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Students who are the first generation of their families to attend college gather for Cal State Fullerton’s event celebrating their achievement.

CAMPUS COMMUNITY

FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS RECOGNIZED WITH A WEEK OF EVENTS

University promotes its standing as a ‘melting pot’ institution

By Lou Ponsi
contributing writer

Each year on Nov. 8, colleges and universities around the country host a First-Generation College Celebration.

The celebration is held on or around Nov. 8 to commemorate the signing of the Higher Education Act.

The landmark legislation created federal financial aid programs to fund students’ post-secondary education, help expand post-secondary access, retention and completion, particularly for limited-income, first-generation college

students — those who are the first in their family to attend college.

With nearly 32% of the student population at Cal State Fullerton identifying as first-gen students, the university doesn’t limit the celebration to a single day, but instead hosts a “First Generation College Student Week.”

Organized by the Department of Student Affairs, this year’s celebration took place from Nov. 6–Nov. 14, with festivities including an informal mixer for first-gen students and alumni to meet, make friends and create networking opportunities.

Several workshops and discussion groups were also held throughout the

week.

Those included: “Navigating Imposter Syndrome as a First-Generation College Student,” “Navigating Social Expectations as a First-Generation College Student” and “Mental Health & First-Gen Students.”

Parveer Singh, a first-gen student who came to the U.S. from Hong Kong and is in his first semester at CSUF, was anxious to attend the mixer, which was held at the Golleher Alumni House on Nov. 6

“As an international student, I think it really helps you come together and meet people, not only meet other first-gen students but alumni who are also

first-gen,” said Singh, who plays club soccer at CSUF.

First Generation Forward, a national first-generation advocacy organization that partners with universities, categorizes the First-Generation College Celebration as an event designed to “raise awareness of the first-generation college student identity by advancing an asset-based, national narrative of these students’ experiences and outcomes.”

Vanessa Pinzon, a former first-gen student at CSUF who serves as vice president of marketing and advertising on the Alumni Association’s board of directors, was among the alumni at

EVENTS » PAGE 5



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Associate professor Mun Chee Yong’s film is nominated for a Golden Horse Award in Taiwan.

GOLDEN HORSE

Faculty member’s short film nominated for award

‘4 Sundays in September’ explores migrant worker’s plight in Singapore

By Nicole Gregory
contributing writer

Mun Chee Yong, associate professor of cinema and television arts, made a short film during her 2022–2023 sabbatical year called “4 Sundays in September,” which was nominated for Best Live Action Short Film at the Golden Horse Awards in Taiwan. Former Cal State Fullerton students contributed post-production work on the film, including animation and sound.

The 61st Golden Horse Awards is a prestigious event considered the Oscars of the Chinese-speaking world and took place Saturday in Taipei.

Yong was inspired by a true story. “The film is about a migrant worker in Singapore (who) finds out she is pregnant,” she explained. “She decides that

she needs to abort the baby because she’s on an employment work permit that she signed. And if she’s pregnant, she’ll be sent home to her home country. Then she finds out that she miscalculated how many months she’s pregnant.

“She has a boyfriend, so there is romance, but he can’t really help her. What can he do? They’re both working class, so he’s just there. And in the end, she’s the one who’s going to be deported, not him. So, she is dealing with this on her own and has to hide it from her employer.”

Though the story has tension, it is not a thriller, Yong said. “It’s a human story.” She wrote the script in collaboration with migrant workers in Singapore and cast migrant workers in the film, as well.

“I think what is special is that it’s a collaboration between me and the migrant workers. I involved them in the writing of the script. And then I put out a casting call on TikTok. Every Sunday the migrant workers have the day off — they only have one day off. So I went to the place where they get together in a park, and I auditioned them. I had about five migrant workers. It was a

AWARD » PAGE 2



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FINANCIAL AID

New scholarships office aims to improve efficiency

Students with questions can walk in, get answers

By Nicole Gregory
contributing writer

A new scholarships office has officially opened at Cal State Fullerton, which will streamline the process of matching students with available scholarships on and off campus, simplify the application, coordinate financial information and ensure that all available scholarships are utilized by students, among other efforts.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony took place on Nov. 8, but work has already been underway at the new office, coordinated by Associate Director Meghan Paradiso-Alva, who previously worked in the development office on campus.

“I’m passionate about what I do,” she said. “I went to a CSU myself and paid for it all myself. I wasn’t eligible for financial aid but wasn’t receiving help from my parents. I didn’t know that scholarships were something that you could apply for on your own. I think a lot of students have this misconception that scholarships have to be offered to you because you excel in athletics or academia in some way.”

She noted that hundreds of scholarships are available both from the CSUF campus and externally. “We want to connect students with them so that they know they have that option.” Receiving a scholarship can positively affect students’ self-esteem, she said.

“Scholarships do two things for students. Obviously, there’s that financial component. Also, when they win a scholarship, it gives them that just that little push for themselves, saying, ‘Hey, somebody recognized you, somebody believes in you and what you can do.’”

Having a physical location in Gordon Hall, across from the financial aid office, has already drawn students who have questions. “We now have a central point where students can come,” Paradiso-Alva said. “We have two dedicated counselors who can sit down with students and talk to them about their scholarship, how it



PHOTOS COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Meghan Paradiso-Alva, associate director of scholarships, speaks during the new office's ribbon-cutting.



