



CSUF biology alums Althea Marks, front, and Marissa Wu monitor restored oyster beds in Upper Newport Bay.

ECOLOGY

STUDENTS, PROFESSOR JOIN COLLABORATIVE WORK RESTORING OYSTERS IN LOCAL WATERS

Restaurants recycle shells; Orange County Coastkeeper deploys

By Nicole Gregory contributing writer

Cal State Fullerton professor and marine ecologist Danielle Zacherl is eager to point out that collaborations with former and current students, as well as the nonprofit Orange County Coastkeeper, have boosted efforts to restore oyster beds of the native Olympia oyster along the Southern California coast. In the latest development of this long-term project, local restaurants have now gotten involved by donating their discarded oyster shells to help re-

store oyster beds. The restaurant shells, after being picked up, cleaned and dried, are put on strings. Zacherl's students and OC Coastkeeper volunteers "deploy" or drop the oyster shell strings off at public docks during the oyster reproductive season — typically April through September — so that oyster larvae will attach and grow on them. In early fall, those strings of shells are then pulled up and collected, and oyster larvae are removed and transported to an already-restored oyster bed where they can grow and thrive. "This spring, OC Coastkeeper, with my students assisting, will deploy shell

strings in Alamitos Bay, Huntington Harbor and Newport Bay," said Zacherl, who has taught marine biology at CSUF since 2003. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses that include marine biology, evolution and diversity, and invertebrate zoology. She's been focused on science-based oyster restoration since 2010. Because of pollution, overharvesting and the destruction of oyster habitats, native Olympia oysters have decreased in local estuaries, according to the Native Olympia Oyster collaborative. Yet the Olympia oyster is the only one that is native to the West Coast, and it plays a key role in the Southern California

marine ecosystem. Olympia oysters filter the water, reduce shoreline erosion and build their own habitats. This happens because oysters cement themselves to each other, year after year. Their shells harden and create a kind of reef or structure that becomes "a living habitat for all kinds of marine life," Zacherl said. She jokes that where an oyster settles is the most important real estate decision of its life because it permanently attaches to whatever hard surface it chooses. Olympia oysters are called a foundation species because they are integral

OYSTERS » PAGE 5



Gregory Wright serves as the senior vice president of Research and Development at Edwards Lifesciences.

VISION & VISIONARIES

Greg Wright fosters next generation of engineers, scientists Giving back at work, to CSUF, community

By Jenelyn Russo contributing writer

In celebration of their accomplishments in their respective fields and their service and support of the university, Cal State Fullerton is recognizing five Distinguished Alumni on February 28, 2026, as the 2026 CSUF Vision & Visionaries Award recipients. Gregory Wright chose Cal State Fullerton over other local college options because he believed the education and one-on-one access to professors would give him a better chance at success. Wright earned his bachelor's degree in biology in 2000 and his master's degree in biological science, physiology and chemis-

try in 2008 and now serves as the senior vice president of research and development for Irvine-based Edwards Lifesciences, where he has helped develop several patented surgical tissues and heart valves. Additionally, Wright serves on the Dean's Philanthropic Board for the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics at CSUF, as well as the university's ECS Innovation Hub Campaign Cabinet. He also helped establish the CSUF Engineering Mentorship Program, a partnership between Edwards and Titan engineering students. In recognition of his work in the field of medical technology, along with his commitment to supporting CSUF and the next generation of CSUF engineers and scientists, Wright has been named a 2026 CSUF Vision & Visionaries Distinguished Alumni award winner. A Southern California native, Wright grew up in Diamond Bar and attended Mt. San Antonio College before transferring to CSUF. He chose to major in biology and initially planned to attend dental school.

Political consultant, entrepreneur Peter Mitchell helps create opportunities. PAGE 3

WRIGHT » 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

LIGHTWALL

AI helps visitors get personal with new art installation

Interaction: Offline,
private and unique

By Greg Mellen
contributing writer

Visitors can always view the new Lightwall piece of art on the wall at the California Center for the Arts from a distance.

Consisting of hand-scapped geometric shapes and prisms on a white background with three rows of four clear acrylic cubes, it is an interesting piece of abstract art on its own merits.

However, when the visitor walks up to Lightwall, it becomes something else altogether.

Equipped with radar, sensors, flashing lights that glint off the rotating acrylic cubes and real-time artificial intelligence that initiates dialogue with the viewer, the artwork is anything but static.

A collaborative piece by artist Rita Sus, technologist Zach Rattner and the College of Engineering and Computer Science at Cal State Fullerton, Lightwall is an interactive composition that responds to the visitor's movement and voice.

A sign next to Lightwall invites visitors to "Talk to the wall. It's listening."

"Hello, it's good to see you," Lightwall says in a clearly robotic voice when approached.

Lightwall can tell you its name, who created it and answer more esoteric questions about its purpose.

"The art is responding to us," said Christopher Ryu, a computer science professor who oversaw the project as one of the faculty leaders.

Behind its simple exterior and plain frame, Lightwall is abuzz with activity. Unlike many AI art installations elsewhere, it requires no cloud dependency and runs off a single Mac minicomputer.

