

OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT RECIPIENT

NURSE ANESTHESIA STUDENT VALUES FACULTY, LIFE EXPERIENCES

Immigration, education led to career path

By **Jenelyn Russo**
contributing writer

As Cal State Fullerton doctoral student Fajer Al Najjar is preparing for a career in nurse anesthesia, she can't help but reflect on the path that led her here and how each step has equipped her for the demands of the profession.

Born and raised in Baghdad, Iraq, Al Najjar and her family left their war-torn country in 2008 and lived in Turkey for a year before immigrating to the U.S. when she was just 13 years old. After living in Alabama for three years, she and her family landed in Orange County. Having to learn English and adjust to a new way of life shaped her choice to pursue the medical field.

"Being an immigrant and coming to America and not knowing really that much and feeling out of place a lot of times, has really prepared me for this career," Al Najjar said of becoming a nurse anesthetist. "It's prepared me to be empathetic to the patients and how they're feeling, but also to be able to change my plan at any time and to have really good critical thinking skills."

Following her graduation from Magnolia High School in Anaheim, Al Najjar chose Cal State Fullerton as the ideal place to continue her education, earning a bachelor's degree in health sciences in 2017.

"I know how many resources and help they have at Cal State Fullerton if I do need it," Al Najjar said. "I also really like the students that go there and the community that you can have a bond with. I feel like I had a really good bond with my undergrad community."

While at CSUF, Al Najjar volunteered at local hospitals, where she was moved by the compassion and care shown by nurses. After earning a master's degree in nursing from UCLA in 2020, she spent nearly four years working in the surgical trauma ICU department at Riverside Community Hospital, and it was there that she decided to specialize in nurse anesthesia.

"When I would ask the nurse anesthetists, they always talked about how much they love their job and how much they like to take care of patients at their sickest and most vulnerable moments," Al Najjar said. "That's what I love and what drew me to the career."

Her positive experience as a Cal State Fullerton undergraduate, combined with the university's nurse anesthesia program, ranked No. 1 in California by U.S. News & World Report in 2025, made it an easy choice for Al Najjar to return to her alma mater, where she is



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAL STATE FULLERTON

Doctoral student Fajer Al Najjar practices medical skills in CSUF's School of Nursing Simulation Center.

now in the second year of the three-year doctoral program.

"The faculty here are so great, and I feel like I can go to any of them for any help I need," Al Najjar said. "They are so approachable and so nice, and they all just want the best for us. I love that

about them."

In partnership with the Kaiser Permanente School of Anesthesia in Pasadena, Al Najjar is in CSUF's integrated anesthesia program, and she currently splits her time between taking courses at the Kaiser Pasadena campus and

working a clinical rotation at UCLA Santa Monica Medical Center. The third year of the program will take her to different hospitals for rotations in specialties such as obstetrics, cardiology and neuroscience.

NURSE » PAGE 2



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAL STATE FULLERTON

Cal State Fullerton theater students bring Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" to the stage.

1-YEAR PROGRAM

Single-Subject Credential in Theatre takes center stage

A new role for future K-12 instructors debuting

By **Larry Urish**
contributing writer

Successful teachers understand that mastery of a given discipline is only part of the equation; they must also impart what they know in ways that motivate and inspire their students to learn as empowered, independent critical-thinkers.

To that end, pedagogy, the study and application of how knowledge and skills are furnished in an educational context, is a central focus of Cal State Fullerton's new Single-Subject Credential in Theatre, a one-year program that prepares bachelor of arts graduates in any major to teach theater in K-12 schools. The program's first cohort began this fall.

"I'm showing future theater teachers how to communicate craft skills and knowledge in a way that helps them pass on essential performance techniques to their own students, rather than directing them to perform through emotional manipulation, which has historically happened throughout the industry," said Amanda Rose Villarreal, CSUF associate professor of theater and subject area coordinator of theater education, who has written theater-curriculum guides for multiple school districts.

