



PHOTO BY MICHAEL GOULDING, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

Discoverfest celebrates wide range of extracurricular activities

The field for the first inflatable mascot race pose for a photo. The race was won by Tommy Bang, second from the left. See the Discoverfest story and more photos on Page 3.

COMMUNITY

PAYING IT FORWARD: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCE

Practical advice for adapting to campus life

By Lou Ponsi
contributing writer

When Keshav Daga and Kavil Jain chose to pursue master's degrees in the United States, they acknowledged feeling a bit of trepidation.

Certainly, there were challenges associated with earning an advanced degree, but doing it 8,000 miles from their homes in India, in unfamiliar surroundings and immersed in a culture different than their own, created additional angst.

But thanks to the support they'd received from international students who

had walked the path before them, the transition, while still tricky at times, became seamless.

And Daga and Jain, in turn, decided to harness the kindness they received and pay it forward for international students who are considering Cal State Fullerton for their higher education.

Daga and Jain began their studies at CSUF in Spring 2023 and completed their master's degrees in December 2024. Their story begins in 2020.

Daga and Jain, close friends who had known each other since high school, had earned bachelor's degrees at universities in India and were working in the IT field. When they decided to pursue master's

degrees in computer science, they wanted to further their studies at a university in the U.S.

"We were basically browsing on what were the best universities in California," Daga said. "We always wanted to come to California."

From their research, the longtime friends discovered that CSUF not only offers a fine computer science program but that the Orange County university prides itself on inclusivity, welcoming learners from all backgrounds.

Before journeying halfway around the world, the pair went to LinkedIn to connect with other international students who attended CSUF.

From making these connections, Jain and Daga felt more at ease about what to expect at an American university.

This support gave them the confidence to apply.

Still, there were some nuanced differences to navigate.

"Even for booking an apartment, we didn't know that we had to pay with a money order," Daga said. "Since we were back in India, how can we pay through a money order? Everything, a lot of people, they helped us, supported us; we are still grateful to them."

So grateful that once they arrived at CSUF, they launched initiatives designed

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PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES
Shu-Chen "Jenny" Yen, professor of child and adolescent studies at Cal State Fullerton

DEALING WITH DISASTER

A children's story about LA fires offers facts and reassurance

Professor Shu-Chen Yen's book is downloadable from website

By Nicole Gregory
contributing writer

Parents who are seeking a way to talk about the destructive fires that raged through Los Angeles with their young children now can use a new "social story" written by Cal State Fullerton professor Shu-Chen Yen.

Her story, "Fire, Fire, Go Away!" illustrated by Ying-Fang Wei, is available in a downloadable form and as an animated video. It talks about the fires in terms that young children can understand while providing reassurance about their safety.

The book is one of many social stories Yen has written for children about disasters.

The idea of using a story to address children's fears was inspired by the events of 9/11. Yen's daughter was just four years old in 2001, when the terrorist attacks took place, and was frightened when she saw her grandparents crying as they watched television. She asked her mother what happened. "I was thinking, how do I explain a terrorist attack to a 4-year-old child?" Yen recalled.

She decided to use a "social story" approach that special education teachers often employ to break down an instruction into simple understandable components for their students.

Yen explained to her daughter what had happened and talked about the people who came to help and assured the girl that she was safe and loved. This technique was successful — and it became first social story that Yen wrote to answer a child's questions while also offering comfort.

"A social story has to be age-appropriate, culturally appropriate, developmentally appropriate," Yen said. They are written in a question-and-answer format, based on questions children often ask in the face of a disaster.

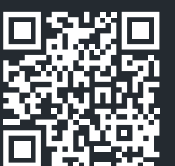
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Cal State Fullerton.

performer in the nation for

TOP 10 SOCIAL MOBILITY

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



fullerton.edu/rankings

MONEY

Financial Wellness Peer Mentoring: Students helping students

Options explored in one-on-one sessions

By **Larry Urish**
contributing writer

The numbers are sobering: More than one in four college students give their personal finances a grade of “C” or worse, according to an August 2024 nationwide survey by WalletHub. The same survey notes that seven in 10 college students feel overwhelmed by their financial responsibilities and that one in five have no plan to pay off their student debt after graduating.

Here’s the good news: The powers that be at Cal State Fullerton understand that many students deal with financial stress, and they realize that offering them a way to better understand the elements of personal finance can help reduce this stress. To that end, the university’s Basic Needs Services office, which furnishes a variety of programs and support to help Titans experiencing unforeseen financial hardship, is offering Financial Wellness Peer Mentoring.

Through this program, which began last semester, CSUF students meet one-on-one with a peer mentor, a fellow student, to discuss a variety of financial literacy topics: building healthy money-management practices, credit basics, budgeting, debt management and more.

“Speaking about finances can be a touchy subject,” said Victoria Ajemian, director of Basic Needs Services. “They often feel more comfortable broaching topics like this with a peer. Having the student-to-student dynamic makes the subject and the challenge more relatable. We’ve seen students who’ve never had any exposure to financial literacy, who’ve never heard financial terms or never started a budget. There’s a need across our campus to get this information out there.”