As a result, the information and interactions with Lightwall remain offline, on-site, personal, private and unique to the visitor and those in the room.

Organizers say the self-contained design makes Lightwall portable and available for tours, collaborations or future institutional partnerships.

Reanimation

Art installations using digital art, computers and AI programs are nothing new. In the 1960s, artist Harold Cohen developed a program named Aaron using artificial intelligence software to create fine art that he debuted in 1974. His work has toured museums such as the Tate Gallery in London and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Since then, AI-generated art, including "interactive" pieces, has proliferated from small museums to large public art displays.

A presentation of work by the late Cohen and Aaron ran until last year at the Whitney Museum in New York and let visitors watch the computer "create" art.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ZACH RATTNER

Developed by artist Rita Sus, left, in collaboration with technologist Zach Rattner and students from Cal State Fullerton, Lightwall integrates kinetic sculpture, custom electronics and artificial intelligence to create an environment that responds in real time to visitors' movement and sound.

However, Rattner said the CSUF project veers away from existing projects.

"We're trying to create a new space," he said.

By integrating one-on-one personal relationships, particularly with discussion and dialogue between the art and the viewer, Rattner said, "I think we're exploring where no one is going."

It is a space about which Rattner, an AI innovator for the past decade in business uses, has thought about a lot.

Rattner says it's about "Using AI not to replace creativity, but to make human experiences richer."

Ryu said one of the exciting possibilities of AI is its ability to interpret objects and reanimate them by "imagining" what the artist thought and even how the object might see itself.

This is part of the reason he is intrigued by the interactions Lightwall will have with visitors as it grows and evolves.

"People love art," Ryu said. "It's interesting to imagine what the artist is thinking."

Rattner said AI can add a dimension to art appreciation.

He likes the idea "to have paint have a personality and have a conversation with it. If you could reanimate a rock, what would it do?"

Or as Ryu put it, "Any dead object we care to communicate with, we can get any object to communicate if we enable it."

Role of the artist

Sus, who is the creative force of the

physical shell of Lightwall, was intrigued by the "balance of human touch, craft and the machine."

"This is my first project in six years as a visual artist that has used AI," she said.

"AI is a tool, and there is no universal use," she said.

While as an artist, Sus is limited to scalpels and brushes and other physical implements, she says "AI doesn't have that limitation. You can utilize it as a tool in any way you want."

Currently, although AI is able to amass massive amounts of data that has been expressed by humanity over the ages through its art, debate about creative spark, the soul of art and artist and its relationship with AI remains in flux.

Ryu said he is interested in studying AI

and so-called creativity.

Akshat Desai, a graduate research assistant, worked on the architecture of Lightwall's "brain," specifically, the "personality engine and hardware bridge."

It has its own knowledge," Desai said of Lightwall, as well as a kind of lyric nature.

"Sometimes it will answer in a poetic way if the question is out of its domain," Desai said. "It might hallucinate if a question is out of context."

In a demonstration of an interaction with Lightwall, Rattner asked, "Are you happy?"

"A spectrum shifting a quiet grace, stillness found in this luminous space," Lightwall answered.

Artists!

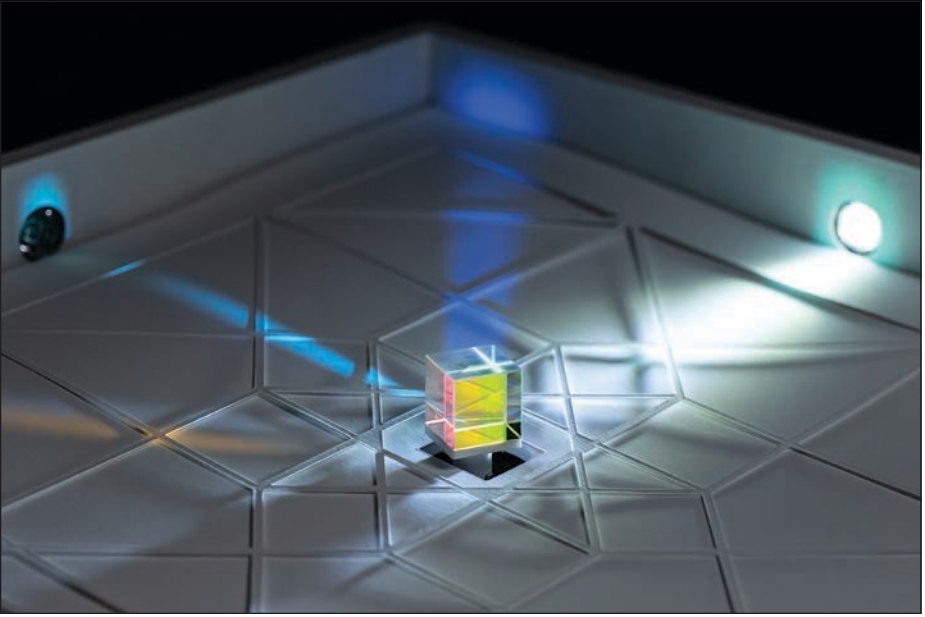


PHOTO COURTESY OF CAL STATE FULLERTON

The rotating acrylic cubes reflect light that is projected from points around the wall's frame.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAL STATE FULLERTON

The piece incorporates light, sound and texture for an interactive AI experience.

