

Outstanding UMB Student Award

Vanessa Gonzalez-Wright



Vanessa Gonzalez-Wright has turned advocacy for students into action along several avenues during her nearly three years at the University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB), working tirelessly to make an impact that's long-lasting and in at least one respect indelible.

A School of Social Work student set to earn her MSW degree this spring, Gonzalez-Wright has been a relentless advocate for students with diverse backgrounds, working with UMB's Office of Interprofessional Student Learning and Service Initiatives (ISLSI), the student group Latinx Unidos

for Community Healing and Awareness (LUCHA), and as co-chair of a Universitywide task force exploring the establishment of a multicultural center on campus.

“Activism has always been a part of who I am and what I strive to accomplish in my personal life as well as my career,” says Gonzalez-Wright, a Los Angeles native who earned a sociology degree from Cal State Northridge. “My parents are emigrants from Mexico and El Salvador who came to this country with a dream to provide their children with more opportunities than they could have ever imagined for themselves. They were only able to attend school up to third grade, which is why advocating for students to have an educational space that is validating and supportive is an important part of who I am.”

For these efforts, Gonzalez-Wright will receive a Diversity Recognition Award as Outstanding UMB Student at the University’s Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Black History Month celebration on Feb. 6. Courtney J. Jones Carney, MBA, director of ISLSI and a member of UMB’s Diversity Advisory Council, says the award is well-deserved and quite fitting, particularly as it relates to a potential multicultural center.

“The exploration of a multicultural center directly connects to the ideals of Dr. King,” Jones Carney said in her nomination. “A multicultural center has the purpose of providing a safe place, lessons on advocacy for self and others, and examples of pride in one’s community. Vanessa’s role in shaping a multicultural center will have a direct impact on how traditionally underserved and under-represented racial minorities and LGBT+ students experience the UMB campus. Her efforts will help propel UMB toward its long-term diversity and inclusion goals.

“Vanessa’s dedication to working across disciplines and with various faculty and staff members on campus also shows her commitment to interprofessionalism and collaboration,” Jones Carney added. “Vanessa believes it’s important for all students to utilize their privilege to help create opportunity for students of all identities to have a supportive community on campus that provides an inclusive space for self-expression and a sense of belonging.”

Formed through student advocacy, the task force consists of representatives from UMB’s six professional schools and interdisciplinary Graduate School. Gonzalez-Wright and co-chair Patty Alvarez, PhD, UMB’s assistant vice president of student affairs, conducted focus groups with student leaders in each school and issued a survey to better understand the needs, attitudes, and recommendations related to a possible multicultural center. They plan to turn in a proposal to UMB leaders by the end of January.

“Participating as a co-leader of the student group LUCHA confirmed the need for students of color to have a space on campus where they can build community and solidarity,” says Gonzalez-Wright, who plans to stay in Baltimore after graduation and work to support students in higher education. “I look forward to witnessing the positive impact that a multicultural center can have on our campus.”

Asked how she found the time for these efforts while working on her master's degree, Gonzalez-Wright admitted the balancing act was difficult. She thanked her husband, Jordan, for his support and encouragement and acknowledged fellow students, LUCHA co-leader Bree Ann Lopez, and mentors who champion diversity and inclusion efforts at UMB.

“Activism is working as a collective to impact the needs of the greater population. Working with other students, faculty, and staff as well as partnering with organizations is crucial to the success of student organizing at UMB,” Gonzalez-Wright says. “Receiving this award brings a moment of reflection and gratitude for the opportunities I’ve received the past three years to not only receive an education in a field I truly love, but also to advocate for UMB to be a place where students are validated and supported in their educational journey as well as in their identity.

“One of my favorite quotes from Dr. King is, ‘The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.’ As a student advocating for systemic change, it was draining and uncomfortable at many times, but the lessons and growth that I have experienced have greatly outweighed the challenge.”

— Lou Cortina