

# Speaker Biographies

Texas Student Leadership Summit

August 6-7, 2026

## **Ernesto Mejia, CoolSpeak**

*Keynote Speaker*

Ernesto Mejia, the proud son of Mexican immigrants, embodies the American dream with his unwavering commitment to empowering families, students, and educators across the country.

After overcoming the challenges of Guillain-Barré Syndrome at 16, which temporarily left him paralyzed, Ernesto defied the odds as a first-generation college student, earning a Master's degree and rising to the role of College Dean of Students.

Ernesto's deep-rooted belief in the power of education and communication has allowed him to travel across the country as a bilingual speaker and facilitator delivering engaging and impactful learning experiences to thousands of students, families, and educators.

His journey of resilience and perseverance fuels his work as a co-founder of CoolSpeak, where family engagement and student success are at the core of his mission, emphasizing the keys to achieving the American dream.

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## **Bavu Blakes, Hip Hop Grew Up**

*Featured Performer*

Bavu Blakes is a Scholar Emcee deliberately walking through the intersection of Hip Hop, education, and spirituality. As a middle school Humanities instructor, he is an award-winning teaching artist who constructs and conducts keynote speeches, interactive learning sessions, and multimedia projects.

As founder of the Hip Hop Grew Up educational agency, Bavu has emerged as a trusted mind and voice helping leaders across the United States move from language to labor, from academic to applicable. The antithesis of a sit-and-get lecturer, he is an "Editor's Pick" TEDx speaker celebrated for incorporating theatrical, musical, lyrical, and visual elements into learning facilitation as well as keynotes for state, national, and international conferences.

Originally moving to Austin, Texas, for journalism school, Bavu ascended to regional rap celebrity, becoming the first emcee in town to have a song added to daytime commercial radio. He has appeared on 21 vinyl records to date and released studio collaborations with several Grammy-winning producers including Adrian Quesada and Gary Clark, Jr., as well as people's champ Paul Wall.

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**Dr. Patrick Valdez, University of North Texas at Dallas***Master of Ceremonies*

Dr. Patrick L. Valdez is an accomplished higher education leader with 25 years of experience in developing and executing academic and student success programs. He is currently the interim dean of the University of North Texas at Dallas' School of Education. Dr. Valdez is former Chancellor and Professor of Education at the University of New Mexico - Taos. He has held senior-level positions at the College of Mount St. Vincent in New York City, the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and CUNY - Lehman College - developing and executing academic and student success programs. He is a graduate of St. Edward's University with a bachelor's degree in International Studies, a master's degree in student personnel administration from Teachers College, Columbia University, and a doctorate in higher education administration from The University of Texas at Austin.

Dr. Valdez has conducted research and practice on the challenges and obstacles facing first-generation college students, given presentations on executive leadership, African American faculty experience at a tier-one university, increasing the number of underrepresented students in STEM, and bridging the gap between higher education and the community. His primary research focuses on the policy formation of Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) legislation and the role that HSI's will play in educating the nation's fastest-growing student population.



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