

College of Science,
Technology, Engineering,
and Mathematics

Celebration of Achievement

*Honoring the outstanding students, faculty,
and staff who make CSTEM successful*

Wednesday, May 13, 2026
USU Ballroom

HONOR CORDS | 4:30PM

RECEPTION | 5PM

AWARDS | 6PM



2025-26 Celebration of Achievement

Master of Ceremonies

Justin Morris, Ph.D.

Professor, ECE & Chair of the Faculty Development Committee

Introduction

Jackie Trischman, Ph.D., Dean

Presentations

Biological Sciences & Biotechnology

James Jancovich Ph.D., Department Chair

Chemistry and Biochemistry

Robert Iafe, Ph.D., Department Chair

Computer Science and Engineering

Simon Fan, Ph.D., Department Chair

Electrical and Computer Engineering

Reza Kamali, Ph.D., Department Chair

Mathematics

Marshall Whittlesey, Ph.D., Department Chair

Physics

Ed Price, Ph.D., Department Chair

College of Science, Technology, Engineering, & Mathematics

Jackie Trischman, Ph.D., Dean

Closing

Justin Morris, Ph.D.

Professor, ECE & Chair of the Faculty Development Committee



Introduction by Dean Jackie Trischman

“Level up: Embrace the Plot Twist.” When we chose that theme, I don’t think any of us fully appreciated just how many plot twists this year would deliver, or how quickly we’d be asked to adapt, rethink, and yes, level up. When life said “inconceivable,” we looked a little closer, and we kept going anyway. This year really brought its share of uncertainty with shifting landscapes in higher education, budget challenges, and the rapidly evolving presence of AI in our classrooms and our work. At times, it was disorienting. At other times, it was energizing. But like any strong community, we didn’t freeze when the plot shifted, we leaned in and kept going.

We quite literally built for the future together, with the groundbreaking, naming, and topping out of Hunter Hall of Science and Engineering marking not just a physical transformation, but a shared vision for what is possible. We expanded who we are academically, launching Electrical and Computer Engineering and reimagining Computer Science & Engineering to better reflect the world our students are stepping into. We deepened our commitment to helping students connect their learning to meaningful futures, supporting them as they navigate not just degrees, but directions. We engaged thoughtfully with the rise of AI. What could have been a distraction became an opportunity. Through workshops, conversations, and ongoing collaboration, faculty and staff came together to shape how we respond with intention, with curiosity, and with a commitment to learning alongside our students. And it was often our staff, typically working behind the scenes, who ensured that even in the most uncertain moments, our work continued to move forward.



Biological Sciences

Outstanding Faculty-Student Collaboration

Awarded to **Dr. James Kezos and Nessa Jamalian**

Nessa Jamalian has been working with Dr. James Kezos since 2025. As a Master's student in Biological Sciences, she has played a key role in advancing research in the Kezos Lab. She led the development of a neurocardiac research model using *Drosophila melanogaster*, creating new opportunities to study biological mechanisms, environmental factors, and human health. This work has supported multiple projects and laid the foundation for future research and funding efforts, with her protocols now integrated into lab practices.

Nessa has contributed to projects focused on cardiac function, metabolism, and aging, using techniques such as metabolic assays, dissection and imaging, and genetic tools. She has presented her work through three poster and two oral presentations and successfully proposed her Master's thesis. She has also mentored undergraduate researchers, supporting the lab's growth and student involvement. Together, Dr. Kezos and Nessa represent an outstanding faculty-student collaboration, with Nessa continuing toward her goal of pursuing a PhD and a career in the biotechnology industry.

Special Recognition:

Dr. Julie Jameson, co-director and founder of the Summer Scholars Program, has shaped the experiences of hundreds of student researchers for more than a decade. Through her visionary leadership, she has fostered a dynamic, supportive environment where students grow as scholars, build confidence, and discover their potential beyond the classroom. Her commitment to mentorship and student success has created a strong network of alumni thriving in graduate study, industry, healthcare, and education. Beyond campus, Dr. Jameson has built meaningful partnerships across the San Diego STEM community, expanding opportunities for student research and professional development. Today, we celebrate her extraordinary contributions and enduring legacy.



Molsoft Award

Awarded to **Brosnan Chernobieff-Brook**

Brosnan Chernobieff-Brook has been selected as the recipient of the 2026 CSTEM Molsoft Award, which recognizes outstanding achievement in computational science and supports students demonstrating exceptional promise in advancing computational approaches to complex problems.

As a member of an interdisciplinary microbial genomics research team, Brosnan has distinguished himself through remarkable contributions early in his academic career. As a first-year transfer student, he assumed a central computational role, developing a custom simulation platform in C++ to model microbial colony behavior under changing environmental conditions. Building this system from the ground up—rather than relying on existing tools—demonstrates both technical ambition and creative problem-solving in addressing complex scientific challenges.

Brosnan's work features a flexible and scalable modeling framework, coupled with careful attention to efficient data organization and memory management, reflecting a high level of programming expertise and computational insight. Faculty have recognized the rigor of his work and his ability to apply computational thinking within an interdisciplinary context, effectively bridging computer science and biological systems.





