

HIGHLIGHTS & SIGNATURES

2026 Newsletter Making Sense of a Changing World

How HSS students are
navigating, shaping and
redefining their place in it.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE



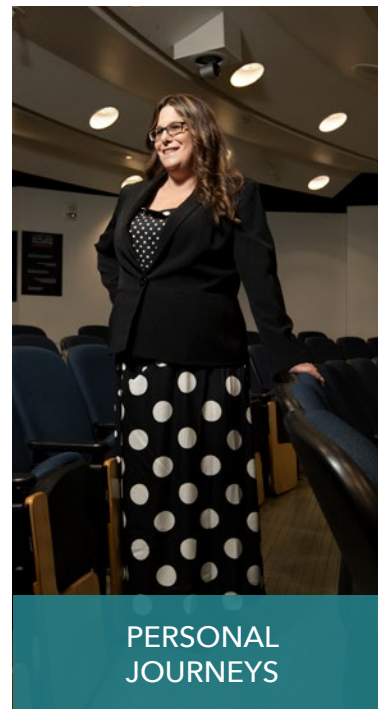
UNDERSTANDING
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Highlights & Signature STORIES

Several of the stories featured in this issue of HIGHLIGHTS include programs and experiential opportunities in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences that are funded by private support. If you are interested in receiving additional information about ways you can make an impact, please contact Dean Jessica Stern at jessicastern@fullerton.edu or call the HSS Dean's Office at (657) 278-3528.



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DEAN'S CHECKLIST 2026

Let's Talk About It!

In a county split nearly even between red and blue, our students report in exit surveys that they encounter fewer opposing political viewpoints in college than they did in high school. Through Teaching Through Polarization, we train faculty to redesign courses that engage hard disagreements head-on, not to change minds, but to help students understand why thoughtful people differ. We capped the year with "Let's Talk About It," an intergenerational gathering of students, faculty, alumni, and retirees who learned dialogue skills and then took on a genuinely hard question—how many genders are there?—across a respectful divide. This is what a humanities and social science education is for.



Adding Humanities and Social Sciences to the AI Conversation

As many on campus embraced artificial intelligence, HSS asked our quintessential questions: how can we understand these technologies and what role should they play in our societies, cultures, and classrooms. Our faculty-led AI Task Force produced a framework defining "AI literacy" as approaching AI "as a sociocultural object whose use and existence have ethical, legal, epistemic, and governance implications and consequences for human and ecological life." We're now designing AI literacy courses and launching a new interdisciplinary minor: Artificial Intelligence, Society, and Culture. We are also affirming the value of AI-free learning environments because negotiating and navigating ambiguity and embracing friction and human connection are essential to the kinds of growth we seek to inspire in our students and ourselves.



Nerdy and fun, that's still how we roll in HSS. Our second annual Pub Fest filled the quad with faculty authors talking about the ideas behind their latest work: how a dual-immersion program reshapes a neighborhood school, the militarization of Brazil under Bolsonaro, the asymmetry of American political humor, the development of Chinese-American communities in Silicon Valley, how twins are the same and different from clones, how a service-learning course pivoted during Covid, and so much more. It's a celebration of what our scholars make, and a chance for students and faculty to connect over ideas outside the classroom. Join us for Pub Fest 2026 on November 19.

A Day for Book Nerds

Honoring the Spradlins

This year, the auditorium where we welcome every new HSS student during orientation was adorned with the most meaningful name: Spradlin. The Kirt and Donna Spradlin Family Auditorium honors Donna Spradlin '70, a 98-year-old alumna who earned her English degree here while raising three daughters, taught in Fullerton schools for 15 years, and, with her late husband, Kirt, made a planned gift of their family home to the university. Their generosity now funds endowed scholarships in Aging Studies and in English. It's a fitting name for the room where we tell students what a love of lifelong learning can build.



Lowkey, We Went Big

Last year, we launched "Lowkey Confused: HSS Explains," our series where faculty answer the questions everyone's quietly Googling. This year it took off. We produced 31 full episodes and 132 short clips. We covered everything from how social media has impacted community formation to the Strait of Hormuz, drawing more than 83,000 YouTube views and 2.3 million Instagram views this spring alone, as well as a new home on Spotify and Apple Podcasts. Follow along at youtube.com/@csuf-HSS.



Launching into Meaningful Careers

"What will you do with a humanities and social science degree?" We're answering by the hundreds. Our Passage to the Future program grew to 614 students and placed 86 in internships, nearly triple last year. And for the first time in its 20-year history, our Cal State DC Scholars



program has a full-time director based in Washington, now serving students from 11 CSU campuses and newly anchored by a \$1 million endowment from the California Credit Union Foundation that will give twelve students a year a \$2,500 scholarship. As federal office internships tightened, our scholars pivoted, landing offices on Capitol Hill and in advocacy and nonprofit organizations across the capital.

UNDERSTANDING SYSTEMS & SOCIETY

FOCUS: HOW THE WORLD WORKS AND WHY

This section explores the systems, structures, and institutions that shape communities and everyday life. Through research, technology, and interdisciplinary learning, these stories reflect the college’s commitment to giving voice to diverse communities, understanding social issues, and preparing students to think critically about how society functions and how individuals connect within it.