SHE'S BLENDING
TECH AND BUSINESS
— AND LEADING
WITH PURPOSE

At CSUF, Taylor Livingston found a community of mentors and industry experts, led campus-wide initiatives and double-majored in computer science and business.

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DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI

Mitchell’s contributions help open doors to educational opportunities

A career as political consultant, entrepreneur

By Jenelyn Russo
contributing writer

In celebration of their accomplishments in their respective fields and their service and support of the university, Cal State Fullerton is recognizing five Distinguished Alumni on February 28, 2026, as the 2026 CSUF Vision & Visionaries Award recipients.

When Peter Mitchell began college at Cal State Fullerton in the late 1980s to study political science, he was looking not only for a strong education but also for a sense of community.

What Mitchell found at CSUF was a training ground that set him up for career success as a political consultant and entrepreneur. More importantly, he found a brotherhood through university Greek life that taught him what it means to be a leader.

Now, as president and CEO of PM Consulting, Inc. and founder and managing partner of Springboard Ventures, Mitchell is a top nonpartisan political consultant in California and a venture capitalist. Additionally, he serves on the CSUF Philanthropic Foundation Board of Governors and represents Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity both locally and nationally.

For his strong alumni support of both the fraternity and CSUF, as well as his contributions to the political consulting and venture capital landscape, Mitchell has been named a 2026 CSUF Vision & Visionaries Distinguished Alumni Award recipient.

The son of Greek immigrants, Mitchell was born in the San Fernando Valley and relocated to Orange County in 1974. As a resident of Anaheim, Fullerton and Buena Park, CSUF was in his backyard, and after graduating from Sunny Hills High School in Fullerton, it was an obvious choice for him to become a Titan.

Mitchell chose to pursue political science and immediately got connected with SAE. When several personal challenges arose during his time as a student, it was his Titan family and his fraternity brotherhood that provided



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAL STATE FULLERTON

Peter Mitchell attended Cal State Fullerton in the late 1980s, majoring in political science. Mitchell is the President/CEO of PM Consulting Inc.

the support he needed.

“I stayed close by, and it was a great education,” said Mitchell of his decision to attend CSUF. “It really changed my life because I also became a proud member of the SAE fraternity. That gave me a huge group of brothers around me. I learned leadership, and I learned how to communicate better. I owe my life to Cal State Fullerton.”

Mitchell’s career trajectory began when he volunteered on a local political campaign. He discovered a passion for public service across party lines and went on to work in political consulting, focusing on people rather than politics.

“I really like to serve people, and I love to solve problems,” Mitchell said. “My mom was a Kennedy Democrat,

and my dad was a Nixon Republican. I learned to like both sides and to like people and not demonize.”

Mitchell connected with the California Association of Realtors, rising quickly to lead the organization’s state-wide political operation at a young age. Under his leadership, the association’s political program grew into one of the most influential in California, shifting from a largely Republican base to a more moderate and bipartisan approach.

After leaving the California Association of Realtors in 2002, Mitchell worked for the California Correctional Peace Officers Association, the union and top political entity representing 26,000 state prison guards. From there,

he started PM Consulting and manages campaigns and public affairs efforts at the city, county, state and federal levels.

Mitchell’s entrepreneurial spirit led him into venture capital, and he has spent the past decade investing in a wide range of asset classes, including clean energy, technology, private equity, real estate, finance and insurance. Through Springboard Ventures, he helps launch new companies while also scaling existing ones, with a focus on solving real-world problems.

Mitchell credits his time at CSUF for making the college pathway accessible and for giving him the confidence he needed to create his own path forward.

“You got a world-class education, and it was something you can afford,” Mitchell said. “If it wasn’t for Cal State Fullerton, I wouldn’t have been educated and met SAE. And if it wasn’t for SAE, I really wouldn’t be anybody.”

Mitchell was instrumental in helping to reinstate his Sigma Alpha Epsilon chapter at CSUF following a 20-year hiatus. He currently serves as the local chapter alumni adviser and the Board of Governors liaison to CSUF’s Greek life community. Nationally, he is a member of the SAE Foundation Board of Trustees.

As a member of the CSUF Philanthropic Foundation Board of Governors, Mitchell serves on the executive committee and as co-chair of the advocacy committee. It’s a role he knows can have a direct impact on improving the lives of Titan students.

“We’re raising a lot of money and doing a lot of good,” said Mitchell of the foundation. “I know higher education can unlock and give people access to things and equalize the playing field for their whole life.”

As someone who prefers to be behind the scenes, Mitchell’s selection as a Vision & Visionaries Award honoree came as a surprise. But his love for people and the CSUF community has inspired him to use this recognition as an opportunity to make a difference for his alma mater.