Ajemian noted that discussing finances may be daunting when the conversation involves a finance professional. “College students are more relatable to other college students,” she said. “Stu-

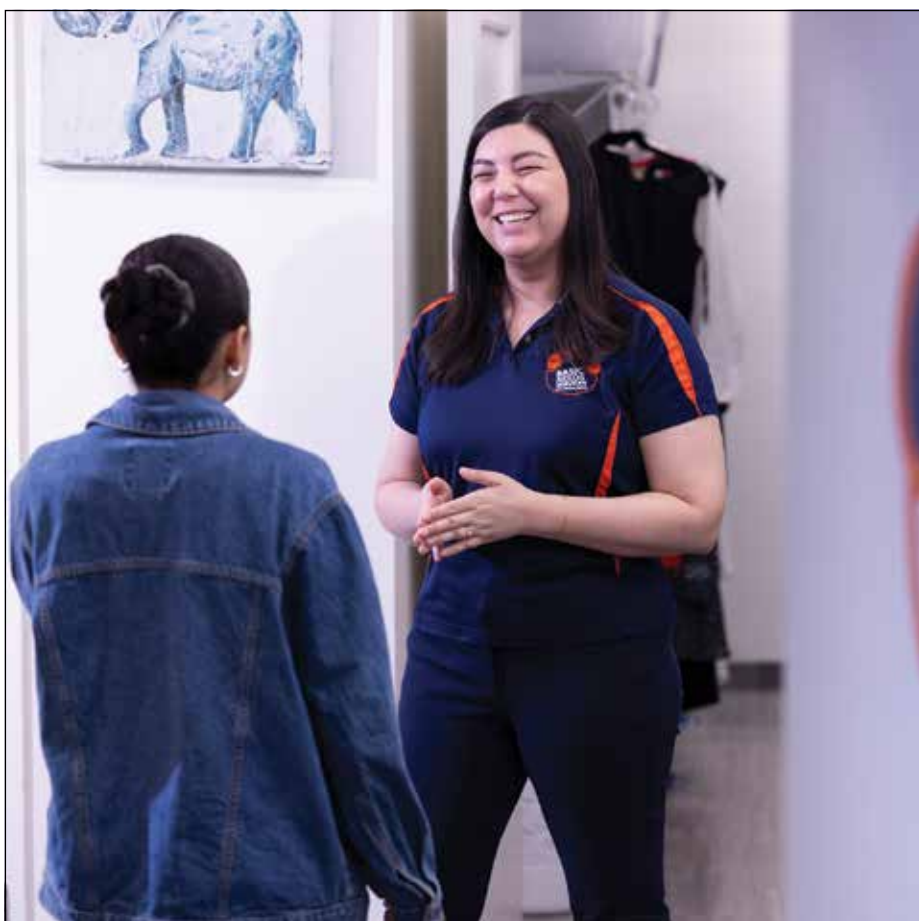


PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES
Victoria Ajemian, director of Basic Needs Services at Cal State Fullerton

dents may think, ‘This peer mentor has had a similar experience. Let’s check this out and give it a try.’”

“Students ask a lot of different questions,” said Tran Nguyen, a second-year business administration student and financial wellness peer mentor. “The process is tailored to each individual. We try to make this as accessible as possible. The sessions average around 30 minutes, and we can meet with them in person or virtually. ... One student commented after a session, ‘This felt so much like a coffee chat, like I was meeting a friend, rather than a professional advisor.’ She was able to be more transparent because I could relate to her in a lot of ways.”

The peer-mentoring effort is part of Basic Needs Services’ Financial Literacy Program. “Students can access all of our programs, which are virtual, via Zoom, if they’re not ready for one-on-one mentoring,” Ajemian said. “We also record programs to have on our website, as well.” To access a helpful variety of YouTube videos, visit the Financial Literacy Program site (fullerton.edu/basic-needs/programs/financial.html) and scroll to the bottom of the page.

In addition to the training that all Basic Needs Services student assistants receive — discussions about the specific services provided, the importance of respecting privacy and some of the

challenges faced by students seeking assistance — peer mentors learn how to effectively engage with students in a one-on-one session. Additional training covers the topics offered through Basic Needs Services’ Financial Literacy Program, as well as issues based on specific questions that come up during the sessions.

“We have group conversations about what financial wellness means to them and how to apply that to a student coming in for help,” Ajemian said. “As this is only our second semester, we’re still learning what topics students are seeking through peer mentoring, and we’ll adjust our training in the future as needed.”

Both Ajemian and Nguyen stressed that the peer mentors are not financial advisers. “If a student comes to a peer-mentoring session with pointed questions designed for a professional advisor, we’ll direct them to other resources,” Ajemian said. “Some of these resources include the Office of Financial Aid, Student Business Services and the Scholarships Office.”