01 Humanities Student Learns to Use AI to Preserve Ladino Language

DEPARTMENT SPOTLIGHT: MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES

Technology meets tradition as one student works to keep a nearly forgotten language alive for future generations.

Humanities student Michelle Ramirez is using supercomputing and data tools to preserve the centuries-old Ladino language with the help of a chatbot named “Estreya Perez.”

Ladino, also called Judeo-Spanish, is an endangered language originally spoken by Jewish people exiled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492. About 50,000 people — mostly older generations — speak Ladino today, said Carlos Yebra López, assistant professor of modern languages and literatures and Ramirez’s faculty adviser.

Ramirez participated in the Titan Supercomputing Center’s student research program, where she learned how high-powered computing, data science, and artificial intelligence can support language revitalization.

“By stepping into high-performance computing, I hope to show that students from the humanities belong in the world

of data just as much as anyone else,” Ramirez said. Yebra López helped develop the first AI-powered Ladino chatbot. Along with collaborators Alp Oktem and Alejandro Acero Ayuda, he launched the “Estreyika” project — meaning “little star” — to support future generations of Ladino learners.

“Estreyika stands as a model for using supercomputing and AI to preserve endangered languages worldwide,” Yebra López said.

Ramirez joined the project because of its potential impact on the Ladino-speaking community.

“When I learned how technology can be used for language revitalization, I realized there’s a need for cultural and linguistic experts who can serve as mediators in training these models,” Ramirez said.

The chatbot is trained with religious and



cultural references and engages in conversation through prompts in English and Spanish. It is also coded with grammatical rules that reflect Ladino’s linguistic particularities.

“I like to think of Estreya Perez as a Ladino teacher that fits in your pocket,” Ramirez said.

Yebra López and his students continue refining the chatbot by analyzing chatlogs, correcting grammatical errors, and fixing bugs to improve performance.

“We hope it becomes a model on how technology and the humanities can work together to preserve endangered languages,” Ramirez said.

02 New Urban Studies Minor Helps Students Explore Cities and Their Challenges

DEPARTMENT SPOTLIGHT: GEOGRAPHY & THE ENVIRONMENT

Cal State Fullerton’s new Urban Studies minor helps students explore the systems, spaces, and social forces shaping modern cities.



Over half of the world’s 8 billion people live in cities. Cal State Fullerton now offers a minor in urban studies, allowing students to deepen their understanding of urban challenges.

The new urban studies minor was created from existing courses across 10 departments in the colleges of Humanities and Social Sciences and Health and Human Development, said Zia Salim, professor of geography and the environment, who spearheaded the program with Mark Drayse, professor of geography and the environment.

Situated in populous Orange County and neighboring Los Angeles, CSUF offers an ideal setting for examining urban issues, Salim said.

Students choosing the minor can explore the “top-down” aspects of cities through public

administration and political science, as well as the “bottom-up” grassroots side via courses on Southern California culture, activism, and nightlife.

College of Humanities and Social Sciences Dean Jessica Stern said the minor “allows students to use the city to examine how broad topics like leisure, immigration, race, and class are shaped by different physical and social environments.”

“Why is your commute long? Why is housing expensive? Urban studies explores the forces shaping our spaces,” said Elaine Lewinnek, a professor of American studies. “It also considers how cities operate on regional and global scales.”

“The world is more urban now than it’s ever been in the history of humankind,” said Mojgan Sami, associate professor of public health. “That requires us to focus on the ways that we think and build and evolve and develop cities.”

Sami hopes students will recognize the benefits of cross-disciplinary programs that expose them to ideas outside their main area of study and help them see the world in new ways.

“How amazing that we can have a cross-disciplinary minor that can bring students across campus together and help build bridges for a better world that we all dream about.”

HIGHLIGHT

SOCIOLOGY & RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Mario Benitez: Path to Higher Education



Mario Benitez’s path to CSUF was anything but traditional. As a first-generation, adult reentry student and parent, he returned to college with a renewed sense of purpose, earning a double major in Sociology and Religious Studies and graduating magna cum laude. Now pursuing a master’s degree in Theology at Loyola Marymount University, Mario hopes to continue into doctoral studies and one day become a university professor.



DID YOU KNOW?

Orange County is home to more than 3 million people, and neighboring Los Angeles County is the most populous county in the U.S.

The minor includes two foundational courses and nearly 30 electives students can choose from, covering topics such as housing, transportation, public health, activism, immigration, and urban culture.

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

FOCUS: CULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND GLOBAL UNDERSTANDING

This section highlights how students gain broader perspectives through cultural immersion, environmental exploration, and international learning experiences. These stories reflect the college's commitment to fostering cultural understanding, social responsibility, and appreciation for diverse global communities.

01 Arctic Trip Gives Students an Experience “You Can’t Get Anywhere Else”

DEPARTMENT SPOTLIGHT: GEOGRAPHY & THE ENVIRONMENT



Midnight sun in the arctic

For 19 Cal State Fullerton students, last summer's study abroad trip to Sweden and Norway was filled with new experiences: seeing caribou, a glacier calving, and the midnight sun. But what will stick with them is the fragile, shifting nature of the Arctic environment and how a place that seems remote actually has myriad connections to the rest of the world.

Trevis Matheus, chair and associate professor of geography and the environment, and Mark Drayse, professor of geography and the environment, took the group to Stockholm, Sweden and Svalbard, an Arctic archipelago north of Norway and east of Greenland.

