurship, healthcare, education and more.
RELIVING THE THURSDAY NIGHT LIGHTS

At a time when “Friday night lights” were just for white high school football games, African American teams across Texas burned up the gridiron on weeknights. Last March, visitors at the DKR Texas Memorial Stadium had the chance to relive this era at a special exhibit of the Prairie View Interscholastic League (PVIL) memorabilia. The display of trophies, jerseys, photos and news clippings were presented by PVIL Coaches Association President Robert Brown.

SPRING CLEANING

In honor of the life and legacy of civil rights leader Cesar E. Chavez, the Longhorn Center for Community Engagement organized a day of service in March. Students wiped away graffiti and picked up trash along the streets of West Campus. Held on Chavez’s birthday, the day of service is a way for students to give back to their community in the spirit of positive change. The event was co-hosted by UTPD, West Campus neighborhood associations and business owners.

NO PLACE FOR HATE

UT Elementary has been officially designated as a No Place for Hate school for the 2017-18 academic year by the Anti-Defamation League. To earn the designation, schools commit to several anti-bias and diversity related activities throughout the year. They must also demonstrate leadership in teaching and modeling respect for individual and group differences while challenging prejudice and discrimination.
GREEN IS THE
NEW BURNT ORANGE

by Jessica Sinn

Just around the corner from the University Elementary School cafeteria, a class of second-graders is sitting on tree stump chairs and watching their teacher point to sketches of plants on a handheld white board.
“Alright! Now I want you all to break into groups and search for this herb,” says Rebecca Vore, the school’s wellness teacher, as she taps her finger to the word “Basil.”

While the young gardeners scavenge for a patch of green leaves, a student walks up to Vore with a plant crawling with microscopic bugs.

“These are aphids,” Vore says. “The ladybugs eat them.”

For a moment, the boy stares down at the insects in wonderment.

“Well then we shouldn’t get rid of them because we need our ladybugs,” he exclaims. “This is why we don’t need pesticides in the garden.”

Vore watches her student with delight as he runs back to the garden to share his newfound wisdom with the group.

“You don’t have to spell everything out to them,” she says. “You just have to guide them and let them make these connections on their own.”

IT’S ONLY NATURAL

When students understand and appreciate their intrinsic bond with nature, they’re able to develop a deeper appreciation for both plant and human life, Vore says. These gardens, she adds, are really outdoor classrooms where children learn valuable lessons—not just about long-term health, but also about science and math, even business.

“They need to have that connection to understand their place in this world,” says Vore, who is proud to work at a school that uniquely offers gardening classes to students of all K-5 grade levels. “If you’re in touch with your sense of place, your sense of self will follow. You can look around and say, ‘Yes, I am a part of all of this.’”

Like scientists in a lab, Vore’s students weave around the leafy garden beds observing the wonders of photosynthesis, insect larvae and metamorphosis. They’re sifting through soil in search of beetles and busily jotting down notes about their findings. This type of fieldwork, Vore says, is the impetus for world-changing innovations—from flight to sonar to electricity.

“In order for them to be prepared for whatever is coming next, they need to put ideas together, make predictions and use their cognitive reasoning skills,” Vore adds. “The best way to do that is by getting their hands dirty.”

UT Elementary alumnus Christian Flores, says he will never forget his time in the garden, where he planted seeds and watched them morph into edible herbs and vegetables. Inspired by his
His fondest elementary school memories, he recently built five tables and six benches for the garden as part of his Eagle Scout project.

“I really enjoyed being out in the garden and working with my hands,” says Flores, who has enlisted in the U.S. Navy and plans on becoming a combat medic. “It was gratifying watching the plants grow and knowing that I had a part in that.”

THE FRUITS OF THEIR LABORS

One of the biggest perks for the students, Vore adds with a laugh, is getting down and dirty. And though her students aren’t aware of it, they’re getting a bonus PE class while moving soil, carrying heavy watering cans and pushing wheelbarrows. Sometimes Vore will catch a student surreptitiously munching on a leafy snack.