While the Single-Subject Credential in Theatre accepts bachelor's graduates in any major, those with a B.A. in theater are especially well-situated to teach in this discipline, since they've received training and instruction in a broad range of related subjects such as casting, acting, directing, choreography, costumes and lighting. To be accepted into the program, however, non-theater B.A. grads must pass the CSET Exam for Theatre. One of the California Subject Examinations for Teachers, it tests for knowledge in theater history, acting techniques and skills and "devising" (the process of developing new works through creative exploration), among

THEATRE » PAGE 5

Cal State **Fullerton.**

performer in the nation for

TOP 10 SOCIAL MOBILITY

■ U.S. News & World Report's 2025 list of
Top Universities Impacting Social Mobility



fullerton.edu/rankings

NAVIGATING CHALLENGES

A day of leadership-building for women: Inspiration and support

Speakers offer perspective; networking encouraged

By Nicole Gregory
contributing writer

The first-ever Cal State Fullerton LeadHERship Women's Conference, held Sept. 30 at the Titan Student Union Pavilion, brought together 250 students, faculty, staff and guests from other CSUs for a day of inspiration, leadership skill-building and networking opportunities.

An additional 100 people were on a waiting list for the free event, according to Phenicia McCullough, vice president of the Department of Human Resources and Inclusive Excellence, who organized the day.

Dynamic and inspiring speakers were invited to offer their perspectives on women and leadership, both as a personal journey and as part of a larger social picture.

Melissa Majors, a leadership consultant who served as facilitator for the day, engaged students in stimulating discussions and provided free copies of her book, "Help Them Thrive: Leadership Coaching for Humans Leading Humans," to attendees.

Cal State Fullerton alum Martha Blanding, who recently retired after a 50-year career at Disney, offered words of encouragement and support, reminding female students not to let anyone tell them what they cannot do. Blanding was the first full-time Black tour guide at Disneyland and finished her career as senior manager of merchandise special events. She, like other alumni in attendance, made themselves available to network with students that day.

Networking was encouraged from the moment the event began at 8:30 a.m. Cards at each of the tables featured challenges for the attendees, such as introducing themselves to three new people during the day. Others featured questions, such as What brought you here today? and What are you most pas-



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAL STATE FULLERTON
CSUF alum and Disney Legend designee Martha Blanding, left, was interviewed by leadership coach Melissa Majors at the Sept. 30 LeadHERship Women's Conference.

sionate about in your work? And some cards had lighter questions, such as What's your go-to method for remembering people's names?

McCullough said a lot of planning went into the conference to make all attendees feel inspired and supported. "We wanted the experience to be special, and we wanted attendees to feel important."

The number of women leaders is increasing, but they continue to face challenges. A 2024 report about women in the workplace from McKinsey & Company showed that although women have made gains in corporate senior

leadership roles during the last 10 years, progress for women of color is "fragile."

Darcy Totten, executive director of the California Commission on the Status of Women and Girls and one of the event's guest speakers, urged students to become advocates for positive change through public policies.

Gretchen Hydo, an executive career coach and author of "Break Free From Your Dirty Little Secret: A New You in 10 Secret Breaking Stages," which discusses women's self-doubt and sense of never doing enough, also addressed the conference attendees. Career coaching

is a relatively new field, and professionals like Hydo can help women navigate some of the challenges they face in the business world, McCullough explained.

Cal State Fullerton's own ASI president, Haneefah Syed, addressed the group, too. She and others sought to bolster young women leaders with suggestions such as don't internalize labels that other people put on you, otherwise they can become your identity; connect with other women for support to help you navigate your career; and you are not alone if you experience imposter syndrome.

"It was inspiring to be in a room full of women sharing ideas," said McCullough, reflecting on the event. "It was a day of women talking to women, where you could relax and be yourself. When women are among other women, we're often more open and more vulnerable. And when someone shares about a situation, we sometimes realize 'Wow, it's not just me, it's a common thread, how do we navigate this?'"

This kind of sharing, McCullough said, is good for students' well-being "by providing a space where they feel comfortable, strengthen their connections and embrace their potential as leaders," she said.

Goals matter, she said, no matter what field a student wants to enter, and that's where educators play a key role. Students need to see leaders, McCullough said, to learn how to be leaders themselves. "We're an institution of higher education so we are all about student success." Giving students access to leaders — whether they're from the Cal State Fullerton community or outside of it — shows them a variety of examples to follow, she said, and this was one intention of the conference.

"I wanted to show our students that there are so many different ways to be a leader," McCullough said. "You don't want to put yourself in a box." There are leaders in science, community relations, government, philanthropy and many other areas, she said. "You need to be open to new possibilities. If you're stuck in a job, sometimes you need to be inspired, a reset."

Nurse

FROM PAGE 1

"The good thing is that you get exposed to so many different ways of doing anesthesia," Al Najjar said. "It helps you prepare for the unexpected when you do graduate."

