

# USC Rossier

M A G A Z I N E



## Rebuilding America's Trust in Education

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Can understanding the past rebuild faith?

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# Building Strong Finances for Those Who Build Strong Minds

From flexible loans and everyday banking to wealth management and financial guidance, USC Credit Union gives Trojans the tools to thrive.

Open to alumni, faculty, staff, and students, because strong minds deserve strong banking made for Trojans.



Dear Friends,



As we approach the end of the year, I find myself reflecting on the moment we are living through and what it means for education. Schools, colleges and universities have become the site of deep political, cultural and social divisions. We have witnessed debates over curricula, equity, admissions and identity play out in classrooms, on school boards and across campuses nationwide.

Learning losses and divisions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, increased acts of violence on campuses and skepticism that the cost of a college degree is actually worth it have shaken the public's confidence in education. At the same time, persistent inequities pertaining to affordability and access remind us that we are still far from ensuring every child has access to the quality learning they deserve.

A recent Walton Family Foundation-Gallup poll showed that just 35% of the American public is satisfied with the state of K-12 education in the United States, and another recent Gallup poll shows that the percentage of Americans who think attending college is "very important" has dropped to 35%. The result is clear: Public trust in education has eroded. Where confidence in our institutions was once taken for granted, today it must be earned again. This loss of trust threatens not only our educational systems but also our democracy, which relies on an informed and engaged citizenry.

At USC Rossier School of Education, we have never shied away from hard questions. In recent years, we have asked whether schools of education remain relevant and have examined the essential link between education and democracy. In this issue, we turn our attention to an urgent challenge: How do we rebuild the public's trust in education?

Rebuilding trust requires honesty about the past, creativity in the present and courage for the future. You will see all three reflected in the pages ahead.



PHOTOS/BRIAN MORRI  
→ Dean Noguera poses with doctoral graduates at commencement in May.



← Five faculty were honored at a chair installation event earlier this spring. (p. 8)

Our faculty, students and alumni are leading in this work, not only in Los Angeles but also across the nation. In these pages, you will learn about the incredible leadership of Superintendent Elizabeth Blanco during the horrific L.A. fires (p. 4). Her team successfully reopened Pasadena Unified schools a day before the Eaton Fire was finally put out. You'll also be introduced to one of our esteemed doctoral students, Zuriel Oduwole, who was nominated for this year's Nobel Peace Prize (p. 10).

Creative and research-backed solutions to improve our schools are also being developed and put into practice by our faculty. Dean's Professor of Leadership Adrianna Kezar's Shared Equity Leadership model is providing a new path for colleges and universities to approach equity (p. 30), and Fahmy and Donna Attallah Chair in Humanistic Psychology Mary Helen Immordino-Yang's innovative research on neuroscience and education is being brought to life in the classroom through a new USC CANDLE Innovation Lab initiative (p. 26). The USC Rossier community is demonstrating that trust can be rebuilt when educators act with integrity, transparency and a commitment to the public good.

My hope is that this issue challenges you to think about your own role in this effort. Trust is not restored overnight, and it cannot be delegated to others. It can be rebuilt by demonstrating how our work in the field of education benefits all of society and not just a select few. It is something we create together, day by day, through our actions, our words and our willingness to listen. Thank you for being part of that ongoing work.

Fight On!

*Pedro Noguera*

Pedro A. Noguera, PhD

Distinguished Professor of Education  
Emery Stoops and Joyce King Stoops Dean  
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## EDITOR'S NOTE



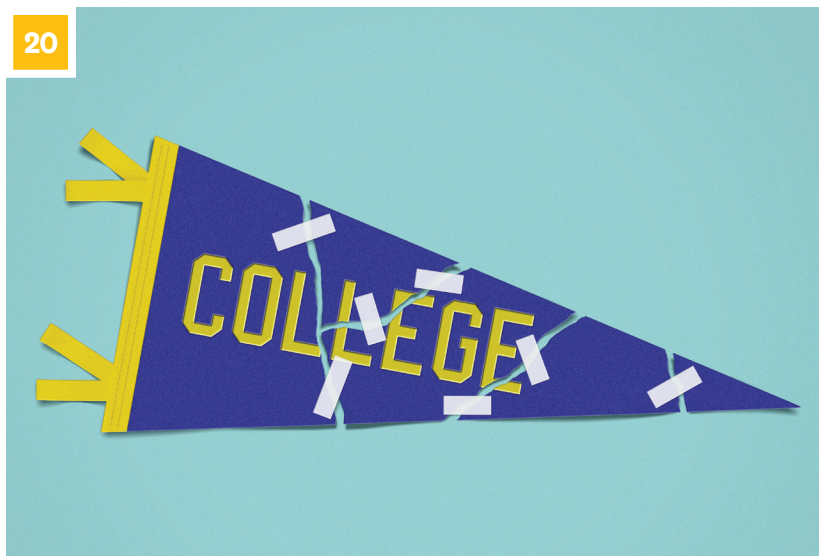
### Rebuilding America's Trust in Education

Over the last decade, schools—from universities to preschools—have become a battleground in the culture wars that have divided the American public. From disagreements over which bathrooms students should be allowed to use and college admissions scandals to school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic and tragic school shootings, education issues have been front and center. Coupled with rising tuition and stagnant income, these contentious debates and incidents have led to an erosion in trust in the institutions responsible for educating our communities.

The decline in confidence has hit higher education particularly hard. In 2015, a Gallup poll reported that around 57% of Americans had a great deal of confidence in higher education and just 10% said they had little or no confidence. Fast forward to 2024 and the numbers shifted dramatically, with 35% of Americans reporting a great deal of confidence and 32% reporting they had very little or no confidence in higher education.

We've dedicated previous issues of the magazine to the important relationship between education and democracy, and last year, we turned our line of inquiry on ourselves and asked if we still need schools of education. These past issues explored pressing challenges facing education and defended the need for education in a free and just society. In this issue, we focus on solutions to repair the public's trust in education and explore ways the USC Rossier community is working to do this.

Kianoosh Hashemzadeh, Editor



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By Katie Walsh

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As federal pressure shutter's DEI programs, the Pullias Center is showing institutions how to integrate equity principles across departments, roles and campus priorities through a shared leadership model.

By Nadra Nittle

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## STORY IDEAS? FEEDBACK?

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ILLUSTRATION BY NATE KITCH

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## Leading Through Tragedy

In the wake of the Eaton fire, Superintendent Elizabeth Blanco rallied Pasadena Unified around one mission: reopening schools.

By Kianoosh Hashemzadeh

**ELIZABETH BLANCO** EdD '09 has worked in education for over 37 years. She has seen and been through a lot during her career, but nothing compares to her experience leading the Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD) through the historic wildfires that swept through the Los Angeles area in January 2025.

Schools in the Pasadena district reopened their doors to students after winter break on Jan. 6, but the next day, the Eaton fire began, quickly igniting dry hillsides fueled by strong Santa Ana winds. Though schools closed on Jan. 8, Superintendent Blanco and her leadership team were hard at work.

But where does a leader begin to address the problems caused by a historic fire event for which there is no tried-and-true playbook?

To start, Blanco activated the district's Emergency Operations Center, which had undergone a dry run in August 2023 when a tropical storm prompted the district to close schools. Blanco knew immediately that the team's number one priority was to reopen schools as soon as it was safe to do so. "We know that school is a sense of normalcy and the bedrock of democracy," she says.

This goal and the district's five core values—cultural competency, equity, accountability, collaboration and fiscal responsibility—guided the seven-member leadership team as they grappled with responding to the deadly fire. Of the 14,000 students enrolled in PUSD, 10,000 lived in evacuation zones or in burn areas. Many of the district's schools were damaged, and five were destroyed in the flames.

While the fire burned for 24 days and was fully contained by Jan. 31, schools reopened in phases from Jan. 23 to 30. It wasn't an easy task and required an incredible amount of collaboration and extraordinary leadership.

Blanco identified early on that it was essential to make sure her staff had access to housing. Many were evacuated during the fires, and nearly 1,000 students and 140 staff lost their homes. But to get schools up and running, teachers, administrators and other staff members needed a place to call home, even temporarily.

To the many leaders who reached out to see how they could support PUSD, from Gov. Gavin Newsom to State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond, Blanco stressed that they needed to provide housing for staff. They quickly entered into an agreement with Airbnb to provide free vouchers to those affected by the fires. "Emergency housing was very important," Blanco explains. "Hotels were full, and teachers couldn't afford to pay for [temporary housing] for more than a couple of weeks."

With a place for displaced PUSD employees to live, Blanco and her team were ready to tackle other challenges. The list of to-dos was endless and included buying new materials, from books to furniture; finding new locations for schools that were badly damaged or destroyed; and deep cleaning the schools that were still standing. The cleaning of one high school that wasn't even close to the flames took seven days and nights, as the powerful winds had blown ash and soot in through the closed windows. As the district tackled these tasks and others, Blanco also oversaw her team's coordination with numerous government agencies, including the cities of Pasadena and Sierra Madre and the town of Altadena, which is governed by Los Angeles County.

Just days after the fire destroyed Eliot Arts Magnet School, the school board passed a resolution to rebuild the historic landmark and keep its tight-knit community intact. "We wanted to give the community hope," Blanco says. The school stood in the center of Altadena and was a cornerstone of the community, Blanco explains. The loss of the school was felt deeply, and many residents came to the building demolition carrying lit candles.

While the district makes plans to rebuild the school, Eliot Arts Magnet students have been relocated to McKinley School. The merger "hasn't been all roses," Blanco says, as there have been challenges with sharing space, but it was important to keep the Eliot Arts community together.

There were certainly moments when Blanco didn't feel strong, but she kept going. "Students and the employees needed to see that," she says. The leadership team also faced their own personal struggles, and some needed to step out to deal with those obstacles. But all the while, they stayed "small but mighty," Blanco says. "They were an army that kept me going."

Blanco also leaned on support from other superintendents. A long-standing group chat that includes other area district leaders, many of whom are also Trojans, was a source of comfort. "It's an isolating role to begin with," Blanco says, but having the ability to share experiences and work through problems with other superintendents was very helpful.

Before Blanco assumed the role of PUSD superintendent



PHOTO/COURTESY OF KLERIN PASADENA

↑ PUSD Superintendent Elizabeth Blanco welcomes Norma Coombs Elementary students back to school after the Eaton Fire.

in 2024, the previous superintendent shared some advice through the adage "Heavy is the head that wears the crown." During PUSD's fire response, this rang even more true. The role demanded that Blanco be not only the district's instructional leader but also the emergency response chief, a grief counselor and a community steward, among many other roles. The superintendency, during a time of crisis, requires "heart, humility and the ability to lead when you are hurting. It's not about perfection but about response and being there for others," Blanco says.

Blanco credits her mentors at USC—professors Maria Ott, Rudy Castruita and Darline Robles—as being key to her success as a superintendent. There have been many times during her leadership when she has put the strategies she learned at USC Rossier School of Education into action.

Ott, the Irving R. and Virginia Archer Melbo Chair in Educational Administration, has stayed in touch with Blanco over the years, tracking her career closely and offering an ear when needed. "Dr. Blanco's selfless response models the best in Trojan leadership," Ott says. "I am proud of her for keeping the focus on students and their future while working with her team and community to rebuild and move forward."

While wildfires are a part of the California ecosystem—some native seeds, in fact, germinate only after a fire—the occurrence of megafires like the Palisades and Eaton fires of

January 2025 has grown due to climate change, faulty infrastructure and the reluctance to conduct controlled burns. "This is not the end of wildfires," Blanco says, adding that district leaders must "prepare now." Having an emergency plan in place is essential, along with strategies to help the most vulnerable students, Blanco explains. A solid communication plan is also key; during the Eaton fire, the district sent messages to the community two or three times a day and has since been widely praised for the strategy.

Also important, Blanco says, is addressing needs after tragedy strikes. The district has hired a crisis counselor and several multitiered systems of support coordinators to help address the mental health needs of the community. "The trauma was very bad and still is," Blanco says. These new hires aim to help the district execute a long-term goal of supporting those affected by the fires.

Through the unimaginable tragedy of the L.A. fires, the resilience of the students of PUSD shone through. Just weeks after the fires, students at Eliot Arts Magnet put on a performance of *Shrek Jr.* Another student group, the PUSD Student Think Tank, planned and executed a robust conference at the Sheraton Hotel. Seeing these students thriving and refusing to be defined by the tragedy of the Eaton fire was incredible for Blanco and the rest of PUSD. "The students were the ones who helped us keep going," Blanco says. —R

# Welcoming New Voices to the Table

USC Rossier’s newest Board of Councilors join returning leaders in reflecting on what’s important to restore confidence in education.

The most important thing for universities to do to rebuild trust with the public is to stay clear about why education matters in the first place. It has always been about much more than preparing students for jobs. That is the role of vocational schools. Universities must prepare students to be critical thinkers who are equipped with the mindsets and dispositions to adapt to change and address the uncertainty of the future. As Einstein once said: “The thinking that produced the problems we face will not solve them.” We must prepare students to be problem solvers who will confront future challenges with creativity and courage.

**Pedro A. Noguera**  
Emery Stoops and Joyce King Stoops Dean, USC Rossier School of Education



“Rebuild trust with our students first.”

**Wesley Smith Edd '05**  
Superintendent, Newport-Mesa Unified School District, Dean’s Superintendents Advisory Group Chair



“Restoring integrity, transparency, and authentic communication—demonstrated through consistent actions that prioritize students’ growth and well-being—is essential to rebuilding public trust in education.”

**Janis Clapoff**  
CEO, California Club

“Developing education delivery methods that increase access and affordability.”

**Michael Lizárraga**  
President & CEO, TELACU and TELACU Industries, President, TELACU Education Foundation



“We must align evidence-based policies with genuine community engagement to achieve practical, equitable outcomes.”

**Patrick Liew Edd '15**  
Executive Chairman, GEX Global Group



“I believe a caring partnership between educators, students and their parents that is based on effective communication, confidence building and achievement is the most important formula to build public trust in education.”

**Lynn Jacobson**  
Advisory Board, Teach for America, Los Angeles



“To the extent that there has been erosion of public trust in education it would be because of a pursuit of a narrow and increasingly exotic lines of inquiry. We need a return to the foundational elements of education that guide us towards a common identity and a common set of core values of intellectual curiosity, inclusive facts and a reversion from sophistication.”

**Noor Menai**  
President and CEO, CTBC Bank



**Margaret (Maggie) Chidester Edd '95**  
Law Offices of Margaret A. Chidester & Associates



**Carol Fox MS '62**  
USC Trustee, Teacher Education Lecturer; Former President, USC Alumni Association Board of Governors



**Elana Glaserberg Edd '21**  
Chair, Educational Consultant, U21 Education Foundation



“Data-driven transparency.”

**Stephen J. Aguilar**  
USC Rossier Faculty Council Chair, Associate Professor of Education



**Frank London Gettridge Edd '18**  
President & CEO, The Philanthropic Collaborative for Education

“Transparency and positive communication are the key!”

**Gary Crisp**  
President, CEO and Founder of Crisp Imaging



“Listening with action.”

**Allyson Felix '08**  
5-Time Olympian; Co-Founder, Saysh and Always Alpha



**Sheree T. Speakman**  
Founder and President, Talent First, PBC



“We should actively work to prepare new teachers and provide continuing education to in-service teachers in such a way that all stakeholders are confident that all teachers have mastered the content that they teach.”

**Richard Rasiej**  
Co-Founder, Herman + Rasiej Mathematics Initiative; Visiting Research Scholar, USC Rossier

“Putting students first.”

**Gary Perez**  
President & CEO, USC Credit Union



“Our communities must see schools as places where students are not only safe and supported, but deeply engaged in meaningful learning every day. Trust grows when we communicate transparently, partner authentically with families, and deliver on our promise of a high-quality education for every student. When our actions match our words and results reflect our commitment, confidence in public education is restored and strengthened.”

**Darin Brawley Edd '17**  
Superintendent, Compton Unified School District



## Five Faculty Honored at Chair Installation Ceremony

On Feb. 20, at the Town and Gown Ballroom on the USC University Park Campus, USC Rossier celebrated five new chair appointments. The faculty appointed to these chairs are all women who are leaders in their fields. This brings a total of 11 faculty at USC Rossier who now hold this honor.

**YASEMIN COPUR-GENCTURK**  
Associate Professor, Katzman/Ernst Chair in Educational Entrepreneurship, Technology and Innovation



**JESSICA T. DECUIR-GUNBY**  
Professor of Education, Robert A. Naslund Chair in Curriculum and Teaching



**MARY HELEN IMMORDINO-YANG**  
Professor of Education, Psychology and Neuroscience, Fahmy and Donna Attallah Chair in Humanistic Psychology.



**MARIA G. OTT**  
Professor of Clinical Education, Irving R. and Virginia A. Melbo Chair in Educational Administration



**TRACY POON TAMBASCIA**  
Professor of Higher Education, Veronica and David Hagen Chair in Women's Leadership.



## TOMMY Program Inspires First-Gen Students

The innovative summer program brings migrant youth to USC for math and college immersion.

By Ellen Evaristo

THIS PAST JUNE, over 70 high school students from the Teaching Outstanding Math to Migrant Youth (TOMMY) program walked past USC's iconic Tommy Trojan statue, many setting foot on a college campus for the first time. These students—all children of migrant farmworkers from California's Central Valley and San Diego area—formed the inaugural TOMMY cohort, a summer program designed to build confidence in mathematics and spark possibilities for the future.

TOMMY is a collaborative effort led by the USC Race and Equity Center, Youth 2 Leaders Education Foundation (Y2LEF) and the Kern County Superintendent of Schools. Held from June 15 to 21, the program brought together high school students who are all first-generation and have faced significant barriers to educational opportunity.

USC Rossier Dean Pedro Noguera visited the class to address the challenges students face in today's educational landscape, the importance of mentorship and the life-changing potential of education. "The more education you have, the more we will be able to control our future," Noguera said, encouraging students to take ownership of their academic journeys.

