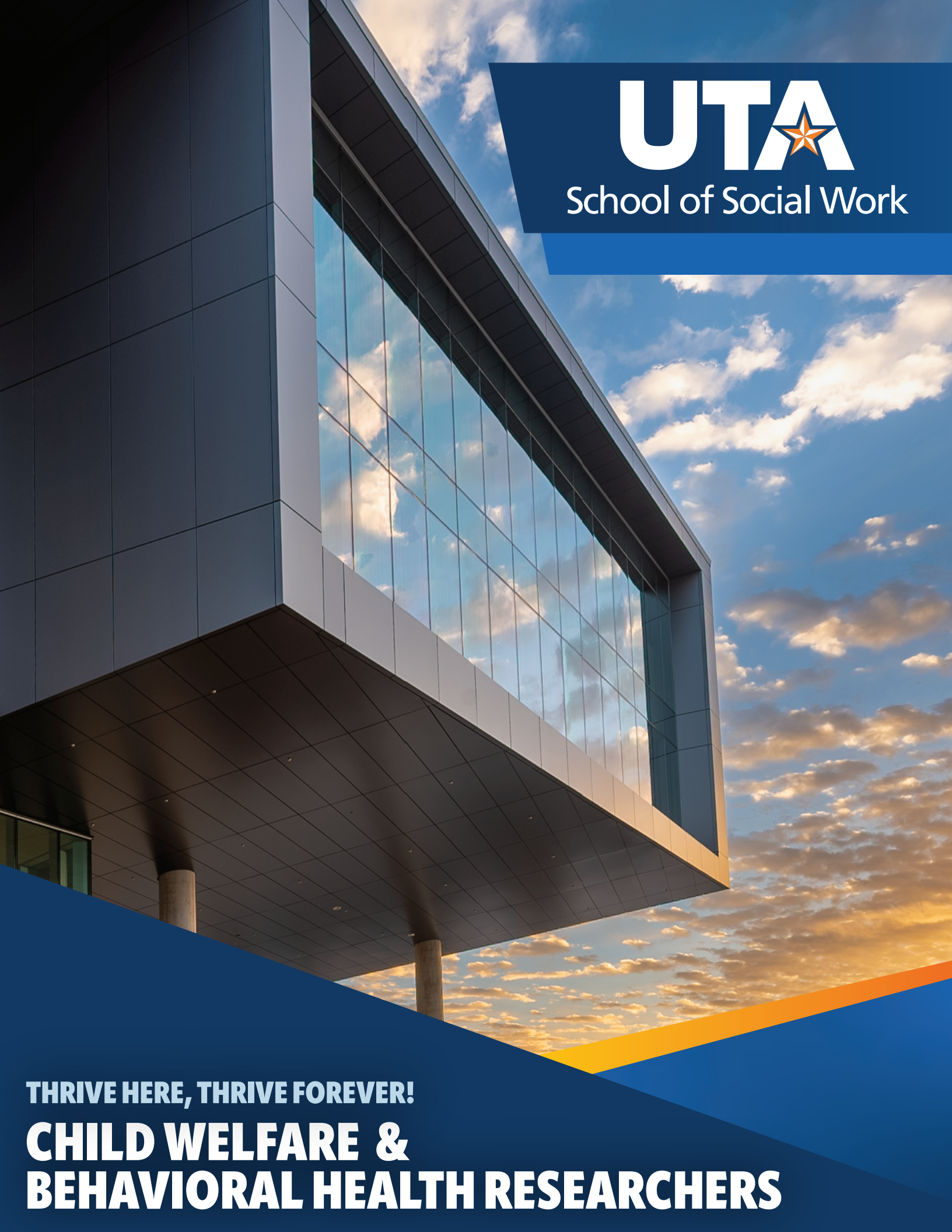


UTA
School of Social Work

THRIVE HERE, THRIVE FOREVER!