This semester, drop-in hours for one-on-one mentoring, which takes place in Gordon Hall, Room 179, are Thursdays, 1-3 p.m., and Fridays, 10:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Zoom sessions are also available.

Students seeking assistance can also schedule an appointment by visiting the Financial Literacy Program site (see the web address above) and selecting the link located under the Financial Wellness Peer Mentoring header, near the top of the page.

Peer mentors have benefitted from the Financial Wellness program, as well. “They get a lot of transferrable skills that can apply to a variety of careers,” Ajemian said. “And in having direct conversations with students, they hone their professional conversational skills.”

“This experience has developed my knowledge in a variety of finance topics because I was able to learn from both the training and the hands-on experience helping others,” Nguyen said. “And when I leave Cal State Fullerton, I can also look back and see how much I was able to contribute and be a part of this community.”

Yen

FROM PAGE 1

“For example, for the L.A. fire, kids want to know who did it, what happened?” Yen said. “So, I had to do research. At that time, we didn’t know the causes for sure. The only two factors we did know are California is very dry and we have the Santa Ana winds.”

For each of her books, Yen thoroughly researches her subject to ensure her facts are correct.

“Bottom line, the child really worries about their safety,” Yen said. “I reassure them that they will be safe and talk about their parents’ unconditional love, then I redirect the child’s attention to the positive, like the firefighters or whoever is helping,” she said.

A key component of the stories is an idea of how a child can help. “The story empowers the child to be the changing agent, to do something through action such as donating a toy or a book to make the child feel better.”

Yen has written a social story about COVID-19 called “Something Strange Happened in My City,” one about anti-racism called “A Scary Trip to a Grocery Store,” one about hurricanes called “After the Hurricane: Can We Fix It? Yes, We Can,” among many others. All are illustrated, and some are accompanied by an animated video. “I create this kind of social story to comfort children in these big situations,” she said.

The stories and videos can be found on The Social Story Center website.

Yen’s stories are aimed at children 3 to 8 years old but parents can adapt the wording so it makes sense to their child. “I have to give the right amount

of information to this age range,” said Yen, who only provides facts a child can understand. She also includes lesson plans for teachers.

Yen tests her stories before making them available to the public and has learned that adults often find them therapeutic, too.

She wants the stories to provide hope but not false promises. For instance, she can’t tell a child there will never be another fire, but she can emphasize that their parents will love them forever. “Kids need to hear that,” she said. “The idea is to reassure the child of your love and then redirect them to the positive of humanity.”

In any disaster, there are people who arrive to help. “For example, for the fires, you see the firefighters, the helicopter pilots, the first responders and volunteers,” Yen said. “During COVID, it was the delivery people, doctors and nurses.”

Yen was born and raised in Taiwan. After studying economics, she changed her major to child education and got her master’s and doctorate degrees at the University of Missouri in Columbia. She serves as a governing board member for National Association for the Education of Young Children and has been teaching at Cal State Fullerton for 24 years, where she’s been recognized as Outstanding Faculty for Community Engagement.

She is working on her next book, which is about deportation.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To read or download “Fire, Fire, Go Away!” and other social stories and lesson plans by Shu-Chen Jenny Yen, visit <https://socialstorycenter.com>.

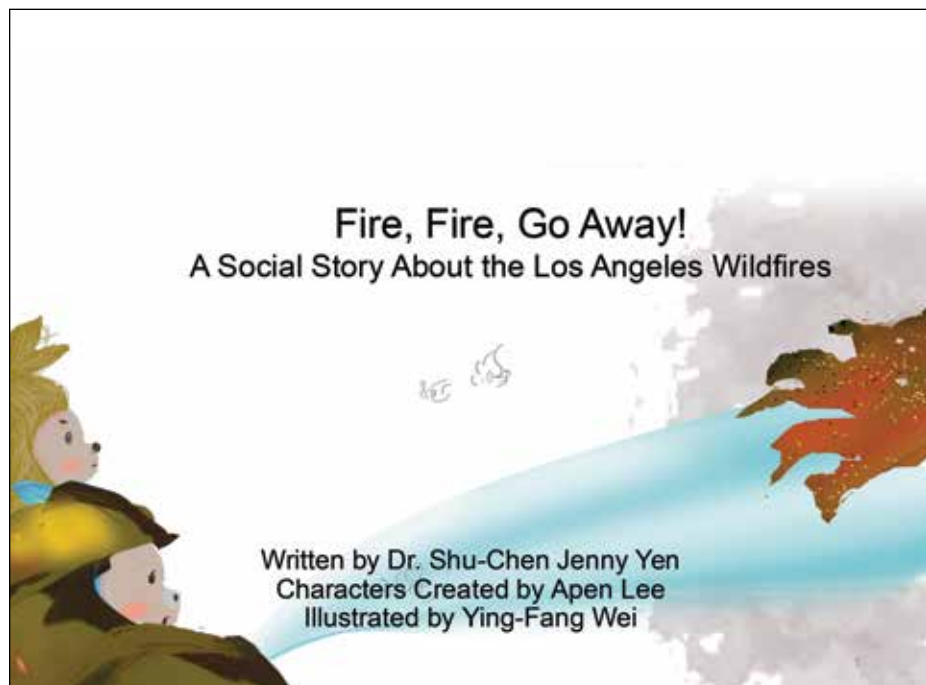


PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES
The downloadable story book explains the causes and response to the Los Angeles fires in a way children can understand.