"We focus on supporting low-income, underserved and underrepresented youth in pursuing higher education," said Gabriel Adame, president of Y2LEF, who attended the event. The partnership

between USC and Y2LEF was designed not only to strengthen students' math skills but also to enhance college readiness and access. Throughout the week, students were fully engaged in college life—attending classes in university classrooms, living in dorms and dining in the campus commons. Adame emphasized the importance of visibility and access, noting the program gave students a meaningful opportunity to "see themselves at a university."

TOMMY was established to equip migrant youth with the tools they need to thrive academically and beyond. At its core, the program aims to strengthen foundational and advanced math skills through culturally responsive, engaging instruction that fosters competence and confidence. It also nurtures college-going identities by immersing students in the culture, resources and expectations of higher education.

Angel, a rising junior at MacFarland High School just north of Bakersfield, said the week-long experience not only strengthened his math skills but also helped him develop leadership and teamwork. "My experience here at USC has been genuinely one of the best ones yet," he shared. "It's opened a lot of new opportunities for me." He stressed that early exposure to college campuses and access to higher education can change the trajectory of migrant families. —R



→ Participants in the TOMMY program gather for a group photo at the USC UPC campus.

PHOTO: USC RACE AND EQUITY CENTER

## Americans Support Civics Education, But Remain Divided on DEI and Free Speech

A new report reveals how U.S. adults view key education issues.

By Kianoosh Hashemzadeh

A NEW REPORT THAT EXAMINES adults' views on education topics shows partisan agreement on how to educate students for citizenship, yet a sharp partisan divide around issues of diversity, equity and inclusion policies and free speech.

Published by the USC Center for Applied Research in Education in partnership with the USC EdPolicy Hub, the report is based on a nationally representative, probability-based survey of adults across the U.S. Lead authors, USC Dornsife Research Scientist Anna Saavedra and USC Rossier Professor of Education Morgan Polikoff, provide detailed analysis of the survey's findings in "Agreement Across the Aisle: Schools Should Prepare Students for the Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship."

### Common ground

With a response rate of 81%, the survey sample of 4,200 adults was carefully designed to show perspectives across the political spectrum. Respondents included 36% who identified as Republican or lean Republican, 37% who identified as Democrat or lean Democrat and 26% who identified as independent or belonging to another political party. Nearly half of the respondents, 44%, have a school-aged child in the home.

Across political parties there was agreement on several issues. Less than a third think that public schools are doing a good job preparing students for citizenship and there was near-universal support—97%—for the belief that preparing students to be good citizens should be an educational priority.

Countering political rhetoric, partisan agreement has increased since USC last administered the same questions about civics in 2021. Greater proportions of Republicans and those with other political affiliations supporting the teaching of most topics in 2024 compared to 2021 is driving the increase, according to Saavedra.

Notably, most respondents believe teaching about racism in school is important, with 93% of Democrats in agreement and 58% of Republicans, up from 54% in 2021. Respondents were also in agreement for their support of various civics-related learning activities and share strong support for students learning about opposing viewpoints. Seventy-nine percent of those surveyed agreed that it is important for students to debate topics from opposite points of view.

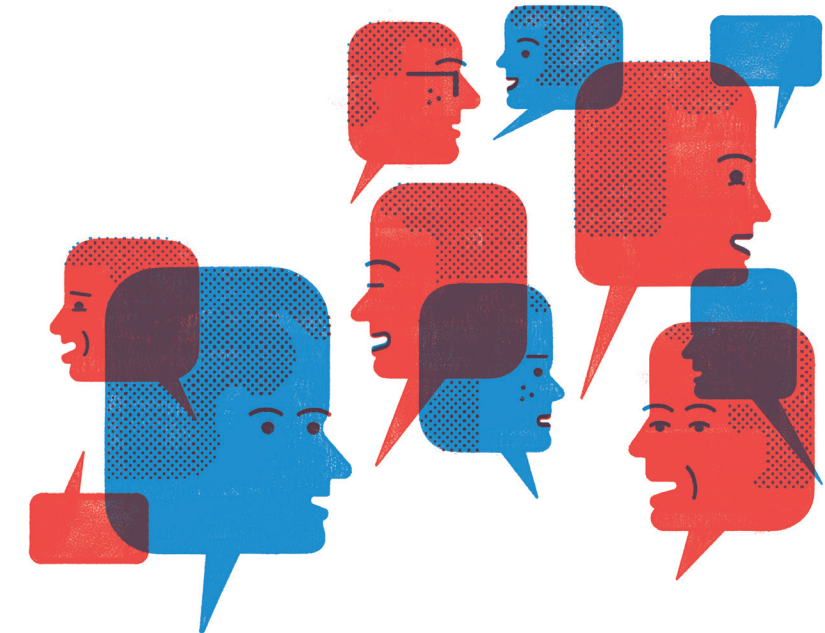


ILLUSTRATION: CHRIS GASH

### Sharper divides on college issues

When it comes to hot-button issues: student free speech/protest rights and diversity, equity and inclusion policies, the political divide is much wider.

While respondents expressed limited support for students' right to protest, views across political parties were especially strong on the most disruptive forms of protest. For instance, 65-80% of respondents think it is never appropriate for students to shout down invited speakers they disagree with, write protest messages on university property or disrupt graduation ceremonies to protest.

Republicans were more supportive of university crackdowns on student speech than Democrats. Sixty percent of Republicans believe it is never appropriate for students to protest by walking out of class, versus 33% of Democrats; and 59% of Republicans say it is always appropriate for universities to shut down protests if they interfere with learning, versus 30% of Democrats.

While the majority of Republicans (51%) support DEI training for faculty and staff at universities, Democrats reported much higher support for DEI training (76%).

"Despite all the media and political attention on DEI, there seem to be a lot of unformed views on the issue, probably because it's a jargon term that many people don't understand," said Polikoff. "In contrast, the strength of Americans' views—and their hostility to student free speech on campus—surprised me."

### What was learned

The report provides a fascinating look into the views of everyday U.S. adults on civics education and shows that perhaps the political divide in the nation is not quite as deep as some may believe.

"Included in this hopeful result, adults across the political spectrum want students to learn about and be able to evaluate differing viewpoints and think practicing this skill is the best way to resolve disagreements about education within local communities," said Saavedra. "Civics education has taken a back seat for far too long. Now is the time to prioritize it, so the next generation will be prepared to carry forward the gift of democracy." —R

## Doctoral Student Zuriel Oduwole Nominated for Nobel Peace Prize

The 23-year-old filmmaker, education advocate and policymaker came to USC to deepen her understanding of leadership and organizational change.

By Adriana Maestas

**LIKE MANY ANGELENOS**, USC Rossier doctoral student Zuriel Oduwole is tuned in to awards season, that time between November and March when nominations for major entertainment awards are announced.

When her father called to check in with Oduwole and her siblings while he was traveling this past February, he asked them to identify which awards were most important. They rattled off the Emmys, Grammys and Oscars, but he asked them to think more globally. He then revealed that Zuriel had been nominated for the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize.

“It’s still surreal thinking about it because it’s an incredible honor, especially when you think of past recipients like [South African] President Nelson Mandela, President Jimmy Carter and former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan,” Oduwole says. “I didn’t even think that people were paying close enough attention to what I had been doing with advocacy and youth to even nominate me.”

While she’s unsure of the specific reason she was nominated, Oduwole does know that one of her three nominators for the prestigious award was Professor of Clinical Education and Engineering Anthony Maddox. The other two were a professor from the University of Missouri and a U.S. senator.

The 23-year-old, who is a student in USC Rossier’s Doctor of Education in Organizational Change and Leadership online program (OCL online), has an impressive background of educational advocacy work that she’s been involved in for over a decade.

Her interest in the subject was sparked by a National History Day contest that she entered as a 9-year-old. For the competition, applicants were

asked to tell a story about a historical topic. Daring to be different, Oduwole opted to make a documentary about the Ghana revolution, which led to her meeting former presidents Jerry Rawlings and John Kufuor, who governed Ghana from 1981 to 2009.

While in Ghana to shoot scenes for the documentary, she noticed that there were children on the street selling small items and hanging out during school hours. She knew that if those children were in school, they could be developing skills to ensure their access to a better future.

After Oduwole finished the documentary, she brainstormed for almost a year about how she could address the issue. At age 10, she started Dream Up, Speak Up, Stand Up, or the DUSUSU Project, which focuses on educational advocacy and creating programs, including film-making workshops, for youths. The project formally evolved a few years later into a 501(c)3 nonprofit.

While she has continued to make documentaries—directing seven in total—she has also become a mediator for global peace and an essential and internationally recognized voice on the importance of education, especially for young girls.

“So far, I have spoken to over 58,470 students in 23 countries, including places like Botswana, Egypt, Seychelles and Jamaica, to talk about the importance of staying in school and the differentiating power of an education,” she says. “Along the way, I learned that there are economic and political issues that relate to why young people might not be in school, and that steered me to speak with more leaders such as prime ministers, heads of state and educational leaders. These leaders could create policies that could directly impact the education opportunities for millions of youths around the world.”

Oduwole has met with over 36 world leaders about these issues, providing a much-needed voice for the children who lack it. At the United Nations at age 13, Oduwole met with David Granger, then president of Guyana, to help ease tensions between Guyana and Venezuela over the Essequibo oil territorial dispute.



PHOTO/COURTESY OF ZURIEL ODUWOLE

→ While on a trip to meet with government officials to discuss global development issues in 2019, Zuriel Oduwole visited Mona Heights Primary School in Kingston, Jamaica, to speak with students.



Oduwole has also been acknowledged for helping end girl marriage in Mozambique in 2019; as a 16-year-old in 2018, she met with President Filipe Nyusi and presented herself as an example of what an educated girl can do. In September 2022, she received the U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon Leadership Award for her 10 years of development work across the globe.

Her interactions with these leaders and heads of state gave her the opportunity to “learn about different leadership styles and complex problems, which led me to this program here at USC that focuses on organizational change and leadership,” Oduwole says. The program, she says, is a good foundation to enhance what she was already doing at the highest levels of leadership and governance around the globe.

Professor Maddox first met Oduwole while he was en route to Doha for the World Innovation Summit for Education, where they were both guest speakers. After learning about her remarkable path, he recommended that she apply to the OCL online program. She’s the youngest member of her doctoral cohort.

“She has been on the minds and in the attention of the world for quite a while,” Maddox says. “Her basis for making her appearances and commentary is scholarly in nature, which, in my view, makes her a natural scholar. In the process of this doctoral program, Zuriel is becoming an academic scholar, and it’s my hope that the kind of inquiry and analysis that she does in her dissertation will be reproduced on the global stage.”

Despite the numerous accolades and recognition she’s received, Oduwole remains grounded and devoted to her work to educate, inform and address the inequities she’s witnessed firsthand around the world. Maddox hopes people will see the full spectrum of skills Oduwole has gained in the OCL online program, which he anticipates will lead her advocacy to take new, exciting forms. With formal training in interrogating systems, examining leadership philosophies and sharpening her skills with a multidisciplinary cohort, Oduwole will be poised to continue leading transformative change and impacting policy globally. As an academic scholar skilled in research and writing, she will be a vehicle and an inspiration for additional learning both inside and outside the academy. —R

PHOTO/COURTESY OF U.S. EMBASSY, KINGSTON, JAMAICA

## In the Media

“Trump has signed executive orders that severely limit the teaching of Black topics in schools, fired thousands of innocent Black federal workers, and eliminated policies and programs that ensure the equitable advancement of Black professionals across industries. Frankly, I wouldn’t have been surprised if he had issued an executive order yesterday canceling Juneteenth, especially since it became a federal holiday during Joe Biden’s presidency.”

—SHAUN HARPER, University Professor, in HuffPost

“[LAUSD’s gains are] indeed impressive and seem to have, in most cases, more than erased losses attributable to the pandemic. ... This is an important development, and the district should be proud of it.”

—MORGAN POLIKOFF, Professor of Education, in the *Los Angeles Times* on LAUSD’s test scores

“It was a gut punch. ... [The NSF cuts] are about the association of educational research with interests and values that are at odds with the administration’s priorities.”

—JULIE POSSELT, Professor of Higher Education, in the *New York Times* on cuts to grants made by the National Science Foundation

“It lets your partner know you’re not just waiting for your chance to respond. You’re interested in hearing and understanding their perspective, which creates a safe space for vulnerability.”

—MOLLY BURRETTS, Adjunct Professor, in *Time Magazine* on effective communication practices for couples

If [students are] more intrinsically motivated, they want to get into the weeds, they’ll want to actually dig deeper, maybe innovate more. That’s how you get the next wave of innovation, or the leaders who truly understand what the [ethical] implications are.”

—STEPHEN AGUILAR, Associate Professor, in *Fortune* on student’s use of artificial intelligence

“There is no doubt that higher education needs reform, but the pending disinvestment in our research universities is unwise and not in our national interest.”

—PEDRO NOGUERA, Dean, and MARK ROBISON, Vice Dean, in *Newsweek*



## Expanding Her Circle of Care

Through USC Rossier's EdD in Mental Health Leadership, Selina Galvan MFT '20 is growing her private practice and guiding the next generation of therapists.

By Margaret Crane

**"GIVEN THE STATE OF THE WORLD,** I felt the calling to do more," says Selina Galvan MFT '20, an alumna of USC Rossier's Master of Science in Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) program. "When I learned that USC Rossier was launching a Doctor of Education in Mental Health Leadership degree, I knew this was what I've been looking for." Last fall, Galvan was accepted into the program's inaugural cohort.

The Doctor of Education in Mental Health Leadership online program (MHL online) offers students the skills to take the lead in educational and mental health fields and address systemic inequities within their disciplines. Like Galvan, many students in the program had reached impasses in their careers. "Most, if not all, of us are licensed, but we didn't have the doctorates needed to be directors, educators or organizational leaders," she says.

The first degree of its kind, the MHL online program offered a solution. "Capable clinicians often have difficulties when promoted to leadership positions," notes Professor of Clinical Education Ruth Chung, who helped create the new program. "This degree is for working professionals in

mental health, human services or related fields who aspire to be leaders."

Galvan, a licensed therapist, is one of those professionals. The three-year EdD program accommodates students, like Galvan, who don't want to be relicensed at the doctoral level, which can take seven or eight years. With its evening classes, the MHL online program fits her clinical schedule.

In 2023, she founded Prime Child and Family Therapy, a private practice that focuses on adolescents, teens and families. The word "Prime" honors her father's business of the same name. It also reflects her values. "The 'prime self' is the best version of yourself, the self you love, accept and believe in," she says. "Prime therapy" recognizes that no one person is the same as another. I am committed to providing the best individualized therapy to each client."

Before her studies at USC, Galvan received her bachelor of arts in special and elementary education from Arizona State University and worked for three years as a clinical counselor in a middle school. Now, she is committed to training other therapists. "I'm passionate about helping new therapists grow," she says. "The program will help me achieve goals like hiring and supervising associates, creating a training pathway within my practice and teaching in a university."

The MHL online curriculum made an immediate impact. In the first semester, Galvan took the course "Organizational Leadership: Theory and Practice," taught by Michelle Dexter, a clinical assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry and the Behavioral Sciences at the Keck School of Medicine of USC. "She changed my perspective on leadership by emphasizing a healthy balance of courage and vulnerability," Galvan says of Dexter, whom she calls an "amazing leader."

Galvan had always planned to expand her practice and hire additional staff. Inspired by one of her courses, "Theory and Practice in Clinical-Administrative Supervision," taught by Vice Provost for Campus Wellbeing and Education Ilene Rosenstein, she hired her first associate earlier this year.

After receiving her master's degree, Galvan worked for the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health, where she encountered therapists with overwhelming caseloads. Her doctoral dissertation will introduce strategies to prevent burnout, focusing on trainees and newer professionals. "They come into the profession so happy," she says, "but they burn out so quickly. I want to help maintain the optimism that brought them into this field."

As a graduate, Galvan has remained involved with the MFT program, assisting with admissions interviews and alumni panels. Today, she is an ambassador for the MHL online program and a cohort representative liaising with students, faculty and staff.

"I've been so blessed with mentors," Galvan recalls. "Sandra Smith in the MFT program was an inspiration. Her belief in me made all the difference. Our world's hurting. We need healing. I want to create good, competent therapists to help our population. I want to share my skills with others."

—R

PHOTO / REBECCA ARANDA

## Gang Youth Research-Practice Partnership Provides Practical Advice for Researchers

Adrian Huerta reflects on the LBCC Phoenix Scholars program as it concludes.

By Adrian H. Huerta, Associate Professor of Education

**FOR MORE THAN THREE YEARS,** USC, Long Beach City College (LBCC) and Centro CHA, a Long Beach-based nonprofit, partnered in the LBCC Phoenix Scholars (LBCCPS), a program designed to support the educational pathways of nearly 150 former gang members and gang-impacted students in earning certificates, college degrees or credentials. I'm proud to share that in May 2025, LBCCPS graduated 35 students with associate degrees, and all those students transferred to four-year institutions across California.

The significance of celebrating these 35 students who earned their degrees within three years is a significant milestone, considering that the average California community college student requires close to eight years. For these students and others still involved in the LBCCPS program, their educational success is not simply an individual benefit. More broadly, their graduation and persistence in college will have broader positive impacts on society with decreased long-term dependence on social welfare systems, reducing potential involvement with the criminal legal system and promoting the power of educational credentials to their social circles.

As a tenured faculty member, the opportunity to partner with a local community college and co-design an intervention for a student population I had studied for 14 years was an incredible and fulfilling professional experience. From 2021-2024, LBCC's Sonia De La Torre, the Dean of Student Equity, and Jose Ibarra, the LBCCPS program director, and I met regularly to discuss students' needs, anticipate challenges they might face and reinforce the support pathways available to help them succeed each semester.

My recommendation for scholars in research-practice partnerships is to lean into the expertise of everyone involved. My expertise included knowledge about the empirical literature about gangs, minoritized student populations, best practices for persistence and retention in higher education, and how to support students in developing help-seeking behaviors. In contrast, Sonia De La Torre knew her institution and was aware of local, state and federal guidelines for grants and

→ Adrian Huerta created the Phoenix Scholars program in 2021. After working on the project for three years, the program will now be run by LBCC.