“I remember this one student who looked like he had his hand caught in the cookie jar,” Vore recalls, smiling. “He had a piece of sorrel in his hand and said apologetically, ‘I just wanted a snack.’ “I just laughed and told him that if he wants to eat sorrel, go right ahead.”

As part of the school’s Healthy Families Initiative, the gardening program promotes physical activity and healthy nutrition for children and their families.

“It’s like ripples in a pond,” she says. “When they get home, they inspire their families to visit the produce aisle and experiment with healthy recipes.”

They learn those recipes in the cafeteria where Kimberly Wilson, the school’s executive chef, shows them how to make healthy snacks such as kale chips and salads with homemade dressing. They even get to taste-test some entrees when Wilson prepares to change the menu. UT Elementary is one of the few schools in Austin that prepares and serves food in-house by professionally trained chefs.

“We serve a lot of items that many of these kids—and adults—would not be exposed to at home,” Wilson says. “Expanding the palates of the students will help them make better food choices as they grow. If they know what real homemade food is supposed to look and taste like, they will be more aware when they are eating less healthy food.”

In the spirit of healthy eating, the students sell their harvested goods at the local farmers market, where they often meet restauranteurs in need of fresh, locally grown produce. Restaurant owner Sam Hellman-Mass enjoys bartering with the young vendors and taking their produce back to his East Sixth Street establishment, Suerte. In the future he aspires to give culinary lessons at the school.

“As a restaurant we have a great opportunity to spark some positive change,” Hellman-Mass says. “If we can make a small impact, any impact really, on helping our community have access to better ingredients and cook more and enjoy food more, I think that’s a worthwhile endeavor.”
GOOD STEWARDS

Like Hellman-Mass, the Little Longhorns are working toward making a positive difference here in Austin and around the world. Whether they’re carrying buckets of water around Ladybird Lake to raise money for well water in Africa or recycling and composting waste to diminish landfill buildup, the young environmentalists are learning how to become good stewards of the land.

Their efforts were rewarded by the school’s community partner Keep Austin Beautiful, a nonprofit that promotes environmental stewardship among the Austin community. In 2017, students and teachers proudly accepted the Applied Materials Education Award for Best Environmental Education Program at the annual Beautify Bash. The school has also partnered with Texas Parks and Wildlife, a state agency that oversees and protects wildlife and their habitats. Through these partnerships, conservation experts visit the school to teach lessons in recycling, composting, water health and more. Students also go on field trips to McKinney Falls State Park, where they learn how to become certified anglers.

“We do catch and release, but mostly they’re learning how to cast out their line into the water,” Vore says. “They get to see the park, learn about fish habitats and rules and regulations for fishing. It’s great for them to learn about these resources and how to properly use them.”

Whether they’re casting out into the gentle rapids of McKinney Falls or loading their baskets with herbs and vegetables in the garden, the students are adopting healthy lifestyle choices that they can pass along to their families. That’s the goal of the Healthy Families Initiative, which was launched in 2007 as a result of some concerning data from the student body-mass-index report. According to the analysis, 67 percent of students were in the obese/overweight zone during the 2007-08 academic year. That number has dropped down to 41 percent in 2016-17 and continues to decline.

“We teach very young children, so these results were really a wake-up call to our community,” says UT Elementary School Superintendent Mellissa Chavez. “We know that students’ brains work better when their bodies are healthy so we needed to be proactive and address this issue.”

After a gardening session, Vore sees these benefits when her students return to the classroom refreshed and eager to probe deeper into their observations. Now is the time, she says, for young people to step away from the screen and get back in touch with the natural world.

