



4TH *Annual* HSI SUMMIT

**In Community, In Continuity:
Sustaining Servingness through Collective Responsibility**

OCT 6, 2025 | 8 A.M. - 5 P.M. | USU BALLROOM



In Community, In Continuity: Sustaining Servingness through Collective Responsibility

At CSU San Marcos, servingness is more than a designation—it's a collective responsibility. In the face of growing challenges to equity and inclusion, this summit invites us to reflect, recommit, and rise together. Through powerful dialogue, shared practices, and bold visioning, we will explore how each of us—faculty, staff, administrators, and community partners—can help sustain a thriving, equity-driven HSI that centers the success and lived experiences of each and every one of our students.

8:00 - 8:50 AM

BREAKFAST & REGISTRATION

9:00 - 9:20 AM

**WELCOME, LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
AND OPENING REMARKS**

Emcees:

Erik Ramirez, Ed.D.

Carmen Nava, Ph.D.

Speakers:

Viridiana Diaz, Ed.D.

Ellen Neufeldt, Ed.D.

9:30 - 10:15 AM

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Featured Speaker: Anne-Marie Nuñez, Ph.D.

10:15 - 10:20 AM

BREAK

10:20 - 11:20 AM

MAPPING MY ROLE IN SERVINGNESS

Facilitators:

Audrey Paredes, Ph.D.

Arely Villalobos Ayala

Session Description: Through a guided, collaborative activity, faculty, staff, and administrators will reflect on where, how, and to what extent they are actively enacting servingness in their roles. Participants will engage in critical dialogue to identify opportunities for growth and consider the support systems needed to meaningfully embed servingness within their individual spheres of influence.

11:20 AM - 12:05 PM **LUNCH**

12:05 - 1:00 PM

SPOTLIGHT ON: BEST PRACTICES PLENARY

Session Description: This dynamic plenary brings together campus and community partners to spotlight the innovative programs, collaborative efforts, and lessons learned in advancing HSI goals. Panelists will share best practices for fostering student success and reflect on how they are sustaining equity-driven work in an evolving landscape.

Speakers:

Erika Diaz Almeyda, Ph.D.

Amber Gonzalez, Ph.D.

Jose Alamillo, Ph.D.

Kevin Ferreira Van Leer, Ph.D.

Frank Gomez, Ph.D.

Yolanda Cataño, Ed.D.

1:00 - 1:05 PM

TRANSITION

1:05 - 2:00 PM

SERVING WITH INTENTION: INTERSECTIONALITY IN PRACTICE

Featured Facilitator: Natacha Cesar Davis, Ph.D.

Session Description: Understanding that Latinx students are not a monolith is critical to servingness. This session explores the intersectional identities within the Latinx community (e.g., AfroLatinx, Indigenous, LGBTQ+, undocumented, first-generation) and how HSI efforts must be inclusive of these experiences. Participants will reflect on the limits of one-size-fits-all approaches and explore more nuanced, identity-conscious practices.

2:00 - 2:10 PM

BREAK

2:10 - 3:10 PM

CONCURRENT SESSIONS

SESSION #3: OUR COLLECTIVE FUTURE AT CSUSM: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? ENVISIONING SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

In partnership with The Makery

Facilitators:

Leo Melena, M.A.

Robert Gutierrez-Perez, Ph.D.

Session Description: This interactive session invites faculty, staff, and administrators to co-create a bold, shared vision for what it means for CSUSM to thrive as an HSI. Participants will generate actionable ideas to guide future HSI efforts. Together, we'll surface themes and commitments that can shape campus-wide strategies for equity, belonging, and servingness for all.

SESSION #4 (STUDENTS ONLY) ¡TU VOZ, TU FUTURO

Facilitator: Maria Venegas Escobedo, M.A.

Session Description: This session is designed to help students understand what it means to attend an HSI and why that matters to their college experience. Through community building interactions, a session on HSI 101: Why It Should Matter to You, and student-led dialogue, students will walk away informed, inspired, and empowered.

3:10 - 3:30 PM

CLOSING REMARKS

Featured Speaker: Aswald Allen, Ph.D.