#3

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

■ U.S. News & World Report, 2024

Cal State Fullerton

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EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Discoverfest connects students with clubs and organizations

Two-day event presents hundreds of possibilities

By Jenelyn Russo
contributing writer

Each semester, Cal State Fullerton's Office of Student Life & Leadership, along with Associated Students, Inc., co-host Discoverfest, a program designed to connect students with their campus community. This two-day event, which was held at the end of January to kick off the spring semester, is the largest involvement event for CSUF student organizations and provides Titans the opportunity to explore everything from cultural, academic and athletic clubs to Greek life and special-interest groups.

Discoverfest in its earliest form was introduced on campus in 1996 when the Dean of Students Office and New Student Programs collaborated to host Clubfest, a new program that put the spotlight on CSUF's then 200+ student clubs and organizations.

Over the years, the event has evolved, both in size and format, adapting to CSUF's growing student body and the interests of the campus community. Today, the two-day experience is held twice a year at the Intramural Fields and features interactive booths, live performances and giveaways, all with the goal of spotlighting the university's 300+ student organizations.

To ensure every Titan has the opportunity to find their place on campus, Discoverfest was strategically planned, with Day 1 taking place midday and Day 2 held in the early evening. This approach accommodates students with varying class times, making it easier for everyone to participate.

"Discoverfest is a really great opportunity for these clubs to connect with other students, to build that community on campus," said Jose Rivera-Hernandez, student organizations coordinator in CSUF's Office of Student Life & Leadership. "It's all for folks who aren't involved in clubs but want to get involved, see what that part of college life is like and, hopefully, make those connections with these clubs and organizations."

Rivera-Hernandez said there are approximately 315 student clubs and organizations currently active on campus, including 38 newly registered this spring semester. Of these, 208 participated in last month's Discoverfest, where nearly 2,000 Titan students attended and engaged with the event.

"This is a really critical time for clubs," Rivera-Hernandez said. "This is an optional opportunity for them, but it does help tremendously with their recruiting because they're exposed to so many students throughout the event. So it's a very popular event for our student clubs. They're always eager to participate."

Titan student Samantha Arrua is a junior history major and president of CSUF's women's club soccer program. Arrua has been playing soccer since she was 8 years old, including through high school at Brea Olinda. When she arrived on campus as a freshman, she chose to join CSUF's women's club soccer team as a way to continuing playing the sport



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL GOULDING, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

The new Furrries Club was a hit with students wanting photos with them on the first day of Discoverfest.



Fraternities and sororities were well-represented at Discoverfest 2025.

while also prioritizing academics.

"I wanted a good balance between school and extracurriculars," Arrua said. "I want to be a teacher, so I think playing club sports is a good balance in between because it is still so competitive. We do play against other colleges and universities. We do travel and we do practice twice a week, so I can do what I love but also have enough time to do schoolwork, too."

Some of their opponents include club teams from UC Riverside, Cal Poly Pomona, Claremont McKenna and UC San Diego. Thanks to their participation in Discoverfest this year, the club saw more than 60 students who expressed

interest, enabling the program to add several new players each semester, which is key for sustaining their year-long season.

"It really exposed us, because there are a lot of students who didn't even know we had club sports," Arrua said. "It was a huge turnout. It was great."

Beyond athletics, Arrua knows several fellow Titans who have found connections through Discoverfest, whether it's in departmental clubs, political and social action organizations or service opportunities.

"Discoverfest is probably the most effective way for people to see there are clubs on campus," Arrua said. "It ac-

tually gets people involved and shows them how much Cal State Fullerton clubs have to offer."

Whether students are looking to join a club for the first time or are seeking new opportunities to engage with the campus community, Discoverfest serves as a gateway to the diverse and vibrant student life at CSUF, ensuring that all Titans have the chance to make the most of their college journey.

"It's a really fun experience," Arrua said of Discoverfest. "The Office of Student Life & Leadership really does their best to make it accessible, and it shows how much they care about the students here at Cal State Fullerton."



Haziel Flores strums the guitar at the Mariachi Titans booth.



The Lambda Theta Phi Latin fraternity decorated their Discoverfest tent with flags of Latin American countries.

FUNDRAISER

5-time Gold Glove winner Matt Chapman gives back to CSUF

CSUF News Media Services

At 8 years old, he attended his first game at Goodwin Field and was awestruck by the players' strength, passion and talent. Years later, he began honing his baseball skills at Titans Athletics summer camp, where he earned his first dream role on the field — a Titan bat boy.

"Picking up Shane Costa and Justin Turner's bats was a highlight of my childhood. I had a front row seat to how to carry yourself on the field, how to compete and how to never back down to a challenge," said Chapman. "The Titans were my heroes."