“I cannot tell you about how many children who’ve told me about all the gardening their grandparents did,” Vore says. “Somehow, it skipped a generation or two, so we need to get them to reconnect with the environment and to have them become vocal, educated, concerned adults.” —Æ
Every year, the African American Male Research Initiative brings hundreds of athletes, educators, mental health experts and sports industry professionals to the Forty Acres for the Black Student-Athlete Summit, a three-day event that sparks timely conversations about the challenges and opportunities faced by Black student-athletes.

While topics ran the gamut from National Anthem protests to professional development, sessions on health and wellness made up a considerable chunk of the program—and for good reason. Left unchecked, the intensity of collegiate sports can pose serious mental health consequences for student-athletes.
Atlanta Dreams player Imani McGee-Stafford spoke out about her mental health journey during her keynote address.

“If I give 100 percent, that’s good enough,” says McGee-Stafford, who attended UT Austin on a basketball scholarship before taking her talents to the WNBA. “It really doesn’t matter what other people expect me to do, because I’m doing this for me.”

For McGee-Stafford, who graduated in 2016 with a degree in accounting, college days are just barely a thing of the past. While she speaks highly of her alma mater and the opportunities it gave her, she knows all too well the costs that some student athletes must pay.

“Too many times we failed the Black student-athlete by only caring about what they do on the field, or the court or the pool—whatever it may be,” McGee-Stafford says. “Once they enter the real world, they’re not equipped with the tools necessary to survive. “They’ve been an athlete for four years. Nobody has taken the time to nurture the other parts of their identity.”
What McGee-Stafford calls the “full identity” of the Black student-athlete runs parallel to a principle aim of mental health recovery programs: to nourish the complex totality of experience and environment that constitutes individual well-being.

Too often, there are parts of that whole that remain unrecognized or mistreated—sometimes for years. McGee-Stafford grew up in an abusive household and turned to drugs to cope with the resulting depression, nearly losing her scholarship in the process.

It took the support of a high school coach to pivot McGee-Stafford away from a downhill path and into her university basketball career.

“When I got [to UT Austin], I received the mental health services I needed my entire life,” she says. “Without any repercussions, without any consequences, without any stigma attached to it.”

Basketball wasn’t the only interest that McGee-Stafford pursued in college. Slam poetry and spoken word soon found their way into her life.

“It gave me a voice I didn’t know I needed—didn’t know I had, for that matter,” she says. “It’s definitely been a very positive coping mechanism for me.”

Her other forms of coping now stem from a powerful sense of self-awareness.

“I know myself well enough to know when I need to ask for extra help,” she says. “When I’m severely depressed, I can tell myself and see my triggers now—which I wasn’t always able to do.”

True self-worth can be hard to come by when ruthless competition and advancement are the order of the day—something student athletes know a thing or two about. However, the bleak narrative of inadequacy and failure that harsh superiors, audiences and other critics help propagate isn’t the only one out there. People like McGee-Stafford are making sure of it.

Through her sharp prose and smart plays, McGee-Stafford shows that recovery is possible—and that a resilient mindset is powerful.

“We definitely have to tell stories of triumph and stories of success, as opposed to the same old ‘woe is me’ story,” she adds. “Most of us get through it, and we get through it positively.” —Æ
For some high school students, the start of the fall semester is a time of excitement and anticipation. But for those within the transgender community, that first day often spurs questions such as, “Will I have to answer to the wrong name or pronoun? Will I feel welcome and accepted by my peers?”

The most vulnerable students, says UT Austin Human Development and Family Sciences Professor Stephen Russell, are those who identify with this community. According to his recently published study, transgender adolescents are twice as likely to have suicidal thoughts as the general population, and they are up to four times as likely to engage in substance use.

“We have known for a long time—before my studies—that there’s a dramatically disproportionate risk for gay and transgender kids,” says Russell, who studies adolescent development.

Although Russell’s findings paint a bleak picture, new results from his 2018 study show some promising insights. The study, published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, shows that when transgender youths are allowed to use their chosen name in places such as work, school and at home, their risk of depression and suicide drops.