3:30 - 5:00 PM

CELEBRATION & NETWORKING RECEPTION



SPEAKER & FACILITATOR *Bios*



José M. Alamillo, Ph.D.

José M. Alamillo is Professor and Chair of the Chicana/o Studies Department at California State University Channel Islands at Camarillo, CA. This teaching and research broadly under Chicana/o cultural history with a focus on labor, immigration, gender, leisure, and sports. He is the author of *Making Lemonade out of Lemons: Mexican American Labor and Leisure in a California Town* (2006) and co-author of *Latinos in U.S. Sport* (2011). He recently published *Deportes: The Making of a Sporting Mexican Diaspora* for Rutgers University Press (2020). He is currently the co-chair of the H.S.I. Taskforce at CSU Channel Islands.



Aswad Allen, Ph.D. Chief Diversity Officer Office of Inclusive Excellence, CSUSM

Dr. Aswad Allen is the Chief Diversity Officer at California State University San Marcos, where he leads the Office of Inclusive Excellence. With over 30 years of experience in higher education, Dr. Allen is a nationally recognized leader in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). His work centers on fostering inclusive environments that promote student success, institutional effectiveness, and social mobility, especially for historically marginalized populations.

At CSUSM, Dr. Allen collaborates with university leadership, faculty, staff, and students to implement strategic, systemic, and sustainable DEI initiatives. His leadership philosophy is rooted in a “partner-leader” approach, emphasizing collaboration and shared responsibility. He oversees a team of professional staff, faculty associates, and student assistants, and serves on the President’s Administrative Team, advising on key decisions that shape campus climate and equity efforts.

Before joining CSUSM, Dr. Allen served as the inaugural Chief Diversity Officer at Emporia State University in Kansas, where he played a pivotal role in advancing inclusive excellence across campus and within the broader community. He also held the position of Assistant Dean of Diversity Affairs at the University of Colorado Denver, where he integrated DEI frameworks into academic and administrative strategies.

Dr. Allen holds a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Administration and a Master’s in Student Affairs in Higher Education Administration from Colorado State University. He earned his Bachelor of Science in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from the University of Colorado Boulder.

Dr. Allen’s commitment to equity is not only professional but deeply personal. He often acknowledges the legacy of those who have labored for institutional change and remains dedicated to amplifying traditionally marginalized voices in higher education.



Yolanda Cataño, Ed.D.

Department of Education HSI-STEM & Articulation Program Grant Manager
CSU Chancellor's Office

Dr. Yolanda Cataño is a proud product of the California State University (CSU) system having earned her B.A. in Women's Studies with a Minor in Theatre Arts and M.A. in Sociological Practice at CSU San Marcos and her doctorate from San Diego State University Educational Leadership Program, both federally recognized Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). Currently, Dr. Cataño serves as Grant Manager for the U.S. Department of Education's HSI-STEM and Articulation Program at the CSU Chancellor's Office, where she works collaboratively with campuses to strengthen pathways for Latinx/é and low-income students in STEM fields. Her research and professional expertise focus on how identity, culture, and systemic practices intersect to impact Latinx/é students' educational opportunities and outcomes. Her research agenda focuses on advancing and supporting students at the various identity intersections they hold. Her passion for HSIs is infused in the work that she does in and outside of academic spaces.



Natacha Cesar Davis, Ph.D.

Senior Director, Student Life Cycle
CSUSM

Dr. Natacha Cesar-Davis is a distinguished academic and seasoned practitioner, embodying a wealth of experience across diverse post-secondary roles on both the East and West coasts. Her unwavering commitment to student success is evident in her dynamic collaborations with faculty, staff, and administrators, fostering research-practice partnerships that amplify student learning and retention. Dr. Cesar-Davis has delved into the intricate dynamics of students' intersectional identities, illuminating the path to vocational identity development. Her research explores faculty pedagogies shaping student engagement, the pivotal role of services like financial aid in fostering student belonging, and how faculty life histories enrich students' navigational and social capital. Holding Bachelor's in Art History and History and Master's in Developmental and Educational Psychology from Boston College and a second Master's in Higher Education and Organizational Change and Ph.D. in Education from UCLA, she has worked as a full-time tenure track faculty at two community colleges, counselor and advisor at both public and private universities, Director of an HSI grant and most recently as Assistant Dean of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion and Black Life at UCLA's School of Education and Information Studies. Currently, she serves as the Inaugural Senior Director of the Student Life Cycle at California State University San Marcos, reporting to both the VP of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, overseeing the strategic planning and coordination of success and retention initiatives. Natacha was born in Argentina and spent her childhood in this country.



