FRESNO STATE®

MAGAZINE

FALL 2026



Nationally Known for

National Parks



Sharing Our Region
With the World

FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK

Dear Friends,

Welcome to this issue of Fresno State Magazine. Through these pages, you will discover the many ways our university is shaped by this remarkable place we call home, and how, in turn, Fresno State helps shape the future of our Valley, our state and the world.

This issue invites us to look toward the mountains, rivers, forests and sacred lands that surround us. Fresno State sits near some of the most extraordinary national and state parks in the world. Yet our story is not simply about proximity. The Central Valley is not a gateway to somewhere else. It is a destination, a landmark and a source of knowledge in its own right.

Still, when we are surrounded by places of such beauty and meaning, we have a responsibility to engage them fully. For our students and faculty, these landscapes become living classrooms, opening doors to learning in science, sustainability, culture, history, education and public service. They also remind us that this land holds stories much older than our university. Through our growing work in tribal relations, Fresno State continues to listen, learn and build relationships rooted in respect.

This issue also highlights a defining moment for our university. This past summer, Fresno State officially joined the Pac-12, placing our work, our students and our Bulldog spirit on a national stage in a new and powerful way. Through "Lead with Pride," our campaign for Fresno State, we are investing in the people and programs that will carry that momentum forward.

As you read, I hope you feel the same pride I do: Fresno State is rooted in a remarkable place, and together, we are helping the world see it.

Go 'Dogs!



Saúl Jiménez-Sandoval, Ph.D.
President, Fresno State

Stay in touch!

We welcome your comments about Fresno State Magazine at ***magazine@csufresno.edu***.

If you receive more than one copy, please pass it along to a friend of Fresno State. If you would like to support the university, visit ***fresnostate.edu/givenow*** to make your contribution. Thank you!

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Cover: *From the heart of the Central Valley to the heights of Yosemite, Abigail Graves, pre-health student, takes in a California sunset from Glacier Point.*

Above: *Alia Murshed, ASI senator for the College of Health and Human Services, takes in a sunset from Taft Point, overlooking the vast beauty of Yosemite Valley and the surrounding Sierra Nevada.*

Left: *Junior quarterback Jayden Mandal got his start in Fresno State's first game as a member of the Pac-12, a 39-0 loss to USC at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum on Sept. 4 in front of thousands of traveling Red Wavers and a national TV audience. Mandal's first completion came on a 13-yard pass to Jahlil McClain on the Bulldogs' opening drive.*

(Photos by Cary Edmondson)

FALL 2026

Fresno State Magazine is published by the University Marketing and Communications team at California State University, Fresno. Every member of the team contributes to the success of this publication. The project leads are listed below, in alphabetical order.

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A Commencement Celebration Like No Other

Photo by Cary Edmondson

Bulldog red and blue confetti rained down from the Save Mart Center rafters on about 1,130 Fresno State graduates who attended the 50th Chicano/Latino Commencement Celebration on May 16.

The celebration has come a long way over the past five decades since the first celebration was held at the Fresno Fairgrounds Industrial Education Building and Paul Paul Theater with 57 participants. The event began in 1977, when alumni Manuel Olgin and Tony Garduque launched and championed it as part of their graduate theses. Both went on to have long careers at Fresno State and returned this year to celebrate the event's 50th anniversary.

Today, the event is the largest of its kind at any U.S. university, with nearly 13,000 in attendance annually. Known for its festive vibe that includes dancing, mariachi and inspirational speakers, the event is open to all graduating students who would like to participate, regardless of race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin. One of the ceremony's most cherished traditions is the reading of graduates' parents' names, recognizing the families who helped make their educational journeys possible.

– Eddie Hughes ('05)

Scan the QR code for a behind-the-scenes look at the 50th Chicano Latino Commencement Celebration.

A Campaign Powered by Pride

Fresno State's philanthropic campaign, "Lead with Pride: The Campaign for Fresno State," is entering its final year with strong momentum, with more than $271 million donated to date and a growing investment in student success, academics, athletics and research.

During fiscal year 2025-26, alumni, friends and community partners contributed $44.4 million, marking the second-highest fundraising year in university history and an increase from $38.9 million the previous year. The total included $30.6 million for academics and a record $13.8 million for athletics, surpassing the previous athletics record of $10.6 million.

"These investments open doors for students, strengthen our faculty and programs, and deepen Fresno State's impact across the Valley for generations," said Brady Crook, vice president for University Advancement.

The year was led by Fresno State's first eight-figure commitment since 2019, a $10 million bequest from a person who wishes to remain anonymous.

Additional gifts supported the Ana Tapia Scholarship, which provides full tuition and fees for students and is named after a graduate student who passed in a car accident; a $100,000 endowment for the George F. Gruner Awards, recognizing outstanding journalism across the San Joaquin Valley; and a $25,000 pledge for the Gender and Leadership (G.A.L.) Program in the Craig School of Business to support underrepresented individuals in business.