At the Jan. 24 Dinner With the Titans fundraiser, the San Francisco Giants third baseman shared how Titans Baseball fueled his love for the game while giving him the foundational tools he needed to thrive in the big leagues.

Joined by a crowd of current players, coaches, friends, family and alumni, Chapman donated \$50,000 to the program that paved the way for his major league career, helping Titans baseball raise more than \$257,000 for new technology, scouting system software, recruiting and more.

Throughout his collegiate career, Chapman earned a myriad of accolades that foretold his major league success, including being named the 2012 Big West Freshman of the Year and earning the 2014 American Baseball Coaches Association Gold Glove Award.

"Cal State Fullerton holds such a special place in my heart. It's where I grew as a person, where I became the player I am today, and where I learned what it truly means to be a Titan," said Chapman.

Drafted in the first round by the Oakland Athletics in 2014, Chapman made his Major League Baseball debut in June 2017 and was signed by the San Francisco Giants last year. At the close of the 2024 season, Chapman was recognized for his defensive power, earning his fifth Rawlings Gold Glove Award since the start of his MLB career.

His achievements at the major league level have landed him among an impressive lineup of Titans Baseball alumni who have brought their skills to MLB, including Tim Wallach, Phil Nevin, Justin Turner, Tanner Bibee, Michael Lorenzen and more.

"When people in professional baseball know you came from Cal State Fullerton, there's a certain respect that you're given. The program carries that weight," said Chapman. "For every one of us who has made it to the big leagues and found success, it's because of the foundation that Cal State Fullerton helped us build."

Off the field, Chapman encourages current players to focus on their education, noting that CSUF doesn't just train professional ball players. It sets graduates up for success after baseball.

"That's the beauty of college. You step into the unknown. You challenge



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KATIE ALBERTSON

University President Ronald S. Rochon, left, with Matt Chapman and head coach Jason Dietrich



Matt Chapman, San Francisco Giants third baseman, at the Jan. 24 Dinner With the Titans fundraiser

yourself, and when it's all over, you come out a better version of yourself. You come out a Titan," said Chapman.

University President Ronald S. Rochon spoke to the program's storied reputation and what it means to be a

student-athlete at the top of their game.

"Everywhere I've traveled across our country, everyone always mentions Cal State Fullerton baseball," said Rochon. "To be a Titan takes hard work, discipline, resiliency and collaboration."

Titans Baseball will open its 2025 season Feb. 14 at home versus Stanford University, and the team will host the inaugural 2025 Big West Baseball Championship May 21-25 at Goodwin Field.

STEM

Civil engineer earns Presidential Award for mentorship

CSUF News Media Services

In addition to producing acclaimed geotechnical engineering research on landslides, mudslides and other natural disasters, Cal State Fullerton civil engineer Binod Tiwari is widely recognized for his mentorship and support of students.

Tiwari, associate vice president for research and sponsored programs and professor of civil and environmental engineering, has mentored more than 240 undergraduates and graduate students during his 18-year career at the university.

For his work to provide guidance, foster growth and create opportunities for his students, Tiwari has been honored with the 2023 Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics and Engineering Mentoring.

Tiwari is among 25 recipients of the nation's highest award for 2022 and 2023, announced Jan. 13 by President Joe Biden.

"At CSUF, we are committed to creating a supportive environment where students from all walks of life can pursue and succeed in their educational journey," said Tiwari, who joined the university's faculty ranks in 2006 and transitioned to the campus leadership role in 2019. "This award affirms the importance of that mission."

The award, established by Congress in 1995, honors science, mathematics and engineering mentors who have demonstrated excellence in mentoring individuals from underrepresented groups in STEM education and the workforce. The National Science Foundation manages the award program and provides each recipient \$10,000.

His former students relayed that his mentorship has led to unimaginable career trajectories. They shared that he "was clearly a foundation that tethered me" and "always made himself available because he was so invested in our success."

Another alum said: "I cannot find the perfect words to express how his moral support helped me to achieve my goals."



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Binod Tiwari, associate vice president for research and sponsored programs and professor of civil and environmental engineering

Alum Beena Ajmera '12 and '11 (M.S. civil engineering; B.S. civil engineering and B.A. mathematics-applied mathematics) noted that Tiwari's desire to help others succeed by going the extra mile sets him apart.

"Dr. Tiwari was my first professor. I could never have imagined then the substantial influence he would have in helping me discover my passion, find my voice and develop the skills, knowledge and connections critical to my ca-

reer and who I am today," said Ajmera, assistant professor in geotechnical engineering at Iowa State University, in her letter of support for Tiwari.

"He has always strived to reduce my limitations and expand my horizons, ensuring I reach my highest potential."

Scott Annin, professor of mathematics, who serves with Tiwari on the Southern California Conferences for Undergraduate Research, called him a model faculty member for his investment in students.