Biotechnology

Outstanding Faculty-Student Collaboration

Awarded to **Dr. George Brusch and Diana Lujan-Johnson**

Diana Lujan-Johnson worked with Dr. George Brusch IV for two years as an undergraduate researcher. She joined his lab after excelling in Introduction to Cellular and Molecular Biology and quickly became an integral member of the team. Diana contributed to an NSF-funded project, assisting with experimental design, laboratory assays, data collection, and coordination. She demonstrated strong independence and critical thinking, engaging with scientific literature and supporting troubleshooting efforts in the lab.

Through this collaboration, Diana developed strong research skills while also mentoring undergraduate students and helping maintain a collaborative lab environment. Diana graduated in December 2025 with a GPA of 3.2 and plans to pursue graduate studies in biological sciences.

Together, Dr. Brusch and Diana exemplify strong faculty-student collaboration through mentorship, research, and student development, reflecting CSTEM's commitment to hands-on learning.





Chemistry and Biochemistry

Outstanding Faculty-Student Collaboration

Awarded to **Dr. Karno Ng and Theodore Cummings**

Theodore Cummings worked with Dr. Karno Ng on developing and optimizing analytical methods for the extraction and enantiomeric detection of an antidepressant drug in complex biological samples. His work focused on improving techniques for analyzing biomolecules and pharmaceuticals, contributing to research in analytical chemistry. Throughout the project, Theodore demonstrated persistence, curiosity, and a strong commitment to refining experimental methods.

Theodore has shown dedication to both research and academic growth. He presented his work at multiple conferences, including the West Coast Biological Sciences Undergraduate Research Conference and the SoCal Undergraduate Chemistry Research Symposium. In the lab, he took on leadership roles by training new research students and leading group discussions to support experimental design and troubleshooting. He also contributed to piloting and improving CURE-based laboratory experiments, helping strengthen course materials and student learning experiences.

Under Dr. Ng's mentorship, Theodore developed strong technical skills and independence as a researcher. Together, Dr. Ng and Theodore exemplify the teacher-scholar model through mentorship, research, and student development, representing an outstanding faculty-student collaboration.





Computer Science and Engineering

Outstanding Faculty-Student Collaboration

Awarded to **Dr. Sreedevi Gutta and Sahar Akbarzadeh**

Sahar Akbarzadeh worked with Dr. Sreedevi Gutta on applying machine learning to classify glioma tumor grades. She implemented and compared five convolutional neural network (CNN) architectures, evaluating both predictive performance and interpretability using Grad-CAM visualizations. She addressed challenges such as limited medical data and class imbalance, identifying models that effectively focus on tumor regions.

Sahar's work reflects strong technical skill and a focus on solving real-world problems. By balancing accuracy and interpretability, she contributed to more reliable models in medical imaging and demonstrated her ability to handle complex analytical challenges.

Through their collaboration, Dr. Gutta and Sahar exemplify strong faculty-student mentorship and research. Their partnership supports Sahar's development as she pursues a future career as a machine learning engineer or data scientist.





Electrical and Computer Engineering

Outstanding Faculty-Student Collaboration

Awarded to **Dr. Reza Kamali and Kevin Gomez**

Kevin Gomez worked with Dr. Reza Kamali on multiple research projects focused on applying engineering principles to real-world challenges. His work includes designing and prototyping an assistive device for individuals with limited motor function, where he developed a 3D-printed adaptive toothbrush handle and integrated an accelerometer to track motion. Using LabVIEW, he visualized brushing patterns to improve user outcomes, demonstrating both technical skill and a strong focus on practical application.

Kevin has also contributed to research in RF and communication systems, including designing and testing transmitters across multiple frequencies. He constructed a 300-meter FM transmitter using a Colpitts oscillator and amplifier stages, and conducted testing to ensure proper performance. His current work focuses on improving signal quality in transceiver systems through low-noise amplifier integration. These experiences highlight his ability to apply analytical thinking and engineering design to complex problems.

Through their collaboration, Dr. Kamali and Kevin exemplify strong faculty-student mentorship and technical development. Their partnership reflects a commitment to hands-on learning and innovation, supporting Kevin's growth as he prepares for a career in RF and communication systems engineering.





Mathematics

Outstanding Faculty-Student Collaboration

Awarded to **Dr. Shahed Sharif and Jacob Mendenhall**

Jacob Mendenhall worked with Dr. Shahed Sharif during summer 2025 on a Summer Scholars project exploring multidimensional Tic-Tac-Toe. Their collaboration focused on analyzing whether draws are possible on higher-dimensional boards. Jacob demonstrated strong initiative by helping shape the direction of the project while independently learning the theoretical background needed to approach the problem. His work combined computational analysis with rigorous mathematical reasoning, leading to significant progress in understanding the structure of the game.

Jacob made notable contributions by proving multiple original theorems related to multidimensional Tic-Tac-Toe. In addition to developing computational tools, he produced clear, self-contained proofs, including one for a known result that previously lacked an accessible explanation in the literature. His work reflects a high level of mathematical maturity and problem-solving ability. Jacob presented his research through a poster presentation, a departmental colloquium talk, and at a Mathematical Association of America conference, where his work was well received.