PHOTO/COURTESY OF USC ROSSIER

key campus programming that could be leveraged to make sure that students had their basic needs supported so they could focus on their educational success. Lastly, Jose Ibarra understood how to work with students, especially those impacted by gangs. He was empathetic and supportive of the students to ensure they were successful, and his vast network within nonprofits and local government enabled him to leverage various relationships in service to the students. I deeply respect my colleagues at LBCC for their individual and diverse expertise and investment in students, which allowed us to flourish, reverberating to student-level programming.

My second piece of advice to junior scholars and faculty is to document the project's achievements and impact on the individual, but also the campus community. For example, earlier this year, we were interviewed about the LBCC Phoenix Scholars program by a reporter for *The Nation* interested in learning about the program's inner workings. From LBCC President Mike Muñoz to multiple graduate student success coaches, we collectively highlighted the fantastic work of supporting this student population to the reporter. During the interview, I was truly touched when an LBCC colleague introduced me to one of the participant's mothers, who was inspired by her son to enroll in LBCC to earn her associate degree. In addition to the media exposure about the program's successes, we wrote a policy and practice paper for *New Directions in Higher Education* that provided a broad project overview.

One dimension of engaging in research-to-practice partnerships is the daily activities and documentation of the various lessons learned from such initiatives. Considering that I'm doing interdisciplinary work across criminology and education, I can leverage both fields to discuss and elevate the fantastic work that higher education professionals do with system-impacted students in local community colleges. I'm grateful that three of my colleagues at LBCC co-authored that paper with me so we can showcase all the achievements across those three years. —R



## USC CANDLE Establishes Innovation Lab With Major Grant

With the two-year grant, the center aims to transform education through neuroscience-informed pedagogical innovation.

By USC CANDLE

THE USC CENTER FOR AFFECTIVE NEUROSCIENCE, Development, Learning and Education (USC CANDLE) is proud to announce a two-year, major million grant from the Bezos Family Foundation to launch the CANDLE Innovation Lab. This groundbreaking initiative will explore how cutting-edge neuroscience can be integrated into classroom practices to foster deeper student engagement and durable change in adolescent education.

Led by Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, the Fahmy and Donna Attallah Chair in Humanistic Psychology and a prominent professor at USC's Rossier School of Education and the USC Brain & Creativity Institute, the CANDLE Innovation Lab will bring together researchers, educators, administrators and students in a collaborative setting. The Lab's primary focus is to explore how understanding adolescent brain development can revolutionize teaching methods, aiming to address challenges such as student disengagement and inequity in learning.

"We are thrilled to be supported by the Bezos Family Foundation in our mission to leverage developmental neuroscience in ways that will create transformative and scalable educational practices," said Immordino-Yang. "This initiative has the potential to reshape not only how teachers approach learning but also how students see themselves and their futures."

Key components of the project include the

creation of collaborative learning and action communities, known as COLABs, where teachers, researchers and youth will co-develop strategies grounded in science to implement in real-world classrooms. These strategies, constructed around human development, aim to promote civic engagement, emotional well-being and transcendent thinking, which research shows plays a crucial role in students' long-term success and mental health.

"We are immensely proud of the CANDLE Innovation Lab's pioneering work in integrating neuroscience with educational practice," said USC Rossier Dean Pedro Noguera. "This project is a powerful example of how research can transform classrooms, empowering educators with the tools to better engage students, foster critical thinking and address inequities in education. Thanks to the support of the Bezos Family Foundation, we are one step closer to reshaping the future of education to create more equitable and inspiring learning environments for all students."

The grant will also support professional development resources for educators and advance research in developmental neuroscience. By enabling a deeper connection between scientific research and practical classroom applications, CANDLE aims to address the pressing educational needs of today's diverse student populations, particularly those in underserved communities. —R



← Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, director of CANDLE (right), and Xiao-Fei Yang, scientific director of CANDLE (left), prepare a research participant for an MRI brain scan.

## Mary Helen Immordino-Yang Inducted Into American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, professor of education, psychology and neuroscience and founding director of USC's Center for Affective Neuroscience, Development, Learning and Education (USC CANDLE), has been elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, one of the nation's oldest and most prestigious honorary societies.

Founded in 1780, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences honors excellence and convenes leaders from every field of human endeavor to examine new ideas, address issues of national and global importance, and work together. Immordino-Yang joins a distinguished company of notable honorees—from earliest members John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton and George Washington to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Maria Mitchell and Alexander Graham Bell. Current members represent today's innovative thinkers in every field and profession, including more than 250 Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winners.

"Being elected to the Academy is a humbling and deeply meaningful honor," said Immordino-Yang. "It affirms the importance of using science to elevate how we think about learning and development—not just as cognitive tasks, but as profoundly emotional, social and cultural processes. I am grateful to my colleagues, students and the communities we partner with for shaping and advancing this work together."

## A Home Run for College Access

USC College Advising Corps celebrates 10th anniversary at Dodger Stadium.

By Ellen Evaristo

ON A LOVELY SUMMER EVENING AT Dodger Stadium, the USC College Advising Corps (CAC)—marked a major milestone: its 10th anniversary celebration. Held on June 10, in partnership with the Los Angeles Dodgers Foundation (LADF), the event welcomed over 100 current and former USC CAC advisers, advisees, staff and supporters.

Since its establishment, USC CAC advisers have directly assisted over 88,000 students with college applications and financial aid assistance—more than can fit in Dodger Stadium. "By 2026, we'll have helped more students than can fit into the L.A. Memorial Coliseum," said USC CAC Program Director Ara Arzumanian EdD '23 in his opening remarks. The program's goal is to serve 100,000 students by next year.

"These dedicated individuals—recent college graduates themselves—have become mentors, guides, cheerleaders and sometimes impromptu therapists to their students," said College Advising Corps Chief Program Officer Cary Claiborne. "As we celebrate this significant milestone, we also look to the future with renewed energy and optimism. The need for college advising has never been more critical than it is today."

Each year, approximately 400 applicants are interviewed for one of 20 spots in a highly selective cohort of USC CAC advisers. "We firmly believe that the students we serve deserve nothing but the best," said Arzumanian. He added that USC CAC

advisers are "the cream of the crop in education"—selected for their integrity and deep commitment to student success.

Adamaris Figueroa is one shining example. A 2018 graduate of Dominguez Hills High School, she received college advising support from her USC CAC adviser Richard Ramirez, who also attended the anniversary event. "I had an adviser who was with me every single step of the way, uplifting and empowering me to chase after my dreams," Figueroa said.

She went on to earn her bachelor's degree in psychology from Cal State Long Beach in 2022 and returned to her high school alma mater as a USC CAC adviser. Today, she is pursuing her master's degree in school counseling at Cal State Dominguez Hills—and was recognized at the celebration as USC CAC Adviser of the Year. "This program has changed the trajectory of my life," she said. "I can't help but wonder what it has done for all the students we have advised."

Among those students is Lexahir Herrera, a 2025 Dominguez Hills High School graduate and one of Figueroa's advisees. "Because of this program and because of my advisers, I got into UC Santa Barbara," Herrera said. "There are hundreds, maybe even thousands of students like me whose lives have been touched because someone chose to care." —R



→ Ara Arzumanian, Adamaris Figueroa and Lexahir Herrera pose for a picture.

PHOTO/USC ROSSIER

## Welcome New Faculty!



**CATHERINE BARRETT**  
Associate Professor of Clinical Education

**Expertise:** Forensic psychology, marriage and family therapy



**KELLY GRECO**  
Professor of Clinical Education

**Expertise:** College mental health, college outreach and community engagement, positive psychology, wellbeing and resiliency, short term psychotherapy



**CHEYEON HA**  
Assistant Research Professor, USC Center for Affective Neuroscience, Development, Learning and Education

**Expertise:** child and adolescent development, psychological methods, individual learning differences, academic engagement, academic growth, social and emotional development, social contexts



← Julie Posselt (left) and Adrianna Kezar will serve as co-directors of the newly combined center.

## Two Leading Research Centers Unite to Advance Equity in Higher Ed

The merger creates a hub focused on strengthening leadership for postsecondary access, enrollment and student success.

By Ellen Evaristo

**IN A MOVE THAT UNDERSCORES** its national leadership in equity and innovation, USC Rossier has merged the Pullias Center for Higher Education and the Center for Enrollment Research, Policy and Practice (CERPP). This strategic unification brings together two of the most respected research centers in the country focused on higher education access, enrollment, student success and leadership.

The newly combined center, which will be known as the Pullias Center for Higher Education, will be co-directed by Professors Adrianna Kezar and Julie Posselt, both higher education research and policy scholars. Their leadership reflects the center’s unique strategy of intentionally connecting research, practice and policy, with a focus on changing systems that shape student access and success, from high school through doctoral education.

The merger strengthens USC Rossier’s ability to support institutions in removing barriers to postsecondary access and ensuring student success, according to USC Rossier Dean Pedro Noguera. “By uniting two respected centers, we are creating a powerful engine for innovation, policy influence and partnership—all in service of a more just and inclusive higher education system,” Noguera said.

“We have two long-standing centers doing synergistic work, and it became clear they would benefit from working more closely together,” said Kezar, who has served as the director of the Pullias Center since 2019 and co-director since 2005. “Campuses are increasingly trying to link their access initiatives with student success strategies, and this merger allows us to lead that conversation in bold new ways.”

“Enrollment management is how institutions bring their visions of access and success to life,” added Posselt, who took the helm as CERPP’s executive director in 2024. “CERPP’s deep roots in enrollment and Pullias’ leadership in access and success make them natural partners. Together, we’re creating a hub for systemic change in higher education.”

The combined center will maintain a strong focus on equity, capacity building for institutional improvement, and student-centered design, while expanding its scope to include deeper community partnerships, translational research and scalable innovations across the postsecondary pipeline. The programs and activities of CERPP will continue under the Pullias Center banner, including the USC College Advising Corps, the annual enrollment conference and the Leadership in Enrollment Management certificate program. —R

## New ME in Learning Design with AI and Emerging Technologies

USC Rossier will launch the Master of Education in Learning Design with AI and Emerging Technologies (LDAI) online program, formerly the Master of Education in Learning Design and Technology (LDT online) in the fall of 2026. This fully online, five-term, 30-unit degree prepares students to effectively and ethically leverage artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies to design instructional and learning experiences in a range of settings, including P-12, higher education, military, nonprofit and corporate learning environments.

“LDAI remains anchored in learning and motivational research and principles and their application to designing effective learning experiences,” said USC Rossier Professor Helena Seli, who is leading the program. According to Seli, the program will offer specialized courses in AI and learning technologies while also expanding its focus on data. She added, “We are embedding AI into the entire analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation process. Students won’t just learn about AI, they will learn with it and through it.”

PHOTO/COURTESY OF PULLIAS CENTER

## Planting Seeds of Environmental Citizenship

Using the U.N.’s Sustainable Development Goals as a framework, educators can help students reach their potential as agents of change.

By Paula M. Carbone,  
Professor of Clinical Education

Global environmental degradation due to climate change is intensifying, and to ensure students have the information they need to become environmentally responsible citizens, teachers need effective methods to add to their pedagogical toolbox.

Climate change and sustainability education can be integrated across disciplines at all grade levels, enriching existing content or serving as the primary focus of curricular units. These tips are suggestions on how to support students in understanding both the complexity of climate change and their role as change agents for social, economic and environmental sustainability.

### 1. Frame sustainability as a humanitarian, justice-oriented issue with social, environmental and economic ramifications, using the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The SDGs focus on interdisciplinary issues related to curricula already being taught. Inquiry-based pedagogy can be used to engage students with the goals, fostering critical thinking and student agency at all grade levels. For example, Goal 11, Sustainable Cities and Communities, aligns with many of the concepts in social studies. Students might investigate urbanization and sustainable ways to manage excessive consumption and waste in urban centers. The SDGs provide students with a comprehensive overview of sustainability from the perspective of equity and justice.

### 2. Start with students’ interests to increase student engagement.

After reviewing the SDGs, students will be better equipped to select a focal issue for studying sustainability. Letting students decide which topics to study allows teachers to learn along with them, highlighting that no one can be an expert on every aspect of sustainability. Information rapidly changes as scientific solutions proliferate, social impacts and movements become more influential, and the inequitable distribution of the harms of climate change become more transparent.

Student-selected topics can be integrated into development of literacy skills such as reading, creating multimodal presentations and discussing the problem. For example, students might want to focus on Goal 2, Zero Hunger. To help them understand the relationship between what they eat and sustainability, ask them to examine what they eat over the course of one day, considering where the food was sourced and what waste it created. Ask them what sustainable eating might involve. Then, let students choose one aspect of what they learned for more in-depth study. Perhaps they could examine why there is so much waste in the cafeteria and work on reducing it by starting a composting campaign.

ILLUSTRATION BY MAGDA AZAB



### 3. Examine external messaging and its impact on how students understand sustainability.

Visual, digital and print bombardment of information that may or may not be true is often impossible to navigate for students. Share “discourses of delay” that redirect responsibility, push non-transformative change, emphasize the downsides and promote narratives of surrender. Students will then gain skills to recognize when messages are being manipulated to sound aligned to sustainability but are working against it. Some examples of such messaging:

- Focusing on recycling to redirect responsibility away from corporate production of non-sustainable materials to the consumer
- Pushing non-transformative solutions, like oil company ads purporting how “green” they are, while not addressing continuing extraction
- Emphasizing the downsides of sustainable practices by claiming that people do not want their lifestyles disrupted
- Surrendering to doom-and-gloom narratives

Students can analyze situations like these and collaborate to produce truthful, solutions-focused messaging.

These three ideas all support critical thinking, student-centered pedagogies and problem solving. Engaging students in solutions to sustainability may also prompt them to larger actions for social and environmental justice. —R

**FACULTY**

**SHAFIQA AHMADI**, professor of clinical education; Darnell Cole, professor of education; and Eugenia Mora-Flores, professor of clinical education, received \$250,000 from Gordon Philanthropies to evaluate the Communities that Read Together, Grow Together program.

**ESTELA BENSIMON**, University Professor Emeritus, received the USC Lifetime Achievement Award.

**DARNELL COLE**, professor of education, and collaborators were awarded a \$50,000 LEVER grant from the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab to conduct a randomized control trial evaluating the Student Engagement, Exploration, and Development in STEM program, for middle school and college students.



**YASEMIN COPUR-GENCTURK**, associate professor of education, has been awarded a Gates Foundation grant for her groundbreaking research on AI-powered, long-form grading.

**KENDRICK DAVIS**, professor of research, received \$33,000 from the Information Sciences Institute at the Viterbi School of Engineering to co-lead research and evaluation for the CA DREAMS workforce development initiative.

**SHAUN HARPER**, University Professor, was awarded his sixth honorary degree from Long Beach City College. Harper also testified to the United States House of Representatives and was declared one of the top 100 leaders influencing the Hollywood film and entertainment industry by *The Los Angeles Times*. Harper received a Presidential Citation at the Annual Meeting of AERA and a \$2.6 million grant from the ECMC Foundation to study institutional innovations for men of color at four-year colleges and universities. The Kresge Foundation further awarded Harper \$60,000 to continue his work on funding inequities at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

**MABEL HERNANDEZ**, assistant research professor, was awarded a 2025 Faculty Fellowship from the Haynes Foundation for “Academic Help-Seeking and Belonging among Asian and Latinx Undergraduates in Los Angeles.”



**MIMI HOANG**, adjunct associate professor, received Los Angeles County Psychological Association’s 2025 Award for Distinguished Service to the Community, Diversity, and Social Justice and the 2025 Doug C. Haldeman Excellence in Advocacy Award from Division VII of the California Psychological Association.

**ADRIAN HUERTA**, associate professor of education, was named a Scholar in Residence for the ACPA Coalition on Men & Masculinities. He was also awarded the Maude Stewart Alumni Award from The Ohio State University for his contributions to higher education and student affairs.

**MARY HELEN IMMORDINO-YANG**, professor of education, psychology and neuroscience, was elected to the American Academy for Arts and Sciences (p. 14) and is the 2026 AERA Conference Co-Chair.

**HURIYA JABBAR**, associate professor, was awarded \$375,000 from the Spencer Foundation Large Grants Program for a project titled

*The Emergence and Consequences of Culture Wars and Curriculum Conflicts in Education*. The William T. Grant Foundation awarded Jabbar and collaborators \$600,000 for “Housing, Networks, and Mobility for Low-Income Youth: A Study of the Implementation of Federal Housing Investments to Reduce Inequality in Detroit.” Jabbar and her co-author won the AERA Division J, Postsecondary Education, 2024-2025 Outstanding Publication Award, for *Discredited: Power, Privilege, and Community College Transfer*.

**JULIE MARSH**, professor of education, received a grant from the Smith Richardson Foundation for a project on *The Quiet Revolution of School Vouchers and ESAs*.

**MARIA OTT**, professor of clinical education, was recently part of a group that was recognized with a National Silver Award by the American Society of Business Publication Editors for the column she contributes to, “Ethical Educators,” which appears in AASA’s *School Administrator Magazine*.

**ERIKA PATALL**, professor of education and psychology, and Julie Poselt, professor of education, joined the class of 2025 AERA Fellows.

**JOHN PASCARELLA III**, professor of clinical education, was elected to the California Council of Teacher Education Board of Directors.

**LARRY PICUS**, professor of education finance and policy, received the USC Mentoring Award.

**MORGAN POLIKOFF**, professor of education, will receive more than \$1 million from a grant by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, for “Expanding Quality Signals and R&D Infrastructure” and is the co-principal investigator on a \$400,000 grant from the Overdeck Family Foundation on the “Understanding America Study.” He was also a recipient of the USC General Education Teaching Award.



**ROBERT RUEDA**, professor emeritus, received the 2025 Faculty Lifetime Achievement Award.

**GALE SINATRA**’s book, *Science Denial*, was translated into Japanese and published in Japan. Sinatra, Distinguished Professor, was also awarded the 2025 Division 15 Career Achievement Award in educational psychology.