One student who benefited from the G.A.L. program, recent graduate Faith Bither, said, "I've learned the value of community, and it's inspired me to be a better community member."

As the campaign enters its final stretch toward its June 30, 2027, conclusion, philanthropic support continues to expand opportunities for students and strengthen Fresno State's impact across the Central Valley.

To join the movement, visit ***leadwithpride.fresnostate.edu***.

– BoNhia Lee

$44.4M
Second-highest fundraising total in university history





"I've learned the value of community, and it's inspired me to be a better community member."

– Faith Bither



Lead with PRIDE
The Campaign for Fresno State



A Record Day of Giving

Fresno State's ninth annual Day of Giving this past spring raised an all-time high of more than $805,000 in just 24 hours — a 31% increase over the previous record. The annual fundraising campaign brought together alumni, faculty, staff, students and friends of the university to support scholarships, internships, research, academic programs and student success initiatives.

Philanthropic partners from 44 states and 13 countries participated, demonstrating the growing reach and impact of the Bulldog community. Since its launch in 2017, Day of Giving has generated more than $4.7 million in support of Fresno State students and programs.

– BoNhia Lee

MARCH 10

Save the date: Fresno State's next Day of Giving will be **March 10, 2027**.

Lasting Legacies

Fresno State honors the legacy of two longtime supporters whose generosity and leadership strengthened the university and the Central Valley.



Dr. Arnold Gazarian, a dentist, community leader and philanthropist, championed education, ethical leadership and Fresno State's connection to the community. He and his wife, Dianne, supported the Smittcamp Alumni House, Fresno State Library, President's Fund, Arnold and Dianne Gazarian Real Estate Center and Armenian Studies. Their support established Fresno State's first endowed professorship, and the couple received the Arthur Safstrom Service Award and Top Dog Alumni Award in 2008. Gazarian died June 16 at age 95.



Dr. Rodger Jensen, a Fresno State alumnus, agricultural leader and decorated World War II Army veteran, helped shape California agriculture while creating opportunities for generations of students. He helped organize the Ag One Foundation in 1979 and, with his late wife Margaret, established scholarships and endowments supporting agricultural business and plant science students. The Jensens also received honorary doctorates from Fresno State in recognition of their service and philanthropy. Jensen died Aug. 5 at age 105.

– Jaguar Bennett ('92) and Geoff Thurner

Preparing Ag Leaders

Three Fresno State students *(pictured below)* were selected as the inaugural recipients of the John Harris Fellowship, a new program to develop the next generation of agricultural leaders. Established through support from Harris Ranch and the Harris family, the fellowship honors the legacy of the late Dr. John C. Harris, a visionary agricultural leader and longtime supporter of Fresno State. Harris, who passed in 2025, was awarded an honorary doctorate in 2019.

The fellowship provides students with professional development opportunities, mentorship, leadership training and firsthand exposure to agricultural business and management. Fellows also engage with industry leaders and gain insight into the challenges and opportunities shaping California agriculture.

By investing in students' growth beyond the classroom, the program continues Harris' lifelong commitment to advancing agriculture and supporting future leaders in the industry.

– Geoff Thurner

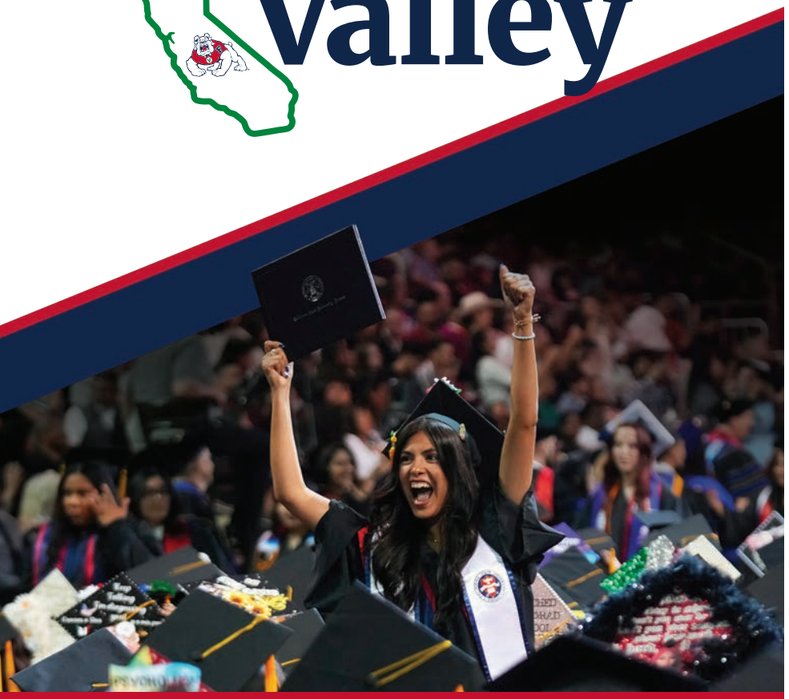


Morgan Jackson *Alyssa Serpa* *Rafael Chavez*

Cary Edmondson

FLAGSHIP OF THE

Central Valley



Grade-A Accreditation

Fresno State's accreditation was reaffirmed for 10 years by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission — the longest reaffirmation period possible and one reserved for institutions demonstrating the highest levels of quality, effectiveness and integrity. The designation certifies the validity of Fresno State degrees and ensures students remain eligible for federal financial aid.