Students learned about factors affecting human interactions with the Earth and natural systems, including environmental ethics, technology, and political policies, and they also met and learned alongside a group of students from a Swedish university.

Classes and lectures touched on the Arctic's shifting climate, Matheus said, but “being able to see these geologic processes in real time, happening right before your eyes, is something that you really can’t get anywhere else.”

Matheus explained to students how Svalbard was formed and how glaciers shaped the vast, barren landscape.

While visiting Longyearbyen in Svalbard, one of the world's northernmost settlements, students saw the changing

climate manifested by buildings shifting as permafrost melts and snow fences erected to protect the town from an increasing number of avalanches.

“One of the things we wanted the students to appreciate is how fast-changing the Arctic is,” Drayse said.

Hearing a lecture about Indigenous cultures inspired Cameron Edwards, a graduate student majoring in geography, to study the region further. “We see the Arctic as this completely uninhabitable zone, but people have been living there for thousands of years. I want to know more — how did they do that?”

Students also learned about the community's economic shift away from coal mining and toward tourism, illustrated by the arrival of a cruise ship with 3,500 aboard, which more than doubled the town's population when they disembarked.

Drayse's teaching stressed the many connections between seemingly remote Svalbard and the rest of the world, such as regular stops by ships and planes and ground stations that download data from satellites in orbit.

For Edwards, the study abroad experience opened up his view of the world: “I don't think a classroom can teach what I was taught just by walking through nature, walking through these towns, being invited to be a part of another culture,” he said.

ARCTIC SNAPSHOT

19

CSUF students participated in the study abroad trip

2

Countries visited: Sweden and Norway

24

Daylight hours during the Arctic summer, known as the midnight sun

“I don't think a classroom can teach what I was taught just by walking through nature.”

- Cameron Edwards, Geography Graduate Student

02 Seoul Study Abroad Gives CSUF Students Lessons in Korean History and Culture

DEPARTMENT SPOTLIGHT: AMERICAN STUDIES

Visiting ancient temples and palaces, learning to navigate the city helps titans become ‘global citizens’

A summer trip to Seoul, South Korea, offered a group of Cal State Fullerton students the chance to see ancient temples and historical palaces, but it also gave them a firsthand view of modern-day Koreans' relationship to their country's past conflicts.

American Studies Professor Susie Woo took 18 students to Seoul to learn about Korean history and culture, and about the sense of national identity in the U.S. and in Korea.

They visited historical spots, including the ancient capital Gyeongju, which houses archeological sites and a Buddhist temple complex that's been in use since the 8th century.

Walking in the footsteps of kings in a 600-year-old palace “lends itself to a much deeper understanding of the materials that they're learning in class,” Woo said.

The group visited the DMZ, the 2.5-mile-wide border separating North and South Korea since 1953. Students spoke with a woman who defected from the north, unsure of her mother and sister's fate after their escape attempt.

In South Korea, people still feel the reverberations of decades of Japanese



Exploring Seoul together

“I feel like I can go anywhere.”



Seeing sites in Korea!

HIGHLIGHT

MODERN LANGUAGES & LITERATURES



Alina Chupikova: A Milestone Year

Alina Chupikova is a recent graduate of CSUF's TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) master's program. Originally from Russia, she immigrated to the United States to pursue higher education and a career in language education. Just one week before her final exams, she welcomed her son into the world and went on to graduate with a perfect 4.0 GPA. When asked why she chose HSS, she said, “I was drawn to HSS because it focuses on people, communication, and culture.” We look forward to seeing where her journey takes her next.

occupation of the region, followed by the Korean War, said Sophia Darvish '25 (B.A. criminal justice).

Seoul's subway stations were designed to double as bomb shelters, and a tour guide explained a common assumption that military conflict between North and South Korea is inevitable.

For Darvish, “It was really grounding to learn that history and see the repercussions of it.”

Many had long hoped to study abroad but assumed it would be too expensive. Then they learned CSUF was paying for the flights and accommodations.

Last summer, almost all of CSUF's 20 study abroad programs received financial support from the university or student fees, with nine programs covering all costs except tuition and fees.

Woo's students learned to navigate Seoul's public transit and prepare a multi-course Korean meal—activities designed to boost their confidence as global citizens.

For some students, this was their first trip outside the U.S., but many left saying, “I feel like I could go anywhere.”

Section 03

From presenting research on global policy issues to receiving guidance from accomplished alumni, students gain experiences that connect classroom learning with real-world opportunities. These stories showcase the college's commitment to developing informed leaders, engaged citizens, and professionals who are prepared to make an impact in their communities and beyond.



FROM LEARNING



TO ACTION

01 Royce Symposium Brings Experts Together to Discuss International Strategy

At Cal State Fullerton's 2026 Royce International Symposium, political science student Francis Arguien had the opportunity to network with global policy experts and government leaders, including Titan alum and former U.S. Rep. Ed Royce.

The annual event aims to advance research while engaging the campus and Orange County community in discussions about international policy and complex global issues.

Arguien presented his research paper, which was titled, "Time to Put the Bombs Away? Explaining U.S. – China Nuclear Competition and Identifying Paths Toward Disarmament."

"Being in the presence of these experts helps contribute to what you're learning in the classroom and what you're seeing in real life and world events," said Arguien, who presented at the 2025 Royce Symposium and was inspired to apply again this year after experiencing how the event connects academic inquiry to real-world policy challenges.