“Being a Titan means being a high performer, a high achiever, but somebody that’s also low key and a person that is humble,” Mitchell said. “It’s a person that not just meets but exceeds their goals because they’re a winner.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAL STATE FULLERTON

Cal State Fullerton employees from across the campus, including geography and public health faculty and planning, construction and transportation staff, work on sustainability projects and initiatives.

GOLD RATING

University recognized for making campus more sustainable

Cal State Fullerton

Cal State Fullerton has been recognized a second time for its environmental efforts with a gold rating from the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education.

The university first achieved gold in the association’s Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System in 2022; that award lasted until CSUF again received a gold rating in 2025.

The nonprofit association provides training and resources to help colleges and universities incorporate sustainability into campus practices, operations and curriculum.

CSUF’s gold ranking “speaks to the commitment the university has toward a sustainable future,” said Kristen Jasko, CSUF’s assistant vice president of university services.

Nearly 400 institutions worldwide have ratings from AASHE, which are

based on criteria including how coursework and research incorporate environmental concepts, how eco-friendly campus energy use and waste handling are, and issues such as affordability and well-being of the campus community.

To earn the latest gold rating, the university compiled a report with more than 1,200 data points on its programs, policies and actions, said Elissa Thomas, who recently retired as CSUF’s director of sustainability and transportation demand.

Among the highlights are long-term accomplishments, such as reducing campus water consumption by 30% since 2012, shifting a majority of the university’s vehicle fleet to alternative fuels and generating more than 20% of CSUF’s power with on-site solar panels.

Recent achievements include more than doubling the number of electric vehicle charging ports to 100, providing students hands-on experiences through internships at the Arboretum

and Botanical Garden and Urban Agriculture Community-based Research Experience Project and offering nearly 900 courses with a sustainability element.

“The gold rating reflects the decades-long contributions of many members of our campus community to create a sustainable campus,” shared CSUF sustainability analyst Stephanie Del Rosario, adding that it also helps position the university as an environmental leader in higher education.

While the current rating is valid through mid-2028, CSUF sustainability advocates aren’t resting and have a number of new and ongoing initiatives in the works.

More water will be saved through programs with state or local grants and rebates, such as replacing grass with drought-tolerant plants near the Nutwood Parking Structure and retrofitting campus restroom fixtures.

New facilities projects follow nationally recognized ecological building stan-

dards, and the university will be forming a working group to explore how CSUF can meet a state mandate to become carbon-neutral by 2045.

Tamara Wallace, CSUF’s energy and resilience manager, noted that future targets include reducing emissions from the campus’s natural gas-fueled power plant.

In an effort to reduce drivers commuting alone to campus, the university recently partnered with the Pave Commute app for personalized ride matching and rewards across modes including cycling, walking, carpooling and transit. CSUF is also collaborating with the city of Fullerton and other agencies to improve bike and pedestrian safety on and around the campus.

Del Rosario said the data gathered to earn the gold rating will help guide long-term environmental efforts at CSUF. “The assessment creates a benchmark for the campus to measure all future progress against.”

COMMUNICATIONS

Aspiring journalist awarded first Sam Rubin Memorial Scholarship

Cal State Fullerton

Class of 2026 senior Raniel Santos hopes to use his love of music, movies and writing to break into entertainment journalism. His career plans recently got a boost from a scholarship awarded by KTLA.

A communications major, Santos is the inaugural recipient of the Sam Rubin Memorial Scholarship. The grant is named for the late reporter who worked at KTLA for more than three decades, interviewing celebrities and entertainers.

Santos has loved television since childhood, and he discovered an aptitude for writing in high school. While drafting a book report, he realized his style sounded like newspaper prose, he said. “So I thought, ‘if this is something I’m good at, then I should run with it.’”

He knew he wanted to study journalism, and the fact that he could minor in cinema and television arts clinched his decision to enroll at Cal State Fullerton.

At CSUF, Santos got involved with the campus newspaper, where filling a series of writing and editing roles helped him polish his journalism skills, he said. He was especially proud of an article he wrote that featured an interview with an indie actor and filmmaker he admires.

Working at the Daily Titan, Santos said, he’s written profiles, opinion



PHOTO COURTESY OF RANIEL SANTOS

Cal State Fullerton communications major Raniel Santos, center, poses with KTLA staff in their studio.

pieces and reviews and covered news events. “It encourages you to explore all of them and not just settle into your

niche.”

In addition to his studies and work at the paper, Santos hosts a show about

music on Titan Radio. Whether on the air, in print or in person, talking about entertainment is often how Santos connects with people and makes friends — and it’s one of the ways he thinks journalistic reviews and analysis can remain relevant.

A skilled writer can help put a movie or album or artist into context and articulate something the reader might have struggled to express, he said. Santos ultimately hopes to work at an entertainment-focused publication like Variety or Pitchfork.

As Santos has advanced in his studies, his writing has leveled up, said Martina Baldwin, lecturer in cinema and television arts. During the semester she had him in class, “Raniel’s arguments became more critically succinct and his analysis improved significantly,” Baldwin shared.

Baldwin said that while recent years have been challenging for the media industry, there are now many ways for writers to share their work. She encourages aspiring journalists like Santos that “there is a path forward,” and it’s worth pursuing.

