

# Channel

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY CHANNEL ISLANDS / 2025 Spring Magazine



*Building on a Legacy of  
Academic Excellence*  
p.16

# Channel

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We welcome your comments and suggestions. Please send correspondence to [channel@csuci.edu](mailto:channel@csuci.edu) or mail to: CSU Channel Islands, Communication & Public Relations, One University Drive, Camarillo CA 93012-8599, or call 805-437-8415.

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### CSU Channel Islands Mission Statement

Placing students at the center of the educational experience, California State University Channel Islands provides undergraduate and graduate education that facilitates learning within and across disciplines through integrative approaches, emphasizes experiential and service learning, and graduates students with multicultural and international perspectives.



Channel Islands

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY

*"CSUCI serves as an anchor institution for our region — deeply engaged with the people and communities we serve and actively working with regional partners to improve social and economic well-being."*

- Richard Yao



## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

CAL STATE CHANNEL ISLANDS HAS ALWAYS had an innovative spirit at its core. As the only public four-year university in Ventura County, in a region filled with opportunity for truly unique, hands-on learning opportunities because of a great variety of distinctive, campus and industry place-based learning assets, CSUCI was designed to be different—to serve differently, to teach differently, and to lead differently.

This claim begs at least two significant questions: Who are we, as an institution of higher education, and why would a prospective first-year, transfer, or post-baccalaureate/graduate student choose us over any number of other options?

A great deal of very good work has gone into our coordinated effort across several initiatives over the past few years to clarify and strengthen our institutional identity. These have included the creation of an Academic Master Plan ([go.csuci.edu/ch-amp](http://go.csuci.edu/ch-amp)) that will allow us to grow our portfolio in academic excellence and better serve regional workforce needs; the creation of cultural centers and a strengthened student-life experience; significant investments in Enrollment Management; creation of a Digital Marketing Plan; a visual rebrand for the University; the redesign of our website; and identification of our vision, values, and goals for our next strategic plan, CSUCI for 2030+.

Each of these endeavors is a major accomplishment on its own, but taken together, they will create a collective impact that is greater than any single effort. We are on the verge of seeing this collective impact in action — positioning us to respond creatively and confidently to the challenges we face.

CSUCI serves as an anchor institution for our region — deeply engaged with the people and communities we serve and actively working with regional partners to improve social and economic well-being for individuals, families, and communities of our region. This reality is evident in projects that showcase community collaboration and research, such as the University Park Restoration led by our CCE Trails Corps students (pg. 7), and community-based research to benefit local non-profit organizations (pg. 8). Dozens of additional community-based projects could be similarly identified and extolled for their work in serving our region.





President Richard Yao interacts with Glen City Elementary School students (from left) Lesly Neri, CSUCI Computer Science student Danika Grey, and Emma Duarte, during a demonstration of the SeaPerch program at Santa Paula High School on May 7, 2025.

These initiatives and so many more enrich our community and foster a sense of stewardship through hands-on engagement. They enable our students to conduct meaningful research addressing critical issues while gaining invaluable, real-world learning opportunities that directly benefit the regional workforce ecosystem. Most importantly, these experiences have a tangible and applied value, allowing students to witness firsthand how their education can positively impact their communities.

The question of who we are is intimately connected to the questions of what makes a Cal State Channel Islands education unique, and why prospective students choosing us are making a fundamentally sound decision – educationally, economically, and personally.

We know that our students and alumni describe their experience at CSUCI as life-changing, as contributing in significant ways to upward social mobility for themselves and their families. Our typically small class sizes – enforced by the fact that few of our classrooms can accommodate more than a few dozen students – with faculty and staff dedicated to placing students at the center of their educational journeys means that student success is, ultimately, our campus's primary value. It is also the linchpin upon which our value to the region depends.

Thank you for being part of this journey. Thank you for your trust. And thank you for all you do to help us lift up our students, our region, and our future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. Yao".

Richard Yao, Ph.D.  
President

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**ON THE COVER** Project AYUDAS PEEP Mentor Amber Seader, recent '25 graduate with B.S. degrees in Biology and Chemistry, interacts with children and parents attending CSUCI's STEAM Carnival.

# CSUCI NEWS

## CSUCI to Host SCCUR

CSUCI has been selected to host the Southern California Conference on Undergraduate Research (SCCUR) on Nov. 22, 2025. This multi-disciplinary conference features research from the sciences, humanities, social sciences, arts, and performing arts. The one-day event provides a forum to show some of the best work of undergraduates from approximately 80 institutions throughout Southern California and the rest of the nation, including some international presenters.

At the conference, undergraduate student participants present their work

in the form of oral presentations, posters, and creative exhibits and performances, and attendance includes faculty mentors, industry, and community partners, as well as family and guests of the student presenters.

As a recent recipient of the new “Research Colleges and Universities” Carnegie designation, this is an excellent opportunity for Cal State Channel Islands to continue to showcase its strength in undergraduate research and ongoing commitment to academic excellence and student success.

**Read more at:** [go.csuci.edu/ch-sccur](https://go.csuci.edu/ch-sccur)

## CSUCI Ranks in Top 20 Universities Across California for Social Mobility

CSUCI has been recognized again for its social mobility performance. The College Futures Foundation has recognized the University as one of the top four-year institutions when it comes to preparing its students with the tools for lifelong success and moving up the economic ladder.

The Foundation, working with the HEA Group, launched the Four-Year California Mobility Index (CMI) which ranked CSUCI no. 20 in the state out of 82 four-year institutions that it surveyed. The CMI is a new

initiative that emphasizes inclusivity and outcomes in higher education. Institutions are evaluated on the proportion of low- and moderate-income students they enroll and the return on investment they provide within the state of California.

**Read more at:** [go.csuci.edu/ch-sm](https://go.csuci.edu/ch-sm)

## CSUCI recognized again as a top producer of Fulbright U.S. Scholars

The U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs has once again recognized CSUCI as one of the nation’s Fulbright Top Producing Institutions for 2024/2025. The first time CSUCI received this recognition was in 2021/2022.

Each year, the national bureau lists the U.S. colleges and universities with the highest number of faculty and administrators selected for the Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program, a federal government-sponsored international exchange program that enables U.S. scholars and other professionals to conduct research, teach and pursue professional projects abroad.

Not only that, but in the master’s degree-granting classification, CSUCI is among the top three of the 46 institutions listed. CSUCI had three faculty members, and one administrator earn the Fulbright scholarship for the 2024/2025 year, whereas the majority of universities in CSUCI’s classification had one or two.

**Read more at:** [go.csuci.edu/ch-fs25](https://go.csuci.edu/ch-fs25)



SCCUR is a conference featuring research.



CSUCI Fulbright scholars conduct research internationally.

# Jessica Lavariega Monforti named Provost

by KIM LAMB GREGORY

CSUCI IS PROUD TO ANNOUNCE the appointment of Jessica Lavariega Monforti as its new Provost. Lavariega Monforti has served as Interim Provost since Fall 2024 and brings with her a distinguished record of academic leadership and a profound commitment to inclusive, student-centered education.

A first-generation college graduate and former community college transfer student, Lavariega Monforti exemplifies the mission and values of CSUCI. Her extensive leadership experience includes previous roles as Vice Provost and Accreditation Liaison Officer at CSUCI, Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at California Lutheran University, Chair of Political Science at Pace University, and Associate Dean for the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Texas—Pan American.

“Dr. Lavariega Monforti is a dynamic and visionary academic leader,” said CSUCI President Richard Yao. “Her permanent appointment as Provost comes at a time when her clarity, compassion, and vision are more vital than ever to our continued growth and success.”

During her tenure as Interim Provost, Lavariega Monforti led key institutional initiatives, including implementation of CSUCI’s Academic Master Plan, advancement of the Uni-

versity’s strategic vision, and successful reaffirmation of WSCUC (WASC Senior College & University Commission) accreditation. Her leadership has been marked by thoughtful collaboration, transparency, and responsiveness to the needs of students, faculty and staff.



Provost Jessica Lavariega Monforti

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**“Her permanent appointment as Provost comes at a time when her clarity, compassion, and vision are more vital than ever to our continued growth and success.”**

**—RICHARD YAO**

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With over 50 scholarly publications and more than \$10 million secured in grant funding to support student achievement, faculty research, and institutional transformation, Lavariega Monforti is a nationally recognized advocate for equity in higher education. She is a past president of the Western Political Science Association and co-founder of the national Women of Color in Political Science Workshop.

Lavariega Monforti holds doctoral and master’s degrees in Political Science from The Ohio State University and a bachelor’s degree in Political Science and Women’s Studies from Florida State University.

Reflecting on her new role, Lavariega Monforti shared: “Guided by a student-centered philosophy, a commitment to ethical decision-making, and a collaborative leadership style, I am deeply honored to continue serving the CSUCI community,” said Lavariega Monforti. “Together, we will advance innovation, promote student success, and expand pathways to social mobility.”