One of five students who presented their research at the March 12 event at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library &

Museum, the Class of 2026 grad said that he chose Cal State Fullerton for moments like these, where he can connect with the university's vast alumni network.

"I was aware of the university's distinguished scholars and the strength of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, especially with a lot of alumni becoming lawyers and politicians," Arguien said.

"It's nice to be in an environment where we can aspire to follow the blueprints set by these alumni."

The student research panel also included Anirv Ayyala, Elise Hackenberg, Ji Hwan Lee, and Simon Wise, who each received \$500 scholarships from the Royce International Symposium Distribution Fund.

Royce delivered the event's keynote address alongside retired U.S. Army Col. David B. Des Roches. The duo shared their expert insights on "American Strategy in International Affairs: Opportunities and Risks," exploring such topics as the current conflict in Iran, Russia's objectives in Ukraine, and China's aerial strategies.

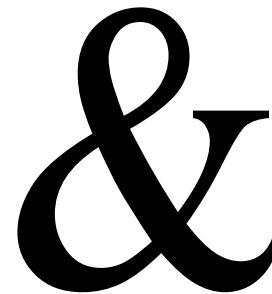
"The theme of this year's symposium could not be more fitting. In an era

defined by unprecedented opportunities yet daunting risks, America must manage domestic priorities and global responsibilities," said Royce '77 (B.A. business administration-accounting, finance).

"This symposium invites critical thinking, collaboration, and a shared commitment to building a more secure and prosperous world."

Throughout his career, Royce represented California's 39th Congressional District from 1993 to 2019 and served Orange County for more than 25 years. He also served as chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee from 2013-19.

This year, the symposium was extended to include two days of programming in honor of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Funding for the event was provided by a grant from the Institute for Humane Studies at George Mason University. The March 11 event, "America at 250: A Global Reflection," featured a career panel, student presentations, and a keynote address from Ambassador Gaddi Vasquez.



02 Alum Guides Cal State DC Scholars Toward Grad School and Career Success

FOCUS: LEADERSHIP, MENTORSHIP, AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

For nearly 50 years, Cal State Fullerton political science alum Raúl Tapia has worked with U.S. presidents, policymakers, and business leaders. Today, the Harvard-trained attorney is helping guide the next generation of Titans, including political science major Colson Houck Teal, through the Cal State DC Scholars program.

"The debt I owe, the debt I can never repay, is the debt to Cal State Fullerton," said Tapia, who received CSUF's President's Award as the outstanding graduate of the Class of 1972.

The son of a seamstress and steelworker and the first in his family to graduate from college, Tapia earned his bachelor's degree from CSUF before going on to graduate from Harvard Law School and Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Seven years after graduating, he joined the White House staff under President Jimmy Carter, later serving as deputy assistant to the president for Hispanic Affairs.

Throughout his career, Tapia has worked in public affairs, business negotiations, and legislative relations, while also serving on corporate and nonprofit boards. Yet

he credits the mentors and professors he encountered at CSUF for helping shape his success.

"Any success I have enjoyed is because I stand on the shoulders of my teachers and my mentors," Tapia said. "That's why I believe so strongly in the concept of mentorship."

Tapia now shares his experience with students in the 20-year-old Cal State DC Scholars program, which connects participants with alumni mentors through a network of more than 600 graduates. Students receive career guidance, networking opportunities, and professional advice while completing internships in Washington, D.C.

One of Tapia's mentees is political science major Colson Houck Teal, who has interned with the Department of Labor's Office of the Inspector General and the United Nations Association of the USA. As Houck Teal prepares law school applications, including one to Harvard, Tapia has helped guide him through the process.

"Mr. Tapia has a wealth of experience to

improve my chances of getting into a good school," Houck Teal said. "He's shown me it comes down to a positive spirit, a dedication to hard work, and a willingness to take the extra bold step that others would be too afraid to even think of."

For Tapia, mentoring students is a way of giving back to the university that helped launch his own journey.

HIGHLIGHT

AMERICAN STUDIES

Camille Wise: Finding Her Place in the Humanities



Camille Wise found her way to the humanities after starting college as a STEM major. While science courses often focused on memorization, she found herself drawn to classes that challenged her to think critically and explore new perspectives. That shift eventually led her to Cal State Fullerton's American Studies master's program, where faculty mentorship and research opportunities helped shape her academic path. Today, she is pursuing a Ph.D. in Africana Studies at Brown University.

PERSONAL JOURNEYS & TRANSFORMATION

FOCUS: INDIVIDUAL TRANSFORMATION, RESILIENCE, AND SUCCESS

This section highlights the personal experiences, challenges and successes that shape the student journey. Through stories of resilience, growth, and perseverance, these features reflect the different paths students take while navigating change, opportunity, and identity.

01

Sociology, Philosophy Grad Named One of The Most Influential People in The OC

DEPARTMENT SPOTLIGHT: SOCIOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

Cal State Fullerton Class of 2026 grad Nichole Gideon is a dedicated advocate for the unhoused.

For her advocacy work, Gideon garnered recognition in 2025 as one of the “125 Most Influential People in Orange County” by the Orange County Register.