Through their collaboration, Dr. Sharif and Jacob exemplify faculty-student mentorship and research excellence. Their partnership highlights the value of curiosity, independence, and collaboration in mathematical research, representing an outstanding example of faculty-student engagement.



Retirement: Karen Kinnison
In Memory of Heydar Zahedani



The Wolfram Award

Awarded to **Eric Nardi**

The Wolfram Award is granted to Eric Nardi for exceptional skill in software-based computation and applied mathematics. As part of the Summer Scholars Math Bandwidth Sharing Team, he contributed to an applied probability project examining whether Reflecting Brownian Motion can be constrained within a workload cone. He worked independently and persistently, using primary documentation to resolve complex programming challenges. Nardi excelled in debugging and refining extensive linear algebra code, producing a clear and elegant final implementation. His disciplined reasoning and technical precision reflect the excellence recognized by this award.

K. Brooks and Marion Reid Student Achievement Awards

Thanks to a generous donation by the Founding Librarian Dean and Librarian Emerita Marion Reid, and Founding Faculty Member and Professor Emeritus K. Brooks Reid, the Department of Mathematics annually recognizes three students that have shown outstanding academic performance in Mathematics.

Stella Muehlhausen, Reid Fall 2025 Graduating Student

Michael Guzman & Cipriana Rodriguez, Reid Discrete Mathematics Award

Kristy Franco Niebles & Daniel Villanueva, Reid Algebra Award

Diana Garcia, Reid Analysis Award

Elizabeth Goehe, Reid Graduate Student Award

Kayla Barrett, Reid Probability/Statistics Award





Physics

Outstanding Faculty-Student Collaboration

Awarded to **Dr. Stephen Tsui and Mahika Kahlon**

Mahika Kahlon has distinguished herself through her collaboration with Dr. Stephen Tsui by contributing to both departmental outreach and student engagement in the Physics program. She has played a key role in strengthening the department's community through her involvement in student organizations and outreach initiatives. Working closely with Dr. Tsui, Mahika helped revamp the department's website, improving accessibility and communication for current and prospective students. Her ability to translate technical concepts into engaging and understandable content has enhanced the department's public presence.

In addition to her outreach efforts, Mahika has taken on leadership roles as Treasurer for both the Society of Physics Students and Women in Physics, supporting events and learning opportunities for students. She has also been actively involved in Super STEM Saturday for the past two years, serving as the primary announcer for rocket launches and making complex scientific ideas accessible to a broad audience. Her initiative, reliability, and communication skills have positively impacted the student learning environment.

Through their collaboration, Dr. Tsui and Mahika exemplify strong faculty-student mentorship and engagement. Their partnership reflects a shared commitment to teaching, outreach, and student development. Mahika, maintains a 3.74 GPA and plans to pursue a career in physics education.





CSTEM *Outstanding Undergraduate Research Award*

Awarded to **Marisa Mendoza**

Marisa is awarded the CSTEM Dean's Outstanding Undergraduate Research Award for exceptional achievement in undergraduate research and leadership in microbial ecotoxicology.

Marisa, a first-generation transfer student, has distinguished herself in microbial ecotoxicology through strong technical skill, independence, and creativity. She has led complex research initiatives and contributed to the development of new genomic sequencing capabilities that will continue to support future students and strengthen research capacity at CSUSM.

Her accomplishments include selection as a Barry Goldwater Scholar, NIH U-RISE Scholar, and Beckman Scholar. She has presented at multiple conferences, earned a Best Poster Award at ABRCMS, been a CSUSM Student Research Symposium finalist, and is a first author on manuscripts in progress. She has also served as a dedicated mentor, supporting peers and helping expand research opportunities and infrastructure at CSUSM.

Marisa is further recognized for her resilience and determination. While balancing significant responsibilities as a first-generation transfer student, she has demonstrated consistent focus, integrity, and perseverance. These qualities, combined with her research accomplishments, position her as an emerging leader in her field.





CSTEM *Community Engaged Scholar*

Awarded to **Tracey Ta**

Tracey Ta is a dedicated and community-minded student who exemplifies the spirit of the Community Engaged Scholar Award. Through her leadership and initiative, she has demonstrated a strong commitment to addressing real-world challenges while supporting the STEM community at CSUSM.

Tracey developed a lab coat donation and redistribution program that reduces financial barriers for students while promoting laboratory safety and sustainability. By collaborating with Safety, Health & Sustainability, she created a lasting solution that benefits both students and the broader campus. Her work highlights the impact of combining academic knowledge with community engagement to create meaningful change.

Beyond this initiative, Tracey has been actively involved in ACS and the STEM Outreach Club, helping create opportunities for students to engage with the community and develop communication skills. She has also served as a mentor to K–12 students, making STEM more accessible and inspiring future generations. Her commitment to outreach, leadership, and service continues to strengthen connections between the university and the broader community.

Tracey said, “The highlight of my college career was being able to participate and facilitate the ACS Better than Magic Chemistry Show. Hearing and seeing the kids screaming “Oooooo” or “Ahhhh” as they watched our show sparked passion for me to continue facilitating these types of events.”