As part of the reaccreditation process, 77 members of the campus community completed a comprehensive self-study centered on the theme "Flagship of the Central Valley." The commission commended Fresno State for its entrepreneurial faculty and staff, strong partnerships with schools and community colleges, use of athletics to foster regional engagement and its transformational impact on social mobility.

The reaffirmation reflects Fresno State's continued commitment to expanding educational opportunity and serving the Central Valley through teaching, research and community engagement.

– BoNhia Lee

WASC | Senior College and University Commission



A Place to Call Home

Fresno State opened its first major new student housing project in more than 50 years this fall, adding 228 apartment-style beds to campus. The four-story, 80,000-square-foot building at Shaw and Cedar avenues includes one- to four-bedroom units, with a limited number of apartments designed for students with children.

The new residence hall includes a gym, recreation room and conference space, along with an outdoor play structure, basketball court and fire pit area. The project was funded through a $33.7 million state affordable student housing grant and about $20 million in California State University systemwide revenue bonds.

The addition brings Fresno State's on-campus housing capacity to 1,598 students across 10 buildings and expands affordable housing options designed to support students and families as they pursue their degrees.

– BoNhia Lee



Cary Edmondson

New Provost Introduced

Fresno State named Dr. Melinda Roberts as its provost and vice president for Academic Affairs. Roberts, who began her role in July, comes to Fresno State from Indiana State University, where she served as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and professor in the School of Criminology and Security Studies.

As the university's chief academic officer, Roberts will help lead Fresno State's academic programs, faculty development, student success initiatives and research enterprise. Throughout her career, she has been recognized for advancing interdisciplinary programs, strengthening advising and student support services, launching new academic offerings and improving student retention and graduation outcomes.

Fresno State President Saúl Jiménez-Sandoval said Roberts' commitment to student success and experience aligning academic programs with workforce needs will help advance Fresno State's academic mission and support the university's continued growth.

Roberts succeeds Provost Dr. Xuanning Fu, who retired after more than two decades of service to Fresno State.

– Lauren Nickerson ('10)

AROUND THE FOUNTAIN



A Car Built for Beau

Three Fresno State students designed and built a custom toy car for 6-year-old Beau Bewarder, who has a rare neurological disorder affecting his mobility. Over 13 weeks, the students created features tailored to Beau's needs, including a custom steering wheel, footrest and handle for his parents. The project gave the students hands-on experience applying their engineering and construction skills to an accessibility challenge — while giving Beau a one-of-a-kind ride of his own.



College Baseball Hall of Fame

Fresno State alumnus Bobby Jones was inducted into the College Baseball Hall of Fame. Jones was the 1991 NCAA Player of the Year at Fresno State, leading the Diamond 'Dogs to the College World Series with a 16-2 record and 1.88 earned-run average. He is the second Diamond 'Dog to be inducted, joining his former coach, Bob Bennett. A first-round pick by the New York Mets, Jones played 10 years in the majors and was an all-star in 1997.



Bulldog Bound Expands

Fresno State expanded its Bulldog Bound program to include community colleges, creating new pathways for transfer students across the Central Valley. The program provides participating students with guaranteed admission, personalized support and access to resources designed to help them successfully transition to Fresno State and complete their degrees.



Judge on the Cover

It's OK to judge this game by its cover – Fresno State alumnus Aaron Judge graced the cover of MLB The Show for the second time in his career. The three-time American League MVP is pictured on the cover in his Fresno State, Team USA and New York Yankees uniforms. The game's release coincided with the World Baseball Cup, as Judge captained Team USA.

Entrepreneurship 155E



Managing the New Venture

Department of Management
Craig School of Business



Professor: **Akhil Kanodia**

Course Description:

In this course, students learn by building their own business from scratch. In one semester, students conceive new products, create designs, find suppliers, source inventory, develop pricing and marketing strategies, and operate two pop-up store events. Professor Akhil Kanodia, an experienced serial entrepreneur, offers guidance, but students make the key decisions. They're working for more than just a grade — they're working to make a profit.

This course teaches practical business skills students will use throughout their careers. Even more important, they develop the confidence to create their own businesses and pursue their entrepreneurial goals.

"I feel excited to go to class and gain this experience. I feel prepared to go into business or start a business of my own, because I've learned from those mistakes."

