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## MEDIA RELEASE

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### ***Advocate for Marginalized Communities to Give Keynote at Rio Hondo College's 56th Annual Commencement***

**WHITTIER** – A former Rio Hondo College student who has long advocated for the homeless and other marginalized communities will give the keynote speech at Rio Hondo College's 56th annual Commencement ceremony, set for 5:30 p.m. Thursday, May 23.

Dr. Luis S. Garcia serves as director of programs and services for the Weingart Center in Downtown Los Angeles, where he helps chronically homeless men and women transition to permanent housing.

Garcia attended the Hacienda La Puente Unified School District and began attending Rio Hondo College as a high school student. Along the way, he dropped out of high school and was briefly incarcerated but returned to Rio Hondo College.

He transferred to Loyola Marymount University, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in theology. He earned Master of Social Work from the University of Southern California and returned to Loyola for his Ed.D. in educational leadership for social justice.

He is active in efforts to assist formerly incarcerated men and women and other marginalized communities. He is a resident of Whittier.

"We are incredibly pleased to have Dr. Garcia as our keynote speaker," Board of Trustees President Gary Mendez said. "His career is a testament to the fact that everyone has the potential to create positive change in our community – the same potential our latest graduates will realize as they, too, enter the arenas of career and higher education studies."

The ceremony will celebrate 1,828 graduates and candidates for Associate of Arts, Associate of Science and Associate Degrees for Transfer. In addition, 16 students will receive Bachelor of Science degrees in automotive technology – a historic first for the community college.

## MORE

*Rio Hondo College, located in Whittier, California, is committed to the success of its diverse students and communities by providing dynamic educational opportunities and resources that lead to degrees, certificates, transfer, career and technical pathways, basic skills proficiency, and lifelong learning. For information on the College or its programs, please call 562-692-0921 or visit [www.riohondo.edu](http://www.riohondo.edu).*

“This year’s commencement is truly a once-in-a-lifetime moment for Rio Hondo College,” Superintendent/President Teresa Dreyfuss said. “We are privileged to have been able to guide so many extraordinary students along this stage of their journey in life.”

Rio Hondo College’s 2019 valedictorian, Hanh “Jenny” Pham, will be recognized during the ceremony with the Marie I. Pellissier Award. Pham, who earned a 4.0 GPA, is an immigrant from Hanoi, Vietnam who arrived in the U.S. about four years ago. An early childhood education and accounting double major, Pham plans to pursue bachelor’s and master’s degrees at Cal State Fullerton.

At Rio Hondo College, she served as vice president of the International Students Club, Senator Chair of Cultural Diversity for the Associated Students of Rio Hondo College, advocated on behalf of community college students in Washington D.C. and served as a substitute teacher at the Rio Hondo College Child Development Center. She has also served as tutor for math, English and child development at the College’s Learning Assistance Center.

The ceremony will also celebrate the 2019 Fellow of the College, Belen Torres-Gil, who retired in 2017. Torres-Gil, who worked at Rio Hondo College for 29 of her 40 years as an educator, served as the counselor coordinator of Career and Re-Entry Services, Online Counseling, Transfer Center, Early Warning and Faculty Advising. As a Rio Hondo College professor, she taught counseling courses online and on campus, and is recognized as a pioneer in online counseling.

Before joining Rio Hondo College, she was a counselor coordinator of recruitment for UC Santa Barbara’s EOP program and held positions at Michigan State University and Delta College in Michigan and worked as an elementary school counselor with the El Monte City and Lynwood Unified school districts.

“Belen Torres-Gil’s commitment to our students is second to none,” Dreyfuss said. “It will be a privilege to honor her contributions to our students’ success.”

In addition, the ceremony will recognize four graduates who overcame significant challenges in their pursuit of a degree and who will further their studies at top UC campuses and Harvard University.

A day earlier, at 5 p.m. Wednesday, May 22, nursing students will be honored in a separate pinning ceremony. Rio Hondo College will award 80 students with associate degrees in nursing, 25 students with vocational nursing certifications and 53 with certifications in nursing assistant programs.

## **PHOTOS**

**RHC\_GARCIA\_1:** Dr. Luis S. Garcia, a former Rio Hondo College student who has long advocated for marginalized communities, will give the keynote speech at Rio Hondo College’s 56th annual Commencement ceremony.

**RHC\_FELLOW\_1:** 2019 Fellow of the College Belen Torres-Gil, who retired in 2017 after 29 years of service, is a pioneer in online counseling.