Every year, as a marketing activity, the leadership board of the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers at UH, recently named outstanding large chapter of the year by the national organization, brainstorms to create the next slogan that typifies their mission. For the 2016-2017 school year the motto is “It does not matter where you come from, SHPE (they pronounce it Shep?) will help you build your future.”

As branding goes, it’s a bullseye. Their executive board is filled with immigrants from different Latin American countries including Mexico, Colombia, Panama and Venezuela— all on the way to successful careers that they credit SHPE with helping them find.

“Most of our members are first generation Americans,” said Maria Violeta Paez, a mechanical engineering senior, president of the SHPE UH chapter and immigrant from Caracas, Venezuela.

That’s what makes the UH chapter feel like a safe place for its members rather than a formal organization. Individually, the 300 UH members may be mostly immigrants to America, but together they are family.

“Fostering ‘la familia’ is really what makes Shep so great. Sometimes you don’t have someone to look up to in
your house or someone who’s been through college, but the fact that you have a friend who supports you here that you can rely on and help you when you’re struggling, that you’ll struggle together, side by side to succeed, that’s why we are all successful,” said Paez.

She would know. When she graduates in May, Paez has a high-powered job waiting as a consultant with Accenture. How’d she snag such an opportunity? “It’s all Shep!” she exclaims.

Turns out her excitement is well placed. She met Accenture recruiters through her SHPE meetings.

The award winners

The UH branch of SHPE is one of 2,050 across the country in the organization that boasts more than 10,000 members in both the professional world and on college campuses. But as far as large SHPE chapters go, it’s number one, grabbing the title from more than 200 other large universities competing at the national organization’s annual conference in November.

SHPE’s vision is a world where Hispanics are highly valued and influential as the leading innovators, scientists, mathematicians and engineers.

They start their influence with young students, through a program they call MentorShep. Every other Friday, 15 members of the UH chapter go to Houston’s Heights High School, which is 80 percent Hispanic and 60 percent low income, to mentor young students in an after-school program and try to inspire them to choose science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields in their future.

“We are so passionate about these kids,” said Luis Espinoza, senior in mechanical engineering, vice president of external affairs for SHPE UH and immigrant from Valencia, Venezuela. The SHPE UH members helped the Heights High students set up their own club, Shep Junior, said Espinoza. Together they build an assortment of engineering projects like mini bridges. “There are kids there that don’t even speak English,” he said, adding that mentorship is another big component of what SHPE UH members provide to the Heights High students.

“If they need help with their college essays or the SATs, we also mentor and help them with school,” said Paez.

“It’s so cool to watch,” said Espinoza. “You see Shep Junior members go from high school and now they’re here at UH and they’re part of the Shep UH chapter. You get to see that growth.”

Getting ahead, together

“There are tangible benefits of memberShep,” said Espinoza, adding, “Yeah, we’re big on the Shep puns.” The group even has a social event called Sheps and Salsa, where they dance, or at least try to learn, the Salsa.

But the professional benefits really rock.

More than 200 representatives from Fortune 500 companies attend the SHPE national conference and industry professionals attend events with SHPE UH members throughout the year. Of the 86 students that went to the annual conference, there were 73 interviews by industry members for either jobs or internships. Espinoza graduates in May and begins working at Shell in July as an associate mechanical engineer, a job he says he got by meeting a contact through SHPE.

In fact, Paez’s final interview with Accenture took place during the award ceremony when her chapter was named the outstanding large chapter in the country.
They asked me why I was so nervous, was it because of the interview? she said. But no, I wanted to know if we were winning first place! They laughed and said they'd hire me if we won. They hired her before she found out.

Later in the day, Paez walked by the Accenture recruiters carrying the 3-foot tall first place trophy just to prove they had made the right decision.