Al Najjar is excelling at her craft, and her commitment to the field was recognized earlier this year when she was awarded the 2025-26 California State University Trustees Award for Outstanding Achievement. Additionally, she was named a Hearst Foundation Scholar and received a \$14,000 scholarship.

"This is just my life and the way I've been living," Al Najjar said. "When

someone else recognizes it and says hey, you've been working really hard to get this, good job, it feels great to be recognized."

After graduation in August 2027, Al Najjar hopes to secure a position at a Level I trauma center where she can care for a wide range of patients and continue building her skills early in her career. She credits her time at CSUF and her life experiences for giving her the confidence she needs to move into this next chapter.

"They always say, 'Titan strong,' and so for me, it does mean being strong," Al Najjar said. "Coming from where I've come from, being a Titan, it's built me up. It's made me the person that I am. And so I think my background has built me up to be strong and ready for this career."



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAL STATE FULLERTON
Doctoral nursing student Fajer Al Najjar received the 2025-26 California State University Trustees' Award for Outstanding Achievement.

CSUF SECTION STAFF

Managing Editor: Jennifer Karmarkar
Project Manager: Caitlin Adams
Creative Director: Tom Halligan
Senior Graphic Designer: Marissa Chamberlain
Copy Editor: Paul Davenport
Director of Communications: Caroline Wong

Have a story idea or comment for the section?
Contact Caroline Wong at cawong@scng.com or 714-796-2202

The Cal State Fullerton community section is produced by The Orange County Register for the benefit of its subscribers. While the university is the section's primary advertising sponsor, all editorial decisions are independent of the university's control.

Published on select Thursdays by The Orange County Register
1920 Main Street, Suite 225
Irvine, CA 92614
ocregister.com/cal-state-fullerton

An advertisement for Cal State Fullerton's Online Master's Business Program. It features a large white hashtag #3 on a blue background. A woman is shown smiling and working on a laptop. The text "Online Master's BUSINESS PROGRAM in California" is prominently displayed, along with a QR code and the Cal State Fullerton logo.

Online Master's
**BUSINESS
PROGRAM**
in California

■ U.S. News & World Report, 2025

Cal State Fullerton.

HEALTH PARTNERSHIP

Mobile CPR training kiosk set up in Titan Student Union

American Heart Association,
Edwards Lifesciences are sponsors

By Lou Ponsi
contributing writer

As Cal State Fullerton’s comprehensive student wellness program, TitanHEALTH provides medical care, health education, counseling and other services to the university’s student population.

TitanHEALTH also ensures student wellbeing through partnerships such as Basic Needs Services and the ASI food pantry, which help students experiencing unforeseen hardships resulting in housing, food and financial insecurities.

Recently, TitanHEALTH added another layer of support for students, one that can save lives.

Through a partnership with the American Heart Association and Edwards Lifesciences Foundation, a mobile Hands-Only CPR training kiosk has been set up in the Titan Student Union, in the breezeway, next to the alumni lounge.

With officials from Associated Students Inc., the American Heart Association and Edwards Life Sciences present, an unveiling ceremony was held Oct. 1 at the Titan Student Union.

The kiosk is designed to reduce fear and hesitation of performing CPR and is expected to reach over 49,000 students, faculty and visitors before it relocates in January.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAL STATE FULLERTON

The American Heart Association and Edwards Lifesciences Foundation brought a new mobile Hands-Only CPR kiosk to Cal State Fullerton to help students, faculty and others understand how they can immediately help a person experiencing a cardiac emergency outside of a hospital.

than men,” said Tania Saison, senior vice president, chief compliance officer, and associate general counsel for Edwards Life Science. “This is a disparity that I hope we can also change through regular education on CPR. I think it’s very important for women, especially, to be aware of this. It’s a cause that resonates very, very near and dear to my heart.”

The American Heart Association first introduced hands-only CPR as a recommended method for bystanders helping adults who suffer a cardiac arrest in 2008.

Previously, multiple scientific studies performed by medical professionals revealed that bystanders were hesitant to perform CPR due to fear of doing it incorrectly or discomfort with mouth-to-mouth breathing.

The American Heart Association has a goal of at least one person in every household knowing hands-only CPR by 2030, said Savannah Mlot, executive director for the Orange County Inland Empire Coachella Valley chapter of the American Heart Association.