Nichole Gideon, second from right, who studied sociology and philosophy, with faculty adviser Pam Fiber-Ostrow, center, and fellow Moot Court team members (Courtesy of Nichole Gideon)

The single mother of two, who has a disability, spent time living on the streets. She rebuilt her life after securing employment and federal assistance for permanent, supportive housing. Gideon then focused on fulfilling her longtime dream of returning to college and one day attending law school.

“Life happened,” Gideon said. “It wasn’t a linear road to make a stable life.”

Gideon graduated with honors and earned a bachelor’s degree from Cal State Fullerton. She double majored in sociology with a focus on deviance and crime. Her second major was philosophy, where she studied social, moral, and legal philosophy.

“Cal State Fullerton has been a huge part of acclimating me back into society. I can’t begin to express how much the university, professors, and staff have done for me,” she said. “It’s bittersweet to graduate.”

Gideon aspires to become a public law attorney to help others like her achieve. She currently serves on Orange County’s Continuum of Care board, which advocates to end homelessness, and is a member of the Lived Experience Advisory Committee.

“I want to drive social change from a legal standpoint,” said Gideon, who earned associate degrees in sociology and social and behavioral sciences from Cypress College.

On campus, Gideon found support and guidance from the Transfer Adult Re-entry Parenting & Pregnant Student Center and Educational Opportunity Program. She also gained leadership and advocacy opportunities through Project Rebound, which provides financial aid and academic resources to formerly incarcerated students pursuing degrees.

“Through Project Rebound, I’ve met other people who’ve defied the odds despite their circumstances,” she said. “I found a community of like-minded individuals who became a support system.”

“Life happened, it wasn’t a linear road to make a stable life.”
-Nichole Gideon

Class of 2026 grad Nichole Gideon, who studied sociology and philosophy, is an advocate for the unhoused and plans to pursue a career in public law.

Gideon also conducted an independent research project with four other formerly unhoused individuals to evaluate the services provided by Orange County homeless shelters.

“This project is important to me because people who are homeless rarely have a voice,” said Gideon, who is working on finalizing the results of her study.

To prepare for a law career, Gideon participated in CSUF’s Moot Court

program, which simulates U.S. Supreme Court proceedings to prepare students for legal careers. In collegiate tournaments, students argue a case before judges using real case records.

“Nichole is a model student and extraordinary woman,” said Pam Fiber-Ostrow, professor of politics, administration, and justice. “She has all the skills needed to be successful, including critical thinking, excellent analytical, legal reasoning skills, and drive.”

As Gideon walked across the graduation stage, she celebrated her achievements and the completion of her university journey with her family by her side.

“The joy of getting to raise my kids is first and foremost my biggest accomplishment, followed by earning my bachelor’s degree,” she said. “And now, I’m one step closer to my dream of becoming an attorney.”

02 CSUF's Latinx Lab Awarded \$1 Million Grant to Support Storytelling Research

DEPARTMENT SPOTLIGHT: CHICANO AND CHICANA STUDIES

Mellon Foundation Grant advances student success in Chicanx and Latinx Studies

Cal State Fullerton's Latinx Lab for Storytelling and Social Justice has earned a national reputation for innovation in humanities research. Now, the lab is receiving a major investment to continue that work.

The Latinx Lab was awarded a \$1 million grant from the Mellon Foundation, one of the nation's leading supporters of the humanities. The three-year grant will support faculty and student advancement, training in humanities research methodologies, and the development of new research projects.

Among the first labs of its kind in the California State University system, the Latinx Lab serves as a hub for scholarship in Chicanx and Latinx studies while providing students with hands-on research opportunities. Students contribute to projects examining topics such as Latinx science fiction, children's and adult storytelling, and oral histories documenting pandemic experiences and queer and trans Latinx communities.

Open to students from all majors interested in Latinx and Chicanx humanities, the lab has introduced humanities research methods to more than 2,000 student researchers.

"We are leading collaborative and relational projects that advance knowledge and prioritize the professional development of our students," said Mario Obando, associate professor of Chicana and Chicano studies and faculty director of the lab.

Gabriela E. Nuñez, associate dean of student relations for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences and a professor in the Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies, said the lab's success is strengthened by CSUF's role as both a Hispanic-Serving Institution and the only CSU campus in Orange County.

"Not only is CSUF a Hispanic-Serving Institution, but we are surrounded by local communities and organizations that make meaningful partnership, engaged scholarship, and student-centered programming both possible and impactful," Nuñez said.

The lab also collaborates with the CSUF Pollak Library, which has unique resources, including the Zúñiga Research Collection and the U.S. Latinx Science Fiction Collection, one of the first collections of its kind in the nation. Through its virtual platform, LatinxLab.Studio, the lab expands access to research, podcasts, databases, and digital projects created by CSUF faculty and students.

For Class of 2026 graduate Ellie Hernandez, a research internship with the Latinx Lab strengthened her critical thinking and analytical skills while preparing her for graduate studies in psychology. "Being involved in those conversations strengthened my ability to connect academic work to real-world practice," she said.