Tuffy Titan poses with faculty and staff during the event.

fits in with the rest of their financial aid. We also have a website where we have resources for outside scholarships, so we’re able to point students in the right direction.”

A new streamlined scholarship application will go live this January. “Previously it had over 80 questions,” Paradiso-Alva said. “One of the things we were noticing is that a lot of students were starting the application but not finishing it, which told me that the application was too long, too complicated. So, we took those 80 questions, brought them down to 12.”

Now, with just one application, a student will automatically be matched with all of the scholarships that they qualify for based on the criteria, Paradiso-Alva said. “It’s a lot more accessible for students. We’re all going to be on the same timeline. They’ll apply at the beginning of the year in January, and they’ll be awarded the following summer so that they can use it for their fall term. That’s the goal, to get it on that schedule.”

About 600 scholarships are available to students who are already enrolled in Cal State Fullerton and about 40 are of-

fered during the summer for incoming students.

Internal scholarships are administered by Cal State Fullerton. “The outside scholarships are administered by different private companies, nonprofits, community organizations and community foundations,” Paradiso-Alva said. “We are working to put a lot of resources for those that are vetted on our website. And we will be doing webinars for students with tips and tricks on both applying for on-campus scholarships and off-campus scholarships.”

The application deadline is March 1. Committees made up of faculty members within all departments go through the applications and decide who will be awarded various scholarships. “This works really well because these are the faculty members who know that major. They know what the students are speaking to in their essays, for instance.”

Decisions are typically made by April 1, and students are alerted by June. “They’ll be awarded in mid-July when their payments will start to be due for the fall term,” Paradiso-Alva said.

She credits the director of financial aid, Nick Valdivia, for helping to start the scholarship office as well as Jessica Barco, assistant vice president for student affairs, David Forgues, vice president of student affairs and Elizabeth Zavala-Acevez, associate vice president for student affairs for their support. She’s also been working with consultant Veronica Popovic, who’s developed scholarship offices at Cal State Northridge and San Diego State.

The amount of money awarded for scholarships has jumped dramatically. “Ten years ago we awarded \$5 million in scholarships, including on- and off-campus scholarships that we processed for our students,” Paradiso-Alva said. “In the last academic year, we processed over \$21 million in scholarships. So, in the last 10 years, it’s gone up over 400%, which is amazing. But it does take a lot more infrastructure to process all of those.”

Approximately 8,000 students at Cal State Fullerton received scholarships in the last year.

Award

FROM PAGE 1

very special experience for me, too.”

The film is just 15 minutes long but, Yong said, “it focuses on the human aspect,” spanning four weeks of the pregnant worker’s life. “She works every day except for Sunday, so it’s four Sundays in September,” said Yong. She has plans to develop “4 Sundays in September” into a feature-length film so she doesn’t want to give away the ending.

Yong has lived in Los Angeles for 20 years, but she was born and raised in Singapore. She was an undergraduate at the London School of Economics and initially worked as a broadcast journalist. After doing some directing in Singapore she came to Los Angeles and eventually got her master’s degree in film production at USC. “Hollywood is a big attraction for anyone,” she said.

Yong’s previous film, the 2011 feature-length “Where the Road Meets the Sun,” takes place in Los Angeles and won numerous awards. “It’s a story about outsiders in Los Angeles,” Yong said. It featured actors Will Yun Lee who appears in “The Wolverine” and Eric Mabius, who acted in “Resident Evil.”

She also was co-creator of “Extraordinary People,” a documentary series that won an Asian Television Award for Best Documentary Series.

In “4 Sundays in September,” Yong ex-

plored the lives of migrant workers in Singapore who work as domestic helpers. “They live with our families,” she said. “They take care of our children. They take care of our old folks. In Asian society, people like to keep their old parents in the family. They don’t like to put them in old folks’ homes. So, in a way, the migrant workers become part of the family.”

Several recent CSUF graduates worked on the film after Yong shot it in Singapore. “They were good in what they do, they were motivated, and they were awesome,” she said adding that one worked as an assistant editor and the others worked in dialogue editing, sound design, graphics and animation.

Yong teaches directing and production at Cal State Fullerton. In addition to teaching technical skills, she emphasizes the importance of the creative collaborative effort.