“While we often measure life in years, when it comes to cardiac arrest, it’s literally seconds,” Mlot said. “In the time that it will take for us to dedicate this new kiosk, 45 people will have experienced a life-threatening cardiac event, and the majority of those will have been outside of the hospital. And in less than five minutes, this kiosk will equip each user with the lifesaving skills of knowing hands-only CPR.”



Jennie Ho, medical director and family medicine physician with Cal State Fullerton's TitanMED Services



Mahak Ahmad, Associated Students, Inc. Board of Directors vice chair, speaks during the event at the Titan Student Union.



American Heart Association representatives demonstrate the new mobile Hands-Only CPR kiosk.

MEDIA

Titans Sports Network alum kicks off career at NFL Network

Cal State Fullerton

The first time Isabella Kechejian stepped foot into an NFL Network control room, she felt right in her element: “I recognized all the buttons, and I knew exactly what to do.”

“It looked like the control room at CSUF, just on a grander scale,” said Kechejian, a Cal State Fullerton alum who got her start as an intern for Titans Sports Network before launching her career as a live digital media specialist for NFL Network.

In her role, Kechejian works with a team to produce content for free, ad-supported television channels. This content includes previews, highlights, fantasy football league updates via podcast and NFL game updates.

“I feel really lucky to be with the NFL, where I can combine my love for broadcasting with my love for sports,” said Kechejian, who earned a bachelor of arts degree in cinema and television arts in 2025. “If it weren’t for the support I received at Titans Sports Network, I don’t know if I would be here.”

A collaboration between the College of Communications and Titans Athletics, Titans Sports Network provides students like Kechejian with hands-on training in sports broadcast media as they livestream events and produce original content for ESPN’s streaming service, ESPN+.

Kechejian joined the student-run network because it was an opportunity to learn more about live broadcasting and capture the kinds of stories that she loved seeing as a sports fan growing up. As an intern, she sharpened her skills behind the camera and in the control room, covering such live sporting events as men’s and women’s basketball, softball, baseball and tennis.

“There are a lot of moving parts that go into producing a live show,” said Kechejian. “Titans Sports Network taught me about teamwork, patience and time management. I learned those skills as a student, and I use them every day because the NFL environment is very similar.”

Kechejian said that her journey to the NFL would not have been possible without the support of CSUF alum Robbie Loya and Tim Jackson, assistant athletic director of broadcasting, facility and events.

Recognizing her talent and drive, Loya



PHOTO COURTESY OF ISABELLA KECHEJIAN

Isabella Kechejian launched her career as a live digital media specialist for NFL Network.

and Jackson encouraged Kechejian to apply for the NFL’s 2025 Technical Operations Training Camp, a summer program that introduces aspiring communicators to various roles within the league’s media and operations teams.

During the camp, Kechejian networked with industry professionals and shared her expertise with NFL communicators, successfully transforming the summer opportunity into a full-time job offer for the 2025 football season.

Jackson has been at the helm of Titans Sports Network since its inception in 2021, and in less than five years, he’s helped students like Kechejian land internships and full-time positions with such top companies as NFL TV Network and Fox Sports.

Fellow Titans Sports Network alum Maeve Rocchi, who earned a bachelor’s degree in cinema and television arts in 2025, also launched her career as a live digital media specialist for the NFL.

Johnny Arellano, who earned a bachelor’s degree in communications-journalism in 2022 and Loya, who earned a bachelor’s degree in communications-journalism in 2024, are leading their own college sports programs as directors of broadcasting for Illinois State University and Seattle University, respectively.

“This program provides students with an opportunity to work hard, sharpen their skills and create their own journey in sports broadcasting,” said Jackson.

GRADUATE RESEARCH

CSUF-trained educator strives to help teachers avoid burnout

Cal State Fullerton

During his 27-year teaching career, Cal State Fullerton alum Jason Euston, admittedly, has grappled with teacher burnout.

“I experienced my own bout with burnout as I struggled to balance my teaching workload with graduate studies and family health issues,” said Euston, a teacher at Valley View High School, a continuation school in Ontario.

With that self-realization, Euston’s capstone research project for his graduate program in the College of Education focused on teacher wellness and well-being.

“Diving into the research turned out to be both cathartic and enlightening. It helped me see that what I was experiencing was part of a larger pattern among educators, and that I wasn’t alone in facing those challenges,” he said.

Euston chose CSUF’s master’s degree program in transformative teaching in secondary education to advance his work of advocating for the emotional well-being of teachers and students.