CSTEM Inclusive Excellence & Diversity Award

Awarded to **Organ Saraphoka**

Organ Saraphoka is the recipient of the 2026 CSTEM Inclusive Excellence and Diversity Leadership Award. Their academic achievement, leadership, and dedication to expanding access in STEM have made a meaningful impact on the CSTEM community.

As a first-generation student from rural Thailand, Organ has transformed these experiences into a strong commitment to equity in education. Through their work with the Center for Research and Engagement in STEM Education (CRESE), they have helped create inclusive, supportive spaces where K–12 students can explore science and build confidence.

As a Lead STEM Ambassador, Organ mentors fellow ambassadors, supports outreach programs, and works directly with students to foster curiosity and belonging in STEM. Their nominators highlight authenticity, humility, and a dedication to uplifting others.

In addition to outreach, Organ is engaged in research in microbial genomics, reflecting both intellectual rigor and a clear sense of purpose. Organ aspires to become a professor at a primarily undergraduate institution, continuing to mentor and support students from diverse backgrounds. CSTEM is proud to recognize Organ's leadership and commitment to building a more inclusive and equitable STEM community.





CSTEM Outstanding Student Leader

Awarded to **Haley Burch**

Haley Burch is an exceptional student leader who has made a meaningful impact on the CSTEM community through her dedication, initiative, and commitment to supporting others. As ASI representative for CSTEM, Haley has contributed to improving student engagement and representation, including revitalizing the Student Art Exhibition and increasing participation while creating a more inclusive space for students.

Haley's leadership extends into university governance, where she has served on the General Education Committee and contributed to the First-Year Seminar Workgroup. She has provided thoughtful insight, representing student perspectives with professionalism and confidence. Beyond these roles, she has demonstrated initiative by mentoring first-year students, organizing panels, and guiding peers toward academic and professional opportunities. Her efforts have helped build strong connections within the CSTEM community.

Haley played a key role in rebuilding the Women in STEM student organization, creating opportunities for networking, mentorship, and community-building. She has also served as a Supplemental Instruction Leader for Organic Chemistry, supporting students in mastering challenging material. Through her leadership, academic excellence, and commitment to service, Haley exemplifies the qualities of an outstanding student leader and continues to make a lasting impact at CSUSM.





CSTEM *Minerva Award for Outstanding Graduate Teaching*

Awarded to **Kaden Winspear**

Kaden Winspear has demonstrated a strong commitment to teaching and mentorship throughout his graduate studies in the Department of Biological Sciences at California State University San Marcos. As a graduate student, he has taken on multiple instructional roles, including serving as a teaching assistant, CELS facilitator, and graduate peer mentor. Through these roles, he has consistently created engaging and supportive learning environments, emphasizing active learning and inclusive teaching practices that help students connect scientific concepts to real-world applications.

Kaden's approach to teaching is grounded in reflection, innovation, and student-centered learning. He has implemented evidence-based teaching strategies and explored how laboratory experiences influence student confidence and interest in science. His ability to communicate clearly, stay organized, and connect with students has made him a highly effective instructor. In addition to his classroom contributions, he has mentored undergraduate and graduate students in research, teaching skills such as programming and bioinformatics while supporting their academic and professional growth.

Faculty mentors consistently recognize Kaden for his leadership, empathy, and dedication to student success. His work extends beyond teaching into research mentorship and the development of computational resources that support both laboratory research and graduate-level courses. With plans to pursue a PhD in population genomics and a career in academia, Kaden exemplifies the qualities of an outstanding educator and mentor, making him a highly deserving recipient of this award.





CSTEM Dean's Outstanding Graduate Award

Awarded to **Isabel Serrano**

Isabel Serrano is the 2026 CSTEM Outstanding Graduate, recognized for exceptional academic achievement, research excellence, and leadership in STEM.

A first-generation college student, she earned a 3.95 GPA in biochemistry while balancing significant family responsibilities, demonstrating resilience and focus. In Dr. Kang Du's lab, Isabel developed novel di-iron complexes with high magnetic moments, with potential applications in MRI contrast agents and next-generation computing. Her work includes a peer-reviewed publication from her summer at USD, a patent contribution through her Novartis internship, and a manuscript in progress at CSUSM. Faculty rank her among the top 1–2% of students they have mentored, citing her intellectual maturity and persistence. She is an accomplished science communicator, earning an Outstanding Poster Award at UC Irvine and finalist recognition for the CSU-wide Glenn Nagel Undergraduate Research Award, and independently preparing a competitive NSF Graduate Research Fellowship proposal.

As founding president of Out in STEM (oSTEM) and a leader in the Association for Women in Mathematics and the American Chemical Society, Isabel has expanded student opportunities and served as a dedicated mentor. Her academic excellence, research impact, and leadership make her a standout student and emerging leader in STEM.





CSTEM Outstanding Lecturer Award

Awarded to **Dr. Sujal Phadke**

Dr. Sujal Phadke is the recipient of the 2026 CSTEM Outstanding Lecturer Award in recognition of her exceptional teaching, mentorship, and service to the Department of Biological Sciences and the Professional Master's Degree Program in Biotechnology. A dedicated and student-centered educator, Dr. Phadke is known for her ability to make complex scientific concepts engaging, accessible, and relevant through innovative, hands-on instruction. Her broad expertise across the biological sciences curriculum has earned her the nickname "the Swiss Army Knife" of the department.