"Dr. Tiwari is a deeply passionate and caring instructor, an expert whose knowledge in the field has created opportunities for countless students to engage in the learning and discovery process both in and out of the classroom," Annin said in his letter of support. "He is a fine role model for teacher-scholars across our campus and community."

Tiwari's mentorship has resulted in more than 150 publications co-authored by his students and 40 scholarship awards, including a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship. His students have delivered 140 research presentations and won 20 first-place awards at research competitions.

Through his guidance, Tiwari has helped his students — including those from underrepresented groups — overcome their challenges and continue their education to earn master's degrees and doctorates.

"My mentoring philosophy centers around fostering growth, development and success for my mentees to allow them to reach their highest potential and dreams," said Tiwari, the university's 2017 Outstanding Professor and a mentor to his staff and early-career faculty members.

Tiwari, a Nepal native who conducted research in his home country in 2015 following deadly earthquakes, called developing his mentees into mentors one of his proudest achievements.

"Success stories of our mentees are the real rewards stemming from mentorship," he said. "Watching them transform the lives of their students and colleagues is truly fulfilling and a testament to the power of mentorship."

U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT

CSUF among California's top 3 online engineering, business grad programs

CSUF News Media Services

U.S. News & World Report names Cal State Fullerton's online engineering and non-MBA business graduate programs among the top three in California and top 30 in the nation of its 2025 Best Online Programs.

The online engineering and computer science graduate programs — Master of Science in Software Engineering and Master of Science in Environmental Engineering — rank No. 28 nationally, up two spots from their ranking in 2024.

CSUF's engineering and computer science programs are tied with UC Riverside and University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The graduate programs are No. 3 in California.

Susamma "Susan" Barua, dean of CSUF's College of Engineering and Computer Science, said one of the reasons students enroll in CSUF's online degree programs is the flexibility that the programs allow students to balance their work, school and lives.

"We are excited to hear that our online programs in software engineering and environmental engineering have been ranked again as one of the nation's top online graduate engineering programs," Barua said. "This national ranking is a validation of the quality of our programs, the excellence and dedication of our faculty members, and the high level of support we provide."

The online business graduate program — Master of Science in Information Technology — ranks No. 29 nationally, up 22 spots from its ranking in 2024.

CSUF's business program is tied with American University, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and University of Maryland, College Park. The graduate program is No. 3 in California, and ranks ahead of programs at Pepperdine



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Cal State Fullerton's online graduate programs in engineering and non-MBA business are among the best in the nation, according to a U.S. News & World Report survey.

University, California Baptist University and University of San Diego.

Sridhar Sundaram, dean of CSUF's College of Business and Economics, emphasized that students in the online information technology graduate program gain the expertise and practical skills necessary to help manage the growing technology needs of the future while building a strong professional

network.

"This rise in the national rankings reflects our dedication to maintaining a cutting-edge curriculum, staying at the forefront of information technology advancements and fostering professional growth to ensure our graduates stand out as top talent in the workforce," Sundaram said.

This year's list evaluates online bach-

elor's and master's degree programs at 1,790 colleges and universities using metrics specific to online learning. U.S. News evaluated schools based on such factors as student engagement, faculty credentials and training, and services and technologies. The rankings only include degree-granting programs offered primarily online by regionally accredited institutions.

RESEARCH

Chemist honored with Henry Dreyfus Teacher-Scholar Award

CSUF News Media Services

Computational chemist Michael Groves is committed to the success of Cal State Fullerton students by getting them involved in chemistry research early in their educational journey.

Groves has mentored more than 70 undergraduate and graduate students on projects that advance his research agenda since he joined the university in 2016. Due to the rigor of the major, he has also created learning interventions and flipped classroom environments to strengthen the educational experiences of his students.

For his work as a mentor and researcher, Groves has received the 2024 Henry Dreyfus Teacher-Scholar Award from the Camille and Henry Dreyfus Foundation. Fu-Ming Tao, CSUF professor of chemistry and biochemistry, was a recipient of the award in 2000.

"I'm honored to be recognized and strive to embody the teacher-scholar persona," said Groves, associate professor of chemistry and biochemistry. "I continually work to improve my research practices and connect students with research and funding opportunities so that they can pursue educational endeavors and career paths they never considered possible."

The national honor is given to early career faculty in the chemical sciences who have created an outstanding independent body of scholarship and are committed to the education of undergraduates. He is one of nine scholars nationwide selected for this year's award.

Groves, who earned his doctorate in chemical and material engineering at the Royal Military College of Canada, was nominated by Peter de Lijser, chair and professor of chemistry and biochemistry.

"Dr. Groves is a superb instructor and top-notch researcher with a proven track



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Michael Groves, associate professor of chemistry and biochemistry

record," de Lijser said. "A significant part of his focus is integrating teaching and research, which is an important department goal as we work towards improving graduation rates and student success."

As a Henry Dreyfus Teacher-Scholar, Groves received a \$75,000 research grant for his latest project, "Using Machine Learning to Understand Gas Sensing Properties of 2D Materials."