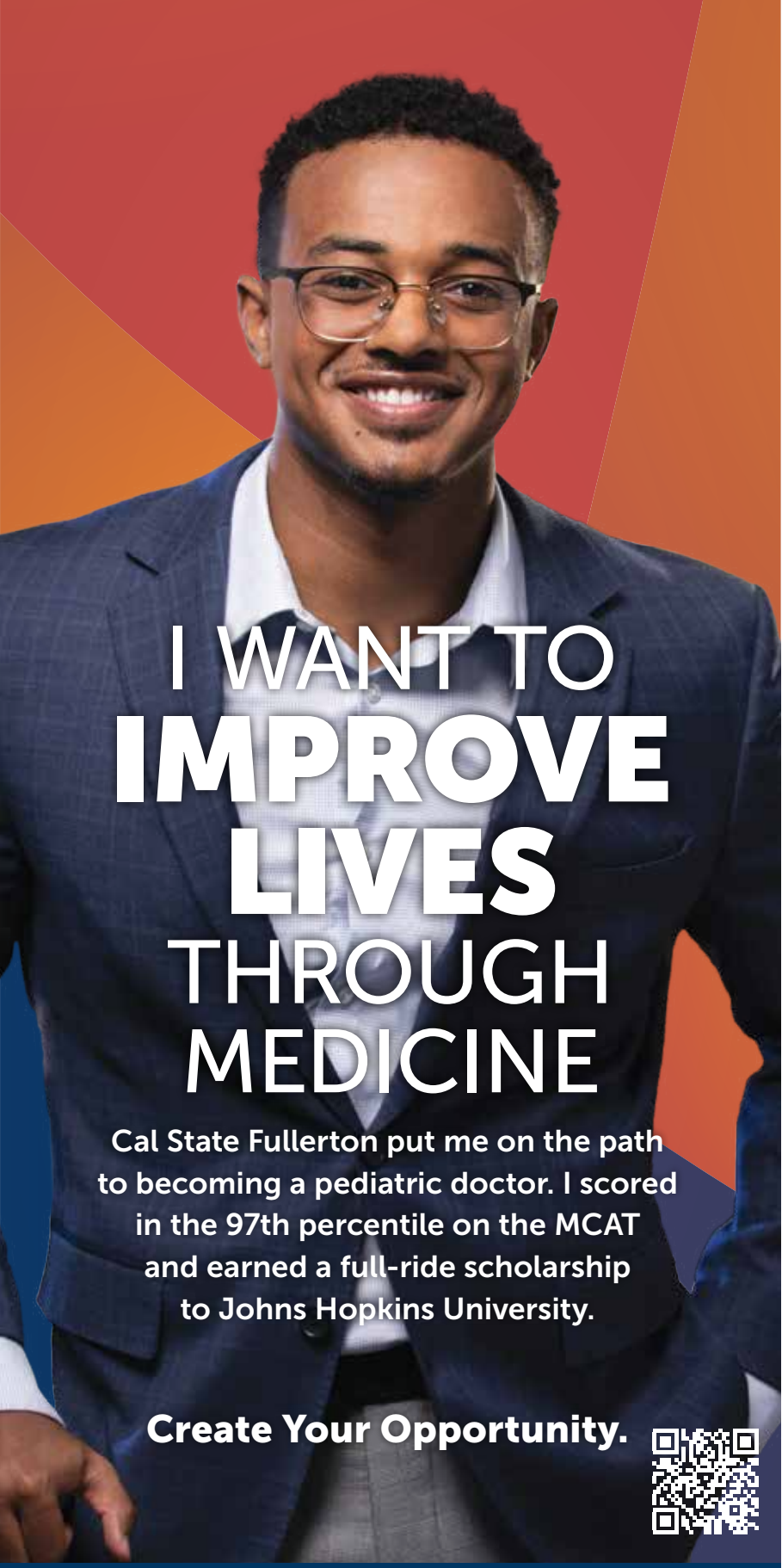
“Filmmaking is teamwork,” she said. She explained that the value of learning to collaborate, in the class and in a career, is that each student can learn from those who are a little more experienced or skilled. “You’ve got to get better in the skills, and one part of that is exposure to people who are further ahead. This gives students an idea where they can get to if they wish to go there.”

Yong is grateful for being able to take her sabbatical to create a story about the life of a migrant worker and for the help and support she received from talented former Cal State Fullerton students to make the finished film a reality.



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES


A still from Mun Chee Yong's film, “4 Sundays in September”






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RESOURCES

Programs help Titans thrive despite challenges they face

Basic Needs, Food
Pantry offer assistance

By Jenelyn Russo
contributing writer

For Titan students who may be experiencing unforeseen hardships, Cal State Fullerton offers a range of comprehensive programs and services dedicated to providing essential support, including CSUF Basic Needs Services and the ASI Food Pantry, both of which ensure students have the resources they need for academic success.

Basic Needs Services addresses students facing food, housing and financial insecurities. Currently enrolled students seeking support in these areas can submit an online request form and meet with a program staff member who will review their specific circumstances and determine what kind of supportive measures would be most helpful.

Two of the program's most utilized services are on-campus walk-in resources – Basic Needs Service hygiene products and Tuffy's Career Closet. The hygiene products supply offers a wide variety of full-size items for students, such as shampoo, shaving cream, body wash, toothpaste and menstrual products. This vital service saw significant demand during the 2023-2024 academic year, with more than 3,100 unique visits to the Basic Needs Center and more than 14,500 hygiene products distributed to students.

Tuffy's Career Closet supports students' professional growth and advancement by offering gently used business attire to Titans preparing for internships, job interviews or class presentations. Items such as dress pants, blazers, ties, skirts and shirts are available for students to keep and use as needed. Last academic year, the Career Closet received more than 1,000 unique visits.