Plus, the flexibility of the fully online, 21-month program was appealing since it’s designed with full-time teachers in mind.

“The graduate program reminded me of my ‘why’ and renewed my purpose. It energized my teaching and strengthened the impact I can have on students every day,” said Euston, who earned his master’s degree last year.

The veteran educator decided on his research topic since other teachers may be at a breaking point in the classroom.

“Burnout is more than just being tired. It’s a combination of emotional exhaustion, feeling disconnected from students and a loss of accomplishment in one’s work,” Euston said. “When teachers reach that point, it doesn’t just affect them personally, it directly impacts students’ learning, classroom climate and long-term success.”

Euston’s research, recently published in The High School Journal, describes the need for systemic reforms to support teacher well-being.

His article, “From Surviving to Thriving: Rethinking Support for Teachers,” details teacher burnout by pointing to factors such as unmanageable workloads, regular classroom disruptions, inadequate mentorship and a lack of professional autonomy.

“Jason’s unwavering commitment to addressing teacher burnout through both personal reflection and rigorous research exemplifies the kind of transformative scholarship we strive to cultivate in our graduate program,” said Chris Street, professor of secondary education and Euston’s research adviser.

Euston’s article addresses the negative impact of burnout on teachers’ emo-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAL STATE FULLERTON

For his master’s research project, education alum Jason Euston addressed the need for teacher wellness and well-being, including supporting teachers with tools like yoga and mindfulness.



Euston, a high school teacher who earned a master’s degree in transformative teaching in secondary education, addresses teacher burnout in his recently published research article.

tional capacity, professional commitment and student learning. He found that teacher stress is often transferred to students, making it harder for them to focus and learn.

To better support teachers, Euston said that schools must enact systemic changes to reduce workloads, provide mentorship, limit classroom disruptions

and give teachers more autonomy instead of frequent changes in curriculum and programs.

“Teachers can use tools like mindfulness, self-compassion, exercise and setting healthy boundaries, along with shifting from empathy — taking on students’ emotions — to compassion, which builds resilience,” said Euston, who

started teaching yoga to his students and fellow teachers to improve overall well-being.

“When educators are supported with both systemic changes and personal strategies, they gain the energy and emotional capacity to connect deeply with students and help them thrive.”

In 1996, Euston earned a bachelor’s degree in business administration, focusing on accounting, from CSUF. He also completed the credential program to teach business and mathematics at the high school level.

Euston spent his first 10 years teaching at Montclair High School. For the past 17 years, he has taught business, math and physical education at Valley View High School.

He is now working on earning a teacher training certification in yoga. Euston also plans to start a career and technical education pathway, centered on health and wellness.

“The new pathway is a natural next step, and I’m excited to share what I learned in the research with students,” he said.

Euston shared that returning to CSUF gave him the tools to advocate for teacher and student wellness.

“Earning my master’s degree made me a far better teacher than before,” he said.

BEYOND THE CONVERSATION

‘Wicked’ director Jon M. Chu tells students: ‘Do the scary thing’

Cal State Fullerton

When filmmaker Jon M. Chu’s manager sent him a script for a sequel to a dance movie, straight to DVD, he hesitated.

But his mom reminded him, “If you’re a storyteller, you can tell stories anywhere.”

With resolve, he decided to make the best direct-to-DVD dance movie he could. Chu rewrote the script, pitched it to producers and two weeks later, the president of Disney greenlit the movie for a theatrical release with a \$20 million budget.

The film, “Step Up 2: The Streets,” is “what started my career,” Chu told students during a Beyond the Conversation event presented by Cal State Fullerton’s Associated Students Inc. and the Division of Student Affairs and Strategic Enrollment Management. The series aims to empower students by inviting inspiring speakers to campus.

From making home videos as a child to directing Hollywood blockbusters, Chu has built a career on telling unforgettable stories. He is known for the global phenomenon “Crazy Rich Asians,” the first contemporary studio film in more than 25 years to feature an all Asian cast.

Most recently, he directed the two-part “Wicked” films, the first of which garnered a 2025 Golden Globe for Cinematic and Box Office Achievement and

the second of which will be released in November.

Chu remembers getting the call to direct the cinematic production of the beloved musical during the COVID-19 lockdown.

“My perspectives were changing: I had just had my second child, America was shut down. There were questions about our systems and structure. Everything was being upended,” he said.