The Sam Rubin scholarship comes at an important time for Santos because his family has recently faced financial struggles, he said. But it also signals to him that he’s growing as a journalist and others recognize his potential.

“My name is out there. It’s in the minds of people who can help me be the best version of myself, and that means a lot,” he said.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAL STATE FULLERTON

Raniel Santos is the first recipient of the Sam Rubin Memorial Scholarship.

MEDICAL TECHNOLOGY

Partnership with Edwards Lifesciences leads to careers for grads

Cal State Fullerton

Cal State Fullerton alumni Greg Wright, Nick Herrera and Ryan Kean are in the business of improving — and saving — the lives of patients with heart valve disease.

The graduates design innovative products at Edwards Lifesciences, a global medical technology company specializing in structural heart therapies.

“The most rewarding aspect of working at Edwards Lifesciences is collaborating with dedicated colleagues and witnessing the positive impact our devices have on patients,” said Wright, senior vice president of research and development, Surgical Structural Heart Business Unit. “Seeing a medical device save a life is truly meaningful.”

Kean, a senior engineer at the company who earned a bachelor’s degree and a master’s in mechanical engineering in 2018, 2025, helps design next-generation aortic heart valves.

“I’ve always been passionate about engineering and problem-solving. What makes this career fulfilling is that I can pursue that passion while making a significant impact on people’s lives,” Kean said.

For the past decade, a partnership between Edwards Lifesciences and CSUF has paved the way for graduates to land jobs in the biotechnology and medical device industries. Over 100 CSUF graduates work at the company’s Irvine headquarters.

“This partnership opens a door for students if they have a desire to start their careers at Edwards Lifesciences or anywhere in the medical device industry,” said Wright, a member of the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics’ Dean’s Advisory Board and the ECS Innovation Hub Campaign Cabinet.

Since 2016, Wright, who earned a bachelor’s degree in biological science in 2000 and a master’s in biology in 2008, has been instrumental in fostering collaboration and creating opportunities for students in the College of Engineering and Computer Science to prepare them for their careers.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAL STATE FULLERTON

Alums and Edwards Lifesciences employees, from left, Ryan Kean, Greg Wright and Nick Herrera outside the medical device company’s Irvine headquarters

Through the partnership, Wright said engineering students participate in senior design projects that focus on real-world products for Edwards while learning from company leaders and contributing valuable perspectives through their diverse experiences and education.

“Our partnership with industry plays a vital role in student success,” said Sagil James, chair and professor of mechanical engineering who advises students working on Edwards’ projects. “These industry projects provide our students with hands-on experience in solving real-world engineering challenges, thereby strengthening the talent pipeline for our regional workforce.”

In recent years, Edwards Lifesciences has increased the scope and number of student design projects — up to six each academic year — that the company sup-

ports.

Wright, who has worked at the company for 20 years and has contributed to publications and patents, said students gain valuable industry insight, forge professional relationships and develop problem-solving skills.

“Through senior projects with Edwards, students gain both technical and soft skills essential for career success,” said Wright, a 2026 Vision & Visionaries honoree.

Herrera, who graduated with a bachelor’s in mechanical engineering in 2022, and Kean said participating in Edwards Lifesciences’ projects as students contributed to securing their positions at the company.

A research and development engineer, Herrera designs delivery tools for structural heart disease. As a student,

he worked alongside one of the company’s product development teams to refine and accelerate a manufacturing process.

“Our team took a very slow and manual process and made a faster and more ergonomic version of it,” Herrera said. “My involvement in the student project is the most important reason I was able to get a position at the company.”

Kean’s student project focused on creating inspection fixtures for a component used in the repair of a leaky heart valve.

“The experience gave me real-world exposure and was a great way to apply classroom knowledge, identify areas for improvement and gain opportunities with an outstanding company,” Kean said. “It helped to showcase my skills, build connections — and land a career.”

TITANS GIVE

Fundraiser supports campus programs, clubs, scholarships

Target for this year: \$1 million

By Larry Urish
contributing writer

March 11 will be an important day for Cal State Fullerton. In a little over a month, the university will host the seventh-annual Titans Give, a 24-hour fundraiser that helps support CSUF's assortment of campus programs, clubs and scholarships, as well as a host of other essential resources. Ultimately, though, Titans Give highlights what the university is all about: student achievement.

The event has raised nearly \$3.5 million over the past six years. Last year's effort was particularly successful, said Courtney Schultz, CSUF's interim director of Annual Giving & Stewardship. "The goal in 2025 was \$720,000, from 2,900 donors. However, we completely blew that out of the water," Schultz said, noting that the event raised \$942,996, from 3,909 donors.

This year's goal is \$1 million. "We definitely think it's achievable," Schultz said. "One of our overarching goals is our 50 State Challenge, to have a donor from every U.S. state. We succeeded last year, and we even had donors from all over the world."

Cal State Fullerton students benefit from Titan Gives in a multitude of ways. In addition to annual scholarships and critical assistance for students who are struggling financially, donations help support student groups. "All of these groups, especially the clubs, really love to fundraise for this day, because it helps with all the work they do," Schlutz said. "So they're able to go to conferences, bring in guest speakers and provide supplies to students who are participating in community projects."