RESEARCH IMPACT

\$1 M

Mellon Foundation grant awarded

2,000+

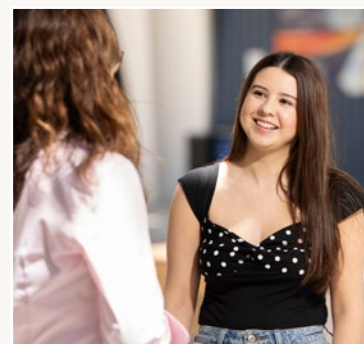
student researchers engaged

3

years of grant funding (2024-2027)

Open to All Majors

interested in the field of Latinx/Chicanx humanities



“

We are leading collaborative and relational projects that advance knowledge and prioritize the professional development of our students.”

- Mario Obando, associate professor of Chicana and Chicano studies and faculty director of the lab



Passage to the Future

Titans Reach Higher Connects Students With Their Future

Passage to the Future has grown steadily over the past three years and now serves more than 600 Humanities and Social Sciences students each year. Through its signature Titans Reach Higher Weekend, students spend time with alumni, business leaders, and professionals who show them what an HSS degree can look like after graduation.

For many students, graduation is exciting—but it also comes with a lot of questions. They leave Cal State Fullerton with valuable knowledge and transferable skills, yet many still wonder: What's next? How do I turn my degree into a career?

Passage to the Future was created to help students answer those questions, and Titans Reach Higher has become one of the program's most impactful experiences. This year's weekend brought 45 HSS students to San Diego for three days of leadership workshops, mock interviews, networking and career exploration.

"The greatest gift we can give our students isn't simply career preparation—it's the confidence to believe in themselves."

— Chérie Rolapp, Director, Passage to the Future

What makes Titans Reach Higher different is the people. Students spend the weekend learning from executives, entrepreneurs, attorneys, nonprofit leaders, and accomplished CSUF alumni who volunteer their time to share their experiences. Speakers such as Silicon Valley technology executive Gideon Marks, entrepreneur Shirin Behzadi, and Deputy Public Defender Matt Wechter spoke not only about their careers,

but also about the setbacks, career changes, and unexpected opportunities that shaped where they are today.

Rather than presenting polished success stories, the speakers were candid about life after graduation. They reminded students that careers rarely follow a straight line and that some of the best opportunities come from being willing to adapt, take chances, and keep learning.

Political science major Daisy Acosta said one lesson stayed with her long after the weekend ended.

"The most valuable lesson I learned was to not let fear take over your life and to take risks because you might miss out on an amazing opportunity."

One of the most valuable parts of the weekend was the chance to sit down with CSUF alumni who had once asked themselves the same questions. Students also participated in one-on-one mock interviews, received personalized feedback, and built relationships with professionals who continue to encourage and mentor them after the weekend ends.

For psychology major Joshua Sumalpong, those conversations completely changed the way he viewed his future.

"Meeting CEOs, executives, and industry leaders who value the unique skills my degree provides opened my eyes to possibilities I had never considered."

For many students, Titans Reach Higher is more than a weekend away from campus. It is often the first time they see how many different paths an HSS degree can lead to—and the first time they begin to picture themselves taking those next steps with confidence.



Your support makes experiences like Titans Reach Higher possible. Scan to invest in HSS students.

ALUMNI PERSPECTIVES



Nataly Luna
CLASS OF 2025



B.A. Liberal Studies
Minor in Child & Adolescent Studies and Literacy Education

TODAY

Master's student in Public Policy, Pepperdine University

"Titans Reach Higher opened doors I didn't even know existed. The networking opportunities connected me with professionals across fields I had never explored, giving me both clarity and confidence. This weekend didn't just expand my pathways—it expanded my belief in what's possible."



Georgina Galindo

CLASS OF 2026



B.A. Criminal Justice

TODAY

Executive Administrative Assistant at Orange County Justice Fund

"Passage to the Future and the Titans Reach Higher Weekend were truly life-changing for me. I met mentors who guided me toward an internship that ultimately opened the door to the full-time job I secured after graduation."

HSS IN ACTION

During the 2025–2026 academic year, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences hosted several events that encouraged open discussion and the sharing of ideas in a welcoming environment. In today’s social and political climate, it can sometimes feel difficult to express thoughts and opinions openly without fear of criticism. In addition, in a college so large (we have over 600 faculty!), it is hard to stay abreast of the scholarship of our colleagues. At Cal State Fullerton, we strive to foster a community of free thinkers who value intellectual curiosity, respectful dialogue, and the freedom to express diverse perspectives.



A YEAR OF CONVERSATION, CURIOSITY, & CURLING UP WITH A GOOD BOOK



What happens when a neighborhood school incorporates a dual-immersion program that draws parents from different locations? How can we understand the militarization of Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro? How did Chinese and Chinese-American families shape Silicon Valley? These were just some of the questions probed during the second annual HSS Pub Fest, the College’s book festival.

Building on the success of the previous year, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences Pub Fest returned on November 13, 2025, to celebrate HSS faculty and their scholarly and creative works. Faculty authors from across the college joined us for a day of interviews, discussions, and research-focused talks highlighting recently published books, poetry, articles, and other projects.

To showcase the diversity of thought within HSS, the event featured both long-format author interviews as well as short-format author talks covering a wide range of subjects. Conversations explored topics spanning politics and history, the impact of diverse scientific communities on suburbanization, and the challenges of understanding our present moment.

In addition to interviews and talks, attendees were able to hear directly from faculty about the process behind their work, gaining insight into the ideas, questions, and experiences that shaped the research the faculty conducted for their publications.

