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President Ronald S. Rochon shares his vision for the university with the audience at the 2024 Convocation.

## CONVOCATION

# NEW UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT OUTLINES HIS GOALS

Student success, faculty and staff engagement, fiscal efficiency among top priorities

By **Lou Ponsi**  
contributing writer

Delivering the 2024 Convocation and State of the University address, Cal State Fullerton President Ronald Rochon said continuing to move “Fullerton Forward,” the official title for the university’s Five-Year Strategic Plan, is his overarching mission.

Speaking to a packed house Sept 19 at the Meng Concert Hall and to an audience tuning in via livestream, Rochon delivered his first convocation message as CSUF president.

The California State University Board of Trustees appointed Rochon, who had served as president of the University of Southern Indiana, as Cal State Fullerton’s 10th president in July.

In developing his goals for the 2024-25 academic year, Rochon said he was guided by the values stated in Fullerton Forward when the plan was first announced from the Meng Concert Hall stage in February by interim President Syliva Alva.

Those values include student, faculty and staff success; diversity, equity and inclusion; scholarly and creative activities; shared governance; and civic and community engagement.

“I began to think about what this campus has already done,” Rochon said. “I believe you need a president who is understanding your vision, your direction, your expectations, how we can work together in a collaborative way to support this institution, advancing our students. So, I’ve identified some goals that align with our strategic plan ... the work you’ve done.”

Rochon’s goals for the 2024-25 academic year are:

- Create a holistic, equity-focused student success plan, from admission to post-graduation, emphasizing support for historically underserved groups through an engaged campus community;

- Foster trust and engagement internally with faculty and staff and externally with alumni and communities; promote a culture of philanthropy; and enhance strategic communications to amplify the CSUF story;

- Increase fiscal efficiency, accountability and budget effectiveness supporting the campus educational mission while navigating budget challenges;

- Advance the 2024-29 Fullerton Forward plan by setting annual priorities and developing action plans including resource allocation to achieve its goals

“Advancing the Fullerton Forward Plan is my goal,” the president said.

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PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Ricardo Valencia, associate professor of communications

## COMMUNICATIONS

### Course gives students insights into political campaign strategies

Politics in the Media Sphere draws connections with the news

By **Nicole Gregory**  
contributing writer

Students of Ricardo Valencia, associate professor of communications at Cal State Fullerton, have a unique perspective on the local, state and national political campaigns filling the news this election year.

In Valencia’s class, Politics in the Media Sphere, they’re learning how campaigns organize, strategize and communicate to their base. In the process, they’re not only becoming informed voters, they’re also finding out how to build a campaign of their own.

Part of the College of Communications, the class focuses on politics and media and how successful campaigns

are developed. “It’s not only about talking about how the media depicts politics and the relationship between media, journalism and politicians but also how students can put together political communication campaigns in 15 weeks with their own resources,” said Valencia, who has been teaching at Cal State Fullerton since 2018 and is the faculty director of the Latino Communications Institute.

His students get to meet with guest political leaders, most recently Ahmad Zahra, council member in the city of Fullerton, and Rachel Michelin, president of California Retailers Association, who talked about the role of communication in policymaking.

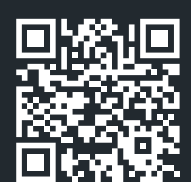
“One of the things that my students learn is that not all the money that influences politics goes to campaigns. Some of them hear for the first time the concept of Super PACs and PACs,” Valencia said. “That’s why also it’s very important to understand the relationship between politics and other economic interests.”

The idea is not to sway students to the left or right politically. “I try to be very bipartisan,” Valencia said. “We have discussions about politics, but they’re

**POLITICAL » PAGE 5**

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SERVICES

# Building community: TAPP Center’s ‘secret sauce’

## Transfers, parents, adult learners get support

By **Larry Urish**  
*contributing writer*

Picture, for a moment, your typical Cal State Fullerton student. You might imagine a bright-eyed teen or 20-something who hit the ground running straight out of high school. However, a high percentage of the total campus enrollment doesn’t fit into this cookie-cutter mold.

That’s where the university’s TAPP Center comes in.

CSUF’s Transfer Adult Re-entry Parenting & Pregnant Student Center was created in the spring of 2022 to assist the estimated 40% of the university’s total enrollment who fall into the following categories: students who have transferred from a community college or another university, “adult learners” age 25 or older, those who are re-entering college after taking time off, and students who are parents or will soon become parents.

The TAPP Center assists more than 4,000 students, and with TAPP’s recent move to a larger space, in Langsdorf Hall, more students can now benefit from all that the center offers.