President Yao extended his gratitude to the search committee and all who contributed to the selection process. “I look forward to all we will accomplish together under Provost Lavariega Monforti’s leadership.”



# Campus Welcomes Artificial Intelligence Technologies

by JULIE DRAKE

## THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGING IN HIGHER EDUCATION.

The California State University system announced its artificial intelligence (AI) initiative in February in a public-private partnership with leading technology firms including Adobe, Alphabet, AWS and OpenAI. CSUCI is poised to benefit greatly from this system-wide initiative with faculty and staff getting access to AI technology and becoming familiar with it before students start using it during the summer of 2025.

"The AI Strategy Initiative brings together several foundational components that reflect our institution's forward-looking approach to artificial intelligence," said Jim August, Associate Vice President for Information Technology Services and Chief Information Officer at CSUCI.

This includes an AI Council, which provides strategic oversight; a Community of Practice that fosters collaboration and professional development; an Ethics Board to ensure responsible AI integration; and an AI Innovation and Research Competition that encourages cutting-edge exploration.

The Community of Practice will include a speaker series with higher education AI leaders from around the nation.

"This series will cover critical topics like ethical frameworks, responsible usage guidelines, emerging tools and technologies, and leadership insights on how AI is shaping the future of higher education," August said. "We see this as a vital opportunity to build shared understanding and spark innovation across the academic landscape."

CSUCI will also have an Ethics board that will have representation from students, faculty, staff and administrators. Given the rapidly evolving nature of AI, the board will stay abreast of ethical topics relevant to the University community and provide a space for discussion about topics such as academic integrity, research ethics, responsible use of technology, and conflicts of interest.

"The specific topics addressed will likely evolve based on the needs and concerns of the University community," August said.

The campus is also looking at ways for AI to improve University operations.

"We intend to use focus groups to ask employees how AI can be used effectively in their area and will seek to implement more effective business processes that include AI," said August.



Assistant Vice President for Digital Learning Lorna Gonzalez stated, "CSUCI is creatively integrating AI across disciplines."

"For example, both the Master's and Bachelor's Health Science programs will have patient simulations," said Jill Leafstedt, Dean of Extended University & Digital Learning.

All 23 CSU campuses (students, faculty and staff) will get access to AI technologies. As the largest and most diverse public four-year university system in the country, this is important.

Taking advantage of AI technology also means knowing how to use it.

"It all lies in the prompt — how effectively are you providing the prompt," said Asha Ramachandra, Director of IT Strategy. "So that's why we are working on training sessions also."

Faculty and staff had multiple learning opportunities this Spring, both through the campus and the Chancellor's office.

"Faculty were invited to participate in a program called Legends of Academia, in which they develop multiple ways to integrate AI applications in their courses (e.g., syllabus statements, student questionnaires, online modules, assignment instructions, etc.)," said Gonzalez.

"We're really excited to see what people can do with it. The fact that the system is working together as a large system to provide equitable access to all students and faculty is truly wonderful," said Jill Leafstedt, Dean of Extended University & Digital Learning.



Students, faculty, staff, and alumni volunteered in clearing brush and restoring trails at University Park.

# Savoring the Joys of Environmental Stewardship

by MICHAEL BRILEY

ON THAT BRIGHT FEBRUARY MORNING AT University Park, there were lots of smiles, laughs and camaraderie as diverse members of the CSUCI family gathered for a trail restoration project. They cleared brush from a section of an existing trail, to make access for everyone safer and easier.

The 51 participants included CSUCI faculty, students, staff, and alumni, as well as including the Center for Community Engagement's (CCE) student Trails Corps; members of the Santa Monica Mountains Trails Council; and local community members, as noted by Jennifer Perry, CSUCI's Executive Director of Regional Educational Partnerships. All but the four Trails Corps members were volunteers.

"People felt great about the work we were doing to ensure access to University Park," said Perry. "They loved being out in nature on a beautiful day. Many commented on the wonderful sense of community they felt working side-by-side."

"It was such a mix of people. It was the first time many had met each other. They also learned more about the many uses of University Park as we all watched walkers, runners, bicyclists, and others enjoying the park that day."

Perry and others sing the praises of Jerry Mitcham of the Santa Monica Mountains Trail Council who has been CSUCI's primary partner in trail restoration work on campus. "Jerry is integral to our planning efforts," said Perry. "He coordinates work in advance; organizes and oversees work the day of; provides guidance; and more. He is the most important person to our success in trail restoration."

Angela Batoon, a junior majoring in Studio Art and student member of the CCE Trails Corps, agrees.

Mitcham supervises her work on Santa Monica Mountains trails, and prepared Angela and other Trails Corps members for the trail restoration at University Park. "Everyone who gets to know Jerry will tell you what a cool and upstanding human he is," said Batoon.

"I see trails maintenance as a wonderful expression of love," she says. "This

idea that you are willing to go back repeatedly and service something that will eventually grow back. Trail work is often laborious, dusty and sweaty. It's not glamorous, but it is beautiful.

"Being on trails has allowed me to reflect on many things like holistic health and environmental stewardship. I'm still learning so much as I go."





# Community-based Research Benefits Local Nonprofit Organizations

by JULIE DRAKE

CSUCI'S CENTER FOR Community Engagement actively facilitates partnerships between faculty and students with community-based organizations for service-learning projects.

"If we can view community-based research as a service-related activity, in that context the Center for Community Engagement has really done a fantastic job of connecting students, faculty members, etc., with various different community partners around Ventura County," said Ronald Berkowsky, Associate Professor of Health Science, who serves as community-based research faculty lead.

CSUCI has a robust data collection system to identify certain service-learning opportunities.

"The idea is that you are working with the community

organization to come up with a research question, to come up with an approach to address that research question, making sure that it is addressing a particular community need," he said.

Berkowsky is working with the Center for Community Engagement to produce a data collection strategy so they can get a better idea as to the extent of community-based research on campus.

The goal is to find out how many faculty are doing the projects; how many students are engaged in the projects; and who the community partners are with which they are working.

Faculty and students also engage in research in the context of a capstone class, which is typically limited to one semester.

"Actually, a lot of our faculty kind of have capstone projects

that students engage in to get this experience," he said.

Some faculty members do research projects outside of the context of a classroom, such as collaboration with community partners or working with students in the context of an independent research project.

"We know that this work happens on campus. We just don't have a ton of data on who is doing what, with whom, where, etc.," he said.

Berkowsky highlighted a couple of projects that he has been engaged in over the past couple of years.

One of those projects involved work he and his students did with CAREGIVERS, a Ventura-based nonprofit organization that provides volunteer caregiving services to independently living older adults and those with disabilities in Ventura County.

His students collected and analyzed over 400 surveys the nonprofit organization had collected over a 10-year period but lacked the capacity to analyze. The data was collected from volunteers for CAREGIVERS and from older adults who had received caregiving services.

"That project gave the students the opportunity to test their research and their analytical skills," he said. "It also provided valuable data to CAREGIVERS on the impacts of their organization in the community."

When the students presented their work, the nonprofit organization was incredibly thankful.

"They had always known the value of their organization but with



Associate Professor Ronald Berkowsky and student Ashley Garcia present research at the President's Dinner.



this project they actually had the data to kind of back up what they already knew,” Berkowsky said.

The organization can use the data to advocate on behalf of their services and volunteers and provide evidence when submitting grant applications for funding.

A group of students took the report they had delivered to CAREGIVERS and continued working on it to revise and turn it into a potential research publication. That was submitted to CSUCI’s internal journal, CBR@CSUCI, an annual volume that highlights community-based research across campus.

The paper, *Evaluation Of Volunteer Care Recipient And Caregiver Experiences In Ventura County*, by Brandon Luna, Carmele Forbes, Bailey Morris, Stephanie Rosales, and Berkowsky was published this past December.

The project was awarded a community-based research award last year at CSUCI’s Celebration of Service.

“It’s a particular project that I’m really proud of,” Berkowsky said.

One other project he highlighted is a current project conducted in coordination with the LGBT+ Aging Coalition of Ventura County. The organization is a volunteer-based program of the Ventura County Area Agency on Aging. They educate and advocate on behalf of LGBT+ elders but with a limited number of volunteers.

Berkowsky collaborated with a team of three students over the summer in the Summer Undergraduate Research Fellows program, also known as SURF.

The students, Rosalinda Arias, Ashley Garcia, and Gracie Lake, conducted a community-based research project to identify and evaluate service needs among LGBTQIA+ older adults in Ventura County.



Professor Geoffrey Dilly explains a microplastics community research project to President Yao and his wife C.J. Student researcher Alyssa Mak also assisted with the research project.

“We organized three focus groups in Ventura, Oxnard, and Thousand Oaks, and conducted one-on-one interviews with members of the LGBT+ Aging Coalition,” Arias said.