Basic Needs Services hygiene products and Tuffy's Career Closet can be visited by students once per month with access via their Titan Card. Both are donation-based resources, and due to the high usage of these services by students, the programs are in urgent need of donated products and clothing items. Donations can be dropped off at McCarthy Hall, Room 143, Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

"We accept donations year round," said Victoria Ajemian, CSUF Basic Needs Services director. "Anyone can stop by and just drop off a donation, and we can provide a receipt for tax purposes. We also accept fiscal donations through our website. We are very appreciative of the support we receive from our community."

In addition to these walk-in resources, CSUF Basic Needs Services connects students with other support options and community-based organizations such as CalFresh, social services, temporary housing solutions and financial grants.

For immediate food insecurities,



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

A student takes advantage of the ASI Food Pantry on the Cal State Fullerton campus.

students are referred to the ASI Food Pantry, an on-campus resource that distributes nonperishable foods, canned goods and fresh produce. And thanks to a recent gift from Kaiser Foundation Hospitals, the ASI Food Pantry will be able to reach more Titan students than ever before.

The \$75,000 grant, received in September, will enable the Food Pantry to expand its offerings and better meet the diverse dietary needs of the student community.

Of the total gift, \$50,000 will be allocated to purchase and install much-needed refrigerated lockers, providing a secure space for students to store Food Pantry items. The remaining \$25,000 will be used to broaden the pantry's food selection, enabling ASI to offer a more varied range of options that can accommodate dietary restrictions and cultural preferences.

"The support from Kaiser Foundation Hospitals is crucial to the success of the ASI Food Pantry, directly addressing some of the most important needs of CSUF students," said Cristina Truong, CSUF associate director for Titan Student Union Programs. "Many students struggle with food insecurity, and the addition of refrigerated lockers will provide a safe and reliable way for them to store food from the ASI Food Pantry for later use."

This gift from Kaiser helps to not only alleviate stress, allowing students to focus on their studies, but also strengthens the Titan community by fostering an environment where all students can thrive.



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

The CSUF Basic Needs Service offers hygiene products to students who need assistance.

"We are extremely grateful for Kaiser Foundation Hospitals' partnership and commitment to supporting CSUF students," Truong said. "Their generosity makes a real difference in ensuring all students have the tools they need to succeed with dignity and pride. This funding will have a lasting impact on our Titan community, and ASI is committed to using it wisely to support our students' well-being and success."

Programs like Basic Needs Services and the ASI Food Pantry are committed to supporting students through unexpected challenges, ensuring that every Titan has the resources they need to succeed and thrive, no matter the obstacles they face.

"The support that we (provide) is helpful for students to really focus on their academics," Ajemian said. "A lot of our students have a variety of competing responsibilities, and unforeseen things happen, so we want to do what we can to help support students' enrollment and maintain their ability to persist to graduation. That's our ultimate goal here at Cal State Fullerton – to help our students graduate so they can go on to make a larger impact on their communities beyond CSUF."

For more information on CSUF Basic Needs Services and the ASI Food Pantry, visit fullerton.edu/basic-needs and fullerton.edu/asi.

INNOVATION

New AI hub will prepare students for careers in emerging technology

CSUF News Media Services

To prepare students for the artificial intelligence workforce, Cal State Fullerton has been awarded a \$400,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to create an AI hub, develop AI-focused curriculum, promote inclusive and ethical practices, and build partnerships with industry.

"This project will catalyze AI initiatives on campus by creating a centralized, interdisciplinary platform that connects students, faculty, industry partners and research organizations," said Yu Bai, associate professor of electrical and computer engineering.

Bai will lead the development and integration of the grant project "CAP: INSPIRE – Inclusive Strategies for Promoting AI Research and Education, Empowering Underrepresented Students and Faculty."

"Overall, the AI hub will be a dynamic ecosystem that nurtures AI talent, fosters interdisciplinary learning, and establishes CSUF as a leader in inclusive AI education and innovation," Bai said.

Bai, whose research interests include AI – machines that think like humans – from unmanned robots to improving academic performance in STEM and machine learning, said that the project will advance the growth and development of underrepresented students in AI fields.

The grant is funded through NSF's Expanding AI Innovation Through Capacity Building and Partnerships program. The program supports projects that help broaden participation in artificial intelligence research, education and workforce development.

Campus leaders hailed the need for an institutional approach to bolster AI infrastructure, develop AI-related curricula, courses and programs, and equip students for AI careers.

"Promoting AI technologies in both the educational landscape and research space is essential for our campus to thrive in the 21st century," said Binod Tiwari, associate vice president for research and sponsored programs.

"This grant project will allow Cal State



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Yu Bai, top center, is leading the CAP: INSPIRE grant project. Co-leaders are Jidong Huang, top left, Joshua DiPaolo, Kiran George, Jessica Jaynes and Sam Behseta.

Fullerton to create meaningful partnerships and provide the resources our students and faculty need to succeed in the AI workforce."

Amir Dabirian, provost and vice president for academic affairs, said the grant project will remove barriers and cultivate an equitable learning environment.

"CSUF can serve as a model for other academic institutions to expand the student talent pool and contribute to developing more ethical, fair and socially responsible AI systems," Dabirian said.

Co-leading the CAP: INSPIRE project are Jidong Huang, chair and professor of electrical and computer engineering; Kiran George, College of Engineering and Computer Science associate dean for graduate programs, faculty research

and innovation; Sam Behseta, professor of mathematics; Jessica Jaynes, associate professor of mathematics and director of the Center for Computational and Applied Mathematics; and Joshua DiPaolo, associate professor of philosophy.