Students consistently praise Dr. Phadke for her engaging teaching style, thoughtful mentorship, and commitment to student success. She integrates current research, computational tools, and inquiry-based learning into her courses, helping students develop critical thinking and technical skills essential for modern science. Beyond the classroom, she is deeply committed to mentoring undergraduate and graduate researchers, guiding students in experimental design, scientific communication, and publication-quality research projects.

Dr. Phadke's impact extends throughout the CSTEM community through her service, collaborative spirit, and dedication to inclusive excellence. Colleagues and students alike value her curiosity, generosity, and passion for lifelong learning. Through her outstanding contributions as a teacher-scholar, Dr. Sujal Phadke exemplifies the excellence celebrated by the CSTEM Outstanding Lecturer Award.





CSTEM Faculty Outreach Award

Awarded to **Dr. Diego Sustaita**

Dr. Sustaita's dedication to science communication and community engagement is evident through his extensive outreach efforts. Throughout his career at CSUSM, he has built strong connections with the community by leading initiatives that make science accessible and engaging. Working alongside his research team, he regularly develops interactive and bilingual outreach activities, ensuring inclusivity and broader participation across diverse audiences.

Dr. Sustaita's most visible outreach contributions include his long-standing involvement in Super STEM Saturday, where he creates dynamic, hands-on exhibits focused on animal adaptations and field research. His presentations combine interactive displays, real-world research examples, and creative tools to engage audiences of all ages. In addition, he contributes to community education through programs such as the Coastal North San Diego County CalNat Course and local outreach events, where he shares expertise in biomechanics and animal ecology with both students and early-career professionals.

Dr. Sustaita's outreach efforts are closely connected to his teaching, particularly through field-based courses that immerse students in real-world research experiences. By integrating teaching, research, and community engagement, he fosters enthusiasm for science while supporting student development. His continued commitment to outreach and education has strengthened connections between the university and the broader community, exemplifying the impact of faculty engagement.





The 2026 CSTEM Gonfalonier

Awarded to **Dr. Ricardo Fierro**

Dr. Ricardo Fierro has been selected by the CSTEM faculty as the 2026 CSTEM Gonfalonier, an honor bestowed upon a distinguished colleague whose record of teaching, research, and service exemplifies the highest ideals of the College. As Gonfalonier, Dr. Fierro will lead the CSTEM graduates in procession at the Spring 2026 Commencement ceremony.

Since joining California State University San Marcos in 1993, Dr. Fierro has played a transformative role in the growth and evolution of CSTEM. Beginning as a Mathematics faculty member, he dedicated himself to excellence in teaching and mentorship, shaping the educational journeys of countless students. His leadership continued through his service as Department Chair and later as CSTEM's first Associate Dean, where he helped define the College's vision, infrastructure, and long-term commitment to student success.

Dr. Fierro's contributions have had a lasting impact across the College. He was instrumental in advancing data-informed decision-making, supporting the development and expansion of engineering programs, and helping secure and implement major initiatives, including the HSI-STEM grant. Through his leadership, CSTEM strengthened its "ecosystem of student success," creating opportunities and support systems that continue to benefit students and faculty alike.

Even after returning to the faculty, Dr. Fierro's dedication to CSTEM has remained unwavering. His thoughtful mentorship, collaborative spirit, and continued leadership in student success initiatives reflect a career defined by service, innovation, and commitment to the College community. It is especially fitting that he will lead this year's graduates at Commencement, as his work has helped shape the experiences and opportunities that brought them to this milestone.





College of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

Outstanding Staff

Amy Armstrong
Lori Asaro
Ford Becker
Lisa Carmosino
Breanna Caso
Clarivel Cedillo Lopez
Jeani Cressy
Andre Dominguez
Courtney Dow
Dana Edstrom
Faraideh Fareidar
Jessica Faulkner
Calvary Fisher
Anissa Garcia Vasquez
Elizabeth Gonzalez
Albert Halili
Dakota Heisel
Jennifer Johnson
George Lane
Calvin Le
Rebecca Luu
Leicia Marin
Diane Mitchell

Tonya Molnar
Jonathan Pont
Angelica Ramos
Dulce Robles-Martinez
Everardo Robles-Martinez
Elizabeth Sanchez Bustos
Laurie Schmelzer
Janine Smock
Mikaela Speets-Drake

Special Recognition:

Dena Hegab,
Dean's Office Student Assistant

For the past three years, Dena has been an invaluable member of the CSTEM Dean's Office staff. She will graduate with top honors, earning Summa Cum Laude distinction in Biotechnology. In recognition of her exceptional achievements and leadership, she has been selected as the 2025–26 CSTEM Commencement Speaker.



CSTEM Outstanding Staff Award

Awarded to **Courtney Nance-Sotelo**

Courtney's impact on the Biological Sciences department is exceptional. As Lab Coordinator and Budget Analyst, she plays a vital role in supporting both instructional and research operations. She oversees laboratory preparation across multiple buildings, manages instructional support staff, coordinates safety compliance, and works closely with faculty to ensure laboratory courses run efficiently. Her ability to anticipate needs and adapt to challenges helps maintain a high standard for the department's laboratory-intensive curriculum.