**STUDENTS**

**LAUREL KRUIKE**, PhD candidate, received the USC PhD Achievement Award.

**DESIREE O’NEAL**, PhD candidate, was awarded the USC Russell Endowed Dissertation Completion Fellowship and a Graduate Student Government Professional Development Grant. O’Neal was also appointed American Education Research Association Division L Graduate Student Council professional development chair.



**RESEARCH CENTERS**

**PULLIAS CENTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

**ADRIANNA KEZAR**, co-director, and her team was awarded a \$600,000 grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to

expand the Change Leadership Toolkit.

The **USC COLLEGE ADVISING CORPS** was awarded multiple service agreements including \$197,140 from Glendale Unified School District.

**STEVE DESIR**, assistant professor of research,



was awarded a \$685,000 grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation

for a project to develop an equity-minded, law-attentive organizational learning series.

**USC CENTER FOR AFFECTIVE NEUROSCIENCE, DEVELOPMENT, LEARNING AND EDUCATION**

With funding from the Stuart Foundation, USC CANDLE is launching a dual-track initiative aimed at transforming adolescent education across California. Working in partnership with leaders in adolescent education, including Arizona State University’s Center for Whole-Child Education, the initiative will bring cutting-edge developmental science into classrooms, school systems and policy environments—with a special focus on elevating alternative school communities as leaders in innovation.

→ Tynes’ study found that online racism has a negative impact on the mental health of Black adolescents.

PHOTO/ALLISON SHELLEY FOR EDUIMAGES

# Study Links Online Racism to Negative Impacts on Black Adolescents’ Mental Health

The research team, led by Brendesha Tynes, found that exposure to online racism heightens anxiety and depressive symptoms in Black youth.

By Eric Olsen

A NEW STUDY LED BY USC Rossier School of Education Professor Brendesha Tynes, and published in *JAMA Network*, reveals that Black adolescents in the U.S. experience an average of six race-related online encounters every day, including three instances of online racism. These daily experiences, from algorithmic bias to traumatic event videos, are linked to increased symptoms of anxiety and depression the next day.

The study was coauthored by Taylor McGee, assistant professor at Christopher Newport University, and Devin English, associate professor at Rutgers School of Public Health.

The research team analyzed data from a nationally representative group of 141 Black and Black multiracial adolescents ages 11–19, using a seven-day diary method as part of the National Survey of Critical Digital Literacy.

Unlike past studies that relied on long-term recall of discrimination over months or years, this project used an intensive daily diary design. Adolescents completed short online surveys each evening for seven consecutive days in December 2020, reporting any race-related online experiences in the past 24 hours and their current symptoms of anxiety and depression. This approach allowed researchers to capture the immediate, day-to-day impact of digital racism on mental health.

**Study findings**

Through their analysis of the data, the team found that online racism is common. Teens reported an average of 3.2 daily experiences of online racial discrimination, algorithmic bias or exposure to traumatic racial events. Some adolescents reported being targeted with doctored or deepfake videos—videos that had been digitally alerted or generated to misrepresent someone or something to spread false information—meant to demean their race. Encounters with photo filters that lighten skin were also reported.

The way teens come across this content is often through biased algorithms that produce biased search results. The result of these encounters is that the adolescents reported significantly higher next-day anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Tynes and her fellow researchers also looked at the impact of the teens’ encounters with positive race-related experiences, including encountering messages that affirmed participants’ heritage and/or culture as well as educational sites that documented the contributions of Black Americans who have built and transformed U.S. society. The study participants reported viewing 2.8 of these types of experiences per day. This content was not associated with any mental health outcomes.

“Our research suggests that algorithms that power daily racist experiences online can undermine adolescent mental health,” said Tynes. “It also shows that Black teens are especially harmed by these encounters and that immediate interventions and policy changes are needed to address algorithmic bias and protect young people from all types of online racism.”

The study underscores the need for researchers, policymakers and tech companies to account for the mental health consequences of online racism. It also calls attention to the growing role of manipulated media, including deepfakes, in perpetuating harm.

The research was supported by the Spencer Foundation’s Lyle Spencer Award to Transform Education, awarded to Brendesha Tynes. —R





# Why Americans Stopped Believing in the Promise of Higher Ed

Story: Kianoosh Hashemzadeh

Illustrations: Edmon de Haro

From rising costs to policy failures, the roots of distrust stretch back decades. Can understanding the past help rebuild faith?

**O**VER THE PAST 20 YEARS, CONFIDENCE IN HIGHER education has fallen dramatically in the United States. Seven in 10 Americans believe that the U.S. higher education system is heading in the wrong direction, according to an October 2025 poll from the Pew Research Center. This figure is up from 56% of respondents who said the same back in 2020.

A Gallup poll first administered in 2015 has shown waning confidence in higher education. The initial poll showed that 57% of respondents reported being confident in higher education. By 2024, confidence had plummeted to just 36%. And while results from July 2025 show a glimmer of hope—with 42% reporting they are confident in higher education—gaps along party lines remain, with 66% of Democrats, 40% of independents and 26% of Republicans reporting they are confident in four-year colleges.

“These polls have shown a steady decline in public favorability of higher education over the last 10 years, with steeper declines in trust aligned with political affiliation,” says Tracy Poon Tambascia, the Veronica and David Hagen Chair in Women’s Leadership at USC Rossier School of Education. In the recent Pew poll, 77% of Republicans were more likely to say that the higher education system is headed in the wrong direction, compared with 65% of Democrats.

Despite these trends, the majority of Americans still believe that colleges and universities have an important role to play in society. A February 2024 poll from Pew found that around 53% of respondents believe that higher education has a positive impact on the country. Understanding today’s crisis in confidence requires looking back at how American higher education began, what it was built to do and who it was meant to serve. This history reveals longstanding tensions between higher education’s noble ideals and its lived realities.

## A Brief History of Higher Education in the U.S.

With its founding in 1636, Harvard University lays claim to the title of the oldest institution of higher education in the U.S. Several other private institutions were founded in the decades following, including the College of William and Mary in 1693, St. John’s College in 1696, Yale University in 1701 and the University of Pennsylvania in 1740. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the oldest public university in the U.S., began welcoming students in 1786. However, it wasn’t until states began to utilize federal funding provided by the Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Acts

of 1862 and 1890 that a plethora of public, land-grant institutions, initially focused on agriculture and engineering, began to emerge across the nation.

The rise of these public institutions stemmed from broader debates about the purpose of higher education. Eric Canny, assistant teaching professor of education, points to this period of the late 1700s to early 1800s as a time “when what it meant to be professional was shifting,” he says. On the heels of the Age of Enlightenment, which ushered in a deep interest in science and reason, the public was questioning the purpose of higher education and actively debating whom it was meant to serve.

Historically, institutions of higher education were seen as places for the white, male and elite members of society, and the professions that required advanced education were limited to priests, doctors, lawyers and scribes. But as the middle class grew and new professions emerged in the late 1700s, people began to question whether the doors of universities should also be open to those beyond the upper echelons of society. New secondary educational paths emerged, including normal schools, which were established to train teachers.

In recent years, we’re seeing a similar pattern of questioning, Canny says. Higher education institutions have been accused of elitism, including by the Trump administration in an August 2025 memo that stated, “President Trump is holding elite universities accountable, ensuring they prioritize fairness, merit and American values.”

Elite is a word Trump has used throughout his political career. “By framing higher education as ‘elite,’ Trump and others are tapping into a powerful cultural tension,” Canny explains. “It plays on longstanding tensions about who higher education is for with a goal of dividing rather than reforming. Important data about access and affordability gets interpreted not to inform policy, but to serve a certain narrative.” Political rhetoric aside, soaring tuition costs have rendered higher education out of reach for many Americans.

In our current times, Canny believes that higher education hasn’t done the best job of communicating its purpose. Universities, especially public ones, were founded with a goal of creating a learned society that could actively participate in democracy. In many ways, higher education institutions were seen as a way to fulfill the promises that America was founded on.

Another essential function of American institutions of higher education has been their role as engines of innovation, University Professor Emeritus William Tierney says. He estimates that around “60% of all innovations that happened in the 20th century had their genesis at universities.” As America rose in prominence, especially after World War II, universities were seen as “a national partner to becoming great,” Canny says. Yet even as universities helped shape American democracy and drive progress, they have also been sites of tension—where new ideas often meet resistance and distrust.

### The politics of distrust

Scorn, skepticism and fear of the new ideas that education ushers in are not new. On the contrary, distrust in education is something we’ve seen in human history for thousands of years. Famed Greek philosopher Socrates was sentenced to death in 399 B.C.E. for corrupting the youth and introducing false gods. Aristotle, a student of Plato (who was, in fact, a student of Socrates), fled Athens a few decades later in 323 B.C.E. to avoid a similar fate after he, too, was charged with impiety.

In modern history, waves of anti-intellectualism have often accompanied the rise of totalitarian governments. Spanish dictator Francisco Franco persecuted and killed many of those in Spain’s intellectual circles—including teachers, academics and artists—in the 1930s and ’40s. In Argentina, on the “Night of the Long Batons” in 1966, academics who opposed the right-wing regime of Juan Carlos Onganía were exiled.

Tierney sees disturbing links between recent efforts from the Trump administration to stifle academic freedom and the era of McCarthyism in the 1940s and ’50s, when U.S. Sen. Joseph McCarthy and others made baseless allegations against government officials, accusing them of being communists and of attempting to overthrow the U.S. government. This “Red Scare” quickly made its way to public school systems and college campuses as well, with administrators and faculty members being investigated and forced to resign over their supposed views.

**“It takes so much to build things and so little to break them.”**

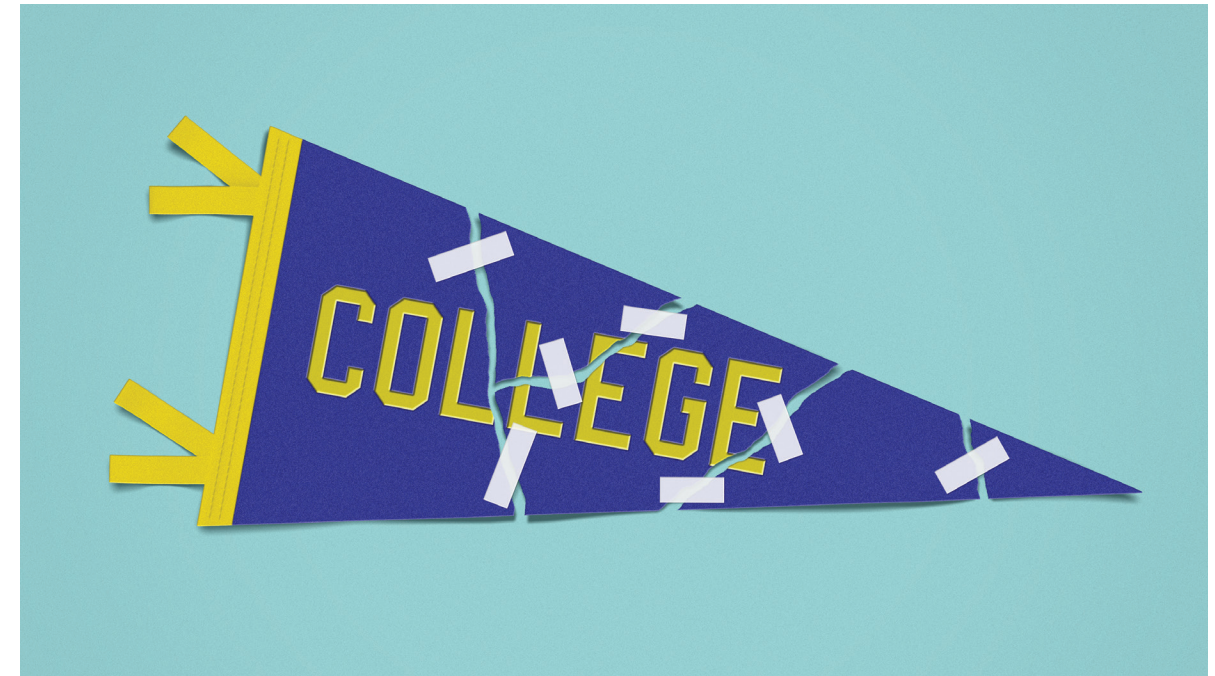
—Julie Posselt, Professor of Higher Education

After that time, Tierney says, “we never did an autopsy on what the problems were and how to make sure it doesn’t happen again.” So now, as federal funding for universities has either been pulled or threatened to be revoked if universities don’t abide by certain rules—from shuttering diversity, equity and inclusion offices to limiting transgender athletes’ participation in sports—those in higher education have no past precedent to look to as they search for a way to challenge these threats.

### How Did We Get Here?

#### Return on investment

The cost of attending a college or university has risen significantly over the past two decades in the United States. Jihye Kwon, associate director for survey research at the



USC Race and Equity Center, explains that tuition at U.S. institutions is among the highest in the world.

The numbers back this up. According to a U.S. News and World Report analysis, in the past 20 years, when adjusted for inflation, tuition has risen by about 32% at private universities and about 29% at public universities. The average cost per full-time, postsecondary student in the U.S. jumped from \$31,800 in 2010 to \$37,400 in 2019, representing an increase of 18%. “For low- and middle-income families, [higher education] is very expensive,” Kwon says.

Myriad factors—including faculty salaries, an increase in administrative staff to assist students, rising health care costs, and investments in new technology and campus infrastructure—have contributed to the steep rise in tuition, according to a report by the American Council on Education. However, the authors of the report argue, it’s not simply that costs have risen, but also that income growth in the U.S. has remained flat and state subsidies have been cut.

During the Great Recession of the early 2000s, Americans began to doubt college as a sound investment. “Graduates struggled to find jobs,” Kwon says, “and people questioned whether higher education was keeping pace with social and economic realities.” Kwon sees parallels between the sentiment of 2008–10 and now. College and its return on investment is being put under the microscope as recent grads, saddled with college debt—some with loans from predatory lenders—struggle to find jobs in a challenging economy.

But what does the research show? Canny stresses that the latest data on college and its ROI still shows that, in large part, “the investment is still there.” Attending and graduating from college still has a huge impact on the earn-

ing power of individuals and can help lift individuals into the middle class.

Tambascia points to Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce, which “has been studying this for years, and the evidence still points to yes, though with wide ranges in median earnings based on various fields,” she says.

Public perception, however, “is that a college education does not lead to gainful employment,” Tambascia says. “This is another example of how the data shows longer-term gains in the workforce for those with a college degree, but data on the 6–18 months following graduation may show that it takes time for graduates to increase earning power.”

Although “we don’t know about tomorrow,” Tierney says, “today it is still true that [if an individual goes to a school like] USC or UCLA, they will make about a million dollars more than the non-college graduate.” However, while Tierney is confident about the financial outlook for today’s students, he is unsure what the future will bring, as artificial intelligence and other technologies begin to change the professional landscape, especially for those who majored in areas like computer science.

This points to the importance of ensuring that college students are taught not just what to think, but also how to think and problem solve. “Communicative skills in math, verbal and writing can be learned in a history class,” Tierney says. Colleges may find it hard to deliver on their promise of upward mobility if students are too specialized, Tierney stresses, as “we don’t know what the market will want in four to five years.”

Equally important, Kwon believes, is equipping students—especially those from marginalized backgrounds—

with financial literacy tools. Many of these students will be taking on large student loans, and managing this financial burden after college presents a huge strain. “If students graduate with high debt and modest income or leave without a degree, the ROI becomes questionable. Many people may then regret that they went to college,” Kwon says.

A narrow focus on financial ROI can also be detrimental, as it reduces the purpose of higher education solely to creating a pathway to individual economic prosperity. This mindset can overshadow the other major benefits of higher education, including the enormous gains from university research and the shaping of students into well-rounded individuals who are prepared to actively participate in democracy.

While some for-profit education companies “are doing an excellent job, particularly those in high-demand fields like health care,” Tamabascia says, some of these companies like ITT Technical Institute, Trump University and Corinthian Colleges, in retrospect, can be seen as cautionary tales of what can happen when higher education institutions focus solely on marketization and operate as businesses concerned only with their bottom line. These institutions were closed because of a combination of fraudulent activities, from operating without a license in the case of Trump University, to losing accreditation in the case of ITT Tech. While marketization has weakened trust in higher education, polarization has deepened the divide.

### Political polarization

Rather than being seen as places of inquiry and research, college campuses have become highly visible sites for modern-day culture wars. From free speech controversies and the Black Lives Matter movement, to protests over the Gaza war and allegations of antisemitism, some of the most contentious issues have played out at universities in recent years. Thanks in no small part to politicians who have manipulated these narratives for their own gain, the purpose of higher education has been overshadowed, and the research it generates has also become politicized. Partisan clashes over immunization and wearing masks during the COVID-19 pandemic are a recent, vivid example of what can happen when science becomes politicized.

Since the Trump administration took control of the federal government in January 2025, a storm of legislation and executive orders has aimed itself at crippling universities, perhaps most prominently seen in the cancellation of federal funding. As of June 2025, around \$3.2 billion in federal grants have been targeted for terminations. Most of these funds come from grants issued by the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation.

Julie Posselt, professor of higher education and co-director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education, had



two grants terminated by the NSF earlier this year. Though one was reinstated, she can't admit graduate students this year due to the reduction in funds, and she faces challenges in funding her highly rated research studies, she says.

At this point, it's hard to gauge the full impact of these massive cuts. “It's slowing down the academic research machine nationally, even stopping it in some places,” Posselt says. “Private philanthropies are doing their best to fill the gap, but it's impossible for them to fully do so. It takes so much to build things and so little to break them.”

### The Path to Restoring Trust

While the factors contributing to this deep erosion of trust are varied and numerous, rising costs and political polarization are two major contributors. So what can universities and policymakers do to address these concerns and begin to regain control of the narrative?

#### Controlling costs

Tuition costs have risen dramatically in the past 20 years, and in many instances, these increases haven't been matched with a similar rise in wages. There have been efforts to make public colleges free for lower-income students. The California Promise and MassEducate programs provide free community college tuition for students who meet

eligibility requirements in California and Massachusetts. John B. King Jr., chancellor of the State University of New York and former U.S. secretary of education, believes that we should be “moving toward a place where public higher education is debt-free for students” (p. 36).