Talk to anyone associated with TAPP and the same word quickly and repeatedly comes up: “community.”

“The TAPP Center is all about building community, which is behind a lot of our programming,” said Futoshi Nakagawa, TAPP’s associate director. “It’s the ‘secret sauce’ behind what we do.”

Laura Hooks, the TAPP Center’s assistant director, concurs. “We’re able to link student connection with student success,” she said. “Students who find community get a reason to continue, which especially helps those returning to school, with or without children.”

The TAPP Center’s support was long overdue. “Our transfer student and adult-learner populations were more or less ignored,” Hooks said. “There weren’t a lot of services or opportunities



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Laura Hooks, assistant director of the TAPP Center, left, with Sonja Daniels, associate vice president for student affairs-identity and belonging; Cameron Cook, director of TAPP; and David Forgues, vice president for student affairs

for them, places where they felt they belonged.”

“Many students are often overlooked when entering a four-year university,” Nakagawa said. “We’re here to help them navigate the huge campus and make the transition smoother. The TAPP Center helps them feel welcome,

valued and connected.”

TAPP supports students through a variety of community-building events and programs, such as family-friendly affairs: drop-in child care during midterms and finals, pool parties, movie nights, pregnancy-care packages (“Tiny Titan Bundles”) and more. The center

also provides one-on-one peer guidance and academic support, to ease the transition to CSUF and facilitate student success. The Tuffy Tidings holiday gift drive assists students in CalWorks, a program that furnishes cash aid and services to needy California families.

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## President

FROM PAGE 1

“Creating a holistic, equity-focused student success plan is something that I really believe that we all need to be focused on. We, each of us, regardless of our title, our tenure on campus or not, every single one of us is a recruitment and retention officer for this university.”

Every individual story that leaves the university serves as guiding points and helps determine the interest and desire for future students and families, the president said.

“I want us to focus on fostering trust and engagement by amplifying the Cal State University Fullerton story,” Rochon said. He called on Titans to boldly extend their kindness throughout the university. “I know that we have in us the ability to receive all people walking on this campus, regardless of race, ethnic background, ZIP code. Let’s engage each other with intentionality. Let’s provide respect and kindness to one another.”

Before Rochon delivered the convocation, Amir Dabirian, provost and vice president for academic affairs, took the stage to recognize the accomplishments of the past and share his vision for the current academic year and future years.

Dabirian celebrated recent achievements such as graduating 11,000 students during the 2023-24 academic year,

launching the Black Student Academic Success initiative and doubling the number of academic advisers.

Matt Jarvis, chair of the Academic Senate, lauded the university’s success in increasing graduation rates, especially at a time when other Cal State Universities are not reaching their enrollment targets.

“Fullerton has about 43,000 students,” Jarvis said. “We graduated more than 11,000 students last year, and they went out into the world with some of the lowest debt loads of any college graduates..” This helps explain why CSUF is ranked among the top universities in the nation for social mobility, Jarvis said.

Joe Morales, the new Associated Students president for the academic year, also addressed the audience, acknowledging that he and ASI board members have had several meetings with Rochon to discuss initiatives to improve campus life.

The establishment of a student wellness initiative was among the topics discussed, Morales said.

“For two years now, we know that half of our students are struggling with stress,” Morales said. “A quarter of our students are suffering from anxiety, sleep deprivation, and depression. I believe that it’s critical that we all come together as faculty, staff, and students to make sure that we address these wellness challenges. and we’re so excited to be able to work with President Rochon and the campus on this effort.”



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President Ronald S. Rochon speaks about the goals and values that drive Cal State Fullerton.

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20TH ANNIVERSARY

College celebrates training tomorrow’s educators and its impact

Continuing to expand programs, funding

By Jenelyn Russo  
contributing writer

This year marks the 20th anniversary of Cal State Fullerton's College of Education. Since its formation on July 1, 2004, the COE has celebrated 12,678 individuals who have completed the college's credential program, 6869 master's graduates and 476 doctor of education graduates.

Over the past 20 years, CSUF's COE has also achieved some significant milestones, including the addition of a new undergraduate degree in urban learning and the receipt of 242 grants totaling nearly \$39 million, which have allowed the COE to advance research initiatives, support ongoing projects and serve the Titan students.

"These numbers are not just statistics," said Dean Lisa Kirtman in a letter sent to the CSUF College of Education community earlier this summer. "They represent the lives we have touched, the careers we have launched, and the impact we have made in the field of education."

One of those impacted is 2022 alumna Dulce Ayon. After earning her bachelor's degree at Cal State San Bernardino, she headed to CSUF to earn her teaching credential, which she did in 2014.