The grant project allows faculty and students to work together on real-world AI applications, innovative research and industry-sponsored projects through hands-on, project-based learning.

Students will also gain machine learning and data science skills and develop technical competencies to thrive in the AI workforce.

Bai said that the rapid advancement of AI technology is transforming industries at an unprecedented pace, creating a challenge for universities to keep their

curricula up-to-date.

The project's interdisciplinary nature will bring together students from STEM and other majors, allowing them to explore AI's applications across different fields and build versatile skill sets.

"Key courses in various disciplines, including computer science, engineering, business, biological science, mathematics and philosophy, will expose students to multiple aspects of applications of AI and prepare them for a wide range of AI-driven career pathways," Bai said.

"By fostering technical skills and ethical awareness, the project prepares students to meet the evolving demands of the AI workforce and make meaningful contributions in a fast-changing, AI-driven job market."

LICENSE PREPARATION

Real estate concentration trains students to be leaders

CSUF News Media Services

The rapid growth and expansion of California's housing market has created a greater need for real estate professionals to lead the industry forward, and Cal State Fullerton is stepping up to the challenge.

To satisfy the high demand for real estate professionals working in residential and commercial real estate in Southern California, CSUF's College of Business and Economics introduced a real estate concentration this fall for business students.

Studying such topics as real estate finance and investment, brokerage, urban planning, market analysis, acquisition, development, and management, students learn to analyze real estate assets, assess risk factors and apply their knowledge to their decision making.

In their courses, students collaborate with a wide range of faculty experts who not only have professional experience in the field, but also conduct academic research that has been published in such top real estate journals as Real Estate Economics, Journal of Real Estate Finance and Economics, and Journal of Real Estate Research.

"Real estate is important to individuals, households, business organizations and society as a whole," said Jia Xie, associate professor of finance and academic director of the Center for Real Estate at CSUF. "The market in Southern California will continue to expand in the future due to the heated housing demand. To prepare students for this, the curriculum spans the broader context of real estate and allows them to explore the full structure of real estate and its role in our com-

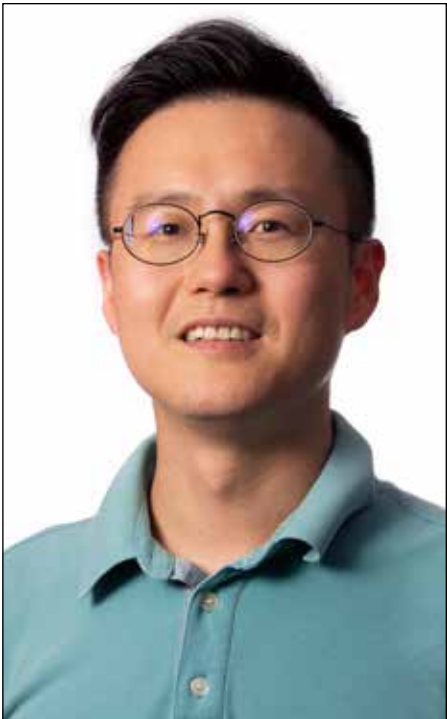


PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES
Jia Xie, associate professor of finance and academic director of the Center for Real Estate

munities."

The concentration also puts aspiring real estate professionals on the fast track to their future roles in the industry, added Xie.

In California, a person must hold a salesperson license for two years before they can earn a broker license, but CSUF has an agreement with the California Department of Real Estate, which stipulates that CSUF graduates can take the



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES
Greg Herder, CSUF alum and director of the Center for Real Estate

exam for their broker license right after graduation. This ensures that CSUF business grads move up in the industry at a quicker rate than graduates from other universities, said Xie.

Through a partnership with the college's Center for Real Estate, students further develop their business, analytical and interpersonal communication skills while gaining networking and professional experience. Established in 1996,

the center is dedicated to promoting real estate education, supporting students and contributing to research in real estate-related fields.

The center provides workshops with real estate professionals, on-campus financial analysis training and certification, access to national and local conferences, and career days. Students in the center can also get involved with the Real Estate Association, a student-run organization that focuses on networking, professional and personal development, and mentorship.

Greg Herder, who earned a bachelor's degree in psychology in 2002, is the director of the center and has been teaching at CSUF since 2006. In that time, he's seen firsthand the transformative power of the center and how it provides students the tools they need to launch their careers.

"Getting involved in organizations and building a network of fellow students, professors and alumni is the fastest way to find outstanding job opportunities that you would never get otherwise," said Herder.

In addition to joining a Titan business alumni network that is nearing 80,000 strong, Center for Real Estate members also have access to such professional networks as the Institute of Real Estate Management, the Building Owners and Managers Association of Orange County, and the International Council of Shopping Centers.

"The Center for Real Estate isn't just focused on helping members grow personally and professionally while they're here at Cal State Fullerton. It's focused on supporting them and setting them up for success long after they've graduated," said Herder.

ALUMNA

Special education teacher recognized for inspiring interest in mathematics

CSUF News Media Services

Cal State Fullerton alumna and special education teacher Suzanne Huerta is committed to empowering her fifth-grade students with disabilities to discover their abilities in learning mathematics.