King raises the important point that the Pell Grant's purchasing power has greatly diminished since the 1980s, when it covered around 80% of the costs of attending public colleges and universities. Today, the Pell Grant covers only 28% of these costs.

With the recent overhaul of the U.S. Department of Education, the offices that handle financial aid and civil rights have been nearly gutted. The effect of these policy changes will likely be felt most by lower-income students who rely on these offices and the programs they run to attend college. “This sends the message that financial aid for marginalized students is not the most important thing, and parents and students assume that attitude as well. It becomes the new norm,” Kwon says.

These policy shifts—from financial aid governance and student visa regulations to support for minority-serving institutions and marginalized students—creates an environment where the public loses trust in both government and higher education. “The core values and policies should stay the same no matter which administration is in power,” Kwon stresses. A volatile environment makes it even more difficult for potential students to decide whether to attend college.

The COVID-19 pandemic also showed that remote learning, especially for higher education institutions, is possible. Looking at how the delivery of education can cut down on high overhead costs for universities should also be a priority, Canny says.

“Do we need the campuses we've constructed?” Canny asks. Universities spend “billions in upkeep and maintenance” on these campuses in the U.S., he explains. Higher education has been slow to incorporate new technologies, and Canny sees opportunities for schools to lower costs by thinking more flexibly about how to deliver their services in new and emerging modalities.

#### Better communication

Trust is hard to earn and easy to lose. One place universities can start is by improving their communication strategies.

“We need transparency,” Canny says. Kwon echoes this sentiment while stressing the importance of universities acting with humility. Universities can't act “like they'll be just fine. That can negatively impact trust-building. Universities need to stay true to their missions: promoting student success and public services rather than reacting to political pressures,” Kwon says.

Trust-building is a long-term project that occurs not only at the institutional level but also at the individual level. “Professors have the ability to change lives,” Kwon says. One

interaction with a faculty or staff member can change the trajectory of a student's life, and these positive interactions add up over time. “It's important for everyone to have ownership of our responsibility [to restore trust],” Kwon says.

## “Research is a common good, and we need to articulate that better.”

—Eric Canny, Assistant Teaching Professor of Education

Also key is ensuring that colleges are spaces where students, staff and faculty can engage in “open, respectful discussions,” Kwon says. In a politically tense and polarized environment, this can be especially challenging, but Canny suggests universities look to their strengths. The classroom environment is the perfect incubator. In the classroom, “we hold conversations where people disagree with us,” Canny says. These spaces are small and intimate, and skilled faculty create environments where all students feel comfortable engaging with one another, even if they find themselves on opposite sides of an issue. Tierney, similarly, encourages universities to encourage dialogue and debates between those who disagree with one another.

Equally important is ensuring that the public knows that higher education isn't only educating future generations but also generating innovation and research that can improve all our lives. “Research is a common good,” Canny says, “and we need to articulate that better.” Additionally, universities must think about messaging strategies that can “bridge some of the gaps” between those on different sides of the political spectrum. “In the recent election, the majority of the country voted for [Trump]. ... They believe in what [he] stands for.” To rebuild trust, Canny says, we must improve our messaging to the general public.

Individual faculty members, especially those who are tenured, also have an important role to play, according to Tierney. Tenure, which helps protect academic freedom, “is not simply job security,” he stresses. “Those who have tenure should be [speaking up]. The university will not succeed if tenured faculty are not forthcoming. Academic freedom is an idea ... and those with tenure must protect people.”

A key component that Tierney, Dean Pedro Noguera and Vice Dean Mark Robison (p. 39) feel universities and colleges need is to speak as a united front. Institutions in the Big Ten Conference, for example, “should be working in concert with one another,” Tierney says.

The time we are in “is the most important time in higher education in the last century,” Tierney adds. “It's an open question: Will we step up?” —R



# Reimagining Learning From the Inside Out

With the launch of its Innovation Lab, USC CANDLE is partnering with educators and schools to co-create research-driven curricula that center student well-being, engagement and equity.

Story: Katie Walsh  
Photos: Rebecca Aranda

**IN THE SCRIPTORIUM OF THE USC UNIVERSITY CLUB** on a recent August morning, there's a sense of anticipation and excitement in the air. Middle and high school educators from across the United States have gathered with staff members of the USC Center for Affective Neuroscience, Development, Learning and Education (USC CANDLE) for the launch of the USC CANDLE Innovation Lab, which has been some six years in the making.

On this first morning together, USC CANDLE Senior Director of Educational Practice and Innovation Doug Knecht guides the group through an introduction, sets shared norms for the two-day launch event and has just

introduced an icebreaker activity. It's called "Teenage Me." A chorus of "oohs" goes up from the room. Knecht asks the educators, who teach students ages 12 to 17, to think about their teenage selves and to input some adjectives into a word cloud.

As the cloud populates on a screen at the front of the room, some words stand out larger than others: "awkward," "hardworking," "insecure," "quiet," "curious." Other phrases are smaller but memorable: "athletic baby giraffe," "passionate creative," "hot mess," "loner," "misguidedly intense." After Knecht highlights a few of these descriptors, the educators share among their teams which words they chose to describe themselves, and a bit about their high school experiences.

As these educators get to know each other while opening up in a vulnerable way, it's also a reminder of this project's focus: adolescents. They discuss the emotions and struggles of being a teenager—the good, the bad and the uncomfortable parts that are unique to this age group but universal to everyone.

It's an icebreaker, but also an opportunity for these educators to ponder what their students might be feeling and going through. Remembering how hard it is to be a teen, and what's meaningful for that age group—how they make meaning of the world around them—can be useful for thinking about the people, activities and places that helped us learn and grow. It's also helpful in brainstorming the ways in which USC CANDLE's research on brain development can be transformed into actionable educational tools and techniques.

It all circles back to USC CANDLE's groundbreaking work in researching the social and emotional development of adolescents—and the goals of the USC CANDLE Innovation Lab to develop methods for teachers and classrooms to support growth.

Funded by a two-year grant from the Bezos Family Foundation, the USC CANDLE Innovation Lab aims to bring cutting-edge neuroscience research on adolescent brain development into the classroom, while also bringing the realistic concerns of teachers and students back to the lab to refine USC CANDLE's future research.

To do this, the center will work collaboratively with teams, or COLABS, of four or five teachers and one administrator from schools across the nation. The first cohort comes from the Beacon School in New York, Da Vinci RISE High in Los Angeles, the Institute for Collaborative Education in New York, John Muir Middle School in Burbank and Savanna High School in Anaheim.

## The Science

For over a decade, Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, the Fahmy and Donna Attallah Chair in Humanistic Psychology and founding director of USC CANDLE, has been leading groundbreaking research bridging neuroscience and edu-

**Remembering how hard it is to be a teen, and what's meaningful for that age group—how they make meaning of the world around them—can be useful for thinking about the people, activities and places that helped us learn and grow.**

cation. Her work at USC CANDLE has pioneered the concept of "transcendent thinking" in adolescents, which has fundamentally reshaped how we understand learning and development in this age group.

At the center of Immordino-Yang's research is the idea that it's not simply facts memorized or skills mastered that helps young people's brains grow over time, but how they think and feel about what they're learning—with deep engagement, a sense of meaning and emotional connection. This expansion in the brain also spurs deep personal growth for the adolescents, which can lead to better life satisfaction and improved outcomes.

Using a transdisciplinary research methodology that combines qualitative interviews with teenagers (often from low-income and diverse communities) and fMRI brain imaging conducted over time, Immordino-Yang and her team of researchers have shown that when adolescents grapple with big ideas, strengthening their "transcendent thinking" skills—their capacity to reflect on experiences in ways that connect to broader ethical, social and cultural meaning—their brains physically develop in different ways. The team of USC CANDLE researchers have found that emotions, culture and context are central to learning and development, not peripheral.

For Immordino-Yang, giving teens a space to experience this development is the role of education, as we all "develop and emerge from our experiences," she says. These types of educational experiences, which the COLABS are focused on creating, will help adolescents understand "the way it feels to think."

USC CANDLE's research underlines how crucial it is for middle and high schools to engage students in complex ways of thinking to support their brain development and mental health. It also demonstrates how important and helpful it is for educators to understand these neuroscientific

✦ Mary Helen Immordino-Yang speaks to educators at the launch of the USC CANDLE Innovation Lab.



← Educators in the first COLAB cohort discuss and reflect on the goals of the USC CANDLE project.

findings so they can put them into practice in their classrooms. The goal of the COLABs is to foster a collaborative space for these educators to reimagine their curricula to create classroom environments where transcendent thinking is possible and encouraged.

### Bringing It to Life

Immordino-Yang admits to the educators gathered at the USC University Club that she’s “ridiculously optimistic” when it comes to USC CANDLE’s mission of changing the world by reshaping education to prioritize human development through neuroscience. But her enthusiasm is infectious—and inspiring. Her goal is to make science work for the classroom, and she urges this inaugural cohort to remember that they are learning in service of something bigger, helping to facilitate students’ self-actualization over time.

Part of the excitement around the COLABs is in the unknown of this endeavor, the riskiness of trying something new that has a high potential for reward. To bridge the controlled environment of the lab and the uncontrolled environment of the classroom requires a “messy transdisciplinary approach,” Knecht says, as well as “deep, humble, intellectually curious” conversations on the educators’ part, according to Immordino-Yang.

The USC CANDLE team asks the educators to “re-see” what they’re witnessing in the classroom with a new understanding of adolescent brain development and to share reflections that can inform USC CANDLE’s research questions and conclusions.

John Muir Middle School teacher Avetis Ovakimyan says one of his goals for the COLAB is to “learn a little bit more about how [students] are thinking and what it means to study on their level.” His colleague, Tara Sherman, notes

that the study and support of adolescent brain development is a “missing piece” in the science of education, and that she’s excited to dive into the neuroscience to “be a better teacher for them—to bring them to the level and expectations that I know they can reach.”

Gabriela Stultz of the Institute for Collaborative Education in New York City adds, “It’s not just about making adaptations to your content and curriculum, but rather: How can we even the playing field by creating environments where all students feel like they can succeed, and to look at the role that that plays in their future success?”

USC Rossier School of Education faculty members are just as excited about the possibility to learn more. Xiao-Fei Yang, associate research professor and scientific director of USC CANDLE, describes the COLAB project as “a dream come true—the motivation behind all the work that we do.” Trained as a neuroscientist, Yang shares a belief with Immordino-Yang that USC CANDLE’s research has the potential to change the world by supporting adolescent development. The COLAB project is the first big step to bringing their research into the classroom in a practitioner-led way.

**Immordino-Yang admits she’s “ridiculously optimistic” when it comes to USC CANDLE’s mission of changing the world by reshaping education to prioritize human development through neuroscience.**

**“The opportunity to actively engage in brand-new research in education and in neuroscience is the coolest thing ever.”**

—Daniel Zucker, Science Teacher, Institute for Collaborative Education

The COLAB project is “the first systematic attempt to engage teachers with the science that we do,” says Yang. “We want to see how they use it.” Her goals are twofold: to see if their findings make a difference for adolescent development, but also to generate new research questions, specifically ones that could be useful for teachers.

The educators are a crucial part of this project, especially for Yang. “We know the science,” she says, “but that doesn’t translate to what do you do in the classroom. That’s why we really need the educators to think with us, because they’re the ones who are enacting the practice. They’re going to be the ones to figure out what to do in the classroom.”

Yang also has longer-term projects in mind, like a longitudinal study of both the participating teachers and their students. One question she’s pondering: “As the teachers are going through this conceptual change about their work, or the actual change in the pedagogy, in what ways do the students benefit?”

Knecht brings to the lab multiple experiences in education, having worked in an education nonprofit, as a high

school science teacher, at the New York City Department of Education and in several leadership roles at the Bank Street College of Education. For a decade, he’s been looking for a way to work with Immordino-Yang after encountering some of her landmark research, which he could “almost immediately see having implications for the way schools are structured and classrooms work.”

As for the COLAB project, Knecht says, “This space is meant to open up something that I have not, frankly, experienced much of in my 30-year career, which is truly generative.” Knecht encourages patience and openness to the process; he knows it’s more than just an “intervention” to be implemented, because it’s designed to be collaborative, with educators bringing their own questions and concerns to the table.

“We think this group is going to help us figure out how to make use of [research findings], generate some interesting ways of querying the science and create some new, research-oriented pathways,” Knecht says.

Over the next year, the schools in this first COLAB cohort will continue to meet with the USC CANDLE team virtually to deepen their understanding of neuroscience in the classroom. They’ll then move on to the next phases of the project: designing frameworks to incorporate these key principles into the classroom, and then implementing and evaluating their innovations.

The excitement for what’s to come reverberates around the room at the two-day deep dive, and is echoed by Daniel Zucker of the Institute for Collaborative Education. “The opportunity to actively engage in brand-new research in education and in neuroscience is the coolest thing ever,” he says. “The opportunity to be invited to participate is such a positive feeling, affirming that we’re doing something right.” —R



→ Educators in the first COLAB cohort discuss and reflect on the goals of the USC CANDLE project.



As federal pressure shutter DEI programs, the Pullias Center is showing institutions how to integrate equity principles across departments, roles and campus priorities through a shared leadership model.

# EQUITY

## Is Everyone's Fight

Story: Nadra Nittle  
Illustrations: Sonia Pulido

**F**OR DECADES, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES have responded to achievement gaps through a variety of efforts, including diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives—only to see marginalized students continue to struggle on campuses. One major reason? DEI efforts have traditionally been relegated to the periphery of the university experience, limiting their reach and effectiveness.

Enter Shared Equity Leadership (SEL), a framework that makes equity a focus campuswide instead of siloing it in DEI offices. Research indicates that historically underrepresented students experience meaningful outcomes through this model, developed by Adrianna Kezar, Dean's Professor

of Leadership and co-director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education. Through a multiyear study, funded by the Sloan Foundation, the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations and the ECMC Foundation, Kezar began her research on SEL in 2019 in partnership with the American Council on Education.

Since then, dozens of institutions across the country have used the research to launch the SEL model on their campuses.

As DEI is subjected to legislative bans and federal scrutiny, the Shared Equity Leadership framework is thriving at the colleges and universities that rely on it by weaving equity into all aspects of how they function. With the SEL

approach, lawmakers can't simply shutter a DEI office and remove its staff or budget to stymie equity efforts.

"One of the benefits is that it's actually resistant to the restrictive political environment that exists today," Kezar says.

Pedro Noguera, the Emery Stoops and Joyce King Stoops Dean of the USC Rossier School of Education, praises the SEL model for making equity an institutional mission rather than "a tangential program."

When this is achieved, Noguera says, equity "is taken much more seriously."

### Why DEI Has Struggled

Although DEI programs at higher education institutions date back over 50 years, national data reveal that marginalized students of color, such as Black, Latino and Southeast Asian undergraduates, still have lower graduation rates than the general student population. The same goes for their economically disadvantaged and first-generation college student peers.

When the American Council on Education asked Kezar to examine why DEI initiatives weren't effecting change, she suspected it was because these efforts weren't braided into the fabric of campus life.

"For a long time, campuses have implemented DEI programs and services, but the mainline faculty and staff aren't doing their work differently," Kezar said. "The students' day-to-day experience isn't changing much. Students may find a cultural center that provides them some sense of belonging, but their general experience, whether in their classes or when they go visit services like financial aid, isn't positive."

DEI efforts and programs, Kezar says, are marginalized on campuses and have been tacked onto the periphery. So, what do we need instead? Kezar's research shows that "transforming campus to create cultures—the overall environment—that support students," Kezar says.

Royel Johnson, an associate professor at USC Rossier and director of the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates in the USC Race and Equity Center, says that concentrating an institution's equity efforts into a single DEI office has drawbacks for multiple reasons.

"Typically, there's an isolated budget for that, a set of staff who are working on that, and, oftentimes, what we know from research is that these folks aren't positioned with any authority to hold people accountable for the work of DEI," he says. "They're often underfunded and working with limited resources."

In Kezar's research, the colleges and universities that shifted outcomes for underrepresented students didn't do it only with a DEI office. Instead, they shared responsibility and leadership widely among a critical mass of educators and changed the culture. To pinpoint how they successfully intervened, she decided to study these institutions.



### The Research: What Worked

The initial SEL study examined eight diverse institutions that were already narrowing equity gaps in retention, graduation and achievement. Despite differences in size, location and type, all the institutions shared a common strategy: broad-based ownership and leadership of equity work matched with accountability for outcomes.

"People at all levels of the institution—the senior administration, faculty leaders, staff leaders, different community groups, sometimes student leaders—were all taking responsibility for changing the environment so that students from all backgrounds could be successful," Kezar says.

Faculty redesigned curricula and teaching methods, using data in collaboration with one another to help them better understand student experiences. Reviewing campus climate data helped campus leaders recognize the alienation of some students and develop techniques to support them. With equity in mind, one institution removed its in-person registration requirement for an academic program because it posed challenges for part-time and online-only students. A different institution scrapped a financial aid policy that saw

students' schedules deleted if they did not pay tuition by a firm deadline. A university official explained to colleagues how the policy lowered student retention rates and wasn't equitable.

As Kezar and her research team began to think about naming the types of successful practices that were creating positive campus environments and closing achievement gaps, they came up with the term "Shared Equity Leadership." The institutions weighed in and agreed that SEL was the best label for their efforts.

The foundation of implementing SEL requires both personal and organizational transformation, according to Elizabeth Holcombe, senior research associate in the Pullias Center.

"A lot of the research that had been done in this space focused either on individual change, like doing some training for people and getting them to change their beliefs, or organizational change—changing these policies at the whole university level," Holcombe says. "And what we found is that both of those things were actually important to really make the type of change feel transformative."

In addition to combining individual and organizational transformation, SEL uses key practices and values that alter the campus culture, Kezar explains. The practices involve decision making, policymaking and data use through an equity lens. "Yet at the same time, culture change

involves relationships, trust and a shared vision," Kezar says. "SEL involves a new approach to leadership undergirded by very different values that develop trust and positive relationships on campus."

At its core, Kezar says, SEL engages values like "love and care" that leaders extend to students to support their success. School officials using the approach also commit to improving relational, communication and decision-making practices with one another.