CHILD WELFARE & BEHAVIORAL HEALTH RESEARCHERS

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PHILIP BAIDEN PHD



Dr. Baiden's research interests center on the social determinants of health, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), the prevention of suicidal thoughts and behaviors, and adolescent health risk behaviors. With expertise in analyzing large secondary datasets, designing and conducting rigorous intervention studies, and evaluating social programs, Dr. Baiden is dedicated to improving the well-being of children and adolescents. His work aims to create impactful interventions that promote better mental health outcomes among youth.

SALTANAT CHILDRESS PHD, MSW



Dr. Saltanat Childress focuses on improving behavioral, educational, and health outcomes for children exposed to trauma, particularly adverse childhood experiences and domestic violence, both locally and globally. Her research aims to expand the application of evidence-based approaches in prevention and implementation science. Currently, her studies are funded by the U.S. Department of State, Qatar Foundation International, and the National Institutes of Health.

CATHERINE LABRENZ PHD, LMSW



Dr. LaBrenz's research, rooted in her practice experience, focuses on supporting families involved in child welfare. Her work aims to empower families and communities to build resilience and break cycles of maltreatment. She is currently funded by the Department of Justice and the State Justice Institute.

DANIELLE HARRELL (NÉE EUGENE) PHD, LCSW



Dr. Harrell's research explores social-ecological factors affecting child and adolescent mental health, focusing on depression and suicidal behaviors. She examines how school environments contribute to or reduce mental health and educational disparities among minoritized youth, aiming to develop culturally relevant models for K-12 schools. Her work also highlights the role of school social workers in improving outcomes for students, families, and communities, with funding from the National Institute of Mental Health and the U.S. Department of Transportation.

MELISSA LEWIS PHD



Dr. Lewis' research examines why adolescents and young adults engage in health-risk behaviors, using this understanding to develop harm-reduction interventions. Her work explores the dual-processing nature of health-risk decision-making while highlighting protective and risk factors. She has led six longitudinal NIH-funded projects as Principal Investigator and contributed to over twenty others, focusing on alcohol use, risky sexual behavior, and sexual victimization.

HUI HUANG PHD, MSW



Dr. Huang's research focuses on child welfare, substance use, juvenile justice, public health, and higher education. Her recent studies aim to improve maternal and child health, including a recent publication on app-based fetal movement counting and pregnancy experiences. Her work is funded by the State Justice Institute and the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.

DANA LITT PHD



Dr. Litt's research focuses on the etiology and prevention of health-risk behaviors, particularly alcohol use among adolescents and young adults. She explores decision-making around health-risk behaviors and prioritizes community-engaged research and implementation science to address substance use and support individuals and families. Dr. Litt has led four NIH-funded projects as Principal Investigator and contributed to over ten others, strengthening academic and community partnerships.

ENHANCING RESEARCH PRODUCTIVITY & COLLABORATION

MARYAM RAFIEIFAR PHD



Dr. Rafieifar's research focuses on serving disenfranchised children and families using community-based participatory methods. Her work explores the impact of immigration-related stress on parenting practices, examining its effects on parent-child relationships and the potential risk of child maltreatment. She has collaborated with organizations such as the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and nonprofits. Dr. Rafiefar is currently funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

JENNIFER MURPHY PHD, MSW, MS



Dr. Murphy's research focuses on adolescent and young adult mental health, with an emphasis on mental health service utilization. She examines school-based service use and its long-term impact on ongoing services and mental health symptoms. Additionally, Dr. Murphy uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the role of school social workers in supporting student mental health in Pre K-12 settings.

SCOTT RYAN PHD, MSW, MBA



Dr. Ryan's research focuses on adoption, including international adoption, the therapeutic needs of adoptees, and adoption by LGBTQ+ headed families. With nearly two decades of experience working with at-risk families as a clinician, educator, trainer, and researcher, his work addresses critical issues in adoption. He is currently funded by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.