They recruited participants via a combination of word of mouth, flyers and community outreach to ensure that they connected with individuals who were eager to share their experiences and perspectives.

The students analyzed the data they collected and presented the results in February to the coalition leadership and membership. They provided recommendations as to what the LGBT+ Aging Coalition can do moving forward given the restrictions on their volunteer base and provided next steps on short- and long-term goal setting.

“This project provided a deeply rewarding opportunity to listen to the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ elders, who shared powerful stories about the barriers they face in healthcare, social interactions, and the pursuit of spaces that allow them to live and thrive, Arias said.

“Their stories gave us a greater understanding of the unique challenges this community faces, and their insights were essential in shaping

our approach to improving services for LGBTQIA+ older adults.”

Berkowsky and one of the students presented the results at the American Society on Aging National Conference held in Orlando, Florida, April 21-24.

Nien-Tsu Nancy Chen, CSUCI Associate Professor of Communication, incorporates community-based research in her Health Communication course. She connected with the Saticoy Food Hub through the Center for Community Engagement.

“They were really trying to get a good sense about the accessibility to healthy food in their community and also the affordability of those healthy items,” Nien-Tsu said.

Saticoy is a small unincorporated community in Ventura County with about 1,100 residents and no grocery store. There are three corner stores within Saticoy including one on the border with Ventura with a small amount of fresh produce.

“There’s a lot of challenges for people to get access to healthy food, especially if you don’t have transportation,” Nien-Tsu said.

**To read more visit: [go.csuci.edu/ch-cbr](http://go.csuci.edu/ch-cbr)**



CSUCI students toured the Port of Hueneme (left). Students then toured Fathomwerx (right), a collaborative research company specializing in serving the Blue Economy.

*In the Spring 2024 issue of Channel, we introduced “One Health” as a global initiative and theme underlying CSUCI’s 2030+ strategic priorities and goals. These emphasize our commitment to the region’s communities, economies, and environments. This is the final article in our “One Health” series.*

# LIFTING ALL BOATS: BUILDING A NEW BLUE ECONOMY

by GEOFFREY DILLY, JASON MILLER, AND JENN PERRY

FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, communities have flourished in our region through a “Blue Economy” of trade, technological innovation, and sustainable coastal lifeways. Exponential population growth and extractive practices have damaged our environment and shown that we are quickly approaching the limits of our ability to sustain a healthy society. While “Blue Economy” might be a newly coined term, it reflects current efforts to build on principles and practices developed generations ago to support a vastly larger population in a similarly sustainable and renewable fashion.

The Blue Economy includes industries that harness or depend on ocean resources such as fisheries, mariculture (marine-based aquaculture), maritime trade, maritime technology, and renewable energy. In neighboring Santa Barbara County, the Blue Economy contributes more than \$7 billion annually and provides 45,000 jobs. Several regional sectors expect growth, especially in aquaculture and blue tech. However, oceans are facing

multiplying challenges — climate change, overfishing, microplastics — and it is critical that our New Blue Economy be developed with sustainability and resilience as core values.

In Ventura County, the Port of Hueneme is the only deep-water port between Los Angeles and San Francisco. Hueneme, a Chumash place name, refers to where people launched and landed boats for fishing,

trade and travel to the Channel Islands for centuries. Today, the Port generates \$2.8 billion in annual economic activity, creates 25,000 trade-related jobs, and creates \$236 million in tax revenue, which funds vital community services. These numbers continue to increase while the Port decreases its impact on the environment through decarbonization, electrification, and whale protection programs such as its Vessel Speed Reduction program.

Next door to the Port, the U.S. Navy (Naval Base Ventura County) employs world-class environmental scientists and technicians to monitor and protect the Mugu Lagoon, San Nicolas Island, and other Navy properties around the globe. Collaborating with private industry and educational partners, including CSUCI, Fathomwerx experiments and tests innovations in maritime safety and security. Fathomwerx feeds a growing community of Blue Economy entrepreneurs in our region by bringing together technology innovators to meet Navy challenges and to conduct 'technology transfer,' the process of using Navy intellectual property and products to meet challenges in mariculture, agriculture, maritime technology, and other Blue industries.

CSUCI is leading research into coastal resilience and sustainable aquaculture. Since 2014, our Santa Rosa Island Research Station has facilitated researchers and students in conducting experimental, monitoring, and restoration projects on the island. Timnit Kefela, Assistant Professor of Environmental Science & Resource Management (ESRM) and Associate Professor of ESRM Clare Steele studies micro-plastics in the environment and in sandy intertidal organisms. ESRM lecturer Brenton Spies is working to bring his restoration efforts in White Abalone to our campus. In addition, Spies and student researchers are studying the impacts of LA wildfires on the endangered Tide-water Gobies. Another research team led by Associate Professor of Biology Geoff Dilly, in partnership with Santa Barbara Mariculture, is exploring intertidal restoration with the resettlement of locally farmed mussels.



Bernard Friedman working at a mussel sorting/washing table.

Photo contributed by Paul Wellman

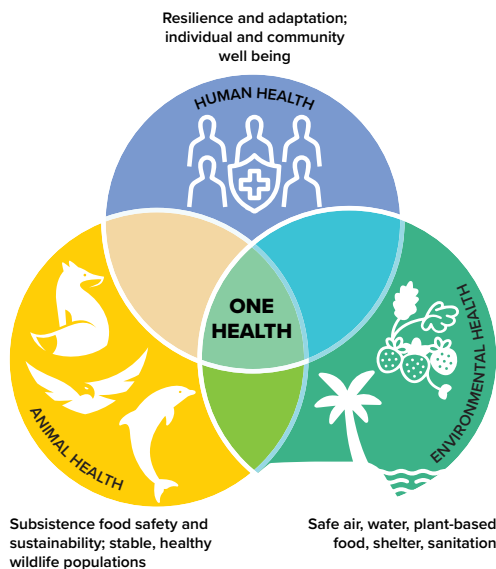
Professor of Economics Bryan Tomlin and Dilly, along with an international doctoral student, are building an economic feasibility and cost/benefit comparison of mariculture in Southern California and Germany.

CSUCI recently joined the Ocean Collective along with Santa Barbara City College and University of California, Santa Barbara, led by Director Kim Selkoe at

the Commercial Fisheries of Santa Barbara. The Collective aims to build training programs to attract and support the workforce to fully utilize the resources and opportunities of the Santa Barbara Channel. This includes addressing ongoing gaps in gender, racial and age diversity within maritime trades through proactive recruitment, training and career support. Successful implementation will require innovations in research and training, as well as intentional regional partnerships.

Fast forward to 2050 when the region boasts a wealth

of sustainable mariculture farms, remote sensing capabilities monitoring changing ocean conditions, a vibrant ecosystem of public-private partnerships advancing technology and conservation, and healthy communities thriving in healthy environments. All this is with CSUCI at the forefront. Welcome to our New Blue Economy.







# Commencement 2025

CSUCI CELEBRATED COMMENCEMENT ON CAMPUS with two in-person ceremonies held on May 17 at the South Quad. Thousands of parents, families, and friends cheered for graduating students who received bachelor's or master's degrees, and credentials, during the morning and afternoon ceremonies. Students eligible to graduate were 2,266 with almost 1,500 participating in the ceremonies.

A University Bell was donated by '05 CSUCI alumna and Associate Vice President for Communication & Public Relations, Nancy Covarrubias Gill. As part of the campus' Commencement traditions, the ringing of a bell is bestowed upon an honored staff member of the campus and symbolizes the official opening of each commencement ceremony. This year's honorees included Dani Rae, Associate Director of Student Conduct & CARE in the morning, and Tatiana Juarez, STEM Transfer Success Outreach Coordinator, in the afternoon.

The Light of Learning symbolizes the University's commitment to the life of the mind and the central role played by outstanding faculty. The Honorary Marshal

who carries the Light of Learning is selected by the President as an administrator or faculty member who has demonstrated an extraordinary commitment to students and the University. Leslie Abell, a Sociology lecturer, was selected to carry the Light of Learning in the morning, and Thomas Clobes, Assistant Professor of Health Science in the afternoon.

The CSUCI Mace represents the authority of the University at official and ceremonial functions for the lifetime of the institution and is carried by the Chief University Marshal and Academic Senate Chair, which this year was carried by Christina Smith, Professor of Communication.

Student speakers selected to provide remarks during the ceremonies included Alden Benjamin Lopez-Hernandez in the morning, and Jazmin Guajardo in the afternoon.

Students who sang the National Anthem included Dana Isabel Joaquin Juat and Sarah Ysordia in the morning and Rachel Gutierrez in the afternoon. Students who offered a welcome in Spanish included Itzel Tena-Ortiz in the morning and Erika Orozco in the afternoon.





**1** Jose Rodriguez Sr., B.A. Art, gives a victory fist pump as he walks behind his son (front left) Jose Rodriguez, Jr., B.A. Sociology, as they process with other graduates as part of this year's Commencement ceremony.