Ayon had a positive experience, and when she decided to pursue a master's program, she returned to CSUF and found just what she was looking for in the college's Master of Science in Reading and Literacy. Additionally, she earned a Reading and Literacy Leadership Specialist Credential in tandem with the master's program, a unique offering that fit her schedule.

Ayon started her master's program in 2019 and graduated with the Class of 2022. Her second time as a Titan was even more positive than the first.

"It's a very high-quality, rigorous program," Ayon said. "I personally didn't want something that I could finish in a year and just get a title. I wanted to truly feel like I learned and was completely immersed in my education, and the program does a really great job with accomplishing that."

While in the program, Ayon felt that the COE faculty and staff provided her a hands-on, personalized experience, and as a Latina, she was inspired to see diversity across the college.

"The staff is so diverse, and what they promote, they completely embody," Ayon said. "They have the best professors in every single course. Everything that they put into the coursework about being culturally responsive, learning to view from different lenses and being able to use data to make informed decisions but also be conscientious of curriculum, they practice themselves."

After starting as a second grade teacher at River Springs Charter School in Hemet, a position opened up on her campus for a literacy specialist, allowing Ayon to apply what she had learned in her master's program directly into the classroom. Now, she is in her second year serving as the school's vice principal, and she credits her experience at CSUF's College of Education with preparing her for the challenges of the role.

"There's definitely an intentionality in preparing educators, and they incorporate real-time issues that educators are facing," Ayon said. "But they come up with ways for the educators to address those issues head-on and to be inspired to remain in education, especially now in times where a lot of people are faced with a lot of challenges. I think that they do such a great job with addressing those challenges that exist today."

In reflecting on the COE's 20th anniversary, Ayon feels her experience is the result of how CSUF empowers the Titan community by breaking down barriers and making education accessible to everyone.

"Their focus on being culturally diverse and culturally responsive and



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Graduates at the 2024 commencement ceremony at the College of Education at Cal State Fullerton



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

A grad is congratulated by the dean after receiving his diploma.



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

The College of Education has celebrated more than 20,000 graduates over its 20-year history.



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Lisa Kirtman, dean of the College of Education at Cal State Fullerton

their dedication to that work is just phenomenal," Ayon said. "The College of Education at CSUF is out to change the world. They're really making a difference in education."

The College of Education's 20th anniversary will be celebrated throughout this academic year with several events during Education Week (Oct. 21-25), including a Future Educators Expo, a celebration with current and former COE faculty and staff and other symposiums

and webinars.

In conjunction with the anniversary celebration, the college is working to raise \$100,000 to fund scholarships for the next generation of educators, ensuring that those who feel called to teach can do so, regardless of their financial circumstances. It is a goal that will allow CSUF's COE to continue the work of empowering their students and leaving a legacy in the community.

"While we celebrate our growth in

numbers and achievements, it is our work with the community that truly defines us," Kirtman said. "Advocacy and service are at the heart of our college. We have forged strong partnerships, championed educational equity, and provided invaluable support to schools, educators and the community. For us, these endeavors are what matter most. They are the foundation of our mission and the driving force behind our vision for the future."

MAGAZINE RATING

CSUF ranks in the top 10 nationally for social mobility

CSUF News Media Services

U.S. News & World Report ranks Cal State Fullerton as a No. 7 top performer on social mobility out of more than 430 national universities listed in its 2025 Best Colleges rankings.

The Top Performers on Social Mobility list assesses schools' graduation rates of economically disadvantaged students. The ranking factors for this national universities category this year were based on the graduation rates and graduation performance of Pell Grant-awarded students.

Out of CSUF's 41,962 enrolled students in fall 2023, 59.8% received financial aid.

The 2025 Best Colleges rankings methodology for national universities evaluated 17 measures of academic quality, like peer assessment, graduation rates and a university's financial resources per student.

The most significant change from the previous year's methodology was that U.S. News no longer considered gradu-



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Langsdorf Hall on the Cal State Fullerton campus

ation rates of first-generation students in its ranking formulas for national universities, including its top performers on social mobility rankings. The weight

formerly attributed to graduation rates of first-generation students was reallocated to graduation rates of Pell Grant recipients.

- U.S. News also recognized CSUF and its undergraduate programs in the following categories:**
- No. 37 in Best Undergraduate Engineering Programs (nondoctorate)
  - No. 69 in Top Public Schools
  - No. 114 in Undergraduate Nursing Programs
  - No. 136 in National Universities
  - No. 147 in Undergraduate Business Programs
  - No. 180 in Undergraduate Psychology Programs
  - No. 193 in Undergraduate Computer Science Programs
  - No. 198 in Undergraduate Economics Programs
  - No. 206 in Best Value Schools



OPPORTUNITY

# PATH Academy prepares diverse students for health care careers

CSUF News Media Services

To help meet California's demand for health care workers, Cal State Fullerton has launched the "Professions Advancing and Transforming Health Academy" to expose undergraduates to career opportunities in the field.

