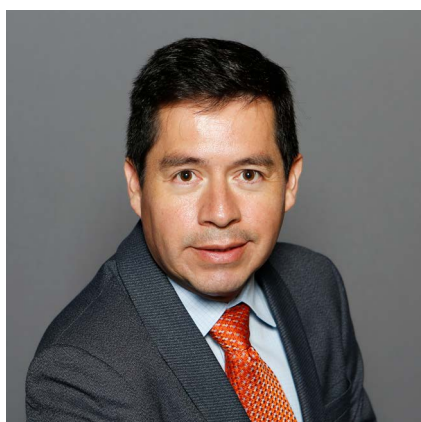# 2026

UTEP ENGINEERING

INAUGURAL PROFESSORIAL LECTURES
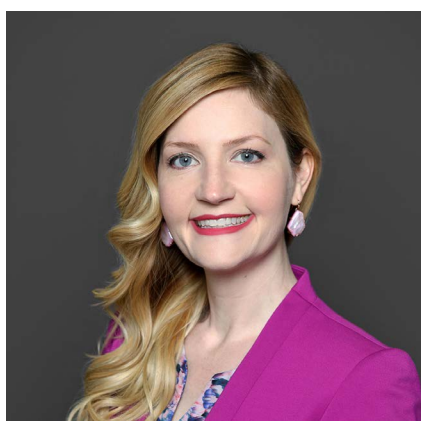
GUEST SPEAKERS

Christopher Kiekintveld
CS — Full Professor

Oscar Mondragon
CS — Full Professor of Practice

Shalayna Smith
MMBME — Full Professor of Practice

02.09.2026
3:30 PM to 5:00 PM
IDRB - 2.204

About this **EVENT**

Join us on February 9 as three faculty members share their career journeys across different disciplines and professional paths.

Through personal stories and reflections, the speakers will discuss how their work has evolved over time, the challenges and opportunities they've encountered, and how experiences in research, industry, and teaching have shaped their careers. The talks will offer perspective on navigating interdisciplinary work, adapting to change, and turning ideas into real-world impact.

This event is open to students, faculty, and staff and is designed to inspire conversation about the many paths an academic career can take.

A reception will follow the talks, providing time to network and continue the conversation with the speakers and fellow attendees. Space is limited, so please RSVP soon to reserve your spot.

**For inquiries please contact
Dr. Martine Ceberio at mceberio@utep.edu**

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AI in the Real World: Advances, Challenges, and the Critical Role of Security

This talk will explore the recent leaps in artificial intelligence and how AI agents are now being used in a wide range of real-world applications. Even with all the progress, there are still big challenges to deploying AI reliably outside the lab.

The speaker will share insights from decades of work developing AI agents, highlighting what makes AI successful, what's new in recent breakthroughs, and the key challenges that remain. The focus will be on the intersection of AI and security, showing why AI is crucial for defending against emerging threats, including those from adversaries using AI.

Topics will include core AI research problems like robustness, handling unclear goals, adapting quickly with limited data, and understanding other agents in complex environments. The talk will give attendees a clear picture of both the opportunities and challenges in applying AI to real-world problems.

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From Industry to Academia: A Multidisciplinary Journey in Systems and Software Engineering

This talk explores the professional journey of Dr. Oscar A. Mondragón, whose background spans Communications and Electronics, Software Engineering, and Computer Engineering. Dr. Mondragón will reflect on his evolution as a researcher and educator, from his undergraduate studies in Mexico City and participation as a Co-PI on a binational research project with UTEP, to his doctoral studies and eventual return to UTEP to support new research initiatives.

Dr. Mondragón will discuss his leadership in developing the Online MS in Systems Engineering, co-creating the College of Engineering Systems Engineering Bootcamp with Lockheed Martin, and managing the MS in Software Engineering program. The talk will conclude with key lessons learned and reflections on his role as a Professor of Practice.

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GUEST SPEAKER

Shalayna Smith
MMBME — Full Professor of Practice

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Bridging Industry and Academia: A Career in Metallurgical and Materials Engineering

In this lecture, Dr. Shalayna Smith will share her journey into metallurgical and materials engineering and reflect on how experiences in both industry and academia have shaped her approach to teaching and research. She will provide an overview of her current roles as Director of the Center for the Advancement of Space Safety and Mission Assurance Research (CASSMAR) and Professor of Practice at UTEP, highlighting her focus on hands-on learning, industry partnerships, and preparing students for real-world engineering challenges.

Drawing on her experience as a licensed Professional Engineer and consultant, Dr. Smith will discuss key contributions, lessons learned, and challenges she has encountered throughout her career. The presentation will also emphasize how applied research and collaboration with industry can enhance student learning and drive innovation.

The talk will conclude with practical advice for students and reflections on her goals for the next stage of her career, offering inspiration for navigating diverse pathways in engineering.

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