UTMB’s School of Health Professions is looking to the future of patient care with two new programs: a Doctorate in Clinical Laboratory Sciences (DCLS) and a Doctorate of Occupational Therapy (OTD). In July 2016, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board approved both unique programs, which are aimed at improving patient care and providing health care professionals with innovative options to advance their career.

The DCLS — a professional doctorate open only to laboratoryians — is the second program of its kind offered in the U.S. The OTD is also a professional doctorate and is the second OTD program offered in Texas. The first students for both programs were admitted in the fall.

“These innovative programs demonstrate the commitment of UTMB’s faculty to excellence in education and health care,” says Elizabeth J. Protas, PT, PhD, FACSM, FAPTA, senior vice president and dean of the School of Health Professions.

Bridging the Gap Between the Lab and the Bedside
The DCLS is designed for practicing clinical laboratory scientists who want to advance their clinical expertise and further develop leadership and management skills. The program combines online coursework with four four-week clinicals offered at the UTMB Galveston campus. Most full-time students will complete the DCLS in three years, part-time students will take four to six years.

“Sixty to 70% of all disease identification, treatment and management decisions are based on laboratory results,” says Vicki Freeman, PhD, MASCOp, MLS(ASCP)SC, FACB, professor and chair of Clinical Laboratory Sciences and associate dean for faculty development in the School of Health Professions.

“We are excited to offer the Doctorate in Clinical Laboratory Sciences degree to educate laboratory professionals who will take an active role in interpretation and application of lab results.”
UTMB’s DCLS program is a collaboration between the departments of Clinical Laboratory Sciences in the School of Health Professions and Pathology in the School of Medicine. Dr. Freeman, who joined UTMB in 1996, was working to establish the DCLS for more than a decade to improve care and create better opportunities for clinical laboratory scientists. The program came to fruition, however, when Dr. Freeman joined forces with Michael Laposata, MD, PhD, who joined UTMB as professor and chair of the Department of Pathology in 2014. Dr. Laposata is equally passionate about using laboratory expertise to improve health and help institutions increase efficiency. Working together — with support from Dr. Protas and Danny O. Jacobs, MD, MPH, FACS, executive vice president, provost and dean of the School of Medicine — Drs. Freeman and Laposata were able to get the cutting-edge DCLS program off the ground.

UTMB’s DCLS is one of a kind because its clinical education is built into the program. Students work as part of a diagnostic medical team, a concept Dr. Laposata pioneered at various institutions before joining UTMB. Diagnostic medical teams bring pathologists, clinical laboratory scientists, expert physicians and others together to select appropriate diagnostic tests and interpret results for patients.

“These clinical lab scientists will be working as part of a team to improve patient care,” says Dr. Laposata.

DCLS graduates will help providers choose the appropriate tests, interpret the results and use these results in clinical decisions, says Dr. Freeman.

“This will improve patient care and safety; prevent errors in diagnosis and treatment. The health care system will see a cost savings by utilizing the DCLS in consultative roles and on interprofessional teams.”

Eddie Salazar, PhD, MLS (ASCP) CM, assistant professor in the School of Health Professions and director of the DCLS program says, “It will greatly benefit patients to have someone that can act as a bridge between the lab and the patient.”

The DCLS also provides a great opportunity for clinical lab scientists who want to expand the reach of the lab and be more involved in patient care, says Dr. Salazar, who earned his bachelor’s degree in clinical laboratory sciences at UTMB in 2003.

“This is a phenomenal step for our profession.”

According to Dr. Laposata, UTMB is ahead of the curve with this program and there are several institutions across the country hoping to establish DCLS programs to fill the existing demand.

Dr. Salazar agrees: “Everyone in the U.S. is looking at UTMB to see what we can do.”

There are 10 students currently enrolled in UTMB’s DCLS program. There is such a high level of interest, Dr. Salazar says, that they hope to be able to expand the program in the future.

Preparing OTs for the Future

The post-professional Doctorate of Occupational Therapy (OTD) program — which offers bachelor’s-to-OTD and master’s-to-OTD options — prepares practicing occupational therapists to serve in leadership roles, including as managers, and/or as clinical faculty members. This program is primarily online with two visits to the Galveston Campus for on-site learning and can be completed in six to seven semesters while maintaining active clinical practice.

Occupational therapists are in demand. According to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics, opportunities for occupational therapists are expected to grow 28% between 2014 and 2024. The field is evolving, says Patricia Fingerhut, OTR, PhD, associate professor and chair of the Department of Occupational Therapy, and there are many OTs practicing with bachelor’s or master’s degrees despite the fact that in the near future the entry level in the field will be a clinical doctorate degree.

For this reason, there has been a demand for a post-professional occupational therapy doctorate for several years, says April Cowan, OTR, OTD, CHT, assistant professor and director of the OTD program. About three years ago, however, it was the right time at UTMB: “We realized we now have the manpower, we have the gumption and we’re going to do this.”

The program came together just in time for 2017 — the 100th anniversary of the occupational therapy profession.

According to the American Occupational Therapy Association, occupational therapists improve the lives of people of all ages through the therapeutic use of everyday activities. OTs help children with disabilities participate fully at school and in social settings, assist patients recovering from injury to regain skills and provide support for older adults experiencing physical and cognitive changes.

UTMB’s OTD program — designed to enhance leadership, professional development and evidence-based practice skills — is different from other programs in the state because it accepts students without master’s degrees. UTMB provides a pre-semester to prepare those students for the doctoral program.

According to U.S. News & World Report, UTMB’s entry-level Master of Occupational Therapy program ranks first in Texas and 14th out of 163 institutions across the country.