— Entrepreneurship major Stephanie Garcia

– Jaguar Bennett ('92)

To view a video of Entrepreneurship 155E — "Managing the New Venture" in action, scan the QR code or visit ***today.fresnostate.edu/magazine***.

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

The Power of Play

Research Area: Physical Activity Research in Kinesiology (PARK)

Department of Kinesiology
College of Health and Human Services



Professor: **Dr. Nicole Smith**

Research Description:

Through the PARK program, Fresno State researchers are studying how recess and physical activity affect children's health, behavior and academic success. Working with local schools, Smith and student researchers collect and analyze data to better understand how play supports learning and well-being.

The research is helping educators and policymakers make informed decisions about physical activity opportunities for children while providing Fresno State students with hands-on research experience. By partnering directly with schools throughout the Central Valley, the program connects academic research with real-world impact.

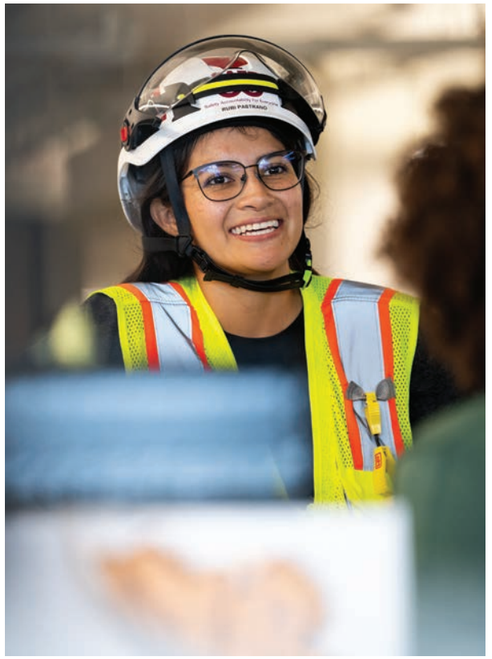
– Melissa Tav ('07)



To view a video about the PARK program and its research, scan the QR code or visit ***today.fresnostate.edu/magazine***.

Physical Activity Research in Kinesiology

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT



Building a Future Beyond Borders

The youngest of three sisters born and raised in Ecuador, Rubi Pastrano told her mother she wanted to go to college in another country. Inspired by her sister, who moved to London to pursue her master's degree, Pastrano began applying to universities in the United States.

"I kept trying and trying and applying and then someone, an angel, came and told me about Fresno State," Pastrano said. "I looked into it and found out there are scholarships. Two days after my birthday I got an email saying 'congratulations, you're a Fresno State student.' It was the best day of my life."

Pastrano, who was awarded the Hans L. Beck and Anna Beck Scholarship, "fell in love with construction management" at Fresno State. Through university partnerships, she gained real-world experience, including internships with Kiewit Corporation and Hensel Phelps. During her internship this past summer, she was responsible for working with contractors and coordinating with trade partners.

Pastrano credits the Department of Construction Management and Architectural Studies for investing in her success. Now, she believes in herself more than ever and is excited to see what the future holds.

For an inside look at Pastrano's summer internship and to see her full "Faces of Fresno State" video, scan the QR code or visit ***today.fresnostate.edu/magazine***.

– Eddie Hughes ('05)



Cary Edmondson

ANSWERING THE CALL

A veteran's journey from battlefield trauma to clinical healing

By Benjamin Kirk ('22)

In late 2011, a team of U.S. Army soldiers in the mountains of Afghanistan near the Pakistan border was heading back to their base in a particularly dangerous area when gunshots rang out.

"One of my buddies got shot," said retired Staff Sergeant Nathan Tomshack, a Fresno State graduate.

Immediately, Tomshack and the team medic began working on the soldier who was fighting for his life.

"The medic was amazing; got him back to life six times."

Sadly, the soldier later succumbed to his injuries on the helicopter.

While dragging his buddy to a point where a helicopter could pick him up, a rocket-propelled grenade exploded nearby, sending shrapnel into Tomshack's leg. In the moment of battle, adrenaline had taken over, keeping the pain at bay, and he carried on.

"Someone came up to me and was like, 'Sergeant Tomshack, how are you walking?'"

Looking down, he recalls seeing a large piece of metal sticking out of his leg and a lot of blood.

"Then I felt it."

The injury ended Tomshack's deployment in Afghanistan, his third combat tour since joining the Army in 2007. His previous two combat tours were in Iraq, where, in 2010, an improvised explosive device caused his vehicle to roll over, resulting in back injuries.

After spending time in Germany to treat his leg, Tomshack made a final deployment to Djibouti, Africa, where he trained foreign troops. In 2014, after about seven years in the Army, Tomshack was honorably and medically discharged.

With the echoes of battles still ringing, Tomshack returned home to Layton, Utah, north of Salt Lake City, and began working in car sales. With his leg injury, he found it difficult to walk in the snow, so he moved to California. Trying to keep his mind off combat, Tomshack dove into his work, which he said contributed to the loss of his first marriage.