Huerta teaches students with mild to moderate disabilities at Whitaker Elementary School in Buena Park.

As Whitaker Elementary's 2023 Teacher of the Year, Huerta uses an instructional method and teaching approach based on understanding how children naturally think and learn mathematics.

"I use cognitively-guided instruction, emphasizing understanding and building upon students' knowledge and thought processes. Instead of just memorizing procedures, it helps students develop a strong conceptual foundation," she said.

"This method gives students confidence and encourages them to solve problems that make sense. By understanding each of my student's thinking and developmental stages, I can tailor their instruction to meet their individual needs."

Instead of giving students multiplication timed tests, Huerta presents them with the opportunity to explore what it means to multiply and devise their own strategies to solve a math problem.

"For example, students will know that that five times two means five bags with two ears of corn in it," she said. "I also use word problems where students have a deep understanding of what the problem is asking versus giving them a worksheet full of word problems."

For her work in boosting the mathematical capabilities of her young students, defying stereotypes and promoting equity in education, Huerta is the state's finalist for the 2024 Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching. She is California's only recipient in the elementary math category.

The award is the highest honor the U.S. government bestows to K-12 STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) teachers. The National Science Foundation administers the program for the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

The California Department of Education partners with the California Mathematics Council and the California Association of Science Educators to recruit and select nominees for the award program.

Presidential Award recipients will be honored at a Washington, D.C., ceremony and receive a \$10,000 special award from the National Science Foundation.

"This award amplifies the voices and abilities of students with disabilities, which enriches the learning environment for all students and promotes diverse ways of thinking and problem-solving," said Huerta, who earned a bachelor's degree in child and adolescent development in 2006 from CSUF.

The award is given to teachers demonstrating deep content knowledge of the subjects they teach and the ability to motivate and enable student success.

Huerta was recognized Nov. 9 by the California Mathematics Council, Southern Section, for her national accolade at the organization's conference in Palm Springs. Huerta also presented a session focusing on the relationships between assessment, artifacts, advocacy, and student access to meaningful mathematics



PHOTO COURTESY OF BUENA PARK SCHOOL DISTRICT
Special education teacher and alumna Suzanne Huerta is the state's finalist for the 2024 Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SUZANNE HUERTA
Huerta shows her presidential award for excellence in teaching math.

and how these play out for students with disabilities.

Huerta was unsure of her career path after high school. At Fullerton College, where she earned an associate degree in liberal arts, she took a course about becoming a teacher.

"I instantly knew this was my future. From that day on, I dedicated all my energy and focus to becoming a teacher," she said.

Huerta transferred to the university to prepare for a career in teaching. She discovered a sense of belonging and



PHOTO COURTESY OF SUZANNE HUERTA
Huerta is congratulated by fellow educators from Whitaker Elementary School in Buena Park at the California Mathematics Council, Southern Section, fall conference.

community with peers in the Department of Child and Adolescent Studies.

"I learned so much at Cal State Fullerton — the courses in educational theory provided me with a deep understanding of various teaching methods and learning styles to adapt teaching strategies to meet diverse student needs," Huerta said.

Through other coursework, she learned how to integrate digital tools into math instruction, create an inclusive classroom environment and observe classrooms in school settings.

"I am forever grateful to CSUF," she said.

The veteran teacher, who went on to earn a master's degree in education from Whittier College, finds it rewarding to watch her students grow and become successful in mastering math.

"It's important that my students feel like they are in a safe place. When they realize they are, they begin to blossom," she said. "Building relationships and partnerships with families is also important to make a lasting impact on young students' lives."

CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

Tapping into Indigenous roots to provide equine therapy

CSUF News Media Services

Kenya Perezgil participated in sweat lodge ceremonies in her family’s backyard for as long as she can remember. Inside the dome-shaped hut, a fire pit burned lava stones infused with a herbal tea mixture to cleanse their spirits and connect them with their ancestors. “My parents taught me that I am the reflection of the Earth, the Creator and to always acknowledge the natural world’s elements,” said Perezgil, a child and adolescent studies student at Cal State Fullerton. “All Native and Indigenous tribes rely on the natural world to sustain all that exists, and it is our responsibility to keep Mother Earth alive and well.”

Since she was a young girl, her parents instilled values that are rooted in community, leadership and respect. Over the years, she became a staunch advocate for increasing cultural awareness and preserving Native American lands in Mexico, Colombia and Peru.

After transferring from the College of the Desert to Cal State Fullerton, Perezgil wanted to connect her Indigenous roots with her experience in higher education. She discovered the Inter-Tribal Student Council, a student-led organization that champions Indigenous and Native culture. Perezgil serves as president of council and had the opportunity to deliver a land acknowledgment at the university’s 2024 Convocation and State of the University.

“Native and Indigenous people are in the process of collectively regaining our culture, power and resources,” said Perezgil. “I actively encourage all students to absorb the deep history and wisdom about the land we are standing on.”

The club’s general meetings consist of educational films, talking circles, powwow dances, social outings, nature walks, workshops, and conversations with representatives from the Native and Indigenous communities.