Erika Diaz Almeyda, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Biology
College of Science, Technology, Engineering, & Mathematics
(CSTEM), CSUSM
Director, The Milpa Project

Dr. Díaz-Almeyda is an Assistant Professor of Biology at California State University, San Marcos. In her microbial ecology lab, she investigates how climate change and rising sea temperatures affect symbiosis, and how anthropogenic stressors impact microbial diversity. As part of her research, she studies how environmentally friendly agroecological systems impact soil microbial diversity and function. Her work emphasizes traditional ecological practices, integrating local stakeholder perspectives, and collaborating with local communities to address the complexities of coastal ecosystems. As a Faculty Innovation Fellow at CSUSM, she leads the Milpa Hub, a community-based initiative that promotes collaborations between farmers, seed savers, chefs and academics. She holds a B.S. in Biology and an MS. In Marine Biology from Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. She completed her Ph.D. in Biology at The Pennsylvania State University. She was an NIH-FIRST fellow at Emory University.



Viridiana Diaz, Ed.D.
Vice President
Student Affairs, CSUSM

Dr. Viridiana Diaz is the Vice President for Student Affairs at California State University San Marcos, bringing over 25 years of experience in higher education. A proud first-generation college graduate, she is deeply committed to advancing student success by closing opportunity gaps, fostering belonging, and promoting retention and graduation.

Her leadership spans a wide range of student affairs areas, including enrollment management, student life, well-being, Title IX/DHR, and student conduct. At CSUSM, she has led a division-wide reimagination initiative, launched a new 2025–2030 strategic plan, and co-led the university's strategic enrollment plan.

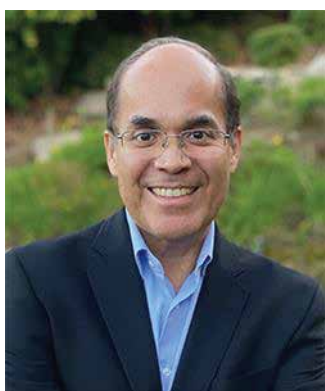
Dr. Diaz holds a doctorate in educational leadership and policy and multiple advanced degrees in communication, Latin American literature, and history. She is also a graduate of executive leadership programs at UC Berkeley, Stanford, and Harvard.



Kevin Ferreira van Leer, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Human Development and Family Sciences
University of Connecticut
CSU Action Research Network

Kevin Ferreira van Leer, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Connecticut. As an action researcher, he examines the sociocultural and policy contexts that promote positive development and liberation for Latine immigrants and their families. Previous research includes working alongside Latine undergraduate co-researchers in examining student success and “servingness” at a Hispanic-Serving Institution using photovoice and student-led surveys. Currently, he co-leads the CSU Hispanic-Serving Institution Action Research Network, a collaborative initiative to transform Latine student success across the CSU. Current research also includes investigating how structural factors, such as variation in social policy exclusions for immigrants, and the assets of immigrant communities, are associated with the wellbeing of immigrant families in the U.S.

A scholar-activist, Kevin has been sought out for supporting educational institutions in addressing the ways that policy and practice create and perpetuate inequity for people of color. He is a co-author of *Bringing Antiracism into Focus: Using Transformative Lenses to Reframe Professional Practice*. His work has been funded by the Spencer Foundation, College Futures Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation and Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. He received his Ph.D. in Applied Developmental and Educational Psychology from Boston College.