**2** Itzel Tena-Ortiz offers a welcome in Spanish in the morning.

**3** Christina Smith, Chief University Marshal, Academic Senate Chair, and Professor of Communication

**4** Leslie Abell, a Sociology lecturer leads the faculty procession with the Light of Learning in the morning.

**5** Professor of Health Science Thomas Clobes carried the Light of Learning in the afternoon.

**6** Dana Isabel Joaquin Juat sings the National Anthem in the morning with Sarah Ysordia translating into the American Sign Language.

**7** Rachel Gutierrez sang the National Anthem in the afternoon.

**8** Morning ceremony bell ringer Dani Rae with her husband, Ethan

**9** Erika Orozco offers the afternoon welcome in Spanish.

**10** Student Alden Benjamin Lopez-Hernandez spoke in the morning

**11** Student Jazmin Guajardo spoke in the afternoon.

**12** Tatiana Juarez, STEM Transfer Success Outreach Coordinator, rings the bell in the afternoon.



# Three siblings, three Communication degrees

by KIM LAMB GREGORY

**A**SK ABOUT “THE SMART ONE” OF THE three Gerardo siblings and there’s no hesitation.

“Kayla,” said Baylee Gerardo.

“Kayla,” said Devin Gerardo.

“They always tell me I’m the smart one,” Kayla Gerardo, 22, said. “I’m a big nerd and I love going to classes.”

During this year’s Commencement, Kayla became the third Gerardo sibling to graduate from CSUCI with a Bachelor of Arts in Communication.

Devin, 27, graduated in 2021 and Baylee, 29, in 2017. All three are from the first generation in their family to attend college.

“I think my drive comes from my family,” Kayla said. “My parents and my grandmother from Mexico who doesn’t read or write. They hadn’t attended college, but I saw firsthand what it meant to be a hard worker.”

Baseball, softball and communication were at the heart of the Gerardo family as the siblings grew up in the San Fernando Valley.

Their dad, Albert, worked as a superintendent for LA Sanitation for the City of Los Angeles and their mom, Julie, worked for the YMCA.

“No matter what, we always had dinner together,” Kayla said. “We sat down and talked out our day, dissected everything. For lack of a better word, we’ve always been yappers. We love to talk.”

When Baylee graduated from high school, her parents encouraged her to enjoy the full college experience away from home. Baylee chose CSUCI as “it was beautiful, calm, and had the perfect atmosphere,” she said.

Devin, “the chill one,” according to his sisters – followed in Baylee’s footsteps and later also enrolled at

CSUCI because his sister was enjoying college so much.

Both majored in Communication as it would be useful in so many careers, and it paid off. Baylee now works as a marketing specialist at Clinicas del Camino Real and Devin is a claims adjuster for the Division of Workers’ Compensation in the San Fernando Valley.

Kayla wanted to be different and attend college elsewhere, but even though she was accepted to several other universities, she chose CSUCI.

“You cannot beat the student to teacher ratio, and it’s a Hispanic-Serving Institution,” Kayla said.

All three Gerardos say Communication Lecturer Vivian

Henchy was their favorite faculty member. As for Henchy, seeing the third Gerardo sibling graduate was a highlight in her 16-year career at CSUCI.

“I’m profoundly proud of all of them,” Henchy said. “And the legacy of all three choosing this major and this special place...it makes a Communication professor speechless.”



The siblings Gerardo: Devin, Kayla, Baylee (left to right) are all CSUCI graduates.



## Honorary doctorates awarded to an original campus champion and an alumna advocate for those with disabilities

by KIM LAMB GREGORY

**A** PHILANTHROPIST WHO HAS CHAMPIONED CSUCI from the beginning, as well as an alumna who is making change for those with disabilities – both received honorary doctorates at the 2025 CSUCI commencement ceremonies held on May 17.

Philanthropist Linda Dullam, a dedicated CSUCI supporter since its inception, received a Doctor of Humane Letters at the 9 a.m. commencement ceremony. Class of 2016 alumna Dani Anderson, Ventura County's first Disability Access Manager, received her Doctor of Humane Letters at the 2 p.m. ceremony, making her the first CSUCI alumna ever to receive an honorary doctorate.

President Yao penned nomination letters to the Chancellor's Office with high praise for both recipients.

"Mrs. Dullam's contributions extend beyond CSUCI to numerous organizations that enrich the cultural and social fabric of Ventura County," President Yao wrote. "Her deep ties to the region and longstanding philanthropic efforts highlight her commitment to making a positive impact."

Dullam has been a familiar face on the campus for more than 23 years. As an original member of the CSUCI Foundation Board, she was instrumental in the launch of the President's Dinner – which she usually chairs – the most significant fundraising event for the University, as well as the President's Circle, which is a stewardship program of donors who annually donate \$1,000 or more. Dullam's philanthropic efforts also spearheaded the fundraising effort to rename University Hall to Richard R. Rush Hall, honoring the founding president of the University.

Dullam's advocacy for higher education in the region is well-known and has earned her numerous honors, including the Robert J. Lagomarsino Award in 2006. A courtyard adjacent to the John Spoor Broome

Library was re-christened the Dullam Courtyard in 2021 to honor her late husband John, and their vigorous and unwavering support for CSUCI.

As a 2016 Communication alumna, Danielle "Dani" Anderson has never been at a loss for words – until President Yao contacted her with the news about the honorary doctorate.

"When I found out I would be getting this honor, I was speechless. I'm never speechless," Anderson said.

Born and raised in Thousand Oaks, Anderson has lived with a rare form of muscular dystrophy that had her using a wheelchair after sixth grade. When

she attended CSUCI, her specialty was disability culture and communication, which has served her well as Ventura County's first-ever Disability Access Manager, a position she has held since 2022.

"Dani's focus on enhancing the County's architecture, public transportation, digital infrastructure, emergency

services, and community programs aims to create a regional environment that is welcoming to all, President Yao wrote in Anderson's nomination letter.

"With over 15 years of experience in the disability field, including roles in the state and federal governments, nonprofit arenas, and customer service, Dani has been recognized for her commitment to fostering inclusivity," President Yao wrote.

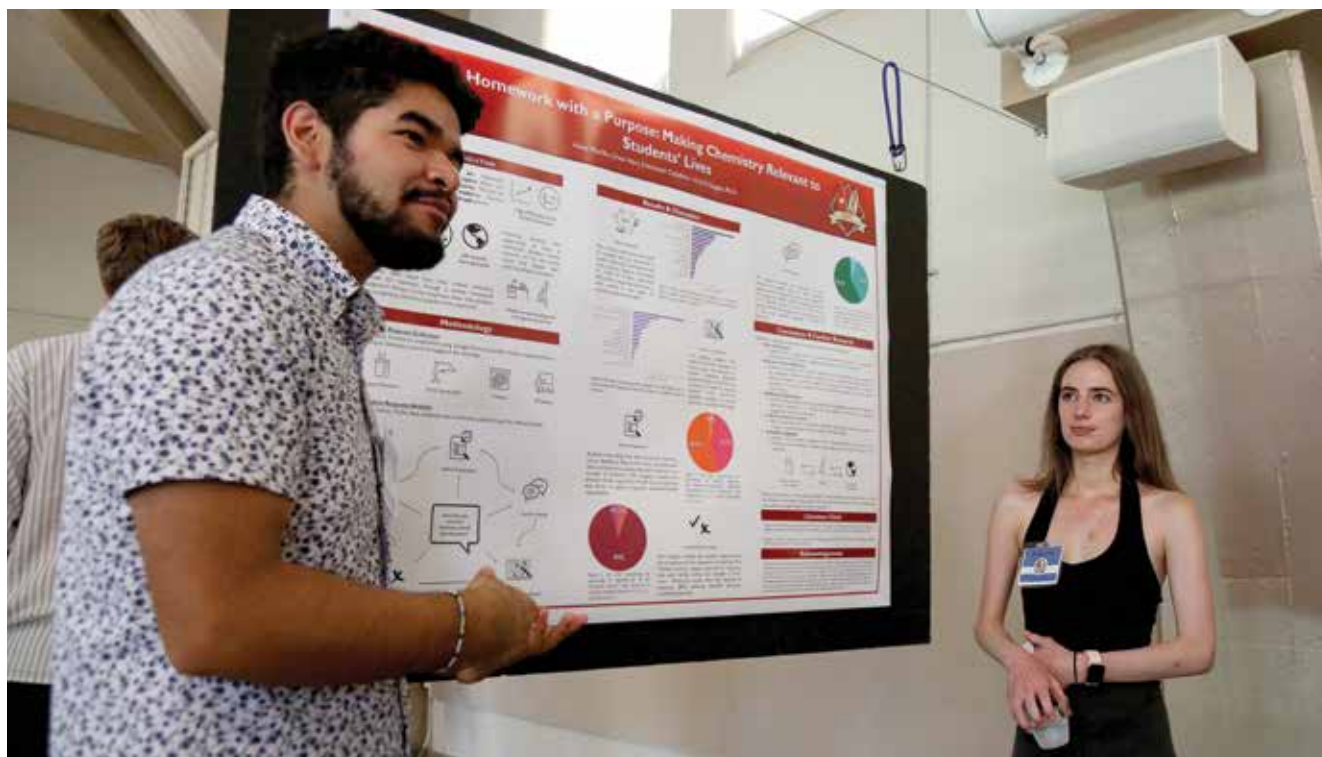
Among her other accomplishments, Anderson was named Woman of the Year by California State Senator Hanna-Beth Jackson and Assemblymember Monique Limon in 2020.