The project builds on his successful work to develop machine learning tools to determine the structure of physical hole defects — a "hole" in the structure that can impact the material's electrical and chemical properties — in two-dimen-

sional materials.

The properties of these materials could be promising candidates for use in leading-edge electronic devices and chemical sensors.

"The research project is innovative and highly engaging, which will increase students' interest in the STEM fields, prepare them for a competitive workforce with technical skills and contribute to the rapidly growing research environment at CSUF," de Lijser said.

As part of their major, de Lijser added that the college's chemistry and biochemistry students take part in a capstone experience, which, for many, involves a

research project under the mentorship of a faculty member.

"Undergraduate research projects must have objectives achievable in the limited amount of time, and mistakes are treated as opportunities to learn so students feel empowered to persevere and continue as STEM professionals," said Groves, who teaches physical and theoretical chemistry.

Groves noted that hands-on research experiences allow undergraduates and graduate students to learn laboratory skills to prepare them for the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) workforce or advanced studies. Many of his students are also co-authors of his peer-reviewed research publications.

"It's important for students to be involved in research early and often in their education so they build social and academic communities on campus. This involvement promotes persistence, retention and degree completion," he said.

Groves has received external grant awards totaling about \$1.5 million to support his research and students, including a \$400,000 Faculty Early Career Development (CAREER) Program award from the National Science Foundation in 2021.

He has been awarded research funding from other agencies such as the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. Department of Energy and the American Chemical Society.

Groves' research uses machine learning and quantum chemical methods to predict and characterize materials for energy, pharmaceutical and electronic applications. His work is geared toward characterizing chemical reactions over metal and two-dimensional surfaces.

Some applications include next-generation high-powered electronics, fuel cells, flow reactors for drug synthesis and green chemistry in industrial processes.

Students

FROM PAGE 1

to make the transition to a U.S. university easier for future international students back home.

Through the support from the International Students and Scholars Office and their own social media engagement, they started pre-arrival Zoom sessions for incoming students.

"And it was really helpful for them," Jain said. We got great support from all our friends here. We had 60-70 students in our first call.

Because of their popularity, the Zoom sessions have become an official International Student Services event held every semester for incoming international students.

"People from similar culture, similar background, when they come here, most of them face similar issues, I would say," Kavit said. So people who have already been here, our seniors for example, they have faced those issues, they know the solutions to most of them. So, they are the best ones to guide the new students who are coming here."

Building on the success of the pre-arrival Zoom sessions, Jain and Daga then revived CSUF's International Friendship Club.

The club connects new international students with current students, help-

ing them acclimate to American culture through a variety of activities.

They kept the momentum going, and in spring 2024, Daga and Jain launched the Hindu Yuva Club to celebrate popular festivals from their homeland here in the U.S.

The club hosted the Hindu festival known as Holi, which celebrates the arrival of spring.

Holi drew 200 students to the intramural field.

The Hindu Yuva Club garnered the Emerging Organization Award from Student Life and Leadership.

Daga and Jain were drawn to running for campus leadership positions.

In spring 2024, both were elected to the Associated Students Inc. board of directors for the College of Engineering and Computer Science and began their roles that fall.

Jain and Daga will walk in the graduation ceremony after the spring 2025 semester.

In the meantime, both are working in IT positions in Orange County.

But they are uncertain about their future and whether they will stay in the U.S. or return to India.

"We are still not sure on that," Daga said. "We'll be working for a while, then we'll figure out whether we are settling here or going back. We're so attached to our family, and it feels like in the long term, we have to live with them. At some point of time, yeah, we'll go back."



PHOTO COURTESY OF CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Keshav Daga, left, and Kavit Jain completed their master's degrees in computer science at Cal State Fullerton in December. They did a good deal of research about the international student experience at CSUF before traveling to California from India.

SPORTS PREVIEW

Coach's goal: 'Playing fundamental, hard-nosed baseball'

By Brian Robin
contributing writer

There is a grim determination permeating Jason Dietrich's voice, one mixed with equal parts frustration and resolve to solve a puzzle. A puzzle that has teased and taunted him for two of his three seasons holding the keys to the Cal State Fullerton flagship athletic program.

Honestly, it was not supposed to be this difficult. Not for a talented coach known for his recruiting wizardry, his ability to take raw pitchers and make them draft-worthy and his skill forging a winning culture. You know, the kind of culture that comes when players put on the uniform sporting "TITANS" across the chest.

About that latter word? The one emblazoned on the uniforms? Well, Dietrich would like a word.

"We have to get back to earning the right to wear 'Titans' across their chests. We have to get back to playing fundamental, hard-nosed baseball," said Dietrich, who begins his fourth season helming the Titans. "I felt like last year was not good."

No. No, it wasn't.

After Dietrich piloted CSUF to a 32-24 record and a Big West Conference title in 2023, the Titans fell through a trap door in 2024. They finished 16-38, including 7-23 in conference — 13 games worse than the previous year and a drop to 10th in the 11-team Big West. The 16-38 mark marked the worst in the program's 50-year history, dating to 1975. Not counting the 2020 abbreviated COVID season, CSUF's 11-18 record (a .379 winning percentage) at Goodwin Field was the worst home record since the field was renamed Goodwin Field in 1992.