Frank Gomez, Ph.D.
Executive Director, STEM-NET
CSU Chancellor's Office

Dr. Frank A. Gomez is the Executive Director of STEM-NET, a multicampus consortium, based at the California State University Chancellor's Office where he leads STEM initiatives for the 22-campus system. Prior to this position he was Professor of Chemistry at Cal State LA since 1994. He received his BS and PhD in Chemistry from Cal State LA and UCLA, respectively and was a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University. As Executive Director, he has been a part of collaborative grants securing over \$56MM in funding for STEM and education-related projects. As a faculty member he has received over \$21 million in research funding for his work in microfluidics, point-of-care diagnostics, and fuel cells. He has mentored over 140 students and postdocs, the majority from underrepresented groups, and has over 130 publications and two books. Gomez has given back to the community by serving on several non-profit boards, and in elected office as a member of the Montebello Unified School District Board of Education, the Montebello City Council and as Mayor. He is President of the Leo Buscaglia Foundation and is Chair of the Central Orange County Democratic Club.



Amber Gonzalez. Ph.D.
Professor, Child and Adolescent Development
Sacramento State
CSU Action Research Network

Amber M. Gonzalez, Ph.D. is a tenured Professor in the Child and Adolescent Development program at California State University, Sacramento. Using mixed methods and participatory action research, her scholarly activities focus on exploring the influence of social support networks and institutional structures on Latine college student identity development and educational and career aspirations, and motivations. In addition, she explores the ways in which students use their aspirations and motivations to ensure their success, manage failure, and persist. She has worked closely with educators, administrators, parents, community agencies, policy-makers, and experts to develop and implement qualitative and quantitative research projects covering a variety of topics related to education, health and human services, immigration, labor, and work force development. She currently works with 8 CSU HSIs to explore ongoing HSI work on each campus, including specific policies, programs, and practices, to identify cross-campus best practices and their impact on the holistic success of Latine students and their communities. Her research has been funded by Sacramento State, The College Futures Foundation, and the Spencer Foundation. Her scholarly work has been published in the Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, Journal of Educational Research, and College Student Journal. Questions about equity and the roles of institutional agents in supporting students' holistic success that guide her research agenda also inform her pedagogy. Her teaching philosophy centers on helping students become critically aware of their own assumptions. Promoting an understanding that social forces shape the creation and use of knowledge is central to her philosophy of teaching because it helps students sharpen critical thinking skills to enable them to go beyond existing knowledge. Dr. Gonzalez' work is grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy, critical reflection, and a deep commitment to inclusive, equity-minded teaching practices. In addition to her scholarly and instructional activities, she serves as an academic advisor to students and faculty advisor to multiple student organizations. She also serves as an active member of the Faculty Senate and has led efforts in creating programming to support and retain faculty of color. Through her multiple roles on campus, she has collaborated with various university stakeholders to address inequities within campus policies, programming, and practices. Her institutional and community service and leadership activities center on advocating for equity and social justice for students and faculty of color.



Robert Gutierrez- Perez, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Communication & Media Studies CSUSM

Robert Gutierrez-Perez (Ph.D., University of Denver) is an Associate Professor of Critical/Cultural Studies in Communication at California State University, San Marcos (CSUSM), a Hispanic-Serving Institution. His scholarship centers on decolonial and Indigenous theories and methodologies, focusing on how power operates in everyday life. His work actively engages with and elevates the knowledge systems of non-Western and subaltern communities.

Gutierrez-Perez is the author of "Jotería Communication Studies: Narrating Theories of Resistance." This book maps the communicative practices of nonheteronormative mestizas/os—such as cuentos, pláticas, chismé, testimonio, mitos, and consejos—as a form of cultural knowledge and resistance.

The book provides "theories in the flesh" that demonstrate how Jotería communities navigate difference and create spaces for queer of color world-making. His research is a testament to the power of performative and narrative inquiry as tools for emancipation.

A recognized scholar in queer of color and Latina/o/x communication, he has been published in numerous national and international journals. He is also the award-winning editor of the collection: "This Bridge We Call Communication: Anzaldúan Approaches to Theory, Method, and Praxis." He is the editor of the Performance & Pedagogy series in *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*.



Leo Melena, M.A.