“Reading those words from Elphaba — ‘Something has changed within me. Something is not the same’ — it hit me so hard,” he said. “I understood that this is not just a musical about the Wicked Witch of the West. This is about us: It’s a reexamination of the American dream and the idea that the Yellow Brick Road was made for all of us.”

Rather than follow a specific dream, Chu advised students to follow their curiosity. “It’s not about passion; you can love a lot of things,” he said. “It’s about that little piece of thread that’s pulling you to follow.”

He encouraged students to stay hopeful during challenging times: “Don’t give up your optimism. In fact, I love when someone says you can’t, because that’s the start of ‘Yes, I can.’”

Finally, Chu shared words from his daughter: “You don’t need to be brave. You only get courage after you do the scary thing. So do the scary thing.”



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ASSOCIATED STUDENTS INC

Filmmaker Jon M. Chu

Speaker a dream for programming coordinator

Mercedes Avila, a CSUF cinema and television arts major, never dreamed she would be on stage with such a notable filmmaker.

With her eyes set on a career in the entertainment industry, Avila joined ASI as a programming coordinator who helps select speakers for the Beyond the Conversation series.

“Jon Chu is the first director we’ve brought to campus for this series, and we were really excited to hear his perspective as a storyteller,” said Avila, who was selected to sit on stage with Chu and moderate the presentation.

“I wanted to make sure each student walked out hearing what they needed to hear,” said Avila, who is inspired to continue learning more about the art of authentic storytelling.

“I just knew Cal State Fullerton was going to be the right school for me.”



Mercedes Avila, cinema and television arts major

TECHNOLOGY

AI interview bot gives job-seeking students an edge

Cal State Fullerton

To give college students realistic practice for their first professional job interviews, Cal State Fullerton mathematics and sociology faculty are using AI to develop a mock interview bot.

The “GπT: Generative Practice Interview Trainer” closes opportunity gaps by providing students with a content-based, authentic interview experience, said project director Alison Marzocchi, professor of mathematics.

“We saw an opportunity to leverage an AI tool that provides students with interview practice so they can enter the job market better prepared for the job application and interview process,” Marzocchi said. “It’s simple to use — even for someone new to AI.”

The mock interview bot, funded by a \$150,000 grant from the California Education Learning Lab, will eventually be disseminated for free next summer across the California State University and other college campuses.

Before broadly sharing the tool, nine CSUF faculty members and 90 students, representing all eight colleges and Pollak Library, will pilot two iterations of the AI bot this academic year to assess it for any ethical issues.

“We want to make sure this transformative tool is accessible to everyone and addresses ethics and privacy concerns,” Marzocchi said.

For instance, the bot will be tested to ensure students are not treated differently based on perceived gender, a person’s native language or other identity characteristics.

Mathematics major Giselle Cortez-Tlaxcuapan is among students working on the project. She is tackling identifying and analyzing potential biases in the AI tool.

“The goal is to develop a tool that truly benefits students and minimizes potential downsides,” Cortez-Tlaxcuapan said.

What’s unique about the project is that the artificial intelligence-powered bot can be customized by instructors and students to simultaneously meet the



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRIDGET DRUKEN

Faculty members involved with the “GπT: Generative Practice Interview Trainer” project are, from left, Francisco Zepeda, Sunny Le, Edward Watson, Matheus Guerrero and Alison Marzocchi.

goals of each.

Students can tailor the bot to simulate interviews to fit specific career paths or job positions. In return, the AI bot gives users real-time and summary feedback, helping them build confidence and skills for interviews with prospective employers.

Instructors from any discipline can customize the bot to draw upon course content for career-relevant interview questions.

For example, it could be a single chapter from an open-source textbook to help students prepare for an exam, PowerPoint slides or an entire set of lecture notes to use as a capstone assignment.

“This helps students build their conceptual understanding of coursework and practice discipline-specific communication skills,” Marzocchi said.

Matheus Guerrero, Sunny Le and Francisco Zepeda, all mathematics faculty, and sociology faculty member Edward Watson are also involved in the project.

The faculty team is creating support materials for students and instructors.

Materials include a student guidebook to explain how to participate in an interview, a faculty guidebook on customizing the bot for their class, and a personalized AI prompt so instructors can adapt the bot to meet their course needs.

Cortez-Tlaxcuapan said by participating in the project, she is honing her research skills while exploring her interest in AI development. After she graduates, the third-year student plans to use the AI tool to help launch a career in software or video game development.