"The model is very much about personal transformation and the different ways of showing up as a leader," Kezar says.

The current phase of research tracks six institutions in the Southeast, West, Midwest and Northeast that are adopting the SEL framework from scratch. Kezar and Holcombe are interested in investigating how institutions that want to support diverse groups of students undergo the cultural change necessary from the outset.

"We're working day to day with campuses that want to transition their work into a Shared Equity Leadership approach, so that we can see what are the first decisions and first steps they need to make to get there," Kezar says.

### The Road Ahead

The political climate has changed drastically since the SEL research project began ahead of the nation's racial reckoning after the police murder of George Floyd in 2020. During that summer, colleges were much more explicit about the racial equity work their campuses needed, Holcombe recalls.

"Some, not all, took advantage of that opportunity to make some real changes," she says. "Unfortunately, it just wasn't very long before the backlash started."

By September 2020, President Donald Trump had issued an executive order to combat "race and sex stereotyping," which laid the groundwork for some state legislators to introduce policies to restrict DEI.

A number of institutions, Holcombe adds, not only retreated from racial equity commitments but also scrubbed their websites of any work they did achieve on that front. Since 2023, at least 20 states have passed anti-DEI laws, and when Trump returned to the White House in January 2025, he fired off a series of executive orders intended to excise DEI from public life.

"Can we think about 2020, where it felt like an unprecedented momentum to do the work of equity?" Johnson says. "We were more precise and bold in naming oppressive phenomena, to now, just five years later, taking regressive steps."

Noguera notes that, first, the federal government has yet to explain why DEI is illegal, which makes the White House's efforts to ban it an overreach.

"Second of all, this country is diverse," he says. "Like it or not, that's the nature of our society in every way. Third, equity is about a commitment to ensuring that we're meeting the needs of all students, and I think all institutions are required to do that. And fourth, we know that when there's

**“Culture change involves relationships, trust and a shared vision. SEL involves a new approach to leadership undergirded by very different values that develop trust and positive relationships on campus.”**

—Adrianna Kezar, Co-director, Pullias Center

## SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP PUBLICATIONS

The Pullias Center has published a number of free reports and toolkits to help guide institutions as they look to implement the Shared Equity Leadership framework. Recent publications include:

### TOOLKIT

#### Capacity Building for Shared Equity Leadership

This toolkit includes a five-step action planning guide to help leaders create a plan to build capacity for SEL on their campus.

### PRACTICE BRIEF

#### Shared Equity Leadership in Politically Restrictive Environments

This practice brief highlights some of the ways that SEL can support leaders in continuing to pursue their equity goals in today's challenging environment.

### REFLECTIVE GUIDE

#### Leading for Equity From Where You Are: How Leaders in Different Roles Engage in Shared Equity Leadership

This contains several questions to help leaders reflect on their roles and consider how their roles might influence their work as equity leaders and shape the values and practices they can bring to the work.

For more publications on the SEL framework, please visit [pullias.usc.edu/publications](https://pullias.usc.edu/publications).

a commitment and an effort made to ensure that students feel included, they perform better. No one performs well when they feel marginalized." These are not radical ideas, Noguera stresses, but very much mainstream ones.

No matter the political environment, the SEL model can lead to change, Holcombe contends.

"Some of the campuses that we studied did have DEI offices or DEI infrastructure, but some of them didn't," she says. "So, we saw that there are multiple ways that the work could get done."

### The Bottom Line

Pressing forward, Pullias Center researchers, with funding from the ECMC Foundation and the Sloan Foundation, have organized professional development workshops, coaching sessions and communities of practice for the six institutions implementing SEL. Holcombe says she's cautiously optimistic that these strategies have been helpful, noting that some institutions that wanted to take part in the project ended their involvement due to DEI restrictions in their states.

“We know that when there’s a commitment and an effort made to ensure that students feel included, they perform better. No one performs well when they feel marginalized.”

—Pedro Noguera, Dean, USC Rossier

"But we have other ones that are staying the course and that really find this framework to be helpful for them during this time," Holcombe says. Those institutions have asked: "What is our mission as a campus, what are our values as a campus, and which parts of the goals that we've been pursuing around equity are really core to who we are as an institution?"

Noguera's advice is not to let a term like DEI interfere with doing the work.

"If you have to change the words to avoid getting your funding cut off, then do that," he says. "But focus on making sure that all people feel welcome, feel supported. Focus on supporting students who may come to us with greater needs so they can graduate and go on to make contributions to society." —R



## Defending Education and Renewing Hope

At the annual Pullias Lecture, SUNY Chancellor John B. King Jr., USC Rossier Dean Pedro Noguera and Pullias Center Co-Director Adrianna Kezar took a candid look at the rising costs, political battles and enduring promise of higher education.

Interview: Pedro Noguera and Adrianna Kezar

Illustration: Heather Monahan

Every spring, the USC Rossier School of Education community gathers for the annual Pullias Lecture. Established in 1978 in honor of Professor Earl V. Pullias, the lecture brings a nationally recognized scholar to USC to speak about important issues in education. In April, John B. King Jr., chancellor of the State University of New York, delivered a moving talk, “Higher Education: Engine of Democracy, Security and Upward Mobility,” that focused on the role of higher education in our society. After his remarks, the former U.S. Secretary of Education under President Obama spoke with USC Rossier Dean Pedro Noguera and Pullias Center Co-Director Adrianna Kezar. The three discussed the challenges facing education—from the dismantling of the Department of Education to the high cost of college—and offered words of hope and wisdom to those in attendance.

**PEDRO NOGUERA:** While you have spoken boldly and plainly about what’s at stake and what your stance is, most of higher ed appears to be trying to lie low, hoping that if they don’t make any noise, then they won’t be a target [of the Trump administration]. Obviously, standing together is a lot more effective than standing alone. How can we get other universities to do more than just capitulate or censor themselves in hopes that the administration won’t target them?

**JOHN B. KING JR.:** That is the question of our times, right? Institutions are naive if they think that they can successfully bargain with the administration when it has laid out an agenda that is so contrary to our fundamental mission and values. That said, we ought to be clear about where we can agree.

At SUNY, we have no tolerance for antisemitism. We enforce Title VI. I think the Students for Fair Admissions case, which ended race-conscious admissions, was wrongly decided—reflected a complete misunderstanding of the purpose of the 14th Amendment. However, it is the law, and we’re following it.

Then, when they say, ‘We want you to stop teaching the truth about our history,’ ‘You must give oversight of academic freedom to implementation of our administration values,’ ‘You must stop doing research on health disparities,’ or ‘You have to bow down before a

particular ideological agenda,’ we have to say ‘No. That conflicts with our values.’

The federal partnership around research represents a 75-year commitment to how we innovate in health and advanced manufacturing research in America. Everything in your cellphone, many of the treatments that you and your family are receiving from your doctor can be traced back to university research.

**“Everything in your cellphone, many of the treatments that you and your family are receiving from your doctor can be traced back to university research.”**

—John B. King Jr.,  
SUNY Chancellor

We’re beginning to see at least the private realization that capitulation is not an option because there’s too much at stake. We will see if people have the courage to say in public what they say in private.

**ADRIANNA KEZAR:** What’s happening at the federal level with the Department of Education is so troubling. What do you think the impact of these current changes is going to be with the Department of Education? What might be lost, particularly [with regard to] supporting democracy, security and upward mobility?

**JBK:** It is important to think about what the core functions of the department are, and there are threats in each of four areas.

One, the department’s Title I program sends money to K–12 schools serving low-income students. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act funding goes to support services for students with disabilities, as well as Title III for English learners and other funding streams that are designed to address long-standing equity gaps. They say they’re not going to disrupt that funding, but they are laying off the very people who are in charge of managing those programs. I worry that without that funding, we will see devastating harm to K–12 schools.

The second major area of work for the department is the Pell Grant program and the federal financial aid system. The Federal Student Aid office was understaffed and underfunded on Jan. 20, but now, it has a lot fewer people. I’m worried about the FAFSA breaking, Pell Grants not being delivered on time and the federal student loan program breaking.

The third area of the department’s work is around civil rights enforcement. A large share of the civil rights complaints are from families of students with disabilities who are not getting the services to which they are entitled. They’re shuttering regional offices and laying off people. Who’s going to investigate those things? This makes you suspect that the real agenda is to undo 50 years of civil rights progress by removing the very mechanisms to enforce protection against discrimination based on race, religion or disability.

The fourth area is data and transparency. We need to know where we’re succeeding and where we’re struggling [in K–12 schools]. In a no-data environment, how do we get better? On the higher ed side, I worry that the elimination of data advances an agenda of steering more money to predatory, for-profit colleges.

**PN:** This raises another question, which is the vulnerability of higher ed. Increasingly, more young people are questioning the value of college because they are saddled with debt for the next 30 years of their life. What are we doing to make sure that these institutions are accessible to a broad public?

**JBK:** In 1980, the Pell Grant program covered 80% of the costs of public higher ed. Today, it’s roughly 28%. The erosion of the purchasing power of the Pell Grant program translated into more debt for students. If we don’t fix the underlying problem of how we fund higher education, we will have another generation of students saddled with debt. We should be moving toward a place where public higher education is debt-free for students.

If you choose public higher ed, you should be able to graduate without debt. But we also need to do a better job making sure students graduate. One of the critiques we are vulnerable to is that a lot of students don’t finish. It’s particularly true at community colleges, and it’s disproportionately true at regional publics.

My view is no one starts college thinking, ‘Oh, I’m going to just take a semester’s worth of classes, drop out and have debt and no degree.’ We must have as our intention to put in place the supports that help students complete, if we want to be less vulnerable to the despair around whether college is worth it.

**AK:** You spoke earlier about how leaders should respond to attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion. Is there any other advice you would give to people right now?

**JBK:** We have not done a good job building the kind of evidence base that we need around the impact of DEI programs and initiatives in higher education. That is a problem when we are making the case to people who are persuadable. There’s a set of people who have an ideological view, and I don’t know that we can win them over. But there’s a healthy group of folks in the middle who I think are persuadable, but we must be able to demonstrate.

We say that DEI initiatives result in a greater sense of belonging that causes students to be more likely to persist and complete. We haven’t built the evidence base around that. What does the right training look like that’s going to be effective in moving people to be more open, collaborative, more willing to learn [and] more tolerant of difference?

**“We should be moving toward a place where public higher education is debt-free for students.”**

—John B. King Jr.

**PN:** It really seems that what this country is suffering from is an amnesia and an unwillingness to confront the past. As a leader who is trying to think about charting these waters, what’s your final message to us? We’re trying to not give in to despair. We’ve been through much worse than this moment. I’m hoping that you can give us something good to hold on to.

**JBK:** We all must try to be very practical about what we can do. Being mad at what you hear on MSNBC and posting on X or Instagram about what you’re mad about is not doing a thing.

**“America’s story is a story of expanding the circle of opportunity, the Underground Railroad, the Civil Rights Movement, the women’s suffrage movement and Stonewall. We must draw inspiration from that.”**

—John B. King Jr.

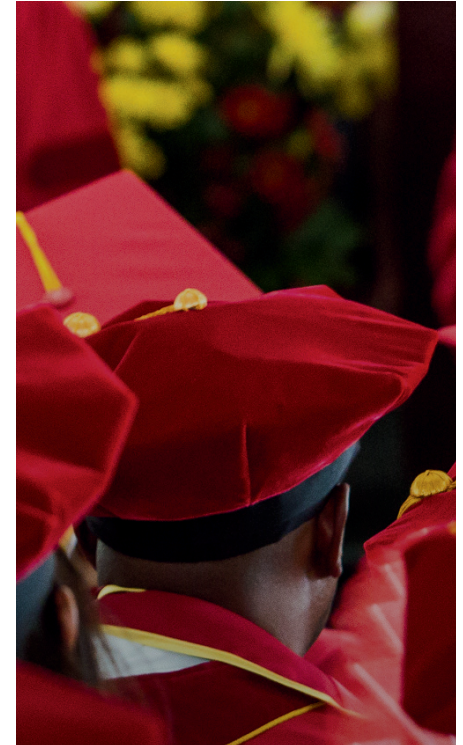
We need to figure out what in our individual world we can control and influence—what we can do to be democracy advancing? It is important to figure out what you can do to try to make forward progress so that you can be purposeful and not just overwhelmed by the threats that we face.

The second thing—and I think you’re exactly right, we have seen much worse—we must stay hopeful about the ultimate outcome. President Obama would often cite Dr. King’s words that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

He would talk about that in the sense that we do have this history of two steps forward and one step back. It sometimes feels like two steps forward, three steps back. In the end, America’s story is a story of expanding the circle of opportunity, the Underground Railroad, the Civil Rights Movement, the women’s suffrage movement and Stonewall. We must draw inspiration from that. —R

*Pedro Noguera is the Emery Stoops and Joyce King Stoops Dean of USC Rossier, and Adrianna Kezar is the co-director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education.*


📶 This interview has been edited for length and clarity. To view the lecture in its entirety, please visit [rossier.usc.edu](https://rossier.usc.edu).



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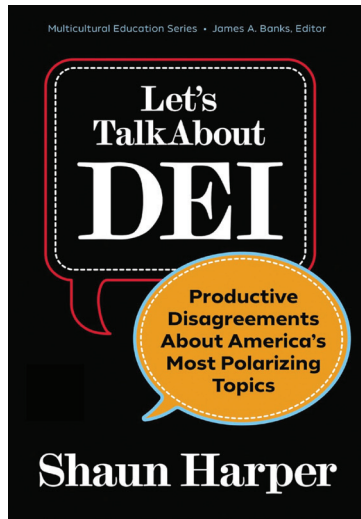
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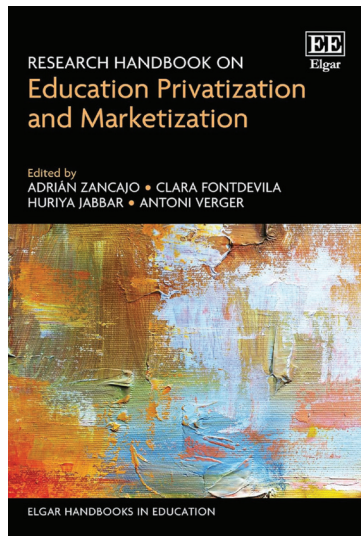
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## Faculty Publications



**Let's Talk About DEI: Productive Disagreements About America's Most Polarizing Topics**  
By **Shaun Harper**, University Professor  
Teacher's College Press  
(July 2025)

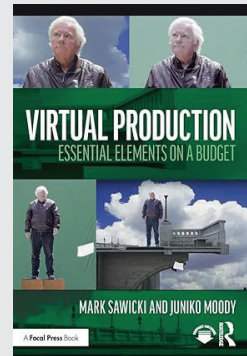
*Let's Talk About DEI* models for professionals and everyday Americans ways to productively critique, learn from and respond to other people's perspectives on topics related to diversity, equity and inclusion. A variety of contested issues are debated, including consequences for kids who do racist things in schools, the U.S. Supreme Court's affirmative action reversal, legacy advantages in college admissions, the tumultuous tenure of Harvard's first Black president, legislative attacks on DEI initiatives, and celebrity coaches at historically Black universities. Readers will also see how the author and his students engage in respectful disagreements about celebrities and influencers, from Beyoncé and Elon Musk, to Kanye West and Brittney Griner.



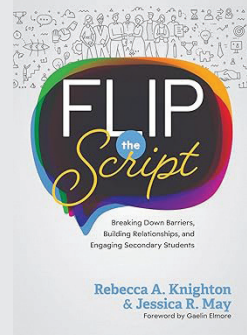
**Research Handbook on Education Privatization and Marketization**  
Edited by **Adrián Zancajo**, **Clara Fontdevila**, **Huriya Jabbar**, associate professor of education, and **Antoni Verger**  
Edward Elgar Publishing  
(February 2025)

This research handbook analyses global trends within education privatization and marketization, two of the most debated topics in contemporary education policy. An international array of expert contributors present illuminating case studies from across Asia, Europe, North America and South America.

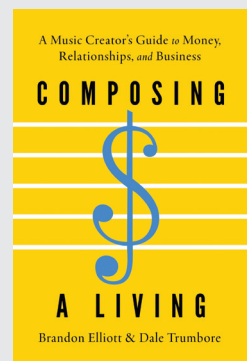
## Alumni Publications



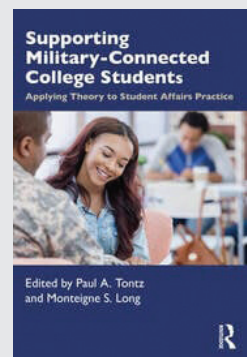
**Virtual Production: Essential Elements on a Budget**  
By **Juniko Moody** EdD '18 and **Mark Sawicki**  
Routledge (June 2025)



**Flip the Script: Breaking Down Barriers, Building Relationships, and Engaging Secondary Students**  
By **Rebecca Knighton** MAT '13 and **Jessica R. May**  
Solution Tree Press (July 2025)



**Composing a Living: A Music Creator's Guide to Money, Relationships, and Business**  
By **Brandon Elliott** EdD '21 and **Dale Trumbore**  
Oxford University Press (September 2025)



**Supporting Military-Connected College Students: Applying Theory to Student Affairs Practice**  
Edited by **Montaigne Long** ME '12 and **Paul Tontz**  
Routledge  
(December 2025)

## Higher Ed's Trust Crisis Can't Be Solved Alone

To restore Americans' faith in their promise and importance, universities must act collectively.