For example, thanks to Titans Give, students from the College of Communications were able to travel to Paris to cover the 2024 Summer Olympics.

The fundraiser is limited to one day for a good reason. "It's structured as a

24-hour event because the limited time-frame creates a sense of urgency and focus, which are really key drivers to participation," Schultz said. "A single day like Titans Give allows us to rally the campus and our community around a shared moment, making the effort feel collective and time-bound, rather than open-ended."

Nearly 150 programs, centers, scholarships and clubs will participate in Titans Give this year, Schultz noted. Prominent campus organizations that are part of the event include the Arboretum and Botanical Garden, the Alumni Association, Titans Athletics, and DIRC: the university's Diversity Initiatives and Resource Centers, among many others.

A high-profile on-campus promotion, Lunch Hour Liftoff, will take place on the big day from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. at Titan Student Union. Everyone there will have the chance to help a CSUF cause. And off campus, Big's Fullerton Bar & Grill will host a Titans Give Happy Hour from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. "This event lets us celebrate the impact of our donations," Schultz said. "Attendees can enjoy great food, and we'll have some exciting prizes."

Donors have the flexibility to support their chosen college department, program, scholarship or student organization. They can also split their gift across different areas. "Donors can give in a way that's most meaningful to them," Schultz said. "And if they don't see a specific fund listed, they can write in the university area they want to support."

Those who don't have a particular university resource earmarked are encouraged to give to four resources deemed as "greatest needs" by the university: the Titan Fund, Titan Scholarship Fund, the President's Strategic Fund and Basic Needs Services. "These are our most important areas," Schultz said, emphasizing the importance of Basic Needs Services, as well as the Associated Students Inc. Food Pantry. "Being able to provide help to students when they need it most is really crucial"

During the 24-hour event, which runs until 11:59 p.m. on March 11, those who donate can have their gift matched, due



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAL STATE FULLERTON

Titans Give, Cal State Fullerton's annual day of giving, united the Titan community on March 12, 2025, for 24 hours of generosity and impact.

to the generosity of several organizations and corporations, including the Anaheim Ducks and PepsiCo. "If somebody says they're going to give \$25, we'll also give \$25," Schultz said.

Titans Give "challenges," Schultz noted, are tied to specific donor goals. "Once a donor goal is met, we unlock additional funding. For example, one of our challenges this year is for the Alumni Association Scholarship. When 90 donors make a gift of any size to this scholarship, a \$5,000 challenge gift will be unlocked. However, the dollar amounts typically vary from challenge to challenge."

Schultz anticipates a great outcome this year. "Together, we can make that \$1 million goal," she said. "We're excited to see what happens."

Those interested in helping CSUF can visit titansgive.fullerton.edu.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAL STATE FULLERTON

Courtney Schultz, director of annual giving and stewardship at Cal State Fullerton

Wright

FROM PAGE 1

But in conversations with one of his professors, the late C. Eugene "Gene" Jones, CSUF professor emeritus of biological science, Jones recognized Wright's interest in research and suggested he consider a career in the pharmaceutical or medical device industry.

"A year after the conversation I had with Dr. Jones, I decided that what I really enjoyed was research, and that's what I wanted to do," Wright said.

Wright's first position in the field before completing his bachelor's degree was with St. Jude Medical (now Abbott Laboratories). He worked there as a scientist until 2005, when he joined Edwards as a senior scientist, focusing on developing next-generation tissue for heart valves.

Over the past 20 years, Wright has co-invented several technologies related to surgical heart valves, working with

his team to develop new ideas aimed at improving valve durability through advanced tissue technologies.

That work led to what is now considered the world's leading tissue technology, RESILIA™, as well as the KONECT RESILIA aortic valve conduit. For the past three years, Wright has served as senior vice president of research and development in Edwards' surgical structural heart business unit.

Early in his time at Edwards, Wright developed a thesis idea on calcification kinetics and returned to CSUF for his master's degree, with Jones as his adviser and mentor.

"Dr. Jones was a fantastic mentor because he had compassion, he had the ability to challenge me and he empowered me," Wright said. "Those are the skills I took away from Fullerton that were invaluable to my success."

Wright also credits CSUF's rigorous academic programs for training him to make data-driven decisions and teaching him scientific writing, skills that are crucial for his interface with the U.S. Food and Drug

Administration.

"The rigor that I went through in writing my thesis and getting feedback and spending a lot of long nights and a lot of time with my advisers to write the best technical document I could was a tremendous learning experience for me," Wright said.

For the past several years, Wright has given back to his alma mater by serving on the Dean's Philanthropic Board for the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics and the ECS Innovation Hub Campaign Cabinet.

"It's a great opportunity to help the dean shape ways that the college can get better at not just fundraising for the college to be able to provide for the students and the faculty, but also to think about what gaps the educational system has today that are needed moving forward," Wright said.

Wright also was instrumental in establishing the CSUF Engineering Mentorship Program, which provides engineering students with opportunities to complete their senior projects with Edwards. The 10-year partnership

has led to a number of career opportunities at Edwards for graduates.