"What I did instead of reaching out for help was just work 80 to 100 hours a week, trying to basically run from the trauma," Tomshack said.

At first, he struggled to find a therapist who could relate to his experiences as a soldier in combat, but he eventually found one in Visalia.

"The biggest blessing was meeting with a therapist who started guiding me down the right path and making it easier to be able to talk about the trauma that I had experienced."

After "floating around," Tomshack landed in Fresno and, in 2019, began his educational journey at Clovis Community College before transferring to Fresno State, where he earned a bachelor's degree in exercise science with the goal of becoming a physical therapist.

The call

Just before he graduated, Tomshack got a phone call from his best friend, a veteran he served with in Iraq. His friend was depressed and talked about possibly completing suicide.

"All I can say is…'Oh, man, I'll get a plane ticket in the next couple of weeks. I'll come out. I'll go see you. We'll hang out.' Thinking I did the right thing," Tomshack recalled. "That night, he took his own life. Having to fly out there, hug his daughters and speak at his funeral was tough."

The experience shook Tomshack, and he vowed that it would be the last time he wouldn't know what to do.

Turning tragedy into a personal goal and professional calling, he returned to Fresno State for his master's degree, shifted his focus from physical therapy to mental health and graduated from the marriage, family and child counseling graduate program in May. Tomshack focuses on learning to help veterans and their families navigate the unique traumas and challenges faced by members of the armed services.

At the heart of his training was the Fresno Family Counseling Center. To earn his degree, Tomshack immersed himself in 600 hours of supervised work — balancing 300 hours of direct therapy with another 300 hours of clinical training and documentation.

"The professional growth of our students during their 600 hours of internship experience is tremendous," said Dr. Kyle N. Weir, director and clinical faculty of the center. "They start at Fresno Family Counseling Center, focusing on how to serve clients. They need the faculty to watch each session through our technology and give feedback halfway through. Gradually, they become more confident and begin to focus more on how to implement theory, enhance their diagnostic skills and develop greater clinical proficiency."

Fresno State students being integrated into the Fresno Family Counseling Center is a unique feature of the program that is not found at many other universities.

"Each time the marriage, family and child counseling program goes through accreditation, the reviewers have consistently commented on how unique Fresno Family Counseling Center is in the nation," Weir said. "Our graduates are highly sought after by community employers because they know how to do so many things at a level most other recent graduates just don't know. Our students just get more depth and breadth in their training than in other programs."

Beyond student training, the center serves as a vital resource for the Central Valley, offering mental healthcare to underserved communities on a sliding fee scale. The community impact is sustained through grants, contracts and faculty who dedicate their time to supervising the next generation of therapists.

Once students graduate, they can carry up to 700 hours toward the 3,000 hours of supervised professional experience required to take the state test to be a fully-licensed therapist.

"Nate's experience as a combat veteran is a huge benefit. He understands how to work with trauma. The Central Valley needs more therapists who know how to work with veterans, first responders



Cary Edmondson

Students like Nathan Tomshack (left) gain 600 hours of internship experience in the marriage, family and child counseling graduate program. As director of the Fresno Family Counseling Center, Dr. Kyle N. Weir (right) oversees students early on in their training.

and others who've faced life-threatening dangers and survived. Nate has been a magnet drawing people with trauma – who are often hesitant to get therapy – into clinical services," Weir said.

While his initial focus was on treating trauma, Tomshack came to appreciate the importance of couples and child counseling.

"I still love trauma work with individuals, but I really have grown," said Tomshack. "I believe that somebody heals from trauma with support around them. And I believe that trauma does leak into the rest of the family. So, finding a way to bridge that gap, to get everyone understanding and healing together, makes it more of a team effort rather than an individual struggle."

Family and a new home

In 2020, Tomshack met his wife, Esme.

"I was at Woodward Park with my daughter, and my wife and her kids walked up, and we just started talking," Tomshack said. "Our daughters are almost the same age, so they started playing, and we started talking. And then our daughters always wanted to hang out, and we all started hanging out after that – me and her, her son and my daughter and her daughter – and the rest is history."

They married in 2023.

Even while managing a family, graduate school, a case load of 15 to 20 clients per week, and dealing with chronic pain from his injuries, Tomshack found time to volunteer with several local veterans' organizations, including the Fresno Vet Center and Beyond the Barracks.

Tomshack's passion and dedication to helping veterans caught the attention of Operation Finally Home, Beyond the Barracks and Lennar Homes, who teamed up to build him and his family a custom, mortgage-free home to accommodate his battlefield injuries. He was chosen for the gift in recognition of his military service and his continued commitment to fellow veterans as a civilian.

Another call

While studying at Fresno State, Tomshack received another call from Mario Alamillo, a friend he had served with in Iraq. Alamillo was at a low point in his life, didn't know who to trust and was struggling with harmful thoughts.