If there's one message Anderson hopes to get across, it's that people with disabilities are not sad, needy, dependent or different.

"I'm not brave just because I'm ordering coffee at Starbucks," she said. "We're just trying to live the same boring life as everybody else."



Dani Anderson (left) and Linda Dullam (right) receive honorary doctorates.



Student research in science, technology, engineering and mathematics earned CSUCI designations of leadership. Above: CSUCI students relate Chemistry to everyday life.

## *Building on a Legacy of Academic Excellence*

by JULIE DRAKE

SINCE CAL STATE CHANNEL ISLANDS FIRST welcomed students in the Fall of 2002, the University has steadily built a strong reputation for academic excellence by staying student-focused, community-driven and innovation-oriented.

By continuing to adapt to the evolving needs of students and employers, the University has positioned itself as a transformative force in higher education in California and beyond, said Provost Jessica Lavariega Monforti.

From its inception, the University has placed a strong emphasis on student-centered learning, interdisciplinary education, community service, and global engagement – and faculty-student research has been a core component of that mission, she added.

“While the University initially focused on providing high-quality undergraduate education with an emphasis on experiential learning, its commitment to research has expanded significantly over time,” Lavariega Monforti said.

In recent news, Cal State Channel Islands is one of just 33 institutions nationwide that earned both designations of Research Colleges & Universities (RCU) and Opportunity Colleges & Universities (OCU) from the American

Council on Education (ACE) and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. These designations recognize CSUCI's leadership on two essential fronts: advancing science and discovery for the nation and prioritizing student access and success.

The University stands in good company with 216 RCU universities across the nation. Awardees spend at least \$2.5 million on research on average in a single year, and this designation aims to acknowledge the growing research efforts for institutions that may not fit the criteria for a traditional “Research 1” (R1) status. With over \$7 million in research expenditures last year alone, CSUCI's faculty and students are contributing meaningfully to scientific discovery, social progress, and regional development.

The OCU designation means that Cal State Channel Islands is among 479 of the nation's model institutions of higher learning when it comes to helping students succeed and increase their socioeconomic standing. The designation is part of the newly developed Student Access and Earnings Classification, which measures universities on whether their student enrollment reflects the communities they serve and how graduates' earnings compare to peers in their region.

“Hundreds of institutions nationwide are providing students an excellent opportunity to use higher education as a springboard to a better life,” said Ted Mitchell, president of ACE. “The Student Access and Earnings Classification highlights the depth and breadth of schools where student success is front and center.”

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education is viewed as a gold standard by policymakers, researchers and philanthropists when making decisions about various colleges and universities.

“Cal State Channel Islands’ recognition as an Opportunity College or University affirms what we know to be true: talent exists everywhere and it is our responsibility to nurture it,” said Lavariega Monforti.

“It underscores our belief in the transformative power of education to change lives, strengthen communities and build a more just and prosperous future. These designations place our University among recognized research institutions, enhancing its reputation nationally and internationally,” said Lavariega Monforti.

Lavariega Monforti added that the designations also underscore the University’s commitment to expanding equitable access, fostering student success and empowering the next generation of leaders in our region and beyond.

Kristen Linton, Associate Professor of Health Science, called the designation “a powerful affirmation of the meaningful, mission-driven research, especially among undergraduates, taking place on campus.”

“What sets our University apart is how we leverage over \$2.5 million in research funding not only to advance academic knowledge, but to deeply transform the lives of our students – particularly first-generation and historically underrepresented undergraduate students,” she said.

She added that for many faculty, through course-based undergraduate research experiences (CUREs), students gain authentic research training directly embedded in their coursework.

A recent study involving 115 students across four health science courses found that participation in CUREs led to statistically significant increases in students’ sense of belonging in engineering and technology fields – an essential factor in long-term STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) retention.

“These gains were particularly impactful among students who had no prior exposure to research, Linton said.

“Beyond the numbers, student stories illustrate the human impact of the University’s research mission. In

their capstone presentations, seniors consistently credited their faculty-mentored research experiences as defining moments in their academic journeys.”

The campus has internal funding through the Research, Scholarship and Creative Activity (RSCA) program. The program supports faculty research, scholarships and creative activity with funds from the University’s Provost office and the CSU Office of the Chancellor.

“This support for faculty scholarship raises the visibility of the California State University as an institution that values faculty RSCA,” Saiqa Anne Qureshi, Interim Director of Research & Sponsored Programs.



Researcher Oasis Garcia explains the results of an investigative Chumash medicinal plants survey.

The University won several key grants in the last year, including approximately \$1 million, to recruit and train 27 scholars from diverse backgrounds through a three-semester program, from the U.S. Department of Education for Proyecto Special and Bilingual Educator Retention (SABER) to address the critical shortage of multilingual (Spanish and English) special education teachers in Ventura County. A \$145,260 grant from the Ventura County Continuum of Care will support the Basic Needs Homeless Prevention program, to support housing-insecure students at risk of losing their housing within 14 days due to rent payment issues.

Furthermore, the University continues to build on work at the Santa Rosa Island Research Station with a marine debris removal project funded by the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation, focused on high-impact and large debris removal within the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary.

To learn more about the designations, visit: [carnegie-classifications.acenet.edu](https://carnegie-classifications.acenet.edu)





Professor Jennie Luna teaches Chicana/o Studies.

# Chicana/o Studies Professor Hits the National Stage

by JULIE DRAKE

**A**S CHAIR-ELECT FOR THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR CHICANA AND Chicano Studies (NACCS), Jennie Luna, Professor of Chicana/o Studies, designed the theme and program for the organization's national conference, held April 2 to 5 in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

"It's an honor to be elected by the national body to chair the organization and also represent my campus at a national level. It's a big deal," Luna said.

Luna is actively working toward changing the paradigm in her field to address Indigenous issues and work toward decolonization; how we imagine it; and how we see it in our reality and lifetime, she said.

"I'm really excited to have people from all over the country gather to share research and participate in the plenary sessions I have coordinated, highlighting scholars leading the field of Chicana and Chicano indigeneity," she said.

Education is especially important to Luna. She is a first-generation college graduate. She attended the University of California, Berkeley where she learned about the Third World Liberation Front.

"It influenced me to become an activist and organize on campus," she said.

The Third World Liberation Front was a 1969 multiracial student coalition that helped establish Ethnic Studies as an interdisciplinary field in the United States. Thirty years after the largest student strike in U.S. history, Luna was one of the student leaders of the 1999 Third World Liberation Front hunger strike and protests against a series of cuts to the Department of Ethnic Studies.

"There's a documentary, *On Strike*, and I'm actually in the documentary and narrate it," she said. "The outcome of the hunger strike was that we helped preserve ethnic studies to what it is today at UC Berkeley, leading the trend to expand Ethnic Studies K-20 in California."

Luna received simultaneous Bachelor of Arts degrees in Chicana/o Studies and Mass Communications from UC Berkeley.

Luna originally wanted to be a journalist. The late Mexican-American journalist Rubén Salazar inspired her. He was one of the first Chicano journalists at the *Los Angeles Times*. He was killed on Aug. 29, 1970, while covering the National Chicano Moratorium March, which was organized to protest the Vietnam War.

However, Luna's path took a different direction. While she was a senior in college, she started teaching Raza Studies at Pittsburg High School. As a member of M.E.Ch.A. (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) and Ch.a.LE (Chicanos and Latinos for Education), the groups organized in the community and demanded Chicana/o Studies. The high school agreed to offer the class but said they had no one to teach it. Luna and another classmate stepped up.

"That's when I decided I needed to go into education," she said.

Luna completed her Master of Education at Teachers College at Columbia University. During that time, she taught at schools in New York City.

"I really loved it," she said. "It was a really hard job."

At the same time, she had a second job where she taught at a community college in the city, Boricua College.

"I loved teaching higher education," she said.

The experience solidified Luna's desire to get her doctorate. Luna got her master's and doctorate in Native American Studies at the University of California, Davis.

"I knew I wanted to teach Chicana/o studies," she said. "But I also wanted to teach it

from an Indigenous perspective. Chicana/o Studies at the time really didn't have a complex curriculum or foundation in Indigeneity."