Our faculty interviews highlighted seven recent publications, including from Sociology Assistant Professor Ed Watson, on his article, “Diversity or Gentrification: Middle-Class Parents at Working Class Schools;” Political Science Assistant Professor Igor Acacia’s book, *Presidentialism and Civil-Military Relations: Brazil in Comparative Perspective*; and Nicole Seymour, Professor of English, who wrote the chapter, “Satirical Liberals and Superior Conservatives: The Asymmetry of US Political Humor” in the book *The Oxford Handbook of Screen Comedy*.

Some of the featured publications for the author talks were African American Studies Associate Professor Natalie Nova’s research article, “Defining Race, Space, and Citizenship through Play: The Playground Movement in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1900-1920;” the book *The Oxford Handbook of the Olmecs*, co-edited by Anthropology Professor Carl Wendt;

and English, Comparative Literature, and Linguistics chair Irena Praitis’, “Naked, Clothed,” a prose poetry geode.

Beyond the discussions and presentations, HSS Pub Fest also offered students, faculty, and staff access to free campus resources and organizations that support research and publication across campus. Students were encouraged to stop by informational booths, connect with campus representatives, and enjoy free food throughout the event.

More than just a celebration of published work, HSS Pub Fest gave the campus community the opportunity to connect through conversation and shared ideas outside of the classroom. Events like these continue to reflect the College’s commitment to encouraging open discussion, intellectual curiosity, and community across campus.

If you are curious to see what our faculty will share next, the 2026 Pub Fest is just around the corner on Thursday, November 19. Mark your calendars to explore a new lineup of faculty publications, engage with groundbreaking research, and connect with the HSS community.

Let’s Talk About It

How to Have Difficult Conversations and Connect Across Differences

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, we are committed to creating a sense of belonging for all of our students, faculty, and staff. Too often, however, safe spaces are conflated with uniform opinions and identities, a premise we are actively seeking to dismantle. Instead, we foster a classroom environment in which people can bring diverse opinions shaped by different life experiences and cultural backgrounds. This also means training our students in active listening and effective communication in order to create constructive dialogue and prepare them to thrive in a diverse society.

As we might know from personal experience, many difficult conversations can quickly turn into arguments, and because of this, people might avoid these discussions altogether out of fear of offending someone, being misunderstood, or taking another person’s opinion personally. Developing the tools to engage with different viewpoints does not require giving up long-held beliefs or practices. Instead, it fosters a society that better understands one another and tolerates differences.

Through our Teaching Through Polarization initiative, we train faculty in best

practices for teaching about polarizing topics, inviting diverse perspectives and positions, and helping students understand and bridge differences. As part of this work, we created a unique event: Let’s Talk About It: How to Have Difficult Conversations and Connect Across Differences. On Tuesday, April 14, 2026 we invited members of our wonderful alumni community, participants in our lifelong learning programs who return to the classroom after retirement (OLLI), as well as faculty, staff, and students. This intergenerational event engaged participants in a complex scientific and social question: How many genders are there? Is it only men and women, or are there more?

Before we launched into this question, participants had the opportunity to learn and practice communication tools, including active listening, asking questions rather than making assumptions, and learning how to sit with disagreement from Alissa Ackerman, a Professor of Criminal Justice and an expert in restorative justice. Participants engaged in roundtable discussions where attendees were given questions to consider, viewpoints to hear, and conversations to facilitate together.

The training was followed by a panel discussion featuring UCLA Professor Emeritus Joseph Manson, an evolutionary social scientist, and CSUF Social Psychologist Ella Ben Hagai, co-author of the book *Undoing the Gender Binary*.

They engaged with questions such as, “Do you think there are significant biological differences between men and women?” “Are there significant historical and regional differences in gender roles?” “Why are we seeing a decline in reproduction across many parts of the world?” Their different backgrounds offered different perspectives on gender. Rather than reducing the topic to a simple right-or-wrong debate, the event encouraged students to think critically and engage with the complexity of the subject.

One of the goals of the initiative Teaching Through Polarization is to shift conversations from separation to connection. Learning how to communicate with people who hold different beliefs or experiences is an important skill not only in the classroom, but also in future workplaces, communities, and relationships.

Keep on the lookout for more upcoming Let’s Talk About It events in the 2026-2027 academic year!

SAVE THE DATES

HSS CONVOCATION

Thursday, September 24, 2026
Bacon Pavilion at CSUF Arboretum and Botanical Garden

HSS PUB FEST 2026

Thursday, November 19, 2026
Humanities Quad

HSS WEEK

April 5-8, 2027

For more information about HSS Events, visit our website at: hss.fullerton.edu



WELCOME TO HSS

NEW HSS FACULTY

CAM CANNON

Department of American Studies



Cam Cannon is an Assistant Professor in the Department of American Studies and a scholar of U.S. trans, social, and medical history. Their current project, *Standard: Trans Activism and the History of Gender Affirming Care in the U.S.*, considers the diverse political and social histories of trans activists concerned with improving and expanding gender-affirming care access from the 1960s onward. Cam received their Ph.D. in American Studies at George Washington University in 2026. At CSUF, they are excited to teach and learn about social movement history, science and society, and gender in the U.S.

