

September 9, 2021

To the Members of the Selection Committee:

I am pleased to nominate my colleague Ms. Maria Leonard for the SBAA Societal Impact Award. Maria is an Assistant Professor of Practice in Management at the Robert C. Vackar College of Business & Entrepreneurship (RCVCOBE) and serves as a role model for faculty who want to positively impact society through their engagement with students and the community. Maria serves as faculty advisor to our campus ENACTUS chapter – the UTRGV student organization of the year. Maria’s passion for improving our world, her love of teaching, and her high level of energy are deserving of this award as they represent the best of what business schools have to offer.

Part of the mission of RCVCOBE is to engage the local community to improve the quality of lives and create economic development opportunities in the region. Maria has taken that mission to heart and created outstanding town-grown relationships, helped dozens of financially-disadvantaged families and created a financial literacy program aimed to help local students and citizens make better financial decisions. Maria serves as a UTRGV Sustainability Fellow and she infuses the UN Sustainable Development Goals into the initiatives that she and her students lead. The good work that she and her students have performed as the RCVCOBE chapter of ENACTUS has been recognized as one of the top national chapters for five consecutive years. Their mission is “As servant leaders, we strive to help our community achieve sustainable economic growth by building strong partnerships.” Their values are commitment, empowerment, and entrepreneurship. Listed below are some of the more impactful projects that Maria and her students have undertaken to improve lives in the Rio Grande Valley.

The first project is the annual Thanksgiving food drive called Cans Giving, targeting the 2<sup>nd</sup> UN sustainable development goal of zero hunger. She began the first food drive in 2015 and collected enough food to feed 25 families a fully sorted Thanksgiving dinner. Through collaborations and scaled efforts, ENACTUS increased its reach to feed 410 families in the Rio Grande Valley last year. The estimated dollar impact was \$12,300. The estimated social impact is far greater.

Maria also led her ENACTUS students on the Vida Nueva Colonia Project. Colonias are the residential areas along the Texas-Mexico border that lack the most basic living necessities - potable water, sewer systems, electricity, paved roads, safe and sanitary housing, etc. ENACTUS worked

with Sister Fatima Santiago to enrich the colonia of Penitas. The women of Penitas had established a clinic, thrift store, vegetable garden, and afterschool programs to generate revenues and improve the lives of the women and children in the colonia, but their ventures were making no profits to support the community. ENACTUS sought to bring new life to the colonia and termed this the Vida Nueva (New Life) Project. They helped the women of the colonia streamline expenses and channel their talent and skills towards the creation of a profit generating business - making reusable canvas bags. The project generated over \$20,000 in profits in two years. The chapter also helped the women learn about using technology, ETSY accounts, and organizational structure to sustain their profitability after the two year project. Additionally, the group created a partnership with the UTRGV Bilingual Education Student Organization to develop a curriculum for English literacy classes for the women of the colonia.

Another impactful project that Maria brought to ENACTUS centered around improving the quality of life called the Sustainability Ambassadors' Program. ENACTUS partnered with the UTRGV Office of Sustainability and HEB to teach sustainability and triple bottom line concepts to a group of at-risk teen moms in one of the poorest school districts in the region. The chapter developed a seven-week program in which these students attended sessions related to personal sustainable practices such as personal finances, education, renewable energy, environmental issues, and food insecurity, and they also participated in academic excursions highlighting organizations that champion sustainability in the Rio Grande Valley. Every part of the program incorporated one or more of the triple bottom line concepts: *People, Planet, and Profit*. The young women who participated were asked to apply these concepts to their own lives. Most have chosen to continue their post-secondary education and implemented practices within their community to eliminate waste, increase awareness, and foster continuous growth. Two of them are currently constructing a business plan to create and sell products out of recycled materials.

Continuing with the theme of improving society through sustainable practices, Maria charged the ENACTUS chapter to address pressing concerns related to the Autism community. The Sustainable Opportunities for Advancement and Recruitment (SOAR) initiative started by partnering with the Texas Workforce Solutions and the UTRGV Office of Sustainability to provide personal and professional development tools centered around sustainability and career-readiness concepts for autistic young adults. As a result of SOAR, all 13 members of the first cohort secured internships upon completion of the program.

One final project that I want to mention is the financial literacy program that Maria has started and grown through ENACTUS. Realizing that a lack of financial literacy in the Rio Grande Valley was a leading cause of strife in the region, Maria and ENACTUS secured funding from multiple sources to create and teach a financial literacy curriculum to local residents and high school and university students. Maria worked with our government relations and institutional advancement staff to bring in over \$40,000 in funding from the Consulate of Mexico, State Farm and Wells Fargo to start and scale the program's impact. This past year was the first year that the program included university students and it has already seen over 100 students voluntarily enroll in the program.

Maria is a tireless bundle of energy who motivates her students to become active in bettering their campus and community. But her approach is that support offered must lead to sustainability of those supported. This makes the efforts of ENACTUS extend far beyond charity or community service. Their efforts are to improve society by providing support that catalyzes positive change. Their efforts were recognized by the university last year as ENACTUS was selected as the most outstanding student organization at the university. I hope that you will honor their faculty leader with the SBAA Societal Impact Award. Maria Leonard is a shining example of how business schools positively impact society.

Sincerely-

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lance Nail". The ink is a light brown or tan color. The signature is fluid and elegant, with the first letter of each name being significantly larger and more stylized than the others.

Lance Nail  
Dean & Distinguished University Professor