Part of the requirement in the Native American studies doctorate program at UC Davis is having to learn two languages, and one of them must be an Indigenous language. Luna already spoke Spanish. When deciding on her Indigenous language study she chose Nahuatl. She studied on campus for two years. She also received a grant for two years to study in Mexico.

It was a two-year summer intensive language course and an immersive experience in a Nahua community. Nahuatl is the third largest Indigenous language spoken on the North American continent.

Further, she has participated in the Intercontinental Indigenous spiritual runs, even running through South America with the Peace and Dignity Journeys. Her work has extended to participation in global gatherings of Indigenous women via the United Nations Permanent Forum for Indigenous Peoples and as a traditional Mexica/Azteca dancer since the age of 15. She started the first Aztec Dance group in New York City.

Luna taught Chicana/o Studies and Native American Studies for over 10 years at various institutions before she joined CSUCI in Fall of 2014. Luna came to CSUCI for the opportunity to be part of building the University's Chicana/o Studies program, developing courses such as Xicana Feminisms, Gender and Sexuality, Nahuatl Language and Philosophy, and Reproductive Justice.

**To read more visit: [go.csuci.edu/ch-luna](http://go.csuci.edu/ch-luna)**



**"I knew I wanted to teach Chicana/o studies, but I also wanted to teach it from an Indigenous perspective."**  
—JENNIE LUNA



Professor Ahmed Awad teaches a laboratory chemistry class.

# *New Faculty Director for Student Research Inspires Student Mentees*

by JULIE DRAKE

**W**HEN CSUCI'S CHEMISTRY PROFESSOR AND FACULTY DIRECTOR FOR STUDENT RESEARCH AHMED AWAD WAS A CHILD, he saw his grandfather carrying a bag filled with pills — each a different shape and color. He asked his grandfather why he took the pills.

“They help me feel better,” his grandfather said.

Awad later learned that those pills contained chemical compounds that could effectively treat diseases and improve bodily function.

“That sparked my curiosity about chemistry and led me to pursue undergraduate studies in the field,” Awad said.

During his studies, Awad discovered organic chemistry and its role in designing molecules with a wide range of useful applications, such as pharmaceutical drugs in medicinal chemistry, he added.

Awad studied chemistry at Cairo University in Egypt.

He graduated with honors as one of the top two students in his class. He then received a scholarship to pursue his doctoral studies in Germany.

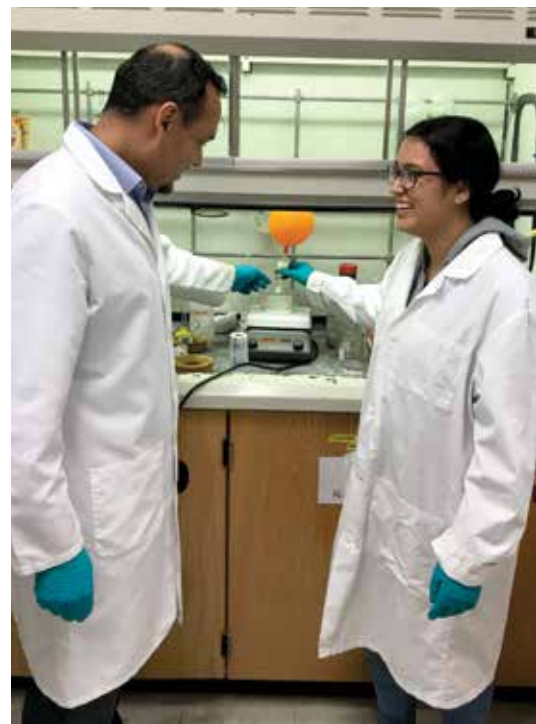
“During my studies at Ulm University in Germany, I focused on investigating novel synthetic nucleic acid molecules, known as oligonucleotides, as potential therapeutics for pancreatic cancer,” he said.

After he earned his doctorate, Awad joined the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at Iowa State University as a postdoctoral fellow, where he continued his research on synthetic oligonucleotides for gene imaging.





Professor Awad explains laboratory protocol and chain reactions to students.



After two years in Iowa, he accepted another post-doctoral position at the University of California Santa Barbara. In his second year at UCSB, Awad learned about CSUCI, a newly established four-year college less than 60 miles away from UCSB.

"I was drawn to its small size and its mission as a public institution that values and embraces student research," he said.

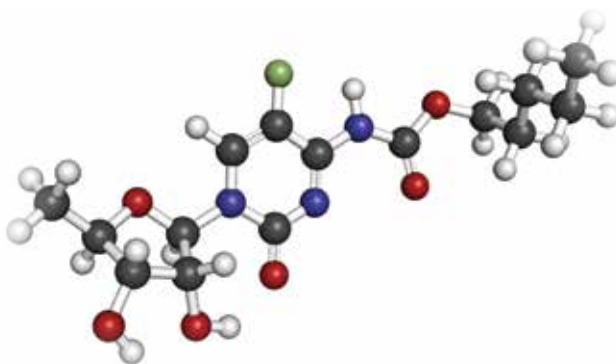
Awad joined the CSUCI faculty in the Fall of 2007. He has since mentored numerous undergraduate students in medicinal chemistry research and witnessed firsthand how this experience transformed many of their lives, he said.

"In my new position as Faculty Director for Student Research, I am committed to strengthening a cross-disciplinary campus culture that values and rewards undergraduate research, while ensuring that opportunities and resources are accessible to a broad and diverse range of students," he said.

CSUCI senior Lillian Straw, who graduated in

May with a degree in health science and a minor in chemistry, and Connor Blackwell, a research associate in his fourth year of college, lead a research team of five students plus Awad.

"Our project pertains to the modification of the chemical structure of the cancer drug capecitabine," Straw said.



A chemical model of the pharmaceutical drug Capecitabine.

They work closely with Awad and meet once a week for several hours at a time to brainstorm and establish solutions to whatever problems arise.

"While Dr. Awad is very involved, he also is hands-off in the sense that he allows students to structure a lot of the work and attempt solving problems on their own before assisting," she said.

"Dr. Awad is an incredible mentor for this reason," Blackwell agreed.

"Dr. Awad has been an incredible mentor throughout this research experience, and I highly recommend him to anyone interested in research within the biotech or chemistry-related fields," he said.

# Esports is Building Academic Skills in Fun Ways

by MICHAEL BRILEY

**T**HE CSUCI ESPORTS CLUB lounge in Trinity Hall is the site of high-energy, high-intensity intercollegiate and intramural Esports tournaments. It's also a welcoming space where more casual video gamers can walk in, hang out, make new friends and chill.

It's a place that fosters students' personal growth, close observers say.

"From what I've seen and heard from students, Esports has a really positive impact on those who participate," says Daniel Stewart, Information Technology Consultant, and staff advisor for the Esports Club. "Students involved in the club and competition are fully engaged in the college experience. They're learning to collaborate, manage their time, and balance academics, work and extracurriculars. These are real-world skills that will benefit them long after graduation."



The club returned in 2023 after a two year hiatus.



The CSUCI Esports Club has a lounge in Trinity Hall where Esports tournaments commence.



**"Before I joined, I didn't interact with many of my peers. But now, I've been introduced to a ton of awesome people, many of whom have become great friends."**

**—TAYLOR MACK**

Esports sharpens focus and builds meaningful relationships, observes Esports Club President Chris Hernandez, a junior Computer Science major. "But while it offers a lot of benefits, it can also add stress from gaming if you don't know how to manage it."

Esports was shut down at CSUCI in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, but beginning in 2023, a student assistant was intent on reviving it. "I joined him on his long journey of bringing the club back," Chris recalls. "Along the way, I made plenty of friends. I'm really grateful for the opportunity to be part of something great."

In that last couple of years, the Esports Club has entered tournaments, built connections with the local community, and importantly, gained its space, the Esports Lounge. The club shares the space with other clubs as it can.

Taylor Mack, a senior majoring in Computer Science who oversees event coordination with the Esports

Club, says that working with the club is teaching him "soft skills" necessary for future success.

But Taylor's favorite aspect of Esports is the sense of community it engenders. "Before I joined, I didn't interact with many of my peers. But now, I've been introduced to a ton of awesome people, many of whom have become great friends," says Taylor. "To me and others, our club is something that unites us behind a common interest."

Contrary to the common mantra of conventional sports, winning competitions is not the most important part of Esports, says Daniel Stewart.

"While performing well and aiming for victory are certainly goals, the real value lies in team building, communication and learning how to work together," he says. "Players develop important skills like leadership, adaptability and finding their role within a team. These experiences are just as rewarding — and often more lasting — than any trophy."





High-Impact Practices experiences can include real-life study abroad trips like CSUCI students (back row) who studied in New Zealand.