Beyond her daily responsibilities, Courtney has demonstrated strong leadership during periods of staffing shortages and increased operational demands. She has coordinated lab operations across buildings, supported hiring efforts, and served as a key point of communication between faculty and university offices. In her role as Budget Analyst, she provides clear guidance on purchasing, grant expenditures, and compliance, ensuring transparency and effective use of departmental resources.

Courtney's initiative, attention to detail, and collaborative approach set her apart. She consistently identifies solutions, supports faculty and students, and ensures that laboratory experiences are safe, organized, and effective. Her dedication and professionalism are essential to the success of the department, making her a truly deserving recipient of this award.





CSTEM *Community Partner*

Each year, the College of Science, Technology, Engineering, & Mathematics honors a community partner who has demonstrated a commitment toward helping CSUSM, and CSTEM in particular, to fulfill its mission of student success.

Presented to: **Mark Rodriguez**

As a member of the CSTEM Advisory Council and a longtime leader in industry, Mark has made an extraordinary impact on the college and its students. His insight as a retired Electrical Engineer from General Atomics, combined with his deep commitment to community connection, has helped shape engineering programs to better meet the needs of the future workforce. He has consistently gone above and beyond by actively engaging with students and faculty and connecting the college with partners and opportunities that expand what is possible for students.

Through his generosity, thoughtful guidance, and unwavering support of CSTEM's mission, Mark has strengthened academic programs and helped students see clearer pathways toward achieving their ambitions in STEM fields. His contributions have had a lasting and meaningful impact on the CSTEM community.





CSTEM *Campus Heroes*

Each year, the College of Science, Technology, Engineering, & Mathematics recognizes campus heroes who have helped us achieve our goals through their outstanding service and support.

Presented to: **Caitlin Rondoe, Mecca Danishwar, Zayla Paschall**

Through their extraordinary partnership and leadership, the team has played a vital role in the success of CSTEM's signature programs. Under the leadership of Caitlin and Mecca, SuperSTEM Saturday has grown into one of the most anticipated and impactful events of the year, bringing thousands of community members to campus to celebrate STEM. Their ability to manage complex logistics, coordinate partnerships, and deliver high-quality experiences has been essential to the event's continued success.

CSTEM also recognizes Zayla for her contributions to Research and Design Day, helping to create a meaningful and engaging experience for students and the broader community.

Across all of these efforts, Event and Conference Services consistently demonstrates professionalism, creativity, and a commitment to excellence. Their work enables CSTEM to deliver large-scale programs that inspire future scientists, engineers, and innovators, leaving a lasting impact on the college and community.





OGSR Dean's Outstanding Graduate Award

Awarded to **Callie Steppat**

Callie Steppat has distinguished herself as an exceptional student, researcher, and mentor throughout her time in the Biological Sciences program at California State University San Marcos. She has made significant contributions to research in physiology, leading multiple projects focused on ion transport and hormonal regulation in insect systems. Her work has resulted in the development of new protocols, extensive data collection, and several manuscripts in progress. Known for her initiative, organization, and strong work ethic, Callie has consistently exceeded expectations and demonstrated remarkable scientific growth.

Beyond her research, Callie has played a key role in mentoring students, guiding undergraduate and graduate researchers while fostering a collaborative lab environment. She has contributed to numerous conference presentations, many of which have received recognition, and has developed expertise in advanced techniques, including electrophysiology methods. Her leadership extends into the classroom, where she has served as a teaching assistant and created inclusive, engaging learning environments that support student confidence and success. In addition, Callie has remained actively involved in community service, supporting local outreach efforts and working with underserved populations.

Callie's dedication to research, teaching, and service reflects a strong commitment to the scientific community. As a first-generation student who completed her master's degree in an accelerated timeline and has been accepted into competitive PhD programs, she exemplifies excellence, resilience, and leadership. Her impact on her lab, department, and community makes her a highly deserving recipient of the Graduate Dean's Award.



CSU Trustee Emeritus Kenneth Fong Scholar Award

Awarded to **Oscar Loyola Torres**

The CSU Trustees' Award for Outstanding Achievement the highest student distinction in the California State University system, honoring 23 students—one from each campus—who demonstrate superior academic performance, personal achievements, community service, and financial need, and remarkable resilience in the face of significant challenges.

As a first-generation Latino college student, Oscar has overcome significant challenges while pursuing his goal of becoming a physician. He is majoring in Molecular and Cellular Biology at Cal State San Marcos and is a COMPASS Scholar, conducting research on breast cancer and adipose tissue interactions under Dr. Carlos Luna Lopez.

Oscar also gains clinical experience through the Palomar Pathmaker Internship, where he provides compassionate, bilingual care to patients and families. In addition, he volunteered at SuperSTEM Saturday, inspiring young students through science education.

Oscar aspires to become a family medicine physician, working to improve healthcare access and serve underserved communities. His dedication to research, service, and community truly reflects the values of CSTEM.