"It's been a program that is also very important to me because it is an opportunity for these students to be mentored and to see what it's like to work in industry," Wright said.

In addition to his work at CSUF, Wright gives back to the community through his service on the board of directors for Goodwill of Orange County, a position he has held since 2021.

Humbled by the Vision & Visionaries Award selection, Wright said he is proud to be part of an institution that focuses on the community and uses higher education as a pathway to make society a better place, not just for Orange County, but for the world.

"I think the thing about being a Titan is the respect that we have for each other," Wright said. "Titans are really a family. We support each other, we support our community and we support our students. You can't graduate from Cal State Fullerton without feeling all that, and I've always felt that."

Oysters

FROM PAGE 1

to the survival of other marine species. They can and do successfully attach to human-made structures such as sea walls or a dock piling, Zacherl said. But when they attach to dead oyster shells in an oyster bed, they build upon that growing reef habitat where they and future generations can live safely.

One of Zacherl's goals is to raise awareness about the importance of oysters. "We wanted to get the public interested and learn how important the oyster shell is," she said. This goal aligns with those of Orange County Coastkeeper, which is dedicated to pro-

tecting local waters.

When a former student of Zacherl's, Kaysha Kenney, was hired as the marine restoration director at OC Coastkeeper in 2024, the two agreed to collaborate on the oyster restoration.

"Kaysha exploded the program," Zacherl said.

Kenney was the first to approach restaurants about picking up their shells to be used for restoration. "I currently partner with 10 local restaurants and OC Coastkeeper staff," she said. "A few volunteers pick up from local restaurants." So far, thousands of pounds of oyster shells from restaurants have been picked up and used in the restoration project.

It is a win-win-win situation: Restaurants can get rid of the shells for a good cause, the restoration project gets free oyster shells to help boost the oyster habitats and students get to study the oysters' cycle of life up close and be a part of enhancing their survival. The oyster restoration project is part of the OC Coastkeeper's overall Living Shorelines Project, which has several key participants.

"The Living Shorelines Project is a true collaboration between OC Coastkeeper, Dr. Zacherl at CSUF and Dr. Whitcraft at CSULB," Kenney said. "It truly would not have happened without all collaborators."

Christine Whitcraft is a professor in the Department of Biological Sciences at Cal State Long Beach, and her research primarily covers wetland habitats.

Zacherl is pleased at how these collaborations have given a boost to public awareness and the oyster restoration project. She's also excited about the contributions her students are making to the effort. For example, one student is working to identify the factors that contribute to the breakdown of an oyster bed, one reason for the population's decline. Another student's research is focused on the ideal local environments for oysters, the locations in the region where they are most likely to thrive.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DANIELLE ZACHERL

CSUF biology graduate student Leeza-Marie Rodriguez and environmental studies graduate student Dan Gifford work in the lab to assess oyster recruitment strength on retrieved oyster recruitment plates that were set out last summer within Seal Beach National Wildlife Refuge.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAL STATE FULLERTON

Danielle Zacherl, professor of biological science

SPORTS

With plenty of ‘Titan Baseball’ potential, coach gears up

By Brian Robin
contributing writer

There is a tone to Jason Dietrich’s voice that hasn’t been heard since he returned to Cal State Fullerton the summer of 2021 to take over a baseball program that was leaking oil. A measured tone that was even absent after the 2023 season, when Dietrich ended the Titans’ four-year post-season hiatus with a share of the Big West Conference title and a regional berth.

A tone that exudes cautious optimism, which is always a good thing to hear for CSUF alums. Cautious optimism plays well these days when Titan baseball is discussed. Even as Dietrich and his staff navigate the seismic shift of coaching college athletics in the NIL Era. More on that forthcoming.

“We knew coming in would be a challenge and be hard, and we said, ‘OK, let’s roll up our sleeves and get to work,’” Dietrich said about his first four years remaking the CSUF baseball program. “Now, we see the fruits of our labor. After all the stuff we went through, I like the team we have. There’s a lot of potential there.

“Of course, that’s potential right now. I tell them, ‘You can beat any team in the nation, but you can lose to any team in the nation if you play a certain style of baseball. It depends how you go about playing the game.’ I’m excited to see what this team can do.”

As he starts his fifth season as the Titans’ head coach, Dietrich thinks he’s finally turned the corner with the Ferrari of the CSUF athletic department. The post-season purges of vast numbers of the roster and constant wheel-spinning trying to find the right combination of players who evoke what the program means to the university and alums are things of the past. Last year’s squad bounced back from a horrific 2024 with a respectable 29-27 campaign and 19-11 conference record that earned CSUF the No. 3 seed in the Big West Tournament.

This, from a team picked to finish ninth in the conference. And Dietrich’s voice took on a nice edginess to it when he chronicled what was a roller-coaster season.

“Last year was a crazy thing. We started out 5-13, and everyone wanted my head. ‘Get a new coach!’ But that’s fine; that comes with this job,” he said. “But I thought it was a good group of guys who competed hard. Once we hit that 5-13 mark, the players had a big talk and unloaded a lot of stuff heart-to-heart.