# Students Discover Enriching Paths to Success

by MICHAEL BRILEY

**G**OODBYE IVORY TOWER, HELLO REAL WORLD. CSUCI has been on this trajectory for several years with its emphasis and prioritization of High-Impact Practices (HIP), a collection of hands-on learning experiences that data show are transforming students' lives.

Students have the opportunity to conduct undergraduate research. They gain real-world work experience with internships in the community. Before they even start their first Fall semester, they attend the Summer Success Academy, in which they earn credits and prepare for university life and learning. These are just three among several HIP student experiences that have been shown to benefit student lives and future careers.

To advance HIP programs and support students, the TOLD Foundation recently established the TOLD Fund for High Impact Practices at CSUCI. TOLD Foundation is the giving arm of Camarillo-based commercial real estate developer, TOLD Corporation.

"Our motivation to assist CSUCI comes from many years of admiring the work of the University and the positive impacts it has made on our community," said Rod Gilbert, TOLD Foundation President. "University President Yao made a compelling case for High-Impact Practices and how the University could better serve its students by unifying those program areas."

President Richard Yao says the TOLD grant is a signif-

icant milestone in the history of HIP at the University. "I have so much gratitude for the TOLD Foundation and how they have embraced the role of High-Impact Practices in improving student success, closing equity gaps, and integrating our academic programming directly into our community. Philanthropic support is especially important now as we navigate enrollment and fiscal realities."

While all students benefit from HIP, they are especially beneficial for first-generation college students, those from historically underrepresented and marginalized groups, and those with the greatest financial need.

The real-life, poignant stories students tell about their HIP experiences are especially meaningful, reflects President Yao, who has heard many.

"You hear students talk about how they arrived on campus feeling a little bit out of touch, a little bit disconnected, unsure of their place here. Then they get involved in a service-learning course or community-based research project and they work with other students, sharing their vulnerabilities, learning new skills from each other – and then they get to apply those skills to benefit their community.

"You hear them say they weren't sure they were going to stick it out until they got involved in a HIP program. Then they started finding their sense of belonging, gaining skills and confidence that they can do this."





KEVIN BOCK ♦ '19 B.S. BIOLOGY

# From Mead to Mentorship

## *Grad Becomes Wildlife Biologist and Bee Expert*

by PAMELA DEAN

**W**ILDLIFE BIOLOGIST KEVIN BOCK IS ONE of Southern California's leading experts on bumble bees. But it was only by chance that he discovered his fascination with the buzzing insects.

"When I was attending CSUCI, I was a big Dungeons and Dragons fan," Bock explained, referring to the popular table-top, role-playing game. "My friends and I would really immerse ourselves. We had Viking helmets, costumes, and would drink mead."

Mead is an ancient style of wine made from honey that the characters in the fantasy game drank to celebrate their victories. Bock was taking organic chemistry at the time and decided to explore making the wine himself.

"But honey is expensive," Bock said. "I saw that CSUCI offered a beekeeping course, taught by Biology Professor Ruben Alarcón, and thought it would be an easy way to get honey and learn about bees."

He didn't let his fear of the stinging creatures get in his way.



“The first time I went out into the bee yard, I was very nervous,” Bock recalled. “I put my suit on and made sure there were no holes in it. I was one of the last students to go out. I felt the bees crawling on me. They were on my veil and on my shoulders. It took a few times out in the yard, but slowly my fear died down and my curiosity started to grow. After a few weeks, I would look at those fuzzy little bees and just fell in love with them.”

The Agoura High School graduate began attending CSUCI in his mid-twenties, choosing to return to college because he wanted to contribute more to the world than what he felt was possible in his job as a file clerk in a workers’ compensation law office.

“I hit a wall one day and decided I really needed to do something else,” Bock said. “Biology spoke to me the most. I loved life sciences. As a kid, my parents would take me camping and backpacking. I am a hiker and a birdwatcher. Exploring the living world really spoke to me. I knew I needed to do something that my heart could follow.”

In addition to learning beekeeping skills, Bock, who graduated in 2019, credits the mentoring, guidance and knowledge of apiculture he received from Professor Alarcón with helping him to land his current job. As a wildlife biologist for Sentinel Science, he assists utility companies to avoid harming California’s endangered native bee



population during maintenance and construction projects. He also advises on wetlands and wildlife conservation.

“I am not sure how I would have gotten this far without Dr. Alarcón,” said Bock. “He was able to recognize and nurture my excitement and enthusiasm. He was the first person in my adult life who really encouraged and listened to me and directed me toward opportunities. The first job out of college that I was able to get was through helping and volunteering with him.”

Bock now provides that same guidance and mentoring to other CSUCI students, returning each year as a volunteer to help teach the beekeeping class and guide students into jobs in the biology field after graduation.

“Kevin is a great role model,” said Alarcón. “He exemplifies that it is possible to go from student to leader, and shows students that what they are learning in school can be applied to the real world.”

“The best feeling I get is seeing the new faces of these young people interested in caring for such extraordinary animals,” said Bock. “It’s more important than ever to get students and the public educated about the environmental concerns that we face today. The beekeeping class provides a window into those challenges.”

**>> Visit [go.csuci.edu/ch-bock](https://go.csuci.edu/ch-bock) or scan the QR code to the right to view a video of Kevin and the bees.**





MELANIE COTA ✧ '19 B.A. POLITICAL SCIENCE

# *First-Gen Student to Financial Literacy Advocate*

by PAMELA DEAN

**T**HE DAUGHTER OF MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS, Melanie Cota's parents instilled in her the idea that one day she would attend a university and have more opportunities in life.

"My parents strongly encouraged me to go to college. They were adamant about it and there was never a question in my mind whether I would go," Cota said.

She grew up in Indio, California and graduated from Shadow Hills High School. Cota applied for CSUCI through the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), even though she had no idea where the city of Camarillo was at the time.

She participated in EOP's Summer Bridge program to help ease her transition from high school to college student. And when she set eyes on the University for the first time, she couldn't believe how beautiful it was.

"When I first arrived for the Summer Bridge program, I was amazed at how green the campus was. I grew up where there is brown sand everywhere, so seeing the trees and greenery was amazing," Cota recalled.

Summer Bridge brings incoming first-year students to campus the summer before they begin college. Students take foundational courses, receive peer and academic advising, and meet other first-year students. During the week-long program, Cota met other first-generation Hispanic students who also grew up speaking Spanish as

their primary language. This helped put Cota at ease as she transitioned to attending college so far from home.

"Summer Bridge helped me discover who I really was. It helped me grow up and become more independent," Cota said.

She graduated from CSUCI in 2019 with a bachelor's in Political Science. Today she is a Risk and Compliance officer for OceanAir Federal Credit Union, where she has worked her way up from an entry level teller position. In addition to analyzing risk and performing fraud investigations, she provides financial literacy education to high school and college students and immigrants across the county.

"Many immigrant families do not have any experience with banks and do not teach their children about opening bank accounts," explained Cota. "We help them learn the importance of managing their money and enable them to make well-informed financial decisions."

The Ventura resident also volunteers with CSUCI's Alumni & Friends Board. She hopes to help build a sense of community among graduates where they are engaged in activities and feel a connection to each other and to the University.

"I want to make sure our alumni feel welcome to participate in campus programs and feel like CSUCI is always their home."



NICHOLAS PALACIOS \* '15 B.S. CHEMISTRY \* '17 M.S. BIOTECHNOLOGY & BIOINFORMATICS

## FROM BEHIND THE PHARMACY COUNTER TO PHARMACEUTICAL LEADER

by PAMELA DEAN

Nicholas Palacios' interest in pursuing a career in the pharmaceutical industry began in community college with a job behind the pharmacy counter at CVS.

"I was able to connect the dots and see how the math and science classes I was taking translated to what I was doing at the pharmacy," said Palacios. "I knew I wanted to work in science."

Palacios grew up in Newbury Park and graduated from Newbury Park High School. In 2015, he earned a Bachelor's of Science in Chemistry at CSUCI. While in college, he took a new job at an independent pharmacy in Camarillo where he was able to dive deeper into pharmacy work, including performing sterile compounding and making products.

"It was really exciting," he said. "It was helping me put it all together and I became even more driven to have a career in the industry."

Wanting to bolster his resume even more, Palacios earned a Master of Science in Biotechnology and Bioinformatics from CSUCI in 2017.

Based on his work and lived experience, he then decided to go to pharmacy school and was fortunate to get into the highly rated University of North Carolina.

"While I was there, I decided to tack on an MBA to my Doctor of Pharmacy degree, which has been key to strengthening my business skills and opportunities," he said.

The pandemic hit while he was finishing up his degrees in the Tar Heel State. Palacios realized he wanted to return home to Ventura County to be close to family, friends and his community.

He completed his degrees remotely in 2022 and was accepted into Amgen's Commercial Leadership Program. The program provides an opportunity for participants to rotate through various departments and experience different aspects of the biopharmaceutical business.

