

September 9, 2021

To the Members of the Selection Committee:

I am pleased to nominate my colleague Dr. Sylvia Robles for the SBAA Societal Impact Award. Sylvia is an Assistant Professor of Practice in Entrepreneurship at the Robert C. Vackar College of Business & Entrepreneurship (RCVCOBE) and serves as an exemplar of generating positive social impact through her service learning courses in Entrepreneurship. Building on her dissertation research, Dr. Robles has created the Adopt A Startup program at UTRGV as a means for her students to better achieve learning outcomes through “real world” application while also improving business outcomes for local entrepreneurs. Realizing the lack of support for women and Hispanic entrepreneurs in the Rio Grande Valley, Dr. Robles trains her students to act as consultants for small business owners in the region – providing the entrepreneurs with extensive market research and critical process reviews from the students as they gain a first-hand view of the issues and intricacies of actually running a business.

I am sure that most of us have a standout faculty member who does something similar with their class. But it is how Sylvia motivates the students to be so engaged in their community that I consider her efforts to be extraordinary. She serves as the faculty advisor to the Collegiate Entrepreneurship Organization (CEO) and her tireless efforts there inspire students to become involved and pursue Entrepreneurship as a major or a minor. She has an incredible ability to demonstrate to students that they can be successful entrepreneurs and that their success feeds the success of the community which in turn creates even greater success. Sylvia teaches the concept of success through sustainability and motivates the students to also live this concept. She is a UTRGV Sustainability Fellow and highlights the UN Sustainable Development Goals in her courses – attracting students from all over campus. This past year two of her CEO students were nominated for the Texas Business Hall of Fame Future Legends Award – neither of them Entrepreneurship majors. The one who won the award was a Business Analytics major. The other was a pre-med major. But they were leaders of CEO and supported the Adopt A Startup program because they believed in the program and Sylvia’s positive impact. This past year Sylvia was recognized as the UTRGV faculty advisor of the year because of her broad-reaching impact. This is how we demonstrate the positive benefit to society of business schools!

To give you an idea of the impact of the Adopt A Startup program, I offer you the example of success experienced by Crepe Town, a struggling local eatery owned by Melissa De La Garza. After Dr. Robles and her class adopted Crepe Town, the students identified areas for improvement and provided market research that pointed to growth opportunities. Melissa was a great chef with



an idea to start her own business, but she did not know how to run a business. Sylvia and her students showed Melissa how to turn her idea into a sustainable business enterprise. Today, Crepe Town is thriving and the featured food restaurant housed in the Brownsville Museum of Art and looking at expansion. This is but one example of the impact of Sylvia's work with Adopt A Startup. Her class has adopted over 60 local entrepreneurs with the majority being female entrepreneurs of color. This is the community that will create economic development in the Rio Grande Valley – and a community largely ignored and unsupported before Adopt A Startup.



Just as great entrepreneurs seek scalable innovation, Sylvia is seeking to spread the idea behind her research and the impact of her program more broadly. She presented her work at the most recent 65th International Council for Small Business World Congress Womenpreneurs session in order for other institutions to learn how to implement similar programs. She has created the Women in Entrepreneurship program here at UTRGV as a network for women entrepreneurs and as a source of inspiration for aspiring female entrepreneurs among our students. Her work with CEO continues to spark entrepreneurial interest among majors from all across campus. Sylvia has been instrumental in bringing a more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem to our campus and community over these last five years and her impact is only starting to show with the success stories of local businesses that might have failed if not adopted by her class. The future generations of business owners she has inspired will be proof of her impact for years to come – entrepreneurs who might have thought they were not destined to own their own business before she showed it was possible.



Thank you for entertaining my nomination of Sylvia for the SBAA Societal Impact Award. Just sharing her story in this nomination inspires me and makes me proud to call Sylvia a colleague. I do hope that we will see her Adopt A Startup program and inclusive engagement with students spread to other business schools as we demonstrate the benefit that we bring to society.

Sincerely-

Lance Nail

Lance Nail
Dean & Distinguished University Professor