“Coming from an underrepresented community and a first-generation college student, tools like this help level the playing field. It’s exciting to contribute to something that could help students like me succeed,” she said.

“What’s most rewarding is knowing this AI tool could help many students land their dream jobs.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF GISELLE CORTEZ-TLAXCUAPAN
Alison Marzocchi, professor of mathematics, left, and student Giselle Cortez-Tlaxcuapan

Theatre

FROM PAGE 1

many other elements.

New program cohorts will begin every fall. Along with a variety of theater-related classes, students receive a world of hands-on teaching experience while being supervised by teacher-mentors. And this month only, the program is crowd-funding to send the fall cohort to a national professional conference for theater educators in the spring (fullerton.scalefunder.com/cfund/project/47258).

Discussing the importance of pedagogy, Villarreal noted that, “A theater teacher is a one-person production team. We look beyond lesson planning, instruction and classroom management and ask, How do you build out a pro-

gram? How do you create a sequence of learning experiences that makes theater accessible for your whole student population? Historically, when there wasn’t training in theater pedagogy, very well-intentioned teachers who didn’t understand how to provide stepping stones for students to become good actors would give parts to those who had the most access to outside training. That creates an inequitable training and learning experience.”

One particular area of emphasis is consent-based pedagogy. “It creates space in which the teacher is encouraging students to meet what they’re being asked to do with agency and autonomy,” Villarreal said. “Many theater students aren’t being taught craft or skills. Rather, they’re informed by the media’s impression of what good artists do.” This includes misconceptions about method

acting and the notion that those in theater must suffer for their art, he said.

“Our program students are learning about how to give precise assessments and direction,” added Villarreal, co-author of “The Theatre Artist’s Guide to Consent-Based Pedagogy,” slated to be published next month. “We’re looking at all the craft skills our students learned in their undergraduate education and then digging into how to translate these for students, especially for students who are at different developmental stages.”

Alyssa Gauss, who earned her bachelor’s degree in theater (with a history minor) at CSUF last spring, has wanted to be a teacher since she was 17. “While I loved theatre growing up, I didn’t have the most supportive high school drama teacher. So I want to be the teacher that I wish I’d had in high school.”

Gauss noted that this fall’s cohort is

composed of seven teacher-candidates, those with bachelor’s degrees who lack a teaching credential, along with four or five current teachers seeking to add to their existing credential. Each of the seven has been assigned a different teacher-mentor. “The day I met my teacher-mentor, he said, ‘As much as you’ll learn from me, I’ll get to learn from you as a new generation of teachers,’” Gauss said.

This open-minded, empowering approach is a cornerstone of the theater credential program. “What makes this program so beautiful is that our mentor-teachers are not supposed to make us into mini versions of themselves,” Gauss said. “They give us insight on what works for them, and we provide them with insight on what we want to use as teachers in our own classrooms one day. It creates this unique collaborative education that the students really respond to.”

MEN'S WATER POLO

Coach pushing team to keep taking big shots

Competition runs deep in Big West Conference

By Brian Robin
contributing writer

Head coach Kyle Witt won his 300th career game in mid-September when the Cal State Fullerton men's water polo team blasted Biola, 16-8. And last weekend, the Titans had an 11-game winning streak snapped when Cal Baptist's Andrea Nuzzo broke an 11-11 tie with 3:37 left to pull out a 12-11 victory in the finale of the Gary Troyer Tournament in Claremont.

There is a connection between these two seemingly disparate happenings beyond what appears at first glance. Because both of these feats brought Witt into mental quandaries that illustrate where his head is on milestones and where his head is going in terms of where his program is going in its third year.

"It's nice when my players get accolades, so I should enjoy this, too," Witt said about his 300th win. "Getting wins is fun, but at the same time, I didn't compete for two years because of COVID and then, a reduced schedule the next year. I lost some wins there, but I don't care. Winning games isn't something I'm focused on. If you do the other stuff, the wins will come.

"It will be a byline in my resume on my profile, but that's about it."

Well, OK. So what about that 11-game winning streak? An 11-game winning streak brought to you by a team featuring three freshmen getting significant minutes, a first-year goalkeeper and four players — led by junior Andrew Barnuevo's 50 goals — who scored 30 or more goals?

"We still have a ways to go, and I don't know how much better this team can get — and I mean that in a good way," Witt said. "I don't know where our ceiling lies. ...