But this time, Tomshack was better equipped. He had the clinical tools to recognize the crisis and the resources to intervene. He offered to send him money to put gas in his car so he could come to Fresno and get help.

"And so he did. I sent him some gas money. He put it in his car. He drove here."

When he arrived, Tomshack found out Alamillo had been unhoused for the past year and a half.

"Because of the education I've had going through this program and then the support of the community, as I reached out and found things, we were able to put him up in a hotel for two months. I was able to help him find resources around town," Tomshack said.

Now, Alamillo has moved into an apartment, is going to barber college and works as a barber. He was also able to reunite with his fiancée and three children, who had separated during his crisis.

"Nate is one of those genuine, caring and selfless types of people. No matter what, he tries to help out a lot of people," Alamillo said. "He's a good guy to have in your corner and just a good guy to have as a friend. Period."

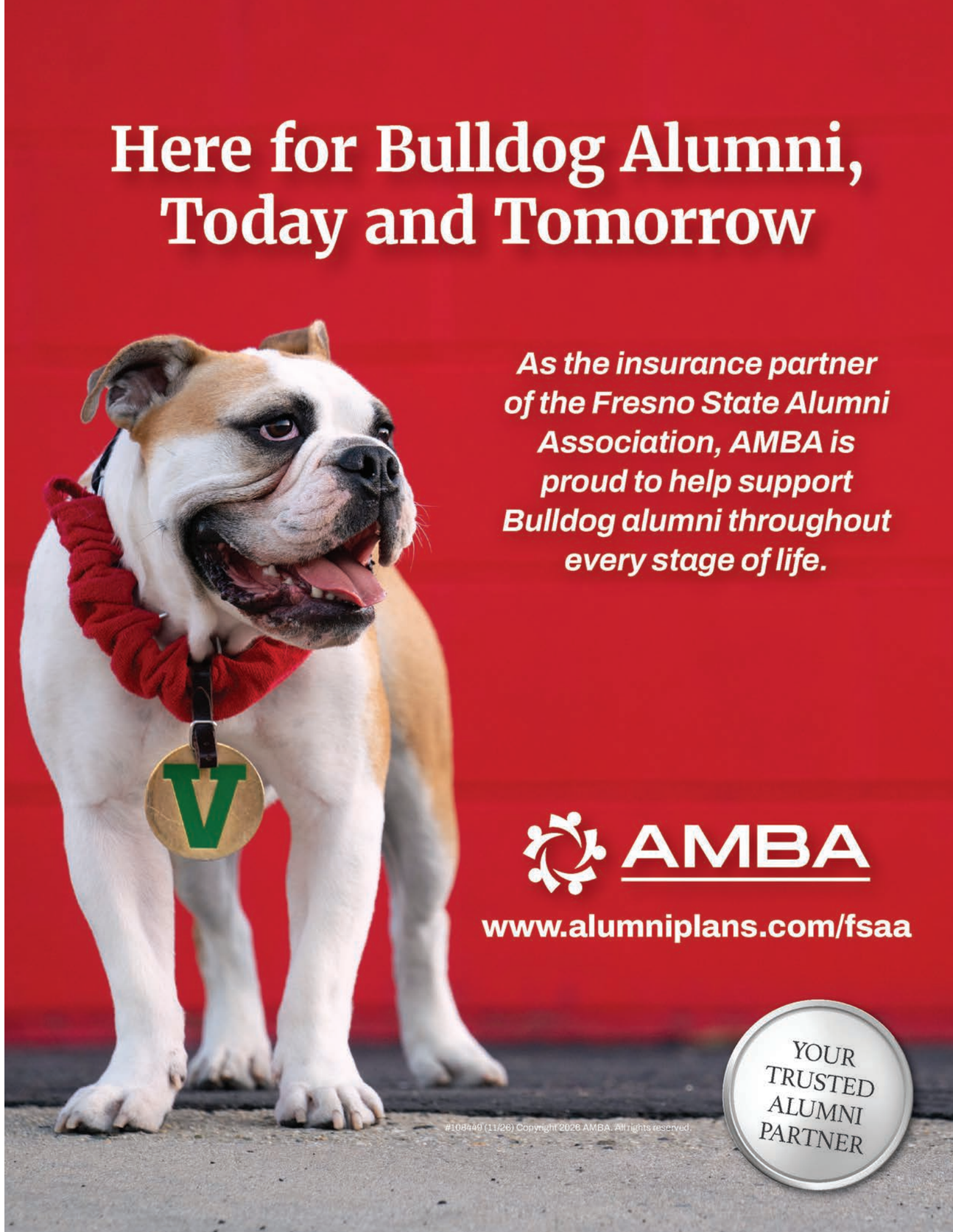
Tomshack is working to complete the 3,000 hours of supervised professional experience required for his state licensing and continue his work treating trauma survivors and their families.

For Tomshack, the walk across the Save Mart Center stage at commencement wasn't just a personal victory; it was a promise kept to the brothers-in-arms he left behind — and a new beginning for the families he's now prepared to help heal.