The PATH Academy is funded by three grant awards totaling \$3 million from the California Department of Health Care Access and Information and centers on four student support programs.

"The overarching goal of the PATH Academy is to support and train students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, in their pursuit of careers in the health professions through academic guidance, experiential learning and community partnerships," said Alice Lee, associate professor of public health.

Lee created and directs the program with David Chenot, professor emeritus of social work. The undergraduate majors best suited for the program include public health, human services, psychology, kinesiology, child and adolescent studies, communicative disorders, nursing and biological science.

Participating students are eligible for stipends ranging from \$500 to \$15,000, depending on the support program and budgetary considerations.

The PATH Academy is funded through 2028 and focuses on all health-related careers, including allied health professions such as public health, physical and occupational therapy, speech-language pathology, social work and counseling.

Lee said that the demand for health workers is projected to significantly increase across the state in the next 10 years, coupled with the need to prepare a workforce that matches the community it serves.

"California has been facing a health care workforce shortage exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a huge exodus of health workers," Lee said.

According to the Health Resources and Services Administration, an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the workforce demand for allied health professionals is projected to increase 23% by 2036. For behavioral health professionals, the increase is projected to be 62%.

"It is critical to expose our students to health-related professions and ensure they are well-prepared to serve California's diverse communities," said Lee, whose research focuses on cancer epidemiology and health disparities.

So far, more than 200 students have

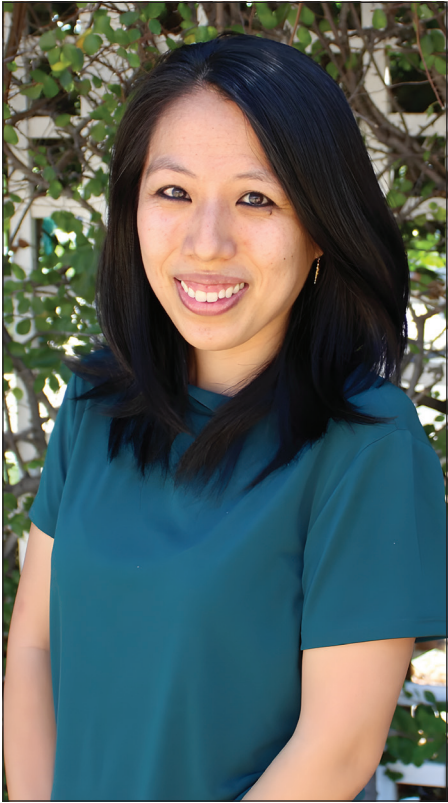


PHOTO COURTESY OF ALICE LEE

Alice Lee, associate professor of public health

participated in PATH Academy programs and events, which include:

- Undergraduate Trainee Program: A one-year academic program that exposes students to health-related careers and prepares them for graduate school and the workforce.
- Research Scholar Program: A six-week summer research experience that pairs undergraduate students with faculty mentors to work on health-related projects.
- Summer Internship Program: A 10-week, hands-on intern experience with a community partner, such as the Orange County Health Care Agency.
- Post-Undergraduate Fellowship Program: A one-year internship at the Orange County Health Care Agency that targets recent graduates who earned a bachelor's degree from CSUF and are applying to health-related graduate programs.
- Health Pathways Fair: A community and education event for CSUF, community college and high school students to learn about health-related careers, majors and programs. The next fair will be held in March.

All the PATH Academy programs and



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALICE LEE

Students in the PATH Academy's Summer Internship Program



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALICE LEE

Brittany Merino Galdamez, a communicative disorders major, presents her research as a participant in the PATH Academy.

events, including the Health Pathways Fair, will be held each year with the goal of engaging more than 1,200 students by the end of the funding period, Lee said.

"We hope PATH Academy students will receive the academic, financial and socio-

emotional support they need to complete their studies and graduate," Lee said. "We also hope they will feel connected to the health professions community — and gain the confidence and motivation to pursue their health career goals."

TITANS UNIDOS FLOOR

# First-gen resident adviser promotes a sense of belonging

CSUF News Media Services

When first-generation student Brian Rubio moved to campus in 2020, it was his first time living away from home.

"I chose Cal State Fullerton because of the high level of student involvement, so when I got here, I hit the ground running and started looking for a community where I could grow and learn," said Rubio.