Director of Student Success, College of Humanities, Arts, Behavioral, and Social Sciences, CSUSM

Leo Melena serves as the Director of Student Success in the College of Humanities, Arts, Behavioral, and Social Sciences, where he has dedicated more than 19 years to uplifting students and colleagues alike. A proud first-generation college graduate with immigrant roots, Leo understands firsthand the transformative power of higher education. He began his academic journey at Palomar Community College before transferring to the University of California, San Diego, where he earned his Bachelor of Arts in Political Science. He later pursued his Master of Arts in Postsecondary Education Leadership at San Diego State University, a path inspired by his commitment to ensuring that students, especially those from historically marginalized communities, thrive in higher education. Leo's work is guided by his belief that every student deserves the opportunity to realize their collegiate aspirations. In addition to his formal role, he has served as Chief Steward of the San Marcos Chapter of Academic Professionals of California, as President of the Latino Association of Faculty & Staff (2011–2012), as an instructor for First-Year and University Programs (OUGS), and was awarded Employee of the Year (2023–2024).



Carmen Nava, Ph.D.
Associate Dean, Curriculum, Academic Programs/Student Success
College of Humanities, Arts, Behavioral, and Social Sciences, CSUSM

Carmen Nava is Associate Dean of Curriculum, Academic Programs and Students Success in the College of Humanities, Arts, Behavioral and Social Sciences at California State University San Marcos. Having graduated from California State University Northridge with a B.A in History, she earned her Ph. D in Latin American History at UCLA. She is Professor in the Department of History at California State University San Marcos.



Ellen Neufeldt, Ed.D.
President, CSUSM

Since becoming the fourth president of California State University in July 2019, Dr. Ellen Neufeldt has focused on engaging, interacting, listening, and building relationships with students, faculty, staff, alumni and community constituents. A champion of innovation and entrepreneurship, President Neufeldt oversaw the opening of CSUSM's Innovation Hub, an on-campus home for meeting societal needs, less than a year into her tenure in March 2020. But her commitment to innovation goes beyond a physical space, encompassing an entire ecosystem that includes a critical focus on social innovation. Dr. Neufeldt is also firmly committed to ensuring that Cal State San Marcos is a diverse, inclusive and welcome home for students, faculty, staff, alumni and community members. Focusing throughout her career on student success and student social mobility, she cares deeply about being part of the solution to creating pathways for students to achieve their dreams.



Anne- Marie Núñez, Ph.D.
Distinguished Centennial Professor in Educational Leadership and Foundations
Executive Director, Diana Natalicio Institute for Hispanic Student Success
The University of Texas at El Paso

Anne-Marie Núñez, Ph.D. is the inaugural Executive Director of the Diana Natalicio Institute for Hispanic Student Success and Distinguished Centennial Professor in Educational Leadership and Foundations at The University of Texas at El Paso. Her work employs sociological approaches to examine how to design organizations and systems to broaden postsecondary educational opportunities. She has published several studies on the higher education experiences and trajectories of Latine, first-generation, English Learner, working, and migrant students. As a national expert on Hispanic-Serving Institutions, her co-edited book *Hispanic-Serving Institutions: Advancing Research and Transformative Practice*, the first ever to focus on HSIs as organizations, won an International Latino Book Award. In her work to expand inclusive science approaches, she has led and collaborated on over \$20 million of funded projects to advance educational effectiveness, experiential learning, and community engagement in computing and geoscience fields, particularly in Hispanic-Serving Institutions. An American Educational Research Association Fellow, she has also been recognized in Education Week's Edu-Scholar Public Influence Rankings as among the top 200 scholars in the U.S. influencing educational practice and policy. In addition, she is an elected member of the National Academy of Education for her outstanding scholarship and leadership related to education.



Audrey Paredes, Ph.D.

**Assistant Professor, Educational Leadership and Administration
College of Education, Health, and Human Services, CSUSM**

Audrey D. Paredes, Ph.D. is an assistant professor of educational leadership and administration in the School of Education at California State University San Marcos (CSUSM) and a co-director of the UCSD–CSUSM Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership. The proud daughter of Guatemalan immigrants and a first-generation college graduate, Dr. Paredes brings a deeply rooted practitioner-scholar perspective shaped by her lived experiences and background as a former college student affairs practitioner. Her interdisciplinary scholarship utilizes critical frameworks and approaches to examine how Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), particularly Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), can be leveraged as transformative spaces for systemically marginalized communities. Her current research centers the heterogeneity of the Latina/o/x college student population by exploring the lived experiences of Central American undergraduates at HSIs. Dr. Paredes is a member of the CSU HSI Action Research Network and the HSI Research Colectiva. Her recent work has been published in the *Journal of Latinos in Education* and the *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*. She earned her Ph.D. and M.A. in Education with a specialization in race and ethnic studies from UCLA and her B.A. in Gender, Ethnicity, and Multicultural Studies (with a concentration in Chicana/o Studies) from California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.