“The Inter-Tribal Student Council exists for us to support each other through our educational journey while learning more about the diversity of Native culture,” said Perezgil.

Plans are underway for a new Native American and Indigenous Resource Center in the Pollak Library as part of Diversity Initiatives and Resource Centers’ expansion efforts. Until a new center opens, students can access resources through Native American and Indigenous Student Services.

With plans to graduate in spring 2025, Perezgil aspires to become a licensed therapist specializing in equine therapy for youth. She felt inspired to care for generations of families through the Native philosophy that children are Earth’s protectors.

“I would like to honor the Native philosophy and be an advocate for children and families,” she said. “My intention is to promote harmonious connections within families.”

She envisions equine therapy as an accessible and transformative counseling practice through the healing force of horseback riding.

As a horse owner for over eight years, Perezgil understands the therapeutic



PHOTO COURTESY OF KENYA PEREZGIL

Kenya Perezgil, child and adolescent studies student

benefits of horseback riding and interacting with horses. She explained that horses function as mirrors, motivating people to reflect on their thoughts and behaviors.

“Horses are highly sensible animals that emit peace and tranquility to any person in their surroundings,” said Perezgil. “Horses helped me build my confidence and shift my mindset to an ‘I can’ attitude.”

Perezgil credits CSUF for enriching her education with hands-on therapy experience.

To obtain her degree, Perezgil practiced 60 hours of applied behavior analysis therapy for children with autism.

“I learned that working with children with autism is a very fulfilling experience, and it brought me to tears of joy when I saw progress within my client,” Perezgil said. “I was patient and detailed during my sessions with him. We quickly built a bond and I wish our connection would last forever.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF KENYA PEREZGIL

Tribal Student Council president Kenya Perezgil, center, at the Native American and Indigenous Recognition Celebration in 2024

Events

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the mixer.

Pinzon, who graduated in 2009 with a communications degree, remembers the supportive environment throughout the campus during her time at CSUF.

“I just remember Cal State Fullerton feeling like such a melting pot,” Pinzon said. “So, I just felt support from every angle, from the orientation to the communications department to being able to go up and ask for help.”

Many first-gen students have to rely on outside sources for help in filling out financial documents and providing information, Pinzon said.

“My parents were here to work and provide a roof over our heads,” she said. “I think as first gen, we grow up a little quicker than the rest of the population. You’re kind of forced to pick up and learn stuff on your own.”

The mixer started four years ago when Justine Budisantoso, Student Outreach and Recent Graduate Initiatives coordinator for the Office of Alumni Engagement, and Stephanie Reyes with the Career Center, were discussing strategies on how to support students through the lens of career professional development.

“We were looking for something new something that we hadn’t seen on campus, but also applicable for the changing student body that we saw at the time,” Budisantoso said. “We wanted to open it up to as many alumni as possible who are willing to share their advice. One of the things I’ve experienced in talking with a lot of our students is ‘how do I talk to people’ or ‘I’m really nervous about saying hi.’ If we provide you the space then it won’t be awkward saying hi because that’s the whole purpose of the event, to say hi.”

Budisantoso and Reyes wanted the mixer to be an informal gathering so students would feel comfortable enough to talk with alumni about their experiences at CSUF.

“We told students there’s no formal program,” Budisantoso said. “Just come, eat, and we hope you take this oppor-



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Nearly 32% of Cal State Fullerton’s student population identify as first-gen students.

tunity to meet other students because the people you meet in college are your network when you graduate.”

Student Jenny Guzman grew up in Fullerton, so attending CSUF has been a seamless process.

When Guzman, who majors in journalism, was applying to colleges, CSUF was her top choice because it “checked up all my boxes, offered my major, it was close to home, and (offered) pretty good financial resources.”

That CSUF is a Hispanic-serving institution is also a huge plus, Guzman said.

“They acknowledge not only my people but also first-generation students like me, as well,” she said. “So being able to provide those resources to students I think is pretty helpful. Without them, I think I’d be pretty lost.”



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

The First-Generation College Celebration recognizes the diversity and accomplishments of the Titan community.

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

Coach refines winning team-building strategy

By Brian Robin
contributing writer

Four years ago, Jeff Harada was on the cusp of doing what a generation of Cal State Fullerton women's basketball coaches before him couldn't do. He had the joystick in his hands and was capably pulling the Titans out of the perpetual dive the program was in for most of the century.

The Titans finished the 2019-2020 season 17-14 and — with Big West Conference Player of the Year Raina Perez raining points and assists on defenders — clearly on the ascendancy. It took Harada three years to rack up the program's best record in the 21st century. Three years to solidify his well-earned reputation as a basketball Mr. Fixit who left programs in far better condition (see Hawaii Pacific and Central Washington) than he found them.

Then, COVID.

Then, Perez transferred to North Carolina State.

Then, Taylor Turney, one of the Titans' best players, the Sundance to Perez's Butch Cassidy, a big guard who was a matchup nightmare for everyone in the Big West, left the team.

Then, New Zealander Amiee Book, one of Harada's most astute recruiting coups: a tall, versatile, do-everything player who could score from all three levels, transferred to Fresno State.

Then, injuries happened.

Then, the wheels came off.