He found that sense of comfort and community in CSUF's Housing and Residential Engagement, where he was inspired to help other students find success in their new home away from home.

Serving as a resident adviser for four years, he hosted a unique lineup of events and found that his favorite programs focused on the Latinx community, spotlighting different cultures and exploring Latinx diversity. When CSUF announced the 2024 launch of Titans Unidos, a themed floor for residents in the Latinx community, Rubio knew that's where he wanted to be.

"Brian exemplifies servant leadership by advocating for his peers and collaborating with staff to develop impactful programs," said Kafele Khalfani, director of Housing and Residential Engagement. "His dedication is especially evident within the Latinx community, where he strives to create inclusive environments that foster connection and growth for all residents."

The inaugural resident adviser for the floor, Rubio connects students with campus resources, hosts events focused on personal development, and provides them opportunities to make community connections and explore their cultures.

"I want to create a space where students can explore their identities and build community with others who understand their backgrounds and experiences as Latinx-identifying students," said Rubio.

He knows firsthand how important accessible resources are to a students' educational experience.

"Both of my parents barely finished middle school, so I had to figure a lot out on my own while navigating a language barrier," said Rubio. "I overcame those challenges, and now, I want to make it easier for other students to find support and succeed while staying connected to their culture."

Jennifer Ortiz, associate director of administration and conference services, added that Rubio's work in housing has served as a launching pad, preparing him to succeed in other leadership roles on campus. Rubio also serves as vice chair for Associated Students Inc.'s



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Brian Rubio, biological science student and resident adviser for the Titans Unidos housing community

board of directors and a student representative for the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics.

"I have seen Brian continue to seek out new opportunities for growth and leadership across CSUF while also encouraging those around him to get involved," said Ortiz.

When he's not helping others in housing, Rubio can be found inside the Evolution and Genomics Research lab studying fruit flies, which share many common genes with humans.

He works alongside Parvin Shahrestani, associate professor of biological

science and 2024 Carol Barnes Excellence in Teaching Award recipient, and a team of graduate students to uncover how changes in a fly's microbiology impact their development.

"Working in the lab has not only provided me with important teamwork and communication skills, but it also gave me the experience I needed to make a difference at Children's Hospital of Orange County," said Rubio, a biological science student and Class of 2025 grad.

As a CHOC research intern, Rubio collaborates with professional researchers to help create an artificial intelligence

model that will predict remission for pediatric patients with inflammatory bowel disease.

This work, combined with the experience he's gained in Shahrestani's lab, have set Rubio on the path toward becoming a physician assistant and continuing to help people in the medical field.

"Cal State Fullerton provides so many opportunities and resources to help students achieve their goals. I'm thankful for the pivotal role it has played in my professional and personal journey," said Rubio.



TRUSTEES' AWARD

# Student’s superhero-inspired renewable energy goals cited

CSUF News Media Services

In Disney’s “Big Hero 6,” Hiro Hamada designs micro-sized robots to fight villainy alongside the lovable Baymax. In Marvel’s “Iron Man,” Tony Stark builds his iconic armored suit to protect the world from evil.

For Estrella Bonilla, these aren’t just fictional characters with a knack for invention. They’re her inspiration, and one of the reasons she chose to study mechanical engineering at Cal State Fullerton.

“After watching these movies and seeing the struggles and accomplishments of the characters, I want to jump out of my seat and get back to work,” said Bonilla. “I might not be able to create a real-world arc reactor like Tony Stark, but I can help create more efficient designs for society’s push toward renewable energy.”

Much like her heroes, Bonilla aspires to use engineering technology to spark innovation. The Class of 2025 grad is pursuing a career in the renewable energy sector where she can work to solve a myriad of challenges, including making batteries more efficient and recyclable, and improving storage resources for energy.

For her superior academic performance, personal accomplishments and community service, Bonilla was named a 2024 recipient of the California State University Trustees’ Award for Outstanding Achievement. Bonilla was named the Edison International Scholar, which comes with a \$7,000 scholarship. The CSU scholarship is awarded annually to one student from each of the 23 campuses.

“This award means so much to me. After transferring from community college, I never dreamed that I would finish my first year at CSUF this strong, let alone receive a scholarship,” said Bonilla. “Since this will be my fifth year in college, I was worried about my financial support, but thanks to this award, I can focus solely on my studies. Whatever comes next, I’m excited and ready.”

Growing up on a small ranch in Northern California, Bonilla said creativity and invention have always been a huge part of her life.

“My dad never had the chance to attend college, but he is constantly learning, inventing and creating tools for our family to use on the ranch,” said Bonilla. “Both he and my mom are always pushing me to continue learning.”