– Benjamin Kirk is a marketing and communications specialist at Fresno State.

If you or someone you know is struggling with mental health concerns or thoughts of suicide, there are resources available:

- **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline**: Call or text 988
- **Central Valley Suicide Prevention Hotline**: 888.506.5991
- **Crisis Text Line**: Text "Home" to 741741



Nationally Known for National Parks



From left to right, students Elizabeth Melendez, Kaydence Nieblas and Darryl Toney hike beneath Yosemite Falls, the tallest waterfall in North America at 2,425 feet.

Cary Edmondson

Fresno State's proximity to major national parks gives students unique course opportunities and plenty of options for recreation

By Eddie Hughes ('05)

Fresno is the largest city in the United States within just over an hour's drive of three national parks – Yosemite, Kings Canyon and Sequoia. A fourth, Pinnacles, is just two and a half hours away. For Fresno State students, that means access to some of the most unique class, research and leisure experiences surrounding any college campus in the world.

Often referred to as Fresno's backyard, the natural wonders of these national parks offer Bulldogs plenty of space to play.

The mountainous peaks, breathtaking canyon views and overwhelmingly large trees are as much a part of the Central Valley's identity as agriculture. As the gateway to these national parks, the Central Valley is represented by Fresno State's Green V symbol, a reminder of the people and places in the region the university so proudly represents.

Millions of people from around the world travel to visit these national parks every year – and there's a growing effort to make sure Fresno State students aren't taking their close proximity for, ahem, "granite" (get it?).

Fresno State's proximity to so many natural wonders – the mountains, trees and canyons of national parks (and yes, beaches too) – is a recruiting pitch few campuses can match.

"As an alum, one of the most underrated parts of the experience was how close you are to places like Yosemite," said Jenna Mills, a 2005 graduate who is now director of global corporate communications at Impact.com. "It wasn't something you had to plan weekends in advance. On a random weekend, or even a free afternoon, you could just decide to go. That kind of proximity makes adventure feel spontaneous and accessible, not like a big production."

Welcome to Yosemite National Park



Cary Edmondson

'DogQuest – Stop 1

Directions

Fresno State Library to Yosemite National Park -South Entrance
1 hr. 8 mins. (58.10 miles)
Via CA-41

Start

- Fresno State Library
- Turn right onto E. Shaw Ave. Go for 1.9 mi.
- Take ramp onto CA-41 N (Yosemite Fwy). Go for 55.3 mi.
- Continue on Wawona Rd. Go for 0.7 mi.

Daniel Suvanto and the students in his REC 87 course, "A Yosemite Experience," visited the park in October for an overnight camping trip. For some, this was their first visit to Yosemite.

Much like the giant granite wonders naturally carved into its landscape, Yosemite helped carve the path for the United States' national park system. President Abraham Lincoln signed the Yosemite Grant in 1864, establishing the precedent of federal land preservation for public enjoyment. Yosemite's wilderness was designated as a national park in 1890 following the advocacy of John Muir.

Home to the world-famous Half Dome and El Capitan granite peaks, visitors are treated to nearly indescribable views when they emerge from the tunnel on their way toward Yosemite Valley.

Yosemite is home to 25 named waterfalls, including Yosemite Falls, the tallest waterfall in North America at 2,425 feet. In February, Horsetail Fall on El Capitan glows at sunset as if it's on fire, a phenomenon known as Yosemite Firefall.



California State Library

Native Land

There are several American Indian tribes with ancestral ties to Yosemite National Park, including the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation, Bishop Paiute Tribe, Bridgeport Indian Colony, Mono Lake Kootzaduka'a, North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians of California, Picayune Rancheria of the Chukchansi Indians and Tuolumne Band of Me-Wuk Indians. The Ahwahneechee are the Indigenous people of Yosemite Valley.



Instructor Daniel Suvanto joined students in a snowball fight – one of their favorite memories of the trip.

Cary Edmondson

"Yosemite National Park is probably the crown jewel of all the national parks in our country," said Fresno State instructor Daniel Suvanto. "It's perfect any time of year. Wintertime, there's snow. Summertime, you can just jump in the river. It's paradise. People travel here from all over the world and it's just so crazy that our students are able to wake up in their own bed and make it to Yosemite before lunch."

Suvanto and the students in his REC 87 course, "A Yosemite Experience" loaded into the College of Health and Human Services' Bulldog-branded 12-passenger van along with one of the students' personal vehicles and left the Fresno State campus about 7 a.m. on Oct. 17, 2025. Just over an hour later, they entered Yosemite National Park.

Their first stop was the Mariposa Grove, featuring a giant sequoia tree that visitors can walk through. The park is also home to the Fallen Tunnel Tree, a giant sequoia with a seven-foot hole that vehicles could drive through until it fell during a snowstorm in 1969.