Erik Ramirez, Ed.D.

**Director, Divisional Initiatives & Partnerships
Student Affairs, CSUSM**

Dr. Ramirez joined Cal State San Marcos in April 2024 and leads high-impact initiatives that advance student success, strengthen institutional capacity, and further the university's mission as a Hispanic-Serving Institution. He manages a federal grant focused on Latinx and first-generation student achievement, coordinates the annual HSI Summit, and serves as one of the campus leads for the Seal of Excelencia—a national recognition for institutions that intentionally serve Latinx students.

His portfolio also includes building cross-divisional and community partnerships, guiding divisional projects such as the Student Affairs Strategic Plan, and leading efforts that expand resources and support for immigration-impacted communities.

Grounded in his background as an immigrant and first-generation college graduate, Dr. Ramirez approaches his work with a deep commitment to equity, belonging, and social mobility, centering students and the diverse communities they represent.



María Venegas Escobedo, M.A.
Director, College Assistance Migrant Program
Activities Director, Pumas Prosperos (DHSI Grant)
Student Affairs, CSUSM

María Venegas Escobedo is the Director of the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) at California State University San Marcos, where she leads initiatives that expand access, retention, and degree attainment for underrepresented students. She also serves as Activities Director for CSUSM's Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions Grant, Pumas Prosperos. A bilingual, bicultural leader, María is recognized for her strengths in strategic program development, culturally responsive practices, and building cross-campus and community partnerships that foster student belonging and achievement for all students. With over 15 years of experience in higher education, she has directed multiple federally funded programs, authored successful multimillion-dollar grants, and launched signature initiatives at CSUSM. Her commitment to higher education is rooted in her lived experience of having her life transformed through education, fueling her passion to create the same opportunities for all students. María is a proud, Mexican-American, first-generation CSUSM alumna, earning her B.A. in Human Development and her M.A. in Postsecondary Educational Leadership from San Diego State University.



Arely Villalobos Ayala
Administrative Support Coordinator
Kellogg Library, CSUSM

Arely Villalobos Ayala is a proud graduate of California State University San Marcos, where she earned dual Bachelor of Arts degrees in Criminal Justice Studies and Sociology. She currently serves in the CSUSM Library as an Administrative Support Coordinator, where she focuses on facilities and personnel strategy. Arely is also pursuing dual master's degrees in Public Administration and Latin American Studies blending policy and cultural studies to create systemic change. Her research explores educational inequities and centers the voices of immigrants, with a particular focus on breaking down bureaucracies of the education system. Guided by her passion for social justice, equity, and access to higher education, Arely would like to help build a future where access and representation in education are not the exception, but the rule.

CSUSM HSI SUMMIT PLANNING *Committee*

Sandra Carrillo

Financial Aid Advisor
EMS Financial Aid & Scholarships Office

Leo Melena

Director of Student Success
CHABSS College of Humanities, Arts, Behavioral & Social Sciences

Carmen Nava

Associate Dean of Curriculum, Academic Programs/Student Success
CHABSS College of Humanities, Arts, Behavioral & Social Sciences

Audrey Paredes

Assistant Professor
CEHHS School of Education

Erik Ramirez

Director of Divisional Initiatives & Partnerships
Student Affairs

Ariel Stevenson

Deputy Chief Diversity Officer
Office of Inclusive Excellence

Mae Talicuran

Interim Associate Director of Special Projects
Student Affairs

Maria Venegas Escobedo

DHSI Activities Director
Director, College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP)

Arely Villalobos Ayala

Facilities & Personnel Coordinator
Library



CSUSM