Findings such as these can lead to big changes in schools across the country, which is why the Stonewall National Education Project Symposium holds nation-wide conferences to bring educators, mental health practitioners, allies and activists to the table. Inspired by Russell’s keynote speech at the 2016 symposium, the Stonewall directors decided to hold the next convening at UT Austin.
“After we were introduced to his research, we became more aware of the great work coming out of UT and the Gender and Sexuality Center,” says Emery Grant, director of programming and education.

Russell said the symposium provides an exciting opportunity for scholars and educators to explore new ways of transforming learning environments where everyone thrives.

“The people at Stonewall are from the school districts and state departments of education that are and have been at the forefront of thinking about what to do about classroom practice and also school and district policy,” Russell says. “It’s just a really amazing group of people because they’re absolutely dedicated.”

Participants addressed a number of measures for improving safety and inclusion on middle and high school campuses, including anti-bullying policies, mental health intervention and LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. To make the biggest impact, the symposium focused on the most marginalized population of students.

“LGBTQ+ students, particularly students of color, are continuously tracked as the most vulnerable population in schools when it comes to suicidal ideation, substance abuse and disciplinary actions,” Grant adds. “These are very serious issues that have a long-term impact on the life of a young person.”

Although these problems persist within the American education system, Grant believes that change will come with time.

“We have to foster community conversations that can shift hearts and minds toward inclusive policies and practices,” Grant says. “We have to help people see that it’s not just an outside agenda. It’s about the health and safety of young people in your own town right now.”

Liz Elsen, director of the Gender and Sexuality Center, is proud to host the symposium at UT Austin. She looks forward to future symposiums, where she can share her knowledge and experience—and also learn new strategies for fostering a safe and inclusive campus culture.

“Every year we have hundreds of students that come to our open house or visit us when we’re tabling,” Elsen says. “For a lot of them, it feels very affirming to see UT prioritize the safety of LGBTQ+ youth and to find a place where they can be comfortable.” —Æ
On the **DDCE Scene**

1. Sanya Richards Ross, Olympic gold medalist and former Longhorn track star, shared the ups and downs of her Olympic journey at the annual Black Student-Athlete Summit in January.

2. Hundreds of students participated in Latinx Graduation. The special ceremony, held in May, was hosted by Latinx Community Affairs, a student agency within the Multicultural Engagement Center.

3. Leonard N. Moore, vice president for diversity and community engagement, and Ryan Sutton, director of the African American Male Research Initiative (far back left) stand alongside members of the John Chase family who accepted the Legacy Award at the Evening of Honors ceremony in May.

4. Students, faculty, staff and civic leaders were honored for their community service at the annual Tower Awards ceremony in May. Pictured here, Rev. Freddie Dixon accepted the William C. Powers, Jr. Lifetime Service Award.

5. Longtime DDCE advisory council chairman and super Longhorn Hector De Leon was honored with the Joe R. and Teresa Lozano-Long Legacy Award at the Community Leadership Awards ceremony in May.

6. Hundreds of children and their families visited the DDCE’s activity tent at Explore UT, an annual March event that features approximately 400 free activities to help thousands of visitors experience the excitement and learning possibilities on the Forty Acres.

7. High School students from all five UT Outreach centers across Texas spent a day preparing for their freshman year on the Forty Acres during Longhorn Preview Day in May.
When Courtney Austin came to UT Austin, she selected a major that allowed her to indulge in her favorite pastime: solving problems.
“I chose computational biology and found that I really liked the math and computer science component because it’s a good way to solve problems,” says Austin, who graduated from the College of Natural Sciences in May 2018. “I like to exercise my brain as much as possible and problem solving keeps me on my toes.”

Whether it’s a puzzling scientific formula or a logistical glitch at a campus event, she’s ready to tackle the issue head on. However, Austin found that the most challenging problems are outside the classroom walls. When she became the co-director of Student Government’s Diversity and Inclusion Agency in 2017, she saw a need for more disability awareness.