CSUF went 4-18 in 2020-21 and 11-18 the following year. The Titans went 14-16 in 2022-23, climbing back to seventh in conference and going to the Big West Conference Tournament quarterfinal, before slipping back to 10-20 and ninth last year.

Make no mistake. It wasn't that Harada lost the grip on the joystick. He was squeezing every talent drop out of his teams and recruiting as fiercely as he ever did, selling Cal State Fullerton as a California Eden: the great weather, the academics, the opportunity to come in as a freshman and contribute immediately. And contribute immediately for playing in a conference that didn't feature a travel schedule straight out of Ferdinand Magellan's itinerary.

No. The rules of engagement changed. As a result, the joystick didn't respond to Harada's grip and guidance the way it once had. Like men's basketball coach Dedrique Taylor down the hall, Harada found himself recruiting those hidden nuggets CSUF coaches must find to re-



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES
Cal State Fullerton women's basketball coach Jeff Harada confers with players during a game.

main relevant.

And much like Taylor, Harada got them for two seasons, before they migrated to bigger programs. Or, in the cases of Lily Wahinekapu (who transferred to Hawaii) and Hope Hassmann (Idaho): two All-Big West Freshmen selections, one season each, before both migrated closer to home.

"After COVID, everything changed. Rules changed, people changed and life as we know it changed," Harada said. "Life as we knew it from four years ago is so different. I think like anything, you have to adapt to the times. If you don't adapt, you're not going to make it.

"The number one thing for us is we have to understand what the landscape of college basketball is right now and be willing and able to adapt to it. That's the biggest key: trying to adapt to a landscape with rules changes and a transfer portal in full swing. We are trying to figure out how we can be successful with what we have. We don't have what other schools have and that's a fact, so we have to try to maximize what we do have and use those things wisely to bring in the best players we can to elevate our program."

For his part, Harada has adjusted his grip on the joystick. He's had to out of pure pragmatism. After all, having a player for four years — like center Aichel Hernandez — has become the exception rather than the rule. Especially at CSUF, which lacks a significant NIL (name, image and likeness) collective to raise money that could keep players

around for longer than two years.

This shifting balance of power means a shift in Harada's approach. No longer can he exclusively use the stick and ignore the carrot as a motivator. Players today want to know why decisions are made on everything from playing time to why they're not The One taking the final shot of a game. Fail to explain the whys to a player, and often that player will start exploring their next where.

"It's definitely reminding coaches to be more aware of their communication and interaction with the players," Harada said. "Not that we weren't in the past, but I'm constantly reminding myself to be more mindful of how I communicate with them and how it can be received and perceived."

This year's Titans receiving and perceiving those messages is a young group. Harada has five freshmen or redshirt freshmen and four sophomores/redshirt sophomores on his 12-player roster. Hernandez and guard Emily Strachan are the only seniors and 5-foot-10 guard Demonnie Lagway is the only junior.

Hernandez isn't a bad senior to build around. The 6-1 native of Chihuahua, Mexico, by way of Orangewood Academy, is a magnetic role model for the young Titans, a member of the Mexico National Team who is already averaging double-figures (10.8) in rebounding this season.

Along with the progress of the underclassmen, Lagway's progression from bit player to key player is one key to the Titans' season. She's already seen a 13-minute jump in minutes (from 16.3 to 29)

and a three-point-per-game jump (5.5 to 8.5) in points. Harada indicated this is just the beginning.

"It's go-time for her. I hope by her junior year, she understands what needs to be done," Harada said.

Sophomore Eva Levingston understands. With Hassmann transferring and All-Big West Honorable Mention guard Gabi Vidmar graduating, Levingston is the lone decorated returner as a member of the All-Big West Freshman Team last year. Harada expects her 4.8 ppg and 3.7 rebounds-per-game totals from last year to jump, even as Levingston is off to a slow start in the scoring department (4.8 through four games) this season.

Four newcomers, including two players Harada plucked from the transfer portal, are expected to contribute. Sophomore point guard Aaliyah Stanton — a transfer from UTEP who Harada said will be the team's defensive sparkplug — has already contributed in the points (a team-best 8.8 points) and assists (a team-high 10) departments.

Redshirt freshman Maddie Muniz, who came from Idaho, is the team's designated sniper. She leads the team in 3-point shots (six) and attempts (16). Freshman Maddy Tauro is the athletic, do-everything player Harada covets, prompting him to say "She can be really special. She's understanding how to translate her skills to the Division 1 level."

Then, there's freshman Jana Falsdotir. Harada found the 5-4 Iceland native through one of his numerous worldly contacts and immediately started checking all the boxes on his wish list. Not the least of which being her time spent on the Iceland National Team as a 16-year-old, playing with older women — and holding her own.

"When I watched her film, I liked her style of play," Harada said. "I liked her motor, her toughness. You could see the things she could bring to the program. I thought she would fit into our team, our system and our conference. The Big West is a guard-dominated conference, and I believe she is someone who can make a difference on both ends. What sealed the deal for me was her commitment to defend. Defense is her favorite part of the game, and she shows it on every possession.

"She's the perfect example of it not being the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog, and she has a lot of fight in her."

Now, Harada has to figure out how to take that fight and pass it around. That's when the joystick will feel right in his hands again.



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