By **Pedro A. Noguera**, Emery Stoops and **Joyce King Stoops** Dean and **Mark Power Robison**, Vice Dean



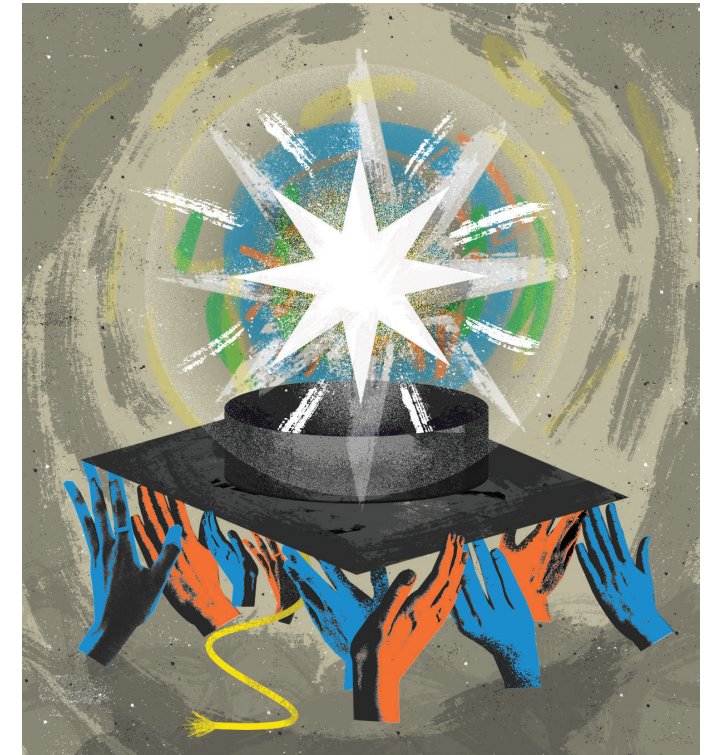
**PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP HAS** issued a set of executive orders threatening universities that embrace diversity, equity and inclusion policies with a reduction of federal research funding. The impact is being felt acutely at elite universities. Leaders in higher education are reeling from the onslaught, even more so after Columbia University agreed in July to pay the government \$200 million and make internal changes demanded by the administration to restore the \$400 million in grants that were canceled in March. The concessions by Columbia and the preemptive self-censorship of DEI policies by many other universities signify a tectonic shift. It demonstrates that intimidation

can be used to silence critics, and that fear of losing federal funds can be used as a lever by political leaders who disapprove of stances taken on college campuses.

Thus far, university leaders have failed to respond. Most university presidents seem to be trying to keep a low profile to reduce the likelihood of being targeted. We believe this is a tremendous mistake. Universities are unaccustomed to operating in the political arena, especially when the stakes are high. This became most evident when presidents from Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology were called to Congress to testify about their responses to campus protests over the war in Gaza. Most failed to see the event for what it was: political theater. Instead of decisive statements against antisemitism and in favor of free speech, they provided lawyerly defenses of their missteps and inaction. Lying low when confronted with blatant bullying will not work.

Here is what we propose instead: Universities and colleges—particularly the elite, highly ranked institutions that are most under threat—must collaborate in unprecedented ways to respond to threats from the Trump administration and to restore societal trust in higher education. We recommend a nationwide collaborative endeavor to win back the hearts and minds of Americans by showing them the value of higher education. Despite their flaws, universities still function as engines of innovation and social mobility and are major economic anchors in communities. By working together, universities can begin to dispel Americans' doubts about higher education.

It is particularly important to counter three pervasive misconceptions that have taken root in American culture.



First, it needs to be made clear that “elite” does not mean exclusionary. Americans are skeptical about the college admission process. Faith in admissions practices can be restored by making opaque admissions offices far more transparent. Similarly, the true cost of attending college needs to be better understood, because relatively few students pay the full price for elite degrees.

Second, people need to understand that teaching is only one part of a university's mission. Research is fundamental to the purpose of a university. It's vital that Americans grasp why university-based research matters and how it benefits the vitality of our industries, health care system and nation's prosperity.

Third, it needs to be recognized that the ivory tower crumbled long ago. Universities and colleges are far more integrated with the communities they serve than people realize. Partnerships with the business community, local government, nonprofit groups and faith-based organizations are fundamental to their work. University health systems play vital roles in communities. Agriculture schools work closely with farmers to ensure the productivity and safety of the food supply. Education colleges like our own work closely with schools to provide training and support to teachers.

Universities must band together to rebuild the trust and support of the American people. This must include sustained public relations efforts in their local communities and states and, most importantly, at a national level. Changing public perceptions of American higher education will take extraordinary levels of cooperation on the part of institutions that largely view themselves as competitors. Given the dire nature of the present political threats, university leaders would be wise to heed the warning purportedly issued by Benjamin Franklin: “We must all hang together or, most assuredly, we will hang separately.” —R

ILLUSTRATION BY NATE KITCH

# Highlights From Class Notes

Class Notes are compiled by Simone Lontok, advancement operations and stewardship coordinator. To view all Class Notes and submit your own update, please visit [rossier.usc.edu/alumni/classnotes](http://rossier.usc.edu/alumni/classnotes).

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## ALUMNI NEWS

### 1950s

**JANET BOLDT SAENZ BS '59** was one of seven finalists for the Excellence in Education award of Alpha Delta Kappa International Association for Women in Education. The winner was announced in July at the ADK International Convention in Austin, Texas.

### 1960s

**DANIEL BASALONE BS '62** published his 11th book, *Elementary School Student Government and Intergroup Relations*.

**MARILYN MCLARNAN THOMAS BS '63** still lives in her Los Angeles home of the last 58 years. Since the passing of her husband, Wayne A. Thomas, in April 2021, her focus has been on her family and traveling with children and grandchildren to Mexico, France, Italy, England and Iceland. She looks forward to attending more USC activities.

### 1970s

**MIKE WILLIAMSON PhD '70** was the principal speaker at the 2024 and 2025 Memorial Day celebrations at the Memorial Wall of Honor in Wilsonville, Ore. In 2024, he received the Ambassador for Peace Medal awarded by South Korea's Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs. Mike is a veteran of the Korean War, serving two deployments in the war zone in 1951–1953. In retirement, he lives in Wilsonville with his wife of 65 years.

### 1980s

**CHUCK URIBE ME '85** was elected to the Center Joint Unified School District School Board in Sacramento County. Chuck is in his 39th year in the classroom, having become a teacher after earning his master's degree while serving in the U.S. Air Force.

**FRED ATKINSON ME '89** continues to see clients at the Center of Neurotherapy in Studio City. He's proud that several of the students he has worked with have gone on to pursue college degrees in a variety of fields.

### 1990s

**JOAN WOODFORD ABU BAKIR MAT '96** is a fieldwork instructor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

### 2000s

**JIM J. ADAMS EdD '02** is celebrating his 70th birthday and five years of retirement from the presidency of Life Pacific University. He stays active in higher education as an adjunct professor, consultant, course designer and doctoral mentor.

**CLINTON M. COVERT EdD '02** authored a new book on leadership, *Who Are You? And Why Should I Care? Learning to Lead as You Have Never Led Before*.

**YOUNES MOURCHID PhD '03** brings over two decades of experience in learning design, instructional technology and student development to his current role as director of student development and learning resources at Chapman University. Younes provides strategic leadership for comprehensive student support initiatives within the Tutoring and Learning Resources Center.

**SIRIA MARTINEZ ME '04** was promoted to vice chancellor of equity, innovation and institutional effectiveness at the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.

**TIFFANY ANGULO RAGOZZINO MAT '06** is the physical education department head and wellness coordinator at the Girls Academic Leadership Academy in Los Angeles. She created a school gym and weightlifting program within PE classes as well as a weightlifting elective.

**DANA TATE EdD '08** is assistant vice president of enrollment management and financial aid at Grand View University.

**MARTHA ENCISO '03, ME '06, EdD '09** and **EMILY SANDOVAL ME '04, EdD '18** served as panelists for "Hanging Up the Cape (For Now)," one of four presentations as part of the GeekEd. Collective at the 2025 San Diego Comic-Con.

### 2010s

**FAL ASRANI EdD '10** transitioned from a 32-year career in TK–12 public schools, including her role as superintendent, to a position at USC Rossier as a program administrator for the Office of Professional Learning. In her new role, she focuses on collaborating with school and district leaders to enhance the education pipeline and expand USC's influence in both local and national education systems.

## USC Rossier Produces Leaders

**Alyson Daichendt EdD '21**  
Vice President,  
Human Capital  
Consulting  
Acquis Consulting  
Group, LLC



**Amber L. Wright EdD '23**  
Executive  
Communication  
Coach and  
Keynote  
Speaker,  
Words Well Said



**Brian P. Creswick EdD '19**  
Director of Operations,  
Aspen Institute College  
Excellence Program

**Helen Park Truong EdD '25**  
Head of Development,  
OneGoal Metro Atlanta

**Josue Sandigo EdD '23**  
Principal,  
Sandigo Group  
Chief  
Information  
Officer, Society  
for Hispanic  
Professional  
Engineers



**Joy Chen EdD '23**  
Senior Advisor,  
Stanford  
Accelerator  
for Learning;  
Senior Advisor,  
Stanford University  
GSV Ventures; Board  
Director, EHL Group



**Martin Payne EdD '24**  
Chief Commercial Officer  
Empowerly

**JASON PAPPAS EdD '10** is a teaching professor and internship program coordinator in the Department of Sport Management at Florida State University. He is co-author of *Masters of the Game*, a book that explores leadership through the lens of sport executives.

**SUNDAY STEELE EdD '10** joined Prometric as associate vice president, K–12, where she will work with the Global Client Advocacy Team to bring AI-powered assessment solutions to K–12 districts.

**RICADORIE GLAZE MAT '11** was hired as an assistant principal in a Southern California school district after 17 years in the classroom.

**WENLI JEN EdD '11** joined the Trojan family in August 2024 as the online programs manager for USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work. She delivered the keynote speech on "Sustainability and Success: Intergenerational Collaboration for Organizational Development and Strategy" at the 37th annual Adult Protective Services Multi-Disciplinary Team Conference. She was also elected chair of the PBS SoCal Community Advisory Board for the 2025–2026 fiscal year.

**JORGE O. RAMIREZ MAT '11** started a new position with Pacific Oaks College, teaching early childhood education to undergraduate students. Jorge is pursuing his doctorate at Pacific Oaks in early childhood education.

**REGINA ZURBANO EdD '11** was recognized as the Association of California School Administrators Region 15 CTE Administrator of the Year for 2025, representing the Antelope Valley ACSA Regional Charter. Regina is director of Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) and charter oversight for the Palmdale School District, the fourth largest elementary school district in the state.

**DEREK IHORI EdD '12** became a licensed educational psychologist and expanded his educational consulting practice, FAPE Consulting, to include assessments of disabilities.

**MATTHEW JELICK MAT '12** was promoted to director for the University of Colorado Denver at International College Beijing. Within his new role, Matthew works with a faculty of about 30 American professors who teach in Beijing. With majors in economics and communication, and minors in writing, philosophy and history, the University of Colorado program provides

## USC ROSSIER ALUMNI SECURE MAJOR GRANT TO ADVANCE LITERACY IN LAUSD



**MARCO A. NAVA EdD '13**, with Patricia Pernin, Wendy Marrero and Rene Gaudet EdD '18, was awarded a two-year, \$525,000 grant to support Los Angeles Unified School District's Reading and Literacy Added Authorization program. The investment will empower educators to assess and deliver specialized reading instruction; support curriculum development and teacher collaboration; lead effective reading interventions and analyze assessment data; and foster digital literacy skills for both students and teachers. —R

students with a dual degree, from both a Chinese and an American university.

**MARGARITA LANDEROS ME '12** is an assistant professor for the School and College Counseling Department at California State University, Dominguez Hills. She is also president-elect for the Western Association for College Admission Counseling.

**CHRISTINE LEVINSON EdD '12** is a Middle Years Programme English teacher at Pan-American School in Costa Rica. Christine returned to the classroom to gain firsthand insight into how international schools are integrating artificial intelligence into education and to understand global educational practices as schools worldwide adapt to AI's role in learning.

**MONTEIGNE LONG ME '12** is proud to announce the upcoming release of *Supporting Military-Connected College Students: Applying Theory to Student Affairs Practice*, which she co-edited with Paul Tontz. The book will be published by Routledge in December. Montaigne also earned her PhD in educational administration from Texas A&M University.



## Westcliff University, Rewired

Over the past decade, Anthony Lee Edd '13 has embraced innovation, positioning his institution to thrive in the changing landscape of modern education.

By: Kianoosh Hashemzadeh

**WHEN ANTHONY LEE EDD '13 TOOK OVER** the role of president of Westcliff University in 2012, the school was unaccredited and enrolled fewer than 100 students. Fast-forward to 2025, and under Lee's leadership, the school is now accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges and has a student body of nearly 8,000.

For Lee, the son of immigrants from Vietnam, education was of utmost importance, and it was deeply ingrained in his upbringing. Based in Irvine, Westcliff University was founded in 1993 by his father, John Lee Yuhnaut, whom Lee describes as a “huge influence on my life.” In his current role as president and CEO, Lee finds a great sense of purpose in empowering others through education. “Allowing them a pathway for success in their future holds very near and dear to my heart,” Lee says.

Before becoming president of Westcliff, Lee worked at Irvine University for nearly a decade, ending his tenure as CEO. With an eye toward expanding and revitalizing Westcliff University, Lee enrolled in the USC Rossier Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership program. Lee's dissertation work focused on expansion strategies for institutions that specialize in international education, and as the newly minted president of Westcliff, he was in a unique situation to immediately put this research to work.

His dissertation chairs, professors Mark Power Robison and Michael Diamond, helped guide his thinking and research as he began to develop strategies to reposition and expand Westcliff University into a preeminent global institution. The focus was on “providing a valuable, quality and effective education to students all over the world,” Lee says.

For his dissertation, Lee “focused on the creation of new programs to meet higher education needs in Vietnam,” Robison says. “Through that research, and in his professional life, Dr. Lee is very adept at identifying educational needs and finding ways to match learners with the opportunities they need to thrive.”

Tapping into Robison's and Diamond's vast experience, Lee also learned the importance of utilizing different modalities for international education, including hybrid models and fully online programs.

Equally important, Lee learned, is building strong relationships with the governments and ministries of education within the countries he wanted to target for recruitment. These relationships can help guide program development at the university, Lee explains. For example, if a country has a need for certain skilled workers, Westcliff can partner with them to create a tailored program, ensuring that local industries will have a

skilled workforce and students will have well-paying jobs after they graduate. The school is working with officials and industry professionals in the Toronto area on programs that will help businesses fill vacant positions in the technology industry.

Westcliff also has the advantage of being able to move quickly and with flexibility. This agility is something Lee has leaned into as the school launched a College of Technology and Engineering a few years back. This year, it has launched a College of Nursing and a Master of Science in Artificial Intelligence program.

“We pride ourselves on how fast we can move and get things approved through the governance process thanks to our collaborative and mission-driven approach,” Lee says. If there is a market need for a program, Westcliff can pivot quickly and have a new program up and running in six months to a year, he says.

“A big part of our success is the team that I've been able to build here at Westcliff. Whether that's across the administrative functions or the academic leaders we have, we are all moving in the same direction,” Lee says.

As the benefits of higher education have come under scrutiny in recent years, with some Americans lacking confidence that an advanced degree will lead them to well-paid careers, Lee believes colleges need to focus on providing a return on students' investment.

The partnerships with local governments that Westcliff has developed can help restore the public's trust in higher education, as the return on investment for graduating students is immediately clear. “One of the reasons why I think Westcliff is successful is our approach: We make it our top priority to offer programs that prepare students for jobs in high demand,” Lee says.

Universities, especially those focused on international education, must also consider their modalities. “The world is continuing to get smaller,” Lee says, and “having innovative models in education is going to be a pivotal component to set us apart.”

Students from around the world still want to come to the United States to study, but many might face barriers and constraints. However, universities like Westcliff can help fill that gap, Lee says: “We can provide them with a quality U.S. education that can advance their skills, enable their social mobility and empower their entrepreneurship, if that's the route they choose to take.” —R

PHOTO/COURTESY OF ANTHONY LEE

**EPPIE LOPEZ MAT '12** achieved a significant milestone in advancing mental health awareness and education through his leadership of NMmentalhealth.org and the innovative RISE (Resilience, Inspire, Self-Empower) initiatives. His work continues to make a profound impact across New Mexico and the United States, especially in supporting educational environments and students.

**JILLIAN GUTHRIE MAT '13** will begin teaching an introduction to film studies class after several years of planning and concurrent teaching at a community college. The course was approved by the school board and will provide college credit to students in the class.

**JACQUELINE JARL MAT '13** graduated from Vanderbilt University's doctor of education program.

**MICHAEL ADAM TANIZAKI KURLAND ME '09, EdD '13** completed the Leadership Development Program for Higher Education through LEAP Advance. He also completed the California State University Middle Leadership Academy, examining student success for juniors and seniors at Cal State Los Angeles.

**REBECCA KNIGHTON MAT '13** released her first book, *Flip the Script: Breaking Down Barriers, Building Relationships, and Engaging Secondary Students*, based on her PhD research of the teachers who are amazing at connecting with and engaging disengaged and struggling students, often changing the trajectories of their lives.

**LAUREN VARGAS MAT '13** completed her lifelong dream of obtaining an MFA and looks forward to publishing her debut poetry novel this year.

**JAMES B. WINTER MAT '13** was accepted to National University's 2025 EdD cohort for educational leadership.

**RONAN HALLOWELL EdD '14** was promoted to clinical associate professor of medical education (clinician educator) at the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

**EDGAR PEREZ MAT '14** is a full-time faculty member at Los Angeles Valley College, where he teaches English as a second language in the Credit ESL and Noncredit ESL departments. He serves as the Academic Senate president



## LYNWOOD UNIFIED WELCOMES SUPERINTENDENT PATRICK GITTISRIBOONGUL EdD '13

**PATRICK GITTISRIBOONGUL EdD '13** was appointed superintendent of Lynwood Unified School District, bringing a proven track record of innovation, equity and student-centered leadership. With a strong focus on educational technology, artificial intelligence and digital learning, he is committed to advancing academic outcomes and driving sustainable innovation. His leadership marks a new chapter for Lynwood Unified centered on collaboration, forward-thinking strategy and preparing students for a tech-driven future. —R

(2023–present), where he represents the LAVC faculty in academic and professional matters, otherwise known as the 10+1. He is also a member of the District Academic Senate for the Los Angeles Community College District and was elected by his peers as Area C representative for the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges.