When the three-year program wraps up in July, Palacios is hoping to land a permanent position at Amgen, preferably in marketing.

"Pharmaceutical marketing would allow me to help patients on a bigger scale by bringing them access to life saving and life extending drugs," Palacios said. "My background in pharmacies, understanding of how health care is delivered and how medication decisions are made gives me insight into how to market products, especially to physicians."

Palacios also volunteers on the CSUCI Alumni & Friends Board. As a first-generation student, he had no one to help him navigate through his college journey and has enjoyed mentoring other students who need guidance figuring out the process.

"I have a soft spot for people in similar situations, who have to figure it all out on their own. I want to help them, and CSUCI, succeed. Also, moving away made me appreciate being back in Ventura County and I really want to give back to my community."



CAITLIN BARRINGER ✧ '11 B.A. COMMUNICATION

# Following in Her Grandparents' Footsteps

by PAMELA DEAN

**Y**OU COULD SAY CAITLIN BARRINGER was destined for a life dedicated to helping others. The third generation Santa Paula native grew up watching her grandparents serving their community in multiple ways.

Barringer's grandfather was on the Santa Paula City Council and president of the Santa Paula Chamber of Commerce. Her grandmother founded the Santa Clara Valley Hospice and was on the board of Interface Children & Family Services. As a child, Barringer often helped them at fundraising events.

The CSUCI alumna graduated in 2011 with a degree in Communication and set about forging her own path in service of others. She worked in fundraising for a few non-profits before landing her current role as program manager for Food Share of Ventura County.

"I really learned compassion for my community and to be involved through my grandparents," Barringer said. "I think it is only natural that for my career, I work in an environment where I believe in the mission and I feel good about what I do. Working for Food Share has been a great experience."

At Food Share, Barringer creates and oversees programs to assist vulnerable populations in the community, such as a diaper distribution program and a program to ensure farm workers and their families have culturally appropriate food.

According to Barringer, Food Share serves 250,000 people a year in the county. The diaper distribution program helps more than 3,800 infants a month.

In addition to her day job, the St. Bonaventure High School graduate has also volunteered with numerous nonprofits and commissions including her current role on the CSUCI Alumni & Friends Board. She is the past chair of the Santa Paula Chamber of Commerce, was on the board of the Santa Paula Rotary International, a Santa Paula Measure T commissioner, a City of Santa



Caitlin Barringer is a program manager for Food Share of Ventura County.

Paula Parks and Recs commissioner and even ran for Santa Paula City Council in 2020.

Despite her busy schedule, Barringer found time to complete her Master of Public Administration degree from CSUN in 2019. Recently married, she and her husband now live in Ventura. She plans to spend the next few years focusing on starting a family, but doesn't rule out returning to her volunteer roots sometime in the future.

"Give me 5 to 10 years to see where I am at," Barringer said. "I'm not ruling anything out."

ZANE GITTINS ♦ '18 B.S. COMPUTER SCIENCE ♦ '20 M.S. COMPUTER SCIENCE

# CSUCI Helps Alum Build Cyber Security Career

by PAMELA DEAN

Zane Gittins, a cyber security expert and CSUCI alum, has been fascinated by computers since he was a boy playing video games. His passion for technology grew even further at the age of 12, when his parents enrolled him in a UCLA computer science summer boot camp.

"At camp, they taught us the fundamentals of coding and I was hooked," Gittins said. "I've always enjoyed building things and coding felt like the perfect blend of creativity and science."

Gittins grew up in El Segundo and graduated from El Segundo High. He chose CSUCI because of its proximity to home, its small class sizes, and the opportunity for direct interaction with professors.

"CSUCI was close enough to family, but still far enough for me to gain some independence," said Gittins. "I also knew it would give me the chance to interact with my professors and really build relationships with them, and that ended up being the case. Those relationships led to internships that helped kick off my career."

Gittins earned his Bachelor of Science in Computer Science and a minor in Mathematics in 2018, followed by a Master of Science in Computer Science in 2020. He credits two professors, Professor of Computer Science Michael Soltys and Computer Science lecturer Kevin Scrivnor, with having the greatest impact

on his academic and professional development.

Scrivnor, who ran the University's Cyber Security Club, sparked Gittins' interest in the rapidly growing field. Additionally, Soltys helped Gittins secure a cyber security internship at Haas Automation, which eventually led to a full-time position with the Oxnard-based company after graduation.

When Gittins was ready for a change, Soltys helped connect him to Camarillo-based Meissner Filtration Products. Today, Gittins is an information technology security manager overseeing cyber security for the organization's entire global operation, with a small team of people reporting to him.

"Meissner has been an amazing place for my professional growth,"

Gittins shared. "They truly invest in the development of their employees, and our team is encouraged to keep learning and improving."

For example, he and his co-workers had the opportunity to attend the prestigious DEFCON Cyber Security Conference in Las Vegas last August. There, they competed in the "CTRL+ALT+DETECT" security challenge, where they secured second place among over 100 teams.

"That was really exciting," said Gittins. "We are planning on competing again this summer and maybe even taking first place."





Tatiana Juarez ✧ '20 B.S. Health Science



## A Passion for STEM Outreach and Acting

by PAMELA DEAN

**A**S CSUCI'S STEM TRANSFER OUTREACH Coordinator, Tatiana Juarez enjoys connecting with K-12 and community college students across Ventura County. She strives to inspire them to attend the University and hopefully major in a field related to science, technology, engineering, or math (STEM).

"I love talking with students in our communities and promoting higher education," said Juarez, who graduated from CSUCI in 2020 with a Health Science degree. "I especially want to show first-generation, Latinx students that going to college and working in STEM is possible. I try to make it exciting rather than daunting."

In addition to making presentations at schools, Juarez also helps her department – Student Academic Success and Equity Initiatives – organize science-related events and family activities, like CSUCI's annual STEAM Carnival, which offers hands-on activities that demonstrate how science and the arts can be fun.

A significant number of the students Juarez meets have parents who did not attend college and often lack guidance on how to pursue a degree. She likes to

share her own life experience as a way to inspire and show them what is possible.

Juarez grew up in Oxnard and graduated from St. Bonaventure High School. Her parents, who are Mexican immigrants, strongly encouraged their children to attend college.

"My parents always had a vision that we all would go to college, and encouraged and supported us," Juarez said. "Both my older sister and I graduated from CSUCI. I love sharing my experience and showing students what they are capable of. I hope they see that the time and money they invest in attending college is worth it."

In addition to her full-time job at CSUCI, Juarez is an aspiring actor. In 2024, she appeared in the film "Jenni" about Jenni Rivera, a Mexican-American music icon who died in a 2012 plane crash. Juarez played the 12- to 16-year-old version of Rivera. "Jenni" is available on the bilingual streaming service ViX.

Juarez enjoys the mix of acting and working in higher education. "I love working with students and their families," she said. "And I love acting as well. I'm looking for the perfect mix of both."

# Class Notes

**D**olphins are natural communicators! We love to hear from our Dolphin alumni around the world — 31,266 and counting — so we can help share life changes and achievements.

Submit a class note to: [go.csuci.edu/class-note](https://go.csuci.edu/class-note) or scan the QR code on the right.



**2012**

**Angela Glenore**

**(B.S. Business)** – *Current Title: Subcontracts Manager, Engineering subcontracts.* In 2022, Angela received a NASA Early Career Achievement Medal at Jet Propulsion Laboratory.



**2022**

**Kaylee Day-Barker**

**(B.A. Psychology)** – *Current Title: Clinical Supervisor.* Earned her M.S. in Psychology in 2023, married her elementary school sweetheart, and began her career in Applied Behavior Analysis as a Clinical Supervisor.



**2019**

**Kaylee Maddux**

**(B.A. Communication)** – *Current Title: Eureka & Teen Coordinator.* Recently stepped into the non-profit world in the role of Eureka and Teen Coordinator at Girls Inc of Carpinteria. She will have the opportunity to mentor young girls and help them discover themselves!



**2024**

**Monica Montoya**

**(B.A. Sociology)** – *Current Title: Case Manager.* Currently pursuing her Masters Degree in Public Policy and Administration from California Lutheran University. She is also approaching her one-year mark at Interface Children and Family Services, where she will serve as a Case Manager and Group Facilitator in the Human Trafficking and Domestic Violence Departments. She noted the most rewarding part of her work is being able to make a meaningful impact in the community.



**2020**

**Ethan Collins**

**(B.S. Computer Science)** – *Current Title: Software developer.* Working with the Denver Broncos organization developing internal applications that support a wide range of team operations including scouting, the draft process, coaching, health and nutrition, and equipment management. Ethan and his wife recently bought their first home in Denver, Colorado, where they're happily settling in and spending plenty of time with their two adorable cats.





The poster features a vibrant red and yellow checkered background with a collage of images including a duck mascot, a marching band, and a cheerleading squad. The text is bold and stylized, with a QR code and website link at the bottom left.

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