She graduated with honors from the College of the Sequoias, where she



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Estrella Bonilla, mechanical engineering student

earned three associate degrees in engineering, physics and mathematics and participated in the prestigious NASA Community College Aerospace Scholars Program.

Ready to take the next step in her educational journey, Bonilla moved more than 200 miles away from home alongside her younger sister, who also transferred to CSUF.

“After learning about the great resources that CSUF has to offer, including the campus, the mechanical engineering program, the community and the support for transfer students, I was excited to become a Titan,” said Bonilla.

Initially nervous about joining a large campus, Bonilla found a community through Project RAISE, a STEM transfer

support program that provides students with advising, research, internship and professional development opportunities to increase persistence, retention and graduation rates among underrepresented students.

In the College of Engineering and Computer Science, Bonilla expanded her technical skills and network by joining the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers and working as a tutor in the mechanical engineering department. Seeking real-world engineering experience, she also joined the Titan Rover team, in which students collaborate to design and build a semi-autonomous robotic system that can survive and operate on a simulated Martian environment.

“I’ve learned so much through my own research and design on the temperature and moisture sensing for the Rover. I’ve also had the opportunity to learn from and work with current team members and alumni,” said Bonilla.

She added that the support she’s received in the Department of Mechanical Engineering has proven instrumental in helping her grow her confidence and excel in her courses.

“She achieved a perfect score for every single exam, which I had never seen before,” said Haowei Wang, professor of mechanical engineering, who taught Bonilla in a thermodynamics course. “Her perseverance and exceptional performance make her a role model for others.”

## TAPP

FROM PAGE 2

In addition, “We have awarded more than \$250,000 in scholarships since we opened,” Nakagawa said.

The TAPP Center’s collaboration with other key programs and resources throughout the campus remains an essential element behind much of what TAPP does. Just one example, Nakagawa said, was Transfer Thursdays, Zoom-based programming for incoming fall transfer students that took place every Thursday from July 11 to Aug. 1. The lineup included workshops about the University Learning Center, which provides one-on-one tutoring and study groups; all manner of academic assistance through the Supplemental Instruction Program; the assortment of programs furnished by the Center for Internships & Community Engagement; and the tech devices and access to technology provided by the Center for Equitable Digital Access.

Another example is the TAPP Center’s collaboration with TitanWELL and TitanTHRIVE. TitanWELL’s “Lunch and Learn: Healthy Eating” promotes the importance of proper nutrition while balancing school, work and family. And TitanTHRIVE’s two-hour “Empowering Self-Defense” program furnishes, among other elements, effective verbal techniques, awareness skills and confidence-building practices.

Senior sociology major Evelyn Alvarado Avalos, a transfer student from Rio Hondo College, discussed the benefits of her involvement with the TAPP Center.

“After transferring, I felt extremely lonely,” she said. “But after learning about the TAPP Center, I began to feel



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Laura Hooks, assistant director of the TAPP Center

a greater sense of community. It has helped me as a student by making sure I have a safe space and by giving me a sense of belonging with other transfer students on campus.”

TAPP’s new, larger space in Langsdorf Hall (Room 216) has a more “student-lounge” feel, Nakagawa said. “The majority of the center is now for student use. The Wakeman Seminar Room, a space for adult learners, is separate

from the rest of the center. We’ve also added a new adult-learner coordinator, who has a separate office as well.”

Given the high number of CSUF students who meet the TAPP Center’s criteria, program growth remains an ongoing topic. “We’d love to expand,” Hooks said. “It’s all based on funding and campus real estate. Space is a challenge.”

“This year we worked with Campus Housing to get a (separate) floor

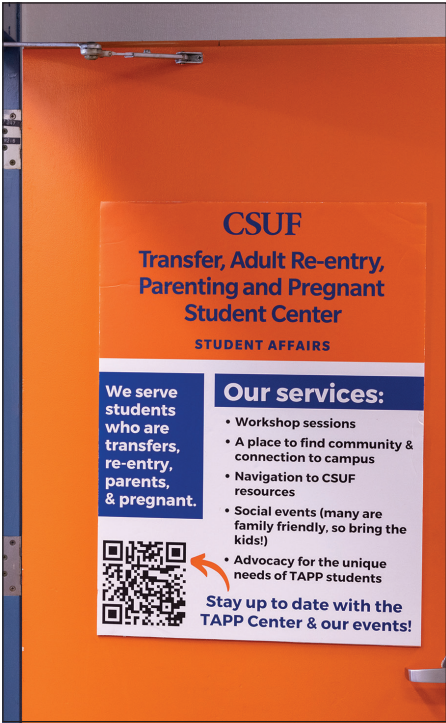


PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

The TAPP Center provides resources for nontraditional college students with diverse needs.

for transfer students,” Nakagawa said. “We’d also like to explore resident hall options for parenting students and their families.”