JENNIFER O'BRIEN PHD, MSW



Dr. Jennifer O'Brien is a practitioner and researcher specializing in the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), particularly those affected by exploitation and trafficking. Her research explores the systemic and individual factors contributing to CSEC, its impact on mental health, and the effectiveness of intervention strategies and support systems for survivors. She is currently funded by three National Institute of Justice grants and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

YAO WANG PHD, MSW



Dr. Wang's research focuses on the outcomes and social support of older youth and young adults transitioning out of the child welfare system. Through her dissertation, she employs mixed methods to explore ways to support and empower these individuals to reach their full potential. Her latest publication examines the impact of COVID-19 on child welfare practice and its future implications, offering perspectives from youth, families, and professionals.

YANGJIN PARK PHD, MSW



Dr. Park's research focuses on violence, trauma, risk and resilience, mental health, and family therapy utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. His work aims to reduce violence and trauma among vulnerable populations, with a recent publication on racial and ethnic variations in the intergenerational transmission of adolescent depression.

MICKI WASHBURN PHD, LMSW, MA, LPC-S



Dr. Washburn's research integrates technology, with expertise in virtual reality (VR) intervention development and telehealth. Her current work focuses on creating culturally grounded interventions for individuals with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders. She is also developing a customizable VR digital therapeutic for substance use treatment and working on large-scale system improvements to better serve LGBTQ+ youth and families in the child welfare system, with funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

ABOUT THE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

The School of Social Work, ranked among the top 13% of 319 social work graduate programs by U.S. News & World Report, upholds the highest standards of integrity and excellence in research, teaching, and service. Our mission is to create a transformative future founded on justice, fairness, and social responsibility, aiming to develop individuals and communities that foster well-being for a just society.

With more than 2,300 students enrolled in our BSW, MSW, and PhD programs, we have a significant community impact through partnerships with over 400 agencies, where our students contribute more than 540,000 hours of community service annually. Our strong community connections enable us to provide innovative, experiential learning opportunities for our students. With the launch of our DSW program in 2026, our students and alumni will be able to create an even greater positive impact in communities and classrooms worldwide.

Faculty at the UTA School of Social Work publish over 200 articles annually in top academic and scientific journals—placing the School in the top 6% for research productivity among social work programs nationwide. This dedication to advancing knowledge is bolstered by various research centers, learning labs, and other major community initiatives that keep faculty actively engaged in their areas of expertise.

The SSW's centers and labs include the Center for Addiction and Recovery Studies (CARS), the Center for Child Welfare Research, the Studying Alcohol and Related Risks (STARR) Lab, the Emotional Robotics Living Lab, and the Social Networks for Social Good Lab, with additional centers planned for 2026. We are proud to showcase our new, state-of-the-art building, which opened in Spring 2023.

Our Students & Community Involvement:

2,300 Students

400 Agency partners for student internships with research & Community impact.

540K Hours of community service annually

$17 M Yearly economic Impact

Our professors:

200+ Academic and Scientific articles published in journals annually

TOP 6% **Percentile** for Social Work research production.

63 Full-Time Faculty

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON



Located in the heart of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, The University of Texas at Arlington is a comprehensive teaching, research, and public service institution dedicated to advancing knowledge through scholarship and creative work. With an enrollment of approximately 41,000 students, UT Arlington is the second-largest institution in the UT System.

Celebrating its 130th anniversary in 2025, The University of Texas at Arlington is a growing public research university located in the heart of the thriving Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. With a student body of over 41,000, UTA is the second-largest institution in the University of Texas System, offering more than 180 undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Recognized as a Carnegie R-1 university, UTA stands among the nation's top 5% of institutions for research activity. UTA and its 280,000 alumni generate an annual economic impact of $28.8 billion for the state. The University has received the Innovation and Economic Prosperity designation from the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities and has earned recognition for its focus on student access and success, considered key drivers to economic growth and social progress for North Texas and beyond.

LEARN MORE ABOUT US

The University of Texas at Arlington
School of Social Work & SMART Hospital
Box 19129, 501 W. Mitchell Street
Arlington, TX 76019-0129
Phone: 817-272-3181