CSUSM *President's Outstanding Faculty Award for Scholarship and Creative Activity*

Awarded to **Dr. Yanyan Li**

Dr. Li's research focuses on cyber threat detection and cybersecurity education, with a nationally recognized record of scholarship. He has produced more than 40 peer-reviewed publications, achieved significant citation impact, and secured over \$1 million in external funding from agencies such as the National Science Foundation. His work advances the scientific foundations of cybersecurity while contributing to the growing importance of this field.

In addition to his research, Dr. Li has mentored more than 30 undergraduate and graduate students, providing opportunities for hands-on learning and scholarly development. Many of his students have gone on to publish their work, pursue advanced degrees, and enter the cybersecurity workforce. He has integrated his research into innovative teaching practices, creating experiential learning opportunities that extend beyond CSUSM.

Dr. Li's contributions to both research and education make him a highly deserving recipient of the President's Outstanding Faculty Award for Scholarship and Creative Activity. His work continues to strengthen cybersecurity education and prepare students for success in a rapidly evolving field.





CSUSM *Harvey Neufeldt Faculty Hero Award*

Awarded to **Dr. Suzanne Hizer**

This award recognizes leadership and dedication to advancing inclusive excellence and student success at CSUSM. Dr. Hizer is honored for 25 years of distinguished service and her lasting impact on the campus community. As a faculty member and associate director of the HSI-STEM grant, she has played a key role in expanding equitable access to STEM education and supporting historically underrepresented students.

Under her leadership, student support models have been strengthened, and culturally responsive teaching practices have been advanced to better serve diverse student populations. Her work has helped create meaningful academic and career pathways, empowering students to persist and succeed in STEM fields. Through her commitment to mentorship and collaboration, she has contributed to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Dr. Hizer is widely respected as a mentor, collaborator, and campus leader who fosters a student-centered culture. A proud CSUSM alumna, she exemplifies the values of compassion, equity, and excellence. Her continued dedication to student success and institutional growth makes her a truly deserving recipient of the Harvey Neufeldt Faculty Hero Award.





Special Recognitions:

COAST Undergraduate Research Awards

The CSU Council on Ocean Affairs, Science, & Technology (COAST) is the CSU system-wide affinity group for marine and coastal related activities. COAST promotes interdisciplinary, multi-campus collaborations to advance the knowledge of California's natural coastal and marine resources, and the processes that affect them.

Awarded to:

Jackson Cross—Dr. Hamed Nademi, Faculty Mentor
Modular Wave Energy Converter Interfacing With Marine Microgrid

Aubree Keyser—Dr. Hamed Nademi, Faculty Mentor
System Integration of Modular Wave Energy Converter Interfacing with Marine Microgrid

Mireya Zamora—Dr. Hamed Nademi, Faculty Mentor
Modular Multilevel Power Conversion for Wave Energy Converter Applications

Alexander Sybowicz—Dr. Darcy Taniguchi, Faculty Mentor
Temporal Changes in Plankton Biomass off the Northern San Diego County Coast

Marissa Geving—Dr. Elinne Becket, Faculty Mentor
Isolation and Characterization of PFOS-Metabolizing Microbes in Marine Wetland Sediment

Brosnan Chernobieff-Brook—Dr. Elinne Becket, Faculty Mentor
Effects of rainstorm runoff on coastal microbial communities and antibiotic resistomes





CSTEM Finalists at the Symposium *on Student Research, Creativity and Innovation*

These students were selected at our campus symposium to represent California State University San Marcos at the Annual CSU Systemwide Student Research Competition. The competition is held to promote excellence in undergraduate and graduate scholarly research and creative activity by recognizing outstanding student accomplishments throughout the twenty-three campuses of the California State University.

Tania Hernandez & Casandra Nguyen – Dr. Carlos Luna Lopez, Faculty

Triple Negative Breast Cancer Proliferation Reveals the Efficacy of Each Inhibitory Drug Treatment Leading to Molecular Pathway Targets

Harnoor Boparai - Dr. Carlos Luna Lopez, Faculty Bioprinting Hybrid Collagen-PEGDA Scaffolds to Study Differences in Breast Cancer Cell Attachment and Migration.

Miguel Kinyon – Dr. Betsy Read, Faculty Mentor
Qualitative research on Calcidiscus leptoporus sexual reproduction.

Julian Banuelos Torres – Dr. Diego Sustaita, Faculty
Exploring the genetics of performance: morphology, kinematics & genomics of salt marsh harvest mice.

Christopher Lambert – Dr. Kang Du, Faculty Mentor
Synthesis of Pyrene-Based Linker for Porous Magnets.

Max Hyman & Madison Gill – Sean Fraser, Faculty Mentor
Solving The Quark Flavor Puzzle With Maximum Flavor Democracy



CSUBioTech Scholars

Howell Research Scholars Program

Awarded to **Monica Ambrocio**

Exploring Cytoskeletal Dynamics Role in Cancer Metastasis In MCF-7 cell lines. Mentor: Dr. Carlos Luna-Lopez

President's Commission Scholar Award

Awarded to **Spencer Wiggins**

Comparative Transcriptomics to Investigate Host-Range Mechanisms in Ranaviruses Mentor: Dr. Elinne Becket

Faculty-Graduate Student Collaboration

Awarded to **Cassandra Nguyen**

Exploring the Impact of Fatty Acids from Brown and White Adipocytes on Breast Cancer Progression: The Role of Inhibitory Drugs" Mentor: Dr. Carlos Luna-Lopez

CSUSM Grad Slam

Grad Slam is a research communication competition where students present their research and scholarly work. It challenges participants to distill complex ideas into clear and compelling presentations within a short time frame. The goal is to effectively communicate the significance and impact of their research in a way that is accessible and engaging to a wide audience .

