

# UMB News

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## Graduate School Celebrates Student Perseverance, Excellence

May 20, 2024 | By [Lorri Angelloz](#)

“With this ceremony, we welcome you into this community of scholars, with all of its prestige, all of its privileges, and all of its responsibilities. You have earned this moment,” said University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Graduate School Dean **Kenneth Wong, PhD**, to graduating students during the Graduate School’s Doctoral Hooding Ceremony.

Wong’s remarks came during two days of celebrations for students from the Graduate School. In addition to the Doctoral Hooding Ceremony on May 16, the school held a Master’s and Certificate Graduation Ceremony on May 15. Both events underscored the interprofessional and interdisciplinary nature of study at the Graduate School, as well as the impressive effort made by all students in their pursuit of advanced education.

During the May 16 event, Wong noted the importance of support systems throughout each student’s academic journey. That journey toward doctoral education, he stressed, is the pinnacle of personalized education, and it involves years of dedicated effort shaped by faculty and family support as well as the unique experiences of each student.



*PhD graduate Todd Becker receives his hood from faculty mentor John Cagle, PhD, during the 2024 Graduate School Hooding Ceremony.*

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“It is clear that our mentors have created an environment where students can excel, and that our graduates are really at the top of their game,” he said. “In a world that is being transformed daily by machine learning and technology, doctoral research — research at this level — is still a very human and very personal endeavor.”

*(See photo gallery below.)*

Each of the 81 graduates who received their PhD degree from the multidisciplinary Graduate School is prepared for a career in research in the health and social sciences, addressing many of the most pressing issues of our time. Over the course of the ceremony, graduates received their ceremonial hood from their faculty mentors, who hail from five of UMB’s six professional schools — dentistry, medicine, nursing, pharmacy, and social

work. Each hood, hemmed in a bright or dark blue color signifying their PhD degree, is lined with black and gold to indicate the institution conferring the degree.

Before each hood was placed, written introductions by mentors extolling each graduate and their research were read by representatives of their professional school. Common themes that emerged during these remarks included the impressive research accomplishments of students and their strong work ethic and collaborative spirit. Mentors also pointed to unique personal qualities and circumstances that impacted their mentees' work.

**Luana Colloca, MD, PhD, MS**, director of the Department of Pain and Translational Symptom Science and director of the Placebo Beyond Opinions Center at the University of Maryland School of Nursing, mentored **Emily Werthman**, and wrote, "It is wonderful to present this outstanding candidate as she reached this important milestone. Emily began her PhD during the COVID pandemic, meeting her mentors and classmates over Zoom while juggling homeschool needs for her two young children."

Adding that Werthman also had to balance night shifts in the ICU and emergency room along with school and family responsibilities, Colloca stressed that her mentee excelled despite the demanding situation. Colloca wrote that as the pandemic waned, "Emily published her first article associated with her dissertation, a literature review of burn pain and adverse childhood experience. She also continued advancing her profession of burn nursing with an appointment to the Board of Certification for Emergency Nursing, and as a special advisor and subject matter expert to the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority."

Werthman, who discussed her research after the ceremony, explained, "I'm interested specifically in burn pain, how pain in general is impacted by diversity in childhood. So, my dissertation looked at chronic pain in people who are survivors of childhood adversity and how they use pain catastrophizing as a coping mechanism, and how that impacts their experience of pain in adulthood."

She added, "It was challenging. I had a full-time job, a full-time family, and I was a full-time PhD student. But relationship building, not just with my mentor but with other people in the lab, was worthwhile. My mentor, Luana Colloca, has a multidisciplinary lab, so I was working with PhD students from neurology, neuroscience, and epidemiology. We were working on similar problems but from extraordinarily different viewpoints."

Students in the May 15 ceremony earned master's degrees or certificates in biomedical, health, and human service sciences. They will work in a variety of fields as they focus on some of society's most challenging questions, fulfilling a mission to serve the public good.

In his remarks during that event, Wong emphasized the remarkable perseverance of graduating students.

"This is a major accomplishment and marks yet another impressive milestone on your quest for personal and professional fulfillment. I know that many of you have pursued this degree while working full time or part time, raising a family, and being caregivers in other ways," Wong said. "We are exceptionally proud of you. We can't wait to see what you do next."

UMB Provost and Executive Vice President **Roger J. Ward, EdD, JD, MSL, MPA**, who attended both ceremonies to officially confer degrees and certificates, thanked families at the master's and certificate celebration for supporting students throughout their academic journey. He also stressed the dedication faculty have to each student's intellectual and personal growth.

"I want to also recognize the exceptional faculty here in the Graduate School at the University that continue to invest in you as students, support your growth, support you intellectually, challenge you, stimulate you, and frustrate you at times, I'm sure," Ward said, adding that faculty do so because they "recognize that you are the future. And we hope, truly, that you appreciate, understand, and pay it forward as you go on to become the next generation of great leaders in whatever your discipline is."

After the ceremony, students spoke about the motivating factors that led them to pursue study at the Graduate School and the rigor of the academic experience.

**Gabriel Dang**, who earned a Master of Science from the Physician Assistant Program, said a visit to the emergency room after an elbow fracture spurred him toward his course of study. "That experience made me realize that I wanted to go into a field where I could deliver care to people and just help them establish a sense of security and well-being during that kind of event," he explained.

He spoke about the program's demanding and immersive experience and said that forming friendships with his cohort was one of the best aspects of the program. "Being in a group willing to put in so much work — seeing the growth we've had has been phenomenal," Dang said, and he summed up his time pursuing a master's by adding, "It's been intensive, it's been formative, and it's been really inspirational."