“People don’t understand how much more we need to do to create equal opportunities on campus,” Austin says. “So I dedicated my time in Student Government to promoting awareness about accommodations for students with disabilities.”

Working alongside her fellow officers, Austin pushed for better ADA standards in West Campus housing. She also took the lead in coordinating speaker events to educate the campus community about visible and invisible disabilities.

“Change will happen if students are knowledgeable,” she says. “Event planning is a good way of reaching to different people and getting the message out there.”

Austin, who is deaf, knows the value of accommodations because she used note-taking services to stay on top of classroom lectures. These tools were critical to her success, however some of her classmates had a different impression.

“People don’t see that I’m deaf and they get frustrated when I have to ask them to repeat themselves,” she says. “I want them to be more understanding about people with invisible disabilities and the accommodations they need. A lot of times, people think accommodations are advantages, but I see it as leveling the field.”

While in class, Austin read lecture notes as they were transcribed in real time by a remote note taker. Post-lecture notes were also uploaded by student volunteers on a web portal provided by Services for Students with Disabilities. The notes were a big help, but when Austin reached her upper-division courses, terms started to get lost in translation.

“A lot of people taking notes don’t have experience with the terminology,” says Austin, who encourages more students in STEM disciplines to become volunteer note takers. “I started to struggle in my classes because the interpreter couldn’t keep up.”

Looking back, Austin says she should’ve talked more with her professors about the tools she needed to succeed. She urges students—with or without disabilities—to make good use out of their professors’ office hours.

“Always talk to your professor,” Austin adds. “You don’t have to tell them about your disability, but let them know about what you need to be successful.”

Now Austin is ready to tackle another challenging problem: affordable healthcare. With her sights set on medical school, she plans to work as a lab assistant and study for the MCAT over the summer. Her goal is to open a clinic for economically disadvantaged women.

“Taking a Business of Healthcare Certificate class really opened up my eyes,” Austin says. “A lot of women with pre-existing conditions die after giving birth because they don’t have access to healthcare. I want to get started in grad school so I can research this more and find ways to work on this problem.” —Æ

More civil rights milestones... Notable speakers, including Sen. Fred Harris, discussed the “Past, Present and Future of Two Americas” at a campus event honoring the 50-year anniversary of the iconic Kerner Report. Read all about it in our recap.

More student success... Meet several outstanding spring 2018 graduates who overcame a number of challenges to achieve their dreams. Read about their academic journey on the Forty Acres and how they plan to make the world a better, more equitable place.

More outreach... Go to “College for a Day” with a group of Neighborhood Longhorns from Paredes Middle School. Read all about their day-long tour of the UT Austin campus, which included a healthy lunch and visits with star athletes.

Most Popular Spring 2018 Tweet

Top Tweet
Congrats to our new VP, Dr. Leonard N. Moore!

Accolades
From left: Janette Gibreal, chair of the Capital Area Local Employee Committee; Erica Saenz, associate vice president for Community and External Relations (CER), DDCE; Milly Lopez, UT Hearts of Texas campaign coordinator and CER associate director

The Hearts of Texas Charitable Campaign, the university’s tradition of charitable giving, received the Capital Area State Employee Charitable Campaign award in February for the highest percent participation for a state agency with more than 1,500 employees. The campaign was also awarded for the highest retiree participation in Central Texas.
“Continue moving forward, own your story on how you got here, and always be bold in your passions.”

— ALEJANDRINA GUZMAN
2017-18 STUDENT GOVERNMENT PRESIDENT
AND LONGTIME STUDENT AGENCY MEMBER,
LATINO COMMUNITY AFFAIRS,
MULTICULTURAL ENGAGEMENT CENTER
A Texas-Sized Welcome
The fall semester is just around the corner and we can't wait to welcome new and returning Longhorns at several events throughout August and September! Visit the DDCE’s news site for updates on the fall welcome events that promote diversity, inclusion and accessibility for all students: diversity.utexas.edu.