Hooks stressed that the collaborative nature of the TAPP Center is essential to its positive influence. “The success of the Center doesn’t happen without the entire team here,” she said. “We’re all invested in this, and we’re all part of the community that we represent.”

## Political

FROM PAGE 1

mostly about the strategic use of communication in politics.”

After the recent debate between presidential candidates Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, Valencia quizzed his students about the messaging they heard. “One of the questions I asked is, who are they trying to talk to? What demographics are they trying to touch with these messages? We want to understand the strategic goal of every word that the candidates are using. It’s not about if it’s good or bad, it’s about what is happening and how can we understand it.”

Students taking his class are interested in political science, but also journalism, advertising and public relations, so Valencia covers election basics in the class. “I want them to understand the

basics of politics, but also understand the complexity of the political system, and, for example, why it’s difficult to predict the election results.”

His students are avid learners, he said.

One student, Krizel Guansing, hopes to go to law school to study international law and has long dreamed of becoming a press secretary for a political leader. “Dr. Valencia’s political communications class has made me more aware of tactics deployed by both the Democratic and Republican parties,” Guansing said. “I took this class this semester specifically because it is an election year, and having a professor like Dr. Valencia is helpful in understanding the ways that a campaign operates itself. It allows me to make more informed choices.”

Fourth-year student Emeka Ogbatue looks forward to Valencia’s class each week and the lively discussions with classmates. Though he already had a

good understanding of the campaigns going on this year, “This class gave me a better understanding of why modern campaigns both nationally and locally are operated the way they are,” he said.

“There’s more complexity than just throwing money and sound bites at voters, partners and donors through campaign events and mainstream media,” Ogbatue said. “There is very strategic communication involved that, whether genuine or not from a candidate, must be deployed by a candidate’s very well-structured team if they want to have a successful campaign and possible political life afterward.”

Valencia enjoys the enthusiasm of his students and hopes to be like a former teacher who influenced him years ago. “I always remember how my first philosophy professor made me feel that I was smart enough to have a conversation with him, and I want the same for my students,” he said.

Born and raised in El Salvador, Valencia received his bachelor’s degree in journalism from Central American University. He was a journalist for the El Salvador newspaper El Faro and a political reporter for La Prensa Grafica. After receiving a master’s degree, he became a diplomat for the Salvadorian embassy in Washington from 2010 to 2014. “I learned a lot about political public diplomacy, the convergence of international politics and media and local politics,” he said.

Valencia came to Cal State Fullerton after receiving his doctorate from the University of Oregon. He is grateful for the support he’s received from his former and current deans, his department chair and the large number of students who’ve enrolled in the class.

“I have very smart students, very bright, critical,” he said. “My students are the reason I have hope about the future of the United States of America.”



**SOFTBALL**

# For Oaks Garcia, all signs pointed back to her alma mater

**By Brian Robin**  
*contributing writer*

As a side hustle in the literal sense of the phrase, Kelly Ford spent a portion of the time she carved out for recruiting every year not trying to bring in the newest, hottest, undiscovered gem uncovered at a tournament.

No. She spent some of that time trying to bring back an “old” Titan softball legend.

By her own admission, Ford had been trying to bring Gina Oaks Garcia back to her alma mater “for years.” Every time there was an opening on the Cal State Fullerton softball coaching staff, Ford had Oaks Garcia on speed dial. And until last year, every time Ford called, Oaks Garcia politely turned her down.

It wasn’t for lack of trying on Ford’s part. Nor was it for lack of desire on Oaks Garcia’s part. She had served as a Titans assistant in 2005-2006, before assistant stints at Azusa Pacific and Loyola Marymount. Now, she was coaching Division III softball at Claremont Mudd Scripps. Her three kids were young and, well, the time wasn’t right to take a Division I job. Not even at the place where Oaks Garcia’s name carried the aura of softball royalty.

Until last year, when Ford’s side hustle finally paid off. An assistant’s position opened up and Ford dutifully made the obligatory call. This time, Oaks Garcia was receptive. After talking it over with her husband, Aaron, she made the plunge and took over as one of Ford’s assistants for the 2024 season.

As things turned out, Ford’s side hustle became CSUF softball’s next main hustle. When Ford announced her retirement in July after a stellar 12-year career guiding the Titans to six conference titles, seven NCAA tournament appearances, five Big West Coach of the Year awards and 410 wins, Oaks Garcia suddenly found herself thinking back to the conversation she had with Ford.