"We're not where we want to be, but this program has taken big steps. Until we're competing with Big West teams, I won't know where we are. We competed last year, and I have to see where we are this year. Until we're competing with Big West teams every single game, then I can answer the question that, yeah, we're where we want to be."

Using the Big West as a barometer makes sense because it's no secret the Titans are truly in the deep end of the



Kyle Witt watches the play from the deck during a men's match against Harvard on Sept. 13.

water polo pool. Waiting for them once conference play begins are five teams — all of which are nationally ranked: UC San Diego (No. 7), UC Davis (No. 8), Long Beach State (No. 9), UC Irvine (No. 13) and UC Santa Barbara (No. 17). As usual, the Titans are conspicuous by their absence in that club.

But as of last week, they're conspicuous by their presence in the overall standings. CSUF's 15-8 overall mark compares favorably to UCI (12-6), Long Beach State (9-5) and UCSB (14-10).

The way Witt looks at his milestone and what seems to be a milestone in a fledgling program is indicative of how he views his job and how he views a picture bigger than himself or any of his players. He often talks about how his players will remember what they did in — and for — this program 30, 40 years down the road. It's that view on the memory-making, on the little things that make you lift glasses through your glasses at reunions that Witt has his eyes on.

Take the foundation he's created and build on it through the process Witt stresses: mental discipline, constant adaptation and a team culture based on checking the drama and the egos before you commit to the Titans.

And when you commit to Witt, you're all-in — and we're not talking about all-in the pool. Two weeks ago, the Titans were coming off a four-game weekend tournament sweep at Cal Baptist University's The Joust. Then came a rare Wednesday night game against McKendree. That's four games in six days — and yet, the Titans weren't done. Witt had more on the plate.

"I guarantee my team was dead-tired, but they have to go to the women's soccer game tonight because we support the other programs at this school," he said.

That karma flowed both ways. With the men's water polo team in the stands, the women beat Hawai'i, 2-1, to remain unbeaten.

"When you get on this campus, you realize that Division 1 is a whole different

thing. It's not just a game or a mistake. It's the whole day," Witt said.

This explains how Witt built his third team. He signed 11 players who understand what it means to play Division 1 water polo in the second-toughest conference in the country. The 11 included Saddleback College expat Barnuevo, who, en route to those 50 goals, has found the back of the net nearly 57% of the time. It included left-handed sniper Ethan MacLeod (35 goals, 20 assists) from perennial state community college power/favored Witt recruiting stop West Valley College. And it included goalkeeper Ethan Ivey, a New Zealander by way of West Valley.

That adds to the United Nations flavor of a team that features players from Turkey (Togan Ozbek), New Zealand (Ivey), Hungary (Marton Thuroczy and Bende Aubeli), South Africa (MacLeod) and Italy (freshman Francesco Schiaffino). All but Ozbek, Thuroczy and Aubeli are newcomers. Schiaffino is one of those three freshmen, along with Luke Vargas and Sam Branco, who are seeing significant minutes.

It also adds a variable to a heretofore missing equation: depth. Witt said this marks the first time he has enough depth to properly answer a question that nagged at him his first two years: "Is the tired player I'm replacing better or worse than the fresh player I'm bringing in?"

Witt said most of the time, when he makes one of his six-player line changes, think hockey lines, the fresher players he's bringing in will be better than the tired sextet they're replacing.

"This is another step forward for our program. Our recruits are better, tougher and smarter," he said. "It's another step forward, but you have to understand we're not going to be able to jump seven steps ahead. You have to take one step at a time. But this class is accomplished. We're going to be a normal team. ...

"Our returners have played three years of Division 1. You can stop having to define everything for them. When you tell them we're playing Long Beach State, they know what that means. They have a point of reference on what it takes to compete with those guys."

And Witt has another point of reference to define where the Titans are at in Year Three. It's the process, that one step at a time, that only begins to define itself in the crucible of the Big West's shark-infested waters.

And the crucible of what kind of waves this team leaves for its successors.

"This program has taken big steps. We're just not at the finish line yet," he said.



Thank you for supporting Cal State Fullerton student scholarships and programs!

PATRÓN PRESENTADOR



PATRÓN DE MUSICA



PATRÓN DE ORO



PATRÓN DE PLATA



PATRÓN DE BRONCE



PATRÓN DE TALENTO ESTUDIANTIL



PATRÓN DE FLORES



Stay connected and give to programs that support CSUF students.

Cal State Fullerton.

give.fullerton.edu/somositans