“I felt some confidence come from that.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAL STATE FULLERTON

Coach Jason Dietrich, far left, with other coaches observes team practice from the dugout.

They won nine of their next 10 and 11 of their next 13. With two weeks left in the season, we had a chance to win the Big West. We were still in it mathematically.”

The run to the Big West Tournament, which CSUF hosted at Goodwin Field, was fueled by a 16-9 road record. The Titans closed the season taking two of three at UC Irvine — after sweeping UC Davis, Cal State Northridge and UC Riverside on the road. Running out of gas on the mound and losing both games in the Big West Tournament (to Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo and Hawaii) didn’t detract from the overall feeling that a corner had been turned.

To keep the hairpin turns and runaway carousel rides to a minimum, Dietrich, his chief lieutenant, Josh Belovsky, and assistants Ryan Day and Tony Schifano — the latter joining the staff this year — hit the recruiting trail and transfer portal hard. They’ve brought in 17 new players who should fill numerous needs.

Three of those more pressing needs will be replacing Maddox Latta, Carter Johnstone and Matthew Bardawell. Latta, the Big West Defensive Player of the Year, graduated after leading the Titans with a .362 average, 52 runs, .486 on-base percentage and .989 OPS.

Johnstone, the Big West Freshman of the Year and a Freshman All-American, led the Titans in hits (74), to go with seven home runs, 42 RBIs and a .966 OPS. But to see where Johnstone goes from there, you’ll have to subscribe to the SEC

Network and watch Vanderbilt — his current home.

“Think about having him at third base this year,” Dietrich mused. “He got paid. This is the animal we’re trying to tackle as best we can.”

Bardawell finally put the season together Dietrich anticipated when he recruited the big first baseman/DH from Riverside City College. He hit .323 with a team co-high 16 doubles, eight homers, 53 RBI and a .940 OPS. Bardawell was denied an extra year of eligibility by the NCAA.

There is good news on the power front, and his name is Andrew Kirchner. The first baseman returns after leading the Titans with 12 homers, 70 RBIs, a .536 slugging percentage and 12 doubles. He anchors an infield bolstered by UCLA transfer Cameron Kim, Long Beach State ex-pat Armando Briseno, Texas transfer Cade O’Hara and Hawaii transfer Britton Beeson, who started his college career at Fullerton JC. Those four, along with returner Eli Lopez, freshman Esteban Olazaba and Mt. San Antonio College ex-pat Ty Thomas will battle for the other three infield positions.

D1 Baseball’s Mike Rooney described Kim — who played behind National Player of the Year Roch Cholewsky at UCLA — as “a 6-foot-3, 205-pound player with tools for days and there may not be a player in the Big West with more upside than him.”

Dietrich would take upside in an area

the Titans could improve in: pitching. Last year, the Titans were sixth in the conference in team ERA (5.51), eighth in walks allowed (235), ninth in opponent batting average (.290) and 10th in hits allowed (570). Improving across the board on the mound is the immediate priority, and this is the puzzle of priority getting CSUF to the next level.

“We have guys who pitched 20-30 innings last year who need to take the next step,” he said. “We don’t have plus-power stuff. We have a lot of guys who throw 88-92 (MPH). Pitchability: moving the ball around, changing speeds, is what we’ll have to live and die by, and have a lock-down defense. Is it bad? No, but at times I wish we had more power.”

Some of what power there is comes from freshman Bobby Mahoney and red-shirt sophomore Chris Hernandez. Both throw in the mid-90s, but both have issues to overcome. For Mahoney, it’s control. For Hernandez, it’s staying healthy and further mastering the two-seam fastball he developed over the fall.

They’ll fortify a staff featuring left-handed seniors Mikiah Negrete (5-3, 5.58, 80 strikeouts in 2025) and Jayden Harper (3-1, 3.68) and sophomore Dylan Smith (1-3, 6.68). Those are the likely starters. Returners Jason Krakoski, Andrew Wright, Landon Martin and Dylan Goff and newcomers Joseph Jasson, Dylan Nieto and Brock Mayer anchor the bullpen.

The versatile Max Ortega returns at catcher, a position Dietrich said has depth. Returner Cam Burdick headlines the outfield.

All of which presents Dietrich with numerous options, something he shares with his predecessors in the Goodwin Field dugout — all of whom took the Titans to the College World Series at least once with deep, versatile teams that found ways to beat you. But none of them — the legendary Augie Garrido, CSUF Athletic Hall of Famer George Horton, Dave Serrano or Rick Vanderhook — had to deal with the ever-shifting landscape of college baseball in the 2020s.

The landscape that took away a player like Johnstone and the landscape where current players have little idea what “Titan Baseball” really means. That it’s not merely a slogan on a hoodie.

“We have to do it the old-fashioned way: recruiting our butts off and getting guys in here who want to be here,” Dietrich said. “It’s a credit to our staff to get the players we have this year.

“I don’t know what we’re going to be, but I’m excited to see what we can be, and it’s just a matter of going out and doing it.”

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