Looking at the numbers explains part — but not all — of the reasons for the plunge. The Titans were 11th and last in the Big West in team batting average (.242) and hits (431). They were 10th in runs (256), RBIs (234) and slugging percentage (.362). Only two players, outfielder Jakob Schardt (.307) and infielder Eli Lopez (.300) batted .300 or better. With a .406 on-base percentage, Lopez was the only CSUF player ranked in the conference's top 40 in a category that is usually littered with Titans.

The pitching was little better. CSUF was fourth in walks allowed (208), fifth in runs allowed (315), eighth in team ERA (5.16), and 10th in saves (a paltry six) and opponent batting average



Titan players watch from the dugout during a field practice on Jan. 15. Coach Jason Dietrich's goal for the season is to rebound from last year's performance.

(.292). And, in the final statistical eye-poke, the normally defensively sound Titans were ninth in fielding, committing 65 errors.

Even if 23 of those losses came by three runs or less, all of this is terra incognita for a program that defined fundamental, hard-nosed baseball. A program where that definition came built into the "TITANS" crest across the home uniforms and a program that defined West Coast—and often national—excellence.

"It was the perfect storm of not-good baseball," Dietrich said. "We were always finding ways to lose, and it became a mindset. The bottom line is we need better players and we need to coach better. We were short of talent, but I don't blame the players. I blame myself. It all falls on me. We have to recruit better, we have to develop players better and we have to do a lot of things better."

If Dietrich went down with the ship last season, he had plenty of company in the water. Not counting the three players off the 2024 roster that were drafted (pitchers Christian Rodriguez, Andrew Morones and Evan Yates) and the three seniors (Peyton Jones, Nico Regino and

Jack Haley), 12 players on the 2024 roster aren't on the 2025 roster.

The exodus included outfielders Colby Wallace, who led the team in RBIs (34), and Drayen Nushida, who transferred to Loyola Marymount and Hawaii, respectively. But it also includes several players who Dietrich jettisoned overboard, the latest batch in what has been a ruthless culling of the Titans' herd. Every year, he and his staff evaluate who can help the program going forward, who fits the culture he's trying to forge and how everyone fits into the necessary roles.

Last year, Dietrich said he played a lot of players who weren't ready to handle the rigors of Division I baseball. Along with that, the Titans lost a lot of leadership from the 2023 team.

"They had a tough time transitioning because we lost all of those guys, and we didn't have anyone to look up to," he said. "We were coach-led, and I feel like it should be player-led."

Now, about those players. Dietrich said at the outset of the season, which began this weekend against traditional opening-weekend foe Stanford, he thinks the Titans have turned the cor-

ner. Lopez is back, along with fellow infielders Maddox Latta and Marcos Rosales, who started 19 games as a freshman, batting .301 with 14 runs and 12 RBIs before going down with a season-ending injury. Outfielder Cam Burdick and catchers Max Ortega and Waldie Perez also return.

The newcomers are promising, starting with first baseman/DH Andrew Kirschner (Golden West College), infielder/DH Isaiah Gomez (Grossmont College) and outfielder Paul Contreras (Modesto JC). They are three of the eight junior college imports. They're joined by freshmen third baseman Carter Johnstone and utilityman T.J. Stottlemire.


The pitching is a work in progress. Dietrich said he's still searching for a Friday night starter — customarily the team ace. But he has right-hander Jason Blood (2-3, 4.74 ERA in 2024) and left-hander Mikiah Negrete (4-5, 4.61) penciled in for the weekend. Junior college import Jayden Harper (Ohlone) will compete for innings with sophomore returners Payton Hawkinson, Chad Gurnea, Andrew Wright and Jason Krakoski and freshmen Dylan Smith and Brady Dockan. Re-entering the mix is right-hander Gavin Meyer, who hasn't pitched in two seasons, and redshirt freshman Chris Hernandez, who returns after Tommy John surgery last year.

"There's some potential there, but you need guys to step up," Dietrich said. "I've been there where we've had freshmen step up, but guys have to take advantage of the opportunities and run with it. It sounds simple, but it's tough."

That could serve as the mission statement for the 2025 Titans' season. Last year, guys were given that opportunity. Few stepped up to meet the moment. And yet Dietrich, who called himself a realist, said he's seeing a different dynamic. One where perhaps the "TITANS" across the uniform will regain some of its aura.

This would be a good year for that sheen to return. For the first time, the Big West features a postseason tournament, which gives the winner the conference's automatic spot into the NCAA Tournament. And the Titans are the host site.

"I feel like we're in a better spot. I'm more optimistic this year than I was last year. ... It's an interesting dynamic because I've never been through a rebuild. I didn't know what it was like. I'm trying to do what I think is right, and I feel like we're finally going in the direction we like. Now, we have to perform at the end of the day."




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