Graduate STEM Category winner: **Callie Steppat** - Voltage-Gated K+ Channel KCNQ1 Regulates Ion Transport in Cabbage Looper Caterpillars

Undergraduate Category runner up: **Sophi Theriault** - Identification and Functional Analysis of Enzymes Involved in K-26 Biosynthesis in *Astrosporangium hypotensionis*



Students Graduating with Honors

Summa Cum Laude

Abdul Majid Abdul Majid

Kabire Akbari

Emma Anderson

Jacob Badillo

Kayla Barrett

Nandin Bat-Erdene

Marie Bethell

Jackson Cross

Zachary Davis

Jordan DeForge

Zella Garrido

Brynn Grofcsik

Dena Riyadh Hageb

Suman Halder

Demiana Hanna

Carlee Herrmann

Colin Homan

Grace Hubbard

Mehjabeen Khan

Cassidy Klein

Alexandra Krejci

Raymond Las Pinas

Ryan Milner

Thomas Nardi Toharia

Denise Natividad

Danielle Paulson

Xuong Tai Phuong

Symphony Rutkowski

Isabel Serrano

Hala Sobh

Kaylin Sparks

Gabriel Tellez Ornelas

Aleksandra Troester

Adria Vargas

Fathima Faheema Vawoo

Abdullah Sahib

Jack Walker

Kayla Wrathall

Francesca Yap

Malcolm Zartman

Graduating Veterans

Kabire Akbari

Elias Estacion

Tania Garcia

Nathan Green

Vincent Hildreth

George Khalaf

Roem Rivera

John Smithers

Thomas Stone

Christian Valiente

Hayden Yingling



Students Graduating with Honors

Magna Cum Laude

Alessandra Adkins

Marcos Arrioja

Philip Avdey

Madison Barrett

Jakub Borycki

Baudiel Camacho

Lia Chavez

Mikel Cruz

Kathleen Dela Cruz

Ian Derevlany

William Dorry

Serenity Enriquez

Elias John Estacion

Jake Faulkner

Jenna Frankina

Ashley Gillilan

Aleks Gonzalez

Noya Hafiz

Ryan Haugen

Vincent Hildreth

Joshua Hucul

Rochane Hurst

Lorena Ibarra-Quinonez

Angela Jara

Kyla Jones

Kayla Le

Grace Le

Cindy Luna

Natalia Maldonado Soto

Renton McGregor

Ryan Mendoza

Xahn Millsape

Marzia Mohammad

Ashley Nagdevand

Brandon Nguyen

Anthony Nicklo

Lynn Pham

Ananya Pokkula

Vanessa Purnell

Jocelyn Quintero

Tyler Rains

Chase Rhubottom

Havanna Robbins

John Smithers

Jaedon Spurlock

Abby Stangle

Alexander Sypowicz

Ethan Tran

Jack Tuszynski

Manuel Villa Hernandez



Students Graduating with Honors

Cum Laude

Thomas Alarcon	Kelly Frear	Kiera Ramirez
Nazar Alyafie	Destiny French	Bryson Reyes
Salvador Aquino	Arpita Godbole	Cameron Robinson
Malia Ayach	Antoine Hathaway	Aidan Rodriguez
Baris Ayarkan	Katelyn Heller	Angelina Ruiz
Isabella Barajas	Mariah Jaboro	Aliyah Ruvalcaba
Nikita Baumgarten	Cooper Jumamil	Maia Schlining
Daniel Beltran	Pushpita Kar	Camile Angel Sevilla
Bricio Blancas Salgado	Aubree Keyser	Sophia Shahryar
Anthony Buchanan	George Khalaf	Timothy Sherrill
Caitlyn Casey	Ethan Lam	Frank Snedecor
Monica Chavez Martinez	Joshua Lara Gomez	Sarah Sower
Angel Chavez Velasco	Christian John Lim	Xina Sulaivany
Luis Cruz	Oscar Loyola Torres	Riley Temple
John Dang	Benjamine Medina	Jack Teply
Paolo Miguel Devesa	Marisa Mendoza	Sophi Theriault
Tiffany Dizon	Gavin Morris	Gonzalo Tomas
Cindy Doan	George Muniz	Ryan Vargas
Beau Dougan	Victoria Nguyen	Ethan Vazquez
Rozlyn Dyke	Tien Nguyen	Jesus Vazquez
Isaiah Esquivel	Natalie Nosco	Andre Velazquez
Ellia Ezami	Savanah Orozco	Andres Vilchis
Noralhuda Farji	Kevin Perez-Ramirez	Matthew Watson
Brandon Feldt	Jack Perich	Joseph Zamiski
Jason Forbes	Carlos Quinones	

Thank You

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ENGINEERING & MATHEMATICS