And a month and a half later, Oaks Garcia became the fourth head coach in CSUF softball program history.

Side hustles usually take longer than this to become main hustles, even for program legends. But we’ll get back to that element of Oaks Garcia’s journey.

“She had mentioned that she wasn’t sure how much longer she’d be coaching,” Oaks Garcia said. “She asked me if I had any aspirations to be a head coach. I’d have to go through the pro-



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Gina Oaks Garcia, new Titans softball coach, poses in front of her own photo from her years on the team, 2000-2003.

cess (of getting hired), but it would be a good opportunity to come in and learn my system.

“I didn’t think it would happen this fast, but I was very grateful for the opportunity to be there, learn, grow and learn the department. Here I was when the position opened, and I went for it. They thought I was the best one for the post, and I couldn’t agree more. Here I am a month later, going full circle and having my dream job, and it’s awesome.”

Ford said that Oaks Garcia “was a blast to work with,” bringing a sense of accountability born of accomplishment. She immediately gave Oaks Garcia and fellow first-year assistant Jamee Juarez plenty of leeway to, as she put it, “bring in the gritty.”

“They’ve brought a new standard, a new vibe and a lot of expectations, and they’re holding these ladies accountable,” Ford said earlier this year.

As pitching coach, Oaks Garcia coached Big West Pitcher of the year Haley Rainey to a perfect game and a no-hitter, Staci Chambers to a no-hitter and produced a pitching staff that led the Big West in ERA (2.18), racked up 18 complete games, 14 shutouts and seven saves. Rainey and Chambers led the conference in opponent batting average.

That Ford would drop in the word

“expectations” when talking about Oaks Garcia wasn’t an accident. Nor was it an accident that she spent time and energy wooing Oaks Garcia back to CSUF. After all, Ford had a front-row seat for Oaks Garcia’s coming-out party—as a player. She was a Titans’ assistant when Oaks Garcia embarked on a career that would stamp her as one of the best two-way players in program history.

Oaks Garcia might as well have her own chapter in the program record book. She holds two records outright — career runs (150) and RBIs in a single game (eight) — and is top 10 in eight other categories: total bases (314), walks (74), career strikeouts (685), career opponent batting average (.184), wins (74), complete games (72), shutouts (25) and saves (four).

She was the first player in Big West history to receive First Team All-Conference at two different positions, a two-time All-American, three-time All-Big West First Team selection and the conference Scholar-Athlete of the Year. Oaks Garcia parlayed that into a six-year career on the USA National Team and a 10-year career playing professional softball on the East Coast and in Australia, Japan and Italy.

All the while, Oaks Garcia knew from her sophomore year at CSUF that college coaching was her ultimate destination. As she was working on a kinesiol-

ogy degree, Oaks Garcia thought she’d like to be either a PE teacher or a college coach. The more time she spent around then-head coach Michelle Gromacki, the more that gig appealed to her.

“I remembered the vivid impact Michelle and all the assistant coaches who coached me there had, and I thought, ‘This could be a cool profession. How cool would it be to one day get the opportunity to coach at my alma mater?’ she said. “But when I graduated, I wasn’t ready to be done playing, and I had the opportunity to play overseas and travel. So I went on and did that.”

“I didn’t know if the window at Fullerton would or wouldn’t open again, but I wasn’t ready to be done as a player. I really enjoyed my time at Claremont, I was 20 minutes away from home and I loved the D3 model because I think there’s a place for every student-athlete out there. But I had it in the back of my mind if I could get back to Division I, I would, and it would definitely be at my alma mater — Cal State Fullerton.”

And, in that serendipitous way that these side hustles sometimes morph into dream jobs, Oaks Garcia returned where she belonged. Answering that call at the right time was yet another sign in a conga line of them. After all, she and her husband were married in 2012 at the Fullerton Arboretum. There were 13 questions on her interview — which matched her uniform number.

“This is supposed to be, right? I’m supposed to be doing this, right? There were definitely alignments there for sure. I’m literally getting all these signs,” she said.

The signs led the way. And along the way, she learned a few things about this playing thing that she can’t wait to impart on her players.

“Often, you think the sport defines you, but it’s a small part of who you are,” she said. “It took a long time for me to realize that when I was a player. You always hear, ‘Softball is life,’ but it took a time for me to understand that as a coach, there’s so much more to it. There’s so many different wins in life, and I’m excited to mentor and teach these young women there’s more to life than softball.

“The real world is challenging a lot of times, and if I can be a small part of helping to guide them and advise them, that’s truly what led me to that moment: being that person they can call, text or lean on and mentor. We get to play this awesome sport, but we can use it to help us in life with what comes up.”



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