**ACACIA WARREN EdD '14** established Itty Bitty Boats, a subsidiary of Acacia Tree Learning Services, focused on educational entertainment through toys, books and storytelling. Her team successfully launched an Amazon toy store and published three children's books featuring the beloved Itty Bitty Boats fleet, using maritime adventures to teach about careers and values like teamwork, perseverance and self-confidence. Her company has donated over 1,000 Itty Bitty Boats toys to underserved children across Los Angeles, supporting holiday drives led by Snoop Dogg, Kendrick Lamar and Power 106, as well as Snoop Dogg's charity efforts for children impacted by the Southern California wildfires.

**KARA KUANG MAT '15** received her permanent contract with her local district and permanent teaching licence in Canada.

**ELOY LOPEZ III ME '15** is the inaugural student affairs officer for the Systems Biology PhD Home Area at the UCLA Division of Life Sciences.

**MELANIE (PENNY) HARRISON MAT '16** earned her PhD in Leadership and Change from Antioch University in 2025. Her dissertation will be published as a book in 2026.

**CYNTHIA LUA MFT '16** was admitted into USC's EdD in Mental Health Leadership program. She started her doctoral journey this fall.

**STU CLEEK EdD '17** was named vice president for student life at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, Calif.

**JANICE LYNN SYKES EdD '17** is a National Board Certified Teacher celebrating 31 years as an educator. She teaches high school English and drama, and she is an assistant professor at National University. She also works in the entertainment industry as a voice actor.

**JAMIE LEE EdD '18** is principal of Edison Elementary, the No. 1 value-added education among all schools in San Diego County. Edison showed significant growth and academic performance in a working-class learning community with a high number of multilingual learners, first-generation Americans and families eligible for free or reduced lunch

**JUNIKO MOODY EdD '18** co-authored a new book, *Virtual Production* (Routledge, 2025).

**MONICA MORAN EdD '18** was named assistant principal at Lennox Middle School in Lennox, Calif.

**AMY CARMACK EdD '19** is the new director of registration and academic records/registrar at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

**NATASHA DRUKAROVA DENMARK EdD '19** joined California State University, Northridge, as a tenure-track professor.

**KRISTINA WRIGHT EdD '19** was appointed director of strategic priorities and community connection at The Seven Hills School in Walnut Creek, Calif., where she will support schoolwide

planning, community engagement and program alignment across key initiatives.

**2020S**

**CECILIA JEREZ MAT '20** has taught English as a second language to adult learners at Glendale Community College and Pasadena City College for the past three years. She is also part of the Avancemos Spanish Support Program, which provides instruction and academic support in students' native language, Spanish.

**DIEUWERTJE "DJ" KAST EdD '20** was honored with the prestigious Leaders of Impact Award from Women Impact Tech. This award recognizes leaders who are creating the conditions for others to succeed, building more equitable systems and ensuring that the future of tech leadership reflects the diversity and innovation the industry needs to thrive.

**SHUNA MCMICHAEL EdD '20** was appointed assistant vice president for sponsored programs administration at Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio.

**IVY TRAC EdD '20** is the director of personnel services at the Garden Grove Unified School District.

**BRANDON ELLIOTT EdD '21** co-authored a new book, *Composing a Living* (Oxford University Press, 2025), a practical and empowering guide for music creators navigating the intersection of music, money and business.

**AMY KING EdD '21** was appointed to the Board of Directors for the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, accrediting over 900 master's and doctoral degree programs throughout the U.S.

**ERIC MEDRANO EdD '21** was named assistant superintendent for the Tri-City Special Education Local Plan Area. Eric will provide strategic leadership and oversight to support the delivery of high-quality special education services across the Tri-City SELPA member districts.

**ANDREW MILLER EdD '21** joined Beijing International Bilingual Academy as the academic principal. In this role, he leads curriculum, instruction and professional learning across the K-12 school, supporting a dynamic bilingual and international learning environment.

**TANYA OLIVA MAT '21** completed her fourth year as a teacher and was accepted to the Teacher Innovator Institute program for the summer in Washington, D.C. The program prepares teacher innovators to deliver STEAM lessons and become mentors for their classroom community.

**ELIA SALAZAR PLASCENCIA EdD '21** started a new chapter in her career as the administrative clinical research program manager in the Department of Diagnostic Radiology at City of Hope National Medical Center. Elia brings over nine years of experience in the clinical research field, having previously contributed to impactful work at Children's Hospital Los Angeles and Keck School of Medicine of USC. In her new role, she will provide strategic oversight and operational leadership for radiology programs, with a strong focus on clinical and translational research initiatives.

**ALEX VIEIRA EdD '21** was hired as an assistant principal at Newport-Mesa Unified in August 2025.

**EDWIN YAU EdD '21** became the first school social worker in California to earn the National Certified School Social Worker credential. He is part-time faculty at the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, serves as an administrator at the Los Angeles County Office of Education and leads statewide trainings on school mental health.

**RAMIRO NICODEMUS ALEXANDER-DUCHESNE MAT '22** published his second book, *Tales From a Troubled Mind*, a collection of short stories exploring themes of love, loneliness, the paranormal and the search for truth.

**CRYSTAL DAY EdD '22** joined the Board of Directors for New Los Angeles Charter Network, providing an enrollment lens for the board.

**RALEEN A. MILLER EdD '22** has a new position as an adjunct professor at California State University, Dominguez Hills, teaching communication sciences and disorders courses for the postbaccalaureate program.

**LT. COL. SEAN FAZANDE EdD '23** was selected to command the 313th Recruiting Squadron for the state of New York. He is responsible for 112 people across 55 offices and enlisting more than 12,000 new recruits from New York annually to fill critical personnel needs in the U.S. Air Force and Space Force. Sean was specifically selected to address competing perspectives in the New York education systems stemming from mixed messaging about military service.

**ROCIO FLORES EdD '23** founded Brillantes Emprendedoras de Los Angeles (BELLA) four years ago to elevate the Latina entrepreneurial voice in Los Angeles. Through small-business education and coaching programs, loans, grants, community building events and interviews highlighting Latina business owners, BELLA has created a safe space where Latina entrepreneurs are not only celebrated but also supported on their journey to thrive.

**JANINE LEE EdD '23** co-authored her first book, *Unstoppable: The Rise of Female Global Leaders*, to share her story as a minority leader. She also published her first article in the *Harvard Business Review*, "Breaking Down Barriers to Belonging for Women of Color in Tech," and published her first LinkedIn Learning course, "Leading Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging Change."



**BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH BOOKS**

**REYNA MACIAS EdD '24** was recognized by the Little Free Library nonprofit organization as a winner of the Todd H. Bol Award for Outstanding Achievement. Her volunteer efforts exemplify the vision of the late founder of Little Free Library, Todd Bol, to engage communities and enrich lives through the power of shared books. Regina launched Casita Tiahui Library with her family during the pandemic to foster community in a time of profound isolation. The library, adorned with hand-painted designs inspired by Mexican tiles and inscribed with bilingual quotes on its sides, has become a powerful symbol of connection. It stands as a beacon of love and literacy in a community often overlooked, reminding us that East Los Angeles is home to readers, dreamers and people who care deeply for one another. —R

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## Living Her Dissertation

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Synovia Moss EdD '25 led the largest African American coalition addressing vaccine confidence as she pursued her doctorate.

Story: Adriana Maestas

**SYNOVIA MOSS EdD '25 JOINED MOST OF** the courses for her doctoral program from airport lounges across the country. As CEO and managing partner of Moss Consulting and Management Group, she was simultaneously taking classes and building the infrastructure for the Good Health Women's Immunization Networks (Good Health



WINS) during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. While in the doctoral program, she crisscrossed the country, building trust on the ground, providing technical assistance and ensuring that more than 40 state and national community-based organizations (CBOs) had the support they needed to implement local vaccine-confidence programs.

Good Health WINS—an initiative of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), the largest Black women's organization in the country—aims to build vaccine confidence and uptake in communities of color. Vaccine hesitancy in these communities is often rooted in systemic inequities and historical health-related injustices. During the pandemic, these communities faced disproportionate infection and mortality rates, underscoring the urgent need for targeted, culturally informed public health interventions.

Moss' efforts involved leading the national endeavor to strengthen vaccine confidence and to address disparities in vaccine coverage, such as by using imagery, language and voice to make the materials more relatable to the communities that they serve. For example, the national network of Black sororities served as messengers, providing timely information about vaccine safety and where to access the vaccines.

Moss brought to her doctoral cohort over two decades of professional experience leading large-scale, transformative initiatives in the nonprofit, corporate and academic sectors. Moss' passion for public health and her desire to "live her dissertation" led her back to USC, where she started her higher education journey as an undergraduate while playing for the Trojans' volleyball team.

After leading the vaccine response for Good Health WINS during the pandemic, she wanted to reinvest in herself to sharpen her skills and leadership capacity. She says the return to USC was an intentional effort to "strengthen the tools that I need to lead complex organizations through change," combining academic research with real-time application in the field.

Moss' dissertation examined evidence-based decision-making and lessons learned during the pandemic, focusing on how organizational leaders navigated challenges in underserved communities. Through interviews with project managers and other leaders, Moss

found that disparities were often not the result of insufficient resources, but of misalignment of vision, strategy and implementation of public health policies. Moss' work has been published in collaboration with her colleagues at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

During her studies at USC Rossier School of Education, Moss connected deeply with Assistant Teaching Professor of Education Eric Canny, who served as her dissertation chair. Given Canny's experience administering programs on a global scale and leading strategic planning, there was a logical alignment with the work that Moss was doing professionally.

"Synovia's work uplifted the voices of community partners—those on the ground who implemented truly life-changing programs within the Black community during COVID-19. Theirs is a voice we do not often hear," Canny says. "Looking at this moment in time, when more programs and research support are being terminated, the importance of looking at her research and ways of helping marginalized communities has taken on a new urgency."

Today, Moss' goal is to continue to live her dissertation, putting the lessons learned from her research into practice. She is committed to helping organizations to set clear goals, measure the impact of their actions and remain adaptive in the face of evolving public health challenges. It also means that she's thinking about what might be on the horizon when the next pandemic strikes and ensuring that community-based organizations are prepared to respond rapidly and effectively.

Recently, Moss helped convene the Good Health WINS National CBO Summit on Vaccine Confidence, a collaboration with national partners to develop a five-year strategic vision for maintaining and expanding vaccine-confidence efforts. These CBOs have been embedded in local communities for years, but Moss wants them to be better engaged and used as a resource, so they are at the top of the list for policymakers when the next public health emergency strikes.

"In leading the largest African American coalition around vaccine confidence in the country, I'm committed to providing a platform for CBOs," Moss says. "They are a powerful group deeply connected to communities, and we must engage them consistently, not just when there's a public health emergency."

—R

ILLUSTRATION BY AGATA NOWICKA

**JANET SHERLOCK EdD '23's** recent TEDx Talk, "Clarity Before Chaos: Building Organizations That Work," was selected as an official TED Editor's Pick, an honor given to less than 1% of the approximately 50,000 TEDx talks per year worldwide. The talk heavily draws from her doctoral research at USC Rossier, including findings from her dissertation on the organizational impact of overlapping executive roles. Now founder and CEO of Org. Works, Janet is bringing evidence-based insights into boardrooms and C-suites to help companies improve structure, clarity and performance.

**JACQUIE BALY EdD '24** was honored as a 2025 Community Champion by Texas Children's Hospital. This prestigious recognition celebrates individuals who make exceptional contributions in the philanthropic space, pediatric health care and the Texas Children's community.

**LINDA BERMEDEZ EdD '24** joined the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office as dean of workforce development. In this role within the Division of Workforce and Economic Development, Linda is committed to advancing the systemwide mission of improving student achievement across all 116 colleges, with particular emphasis on eliminating achievement gaps and enhancing economic mobility for students.

**DOLAPO DEMUREN EdD '24** was named a winner of the 2025 Poetry Society of America Chapbook Fellowship. Founded in 1910 and recognized as the nation's oldest poetry organization, the Poetry Society of America works to place poetry at the crossroads of American life. Since 1970, the Chapbook Fellowship has supported the professional development of emerging poets by publishing selected manuscripts and connecting poets with distinguished mentors.

**ELISE RUCKERT EdD '24** and a team of researchers were awarded a \$5,000 Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Grant by Evidence In Motion to develop a tool for measuring faculty belonging of health professions educators

**SAMATRA DOWNING EdD '25** was appointed principal of Starr King Elementary School, a TK-5 Mandarin immersion school in the San Francisco Unified School District.

**COLLEEN EVENS EdD '24** was named coordinator of culture and climate at U-46, the second-largest school district in Illinois, where she will oversee 58 schools. Colleen will lead the

district in restorative justice practices by first focusing on the adults and bringing awareness to non-exclusionary discipline practices.

**ANGELA AGUIRRE MAT '25** was hired by her student teaching placement Mission Crest Elementary as a fourth grade teacher. She is excited to continue in the same school with familiar colleagues and staff. Angela was a student at the school years ago; she is excited to give back to her community and be the representation she wished she had growing up.

**ELIZABETH CERVANTES MAT '25** is an eighth-grade English teacher at Wiseburn Middle School.

**VICKI HIGGINS ME '25** was awarded the prestigious Fulbright U.S.-Taiwan International Education Administrators Award and traveled to Taiwan for a seminar with higher education officials.

**ANNA D. HEINBUCH EdD '25** launched a culturally groundbreaking social-emotional learning initiative that is resonating in classrooms and communities across California. Anna is the founder of NeuroNurture Apoyo Educativo LLC and the visionary behind Social Emotional Lotería—a six-week, bilingual curriculum and interactive game designed to center culture, identity and emotional well-being in the classroom.

**LISETTE ISIORDIA ME '25** returned to her undergraduate alma mater, Pepperdine University, as assistant director of alumni engagement for Seaver College.

**ALMA RAMIREZ MAT '25** began a fourth-grade Spanish dual immersion teaching position with Hacienda La Puente Unified School District this fall. She is filled with excitement and gratitude as she starts this new journey and connects with her students and school community.

**AIMEE TENG MAT '25** presented a lesson in May at the Qingdao Laoshan New Century School 2025 Teaching Symposium, themed "From Transmission to Empowerment—Reimagining the Modern Classroom." Aimee's lesson, "Why Does Garbage Smell?," integrated academic English with inquiry-based science learning. A key feature of the lesson was the incorporation of AI-assisted inquiry.

**HAISHAN YANG EdD '25** was awarded the Graduate Rising Star Award by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Region VI.



## Her Teaching Career Began at USC Rossier, and Now She's Giving Back

Sandra Lieberman's fulfilling work in special education inspired a scholarship fund to support the next generation of educators.

By Kianoosh Hashemzadeh

**AFTER TRADING THE HARSH** winters of Minnesota for the California sunshine, Sandra Lieberman—armed with a degree in parks, recreation and leisure studies from the University of Minnesota—began working at Camarillo State Hospital in the early 1970s.

It was there that she worked with special needs children for the first time, and it was an experience that changed the course of her life. Part of her role was to take the children out for fun activities, and the excitement of the children sparked something in her. After taking a class at Fairview Developmental Center with a woman who specialized in special education, she immediately knew she wanted to return to school to gain more experience working with special needs children. Soon after, she enrolled in courses at the USC Rossier School of Education, studying special education.

Looking back at her time at USC Rossier, Lieberman fondly remembers Professor Leo Buscaglia '49, MS '52, PhD '63, or "Dr. Love," as he was known to many. "He required that you

meet with him to be in his classes," Lieberman recalls. She took two classes with him, and his impact on her was profound. "He was extremely passionate about education. He was committed to his students. He wanted to know his students," she says.

Lieberman also points to the impact of her counselor, Dr. Williams, who helped arrange her student teaching for a location near where she lived in Marina del Rey. "USC sets you up in positive situations," Lieberman says.

Her time at USC opened doors for her that she couldn't have imagined. After completing her student teaching, she soon began looking for a full-time role. Her counselor suggested she reach out to Principal Jim Barton at Canyon Hills School in Orange, Calif. The administrator she spoke with told her he was departing for vacation but would respond on his return. But after Principal Barton learned she attended USC Rossier, he called her back immediately and asked her to come in for an interview the next day. She ended up working in education for over 30 years.

"I did spoil my kids in those days," Lieberman says. She was constantly planning exciting activities for her students. Once, the week before winter break, she took her class to breakfast with Disney characters. Another time, she and her aides took the class to Disneyland during a McDonald's student ticket giveaway. "The parents bought their tickets and joined us. It was a special, fun day," Lieberman recalls.

Throughout her teaching career, Lieberman worked with students of all ages, from pre-K to young adults. She points to her time working with a fantastic master teacher as one of the most formative parts of her training. During student teaching, she says, you gain invaluable hands-on experience: "You see lessons that don't work well, and you see lessons that are super successful." Making the most of this training, Lieberman says, will help new teachers step into their future classrooms better prepared.

Lieberman also believes that standard education can learn a lot from the practices of special education. "In special education, we do an IEP (individualized education program), so what we're doing is for the needs of that specific child. If we do more of that with all children, instead of following this [standardized] curriculum, that would really help."

Special education teachers, in particular, should also not be afraid to get outside help, Lieberman says. During her career, she sought the expertise of psychologists, speech therapists and other specialists to help her provide full wraparound services for her students.

In 2024, with an aim of truly "making a difference in someone's life," Lieberman established the Sandy Barry Lieberman MAT Scholarship Fund at USC Rossier. Her generous scholarship gift will support students enrolled in the Master of Arts in Teaching, Special Education Pathway. —R

To learn more about giving to USC Rossier, please visit [rossier.usc.edu/giving](https://rossier.usc.edu/giving) or contact Rachel Beal, associate dean for advancement, at [bealr@rossier.usc.edu](mailto:bealr@rossier.usc.edu).

PHOTO: KIANOOSH HASHEMZADEH, USC ROSSIER

Please support the Mary Andres Endowed Scholarship Fund, established to honor the legacy of a visionary leader and professor of clinical education. Her dedication continues to inspire future professionals in the field of mental health and well-being.

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↑ Sandra Lieberman established the Sandy Barry Lieberman MAT Scholarship Fund at USC Rossier in 2024.

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