



# START RIO...GO ANYWHERE

## MEDIA RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
RELEASE DATE: **May 27, 2021**

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### ***Río Hondo College Honors 2021 Extraordinary Students***

**WHITTIER** – Río Hondo College has honored five students with its 2021 Extraordinary Graduating Students award, a distinction that recognizes individuals who have reached their goals while overcoming adversity and personal tragedies.

This academic year's award winners are Albert Steven Mendoza Jr., Dominic Castanon, Pretty Garcia, Luis Alberto Cruz and Stephanie Paz. They were selected by faculty members and staff for their stellar work ethic and ambition for achievement.

Albert Steven Mendoza Jr. has turned his life around after spending years in and out of the Los Angeles County Jail system and struggling with drug addiction. One day, he decided enough was enough – he earned his GED and enrolled at Río Hondo College, where he thrived in subjects such as algebra and physics.

Mendoza has completed biophysics research at the City University of New York and is an active member of Extended Opportunity Programs and Service (EOP&S), the Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA) and TRIO Student Support Service STEM. Graduating with a 3.95 GPA, Mendoza will attend UCLA in the fall to study physics.

Luis Alberto Cruz turned self-doubt into success, after nearly dropping out of Río Hondo College due to mounting academic struggles and his undocumented status while also finding his place in the LGBTQ community. However, a trip to the College's Student Success and Dream Center showed that he could apply for financial aid while gaining support. Cruz quit his full-time job and focused on his education, joining the (MESA) program. Graduating with a 3.7 GPA, Cruz will attend UC Berkeley to major in chemistry. Cruz was also awarded the prestigious Regents' and Chancellor's Scholarship from UC Berkeley.

Dominic Castanon joined Río Hondo College in spring 2020 through the Near Completion project. Castanon was originally a business major, but a near-fatal motorcycle accident in 2014 left him with a head trauma, a fractured spine and a severe diffuse axonal injury.

**MORE**

*Río Hondo College is an educational and community partner committed to advancing social justice and equity as an antiracist institution that collectively invests in all students' academic and career pathways that lead to attainment of degree, certificate, transfer, and lifelong-learning goals. For information on the College or its programs, please call 562-692-0921 or visit [www.riohondo.edu](http://www.riohondo.edu).*

After learning to walk and talk again, Castanon decided to major in child development, pursuing his passion of helping others. Graduating with a 3.7 GPA, Castanon will attend Cal Poly Pomona in the fall to major in early childhood studies.

Pretty Garcia thought she made a mistake when she decided to study environmental science, believing the work to be too difficult. She would arrive on campus at 7 a.m. and leave after 10 p.m. every day before COVID-19 hit, continuing to study at local parks and in her car afterward. Her motivation to provide a better life for her family through education is driving her decision to become a synthetic biology researcher. Graduating with a 3.4 GPA, Garcia will attend UC Santa Cruz in the fall to study bioengineering.

Stephanie Paz is the definition of a determined, strong single mother. Paz originally enrolled at Río Hondo College in 2009, but struggled with the demands of being a single mother, a student and a full-time worker, and dropped out to focus on her career. In 2019, Paz knew she needed a change and re-enrolled at Río Hondo College to study sociology. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic disrupting her education, Paz secured at 3.6 GPA and will attend Cal State Los Angeles to study sociology in the fall.

“We are so proud of our Extraordinary Graduating Students, for overcoming so many obstacles to find true success,” Superintendent/President Teresa Dreyfuss said. “We know that these five graduates have bright futures ahead of them and we are glad to have encouraged and nurtured them on their academic journeys.”

#### **PHOTO CAPTIONS:**

**RHC\_GRADS 1:** Albert Steven Mendoza Jr. is one of Río Hondo College’s 2021 Extraordinary Students for completely turning his life around. He is graduating with a 3.95 GPA and will attend UCLA in the fall to study physics.

**RHC\_GRADS 2:** Luis Alberto Cruz is one of Río Hondo College’s 2021 Extraordinary Students for defying many odds to become a scholar. He is graduating with a 3.7 GPA and will attend UC Berkeley to major in chemistry.

**RHC\_GRADS 3:** Dominic Castanon is one of Río Hondo College’s 2021 Extraordinary Students for surviving a near-fatal crash and refocusing on helping people. He is graduating with a 3.7 GPA and will attend Cal Poly Pomona in the fall to major in early childhood studies.

**RHC\_GRADS 4:** Pretty Garcia is one of Río Hondo College’s 2021 Extraordinary Students for going above and beyond in her studies. She is graduating with a 3.4 GPA and will attend UC Santa Cruz in the fall to study bioengineering.

**RHC\_GRADS 5:** Stephanie Paz is one of Río Hondo College’s 2021 Extraordinary Students for being able to balance raising a child and a full-time school workload. She is graduating with a 3.6 GPA and will attend Cal State Los Angeles in the fall to study sociology.

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