CLEMENT DAMOAH

Division of Politics, Administration, and Justice

Clement Mensah Damoah is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Politics, Administration, and Justice at California State University, Fullerton. He is a public administration scholar whose research focuses on digital governance, disability, civic engagement, and public policy. His work examines how digital technologies shape the social, civic, economic, and political participation of marginalized populations.



Damoah earned a Ph.D. in Public Administration and Policy from Arizona State University. His research has been published in journals including *Information, Communication & Society*, *Review of Policy Research*, *Development in Practice* and *Research in Transportation Business & Management*. His scholarship has also appeared in edited volumes published by Routledge, Sage, Springer, and Edward Elgar Publishing. He holds an M.Phil. in Public Administration and a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Ghana. Damoah is a Founders' Fellow of the American Society for Public Administration and a Fellow of the Institute for Civically Engaged Research through the American Political Science Association.

ASAKO YONAN

Department of Asian American Studies



Asako Yonan will be joining CSUF ASAM beginning Fall 2026. Asako Yonan is completing her Ph.D. in Indigenous, Race, and Ethnic Studies at the University of Oregon and is a Dissertation Fellow with the American Association of University Women. She received her M.A. in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies from San Diego State University. Her research focuses on how material objects racialized as "Asian" animate the political anxieties and desires of US empire, and the ways in which they forge connections with Asian diasporic subjects beyond Western frameworks of kinship. She is also a co-steward of Q[Ch] Asm, a research and art collective of graduate students and multimedia artists exploring queer Asian American art and the digital humanities.

KATY MALDONADO DOMINGUEZ

Department of Chicana/o Studies

Katy Maldonado Dominguez is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Chicana/o Studies at California State University, Fullerton. Katy received her B.A. in Chicana/o Studies and Geography from the University of California, Los Angeles, and Ph.D. in American Studies from Yale University. Her work foregrounds belonging as fundamental to being human and framing its denial as dehumanization. Her work appears in the anthology *We Are Not Dreamers: Undocumented Scholars Theorize Undocumented Life in the United States*, where she examines how undocumented and queer parents create and navigate families as they resist the twin pressures of xenophobia and homophobia. Katy broadly examines (non)belonging among Central American students, undocumented queer parents, and undocumented scholars, revealing how (non)belonging is produced in political, educational, and social spheres. Simultaneously, she highlights how these communities create disruptive and flexible forms of belonging that demand more just worlds. Drawing from oral histories and social media posts, she is building a digital archive documenting Central American student organizing in the United States from 1990 to the present day.



LOWKEY CONFUSED? HSS EXPLAINS!

Faculty experts help listeners make sense of a rapidly changing world.

What is **conversion therapy**? **Sunni and Shia Muslims** - are they the same? How will **artificial intelligence** change the way we live and work? What does the **future of national parks** mean for local communities? How does **global oil transportation** affect the country we live in?

These questions are just some examples of what our students are already asking and the questions faculty experts tackle in *Lowkey Confused?: HSS Explains!*

Launched in 2025 by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, the social media series and podcast connects student curiosity with our very own faculty experts to explore the issues shaping our rapidly changing world. Each episode breaks down complex issues to provide the context needed to better understand today's headlines. From pop culture to history, from politics to geography, the series has one goal: to make it make sense.

Recent episodes have explored topics ranging from recent supreme court decisions, artificial intelligence, social media, and the historical roots of divisions within Islam. By drawing on expertise from faculty across multiple disciplines, the podcast helps listeners connect classroom knowledge with real-world events and conversations.

But the podcast serves a broader purpose as well. It highlights HSS faculty as trusted experts and demonstrates the depth of

knowledge available throughout the college. Through accessible conversations and timely topics, *Lowkey Confused?: HSS Explains!* showcases the scholarship, research, and public engagement taking place across HSS while providing a platform for conversation to students, community members, and fellow faculty.

The podcast started during a period of significant change in society. We realized that our students are increasingly seeking knowledge from trusted sources to help them navigate issues and form their own opinions.

Rather than telling listeners what to think, faculty experts help explain why issues matter, how they developed, what questions we should be asking next, and bring to light the quiet voices on the other side of an issue. The goal is simply to encourage curiosity and critical thinking on topics that will then lead to informed discussion while making complex subjects more accessible to students and the broader community.

At its core, it embodies one of the college's central missions: helping people better understand the world around them. By bringing faculty expertise beyond the classroom and into public conversations, the podcast encourages listeners to engage with complex issues thoughtfully, ask better questions, and approach today's challenges with greater understanding.

Because sometimes we're all a little lowkey confused.

RECENT EPISODES

From Isolationism to Global Leadership: What Happens When the U.S.A. Rethinks Its Role in the World?

With Robert McLain, Professor of History

The Hidden Dimensions of the Epstein Case

With Siobhan Brooks, Professor of African American Studies

Henry David Thoreau: A 19th-Century Take on Work-Life Balance

With Andrew Bridges, Professor of Philosophy



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CSUF | COLLEGE OF
Humanities and
Social Sciences

Pub Fest

NOVEMBER 19, 2026
HUMANITIES QUAD



For more information scan the
QR code or visit our website at
hss.fullerton.edu!

Several of the stories featured in this issue of HIGHLIGHTS include programs and experiential opportunities in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences that are funded by private support. If you are interested in receiving additional information about ways you can make an impact, please contact Dean Jessica Stern at jessicastern@fullerton.edu or call the HSS Dean's Office at (657) 278-3528.



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