For some students, this was their first time visiting Yosemite. For others, this one-unit course was an excuse to go back.

Students in REC 87 only meet twice throughout the semester – once for a class meeting to go over details, and again on the day they travel to Yosemite for an overnight camping trip.

The Yosemite experience gives students a chance to venture outside their comfort zone, bond with peers and challenge themselves to try new things. "These are the types of classes that make a university a university," Suvanto said.

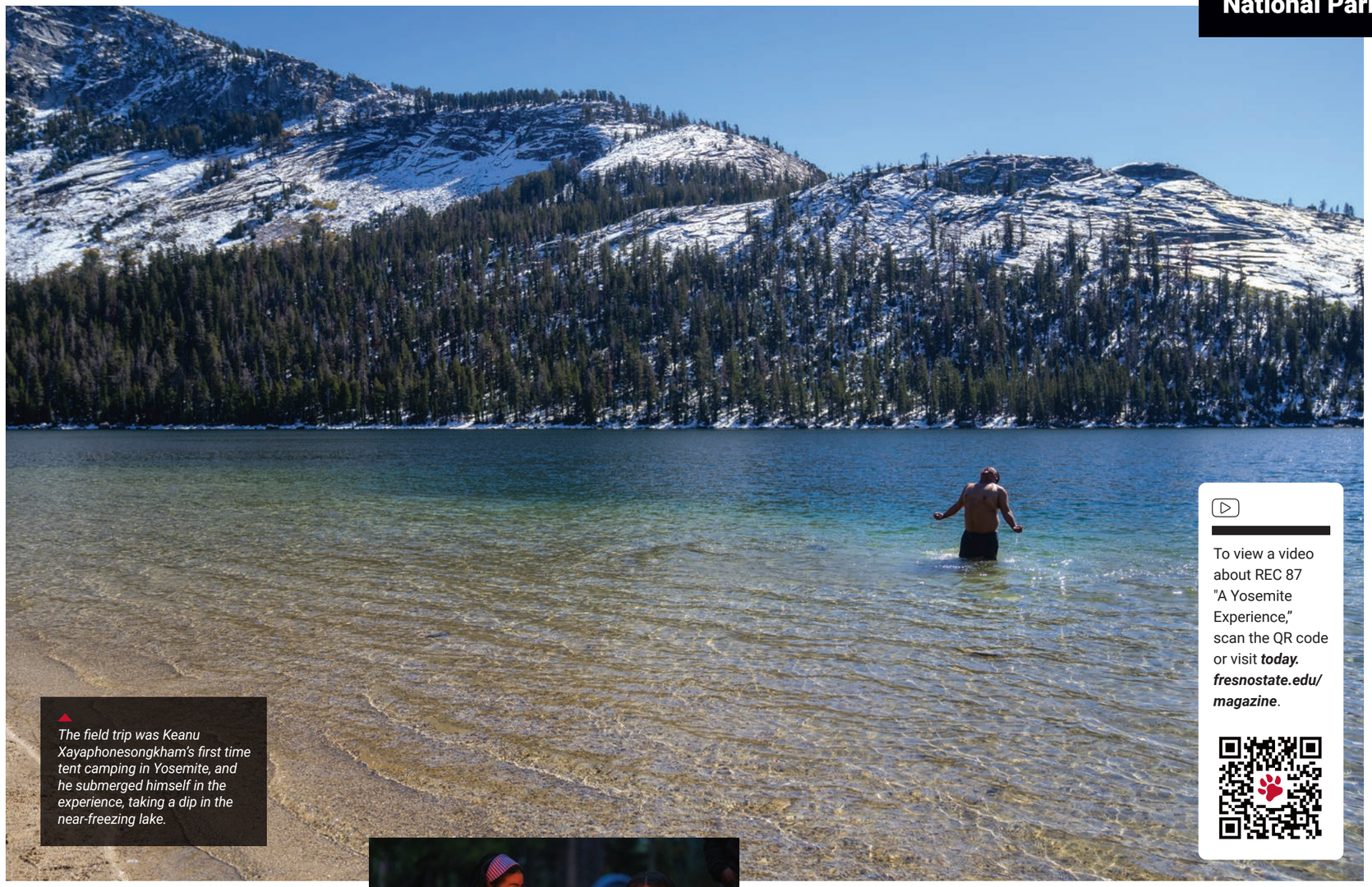
And they are the types of classes Fresno State is uniquely positioned to offer.

The class was Keanu Xayaphonesongkham's first time tent camping in Yosemite. He was joined by his girlfriend Makayla Payne, a grad student pursuing a master's in general experimental psychology. It was her first time ever visiting Yosemite.

The students enjoyed Suvanto's guided hikes and exploration deep in the Yosemite wilderness, a campfire with creative would-you-rather questions and even a snowball fight.

Despite the chill in the air, Xayaphonesongkham ended up shirtless and fully submerged in near-freezing lake water, yelling out with his fists clenched as he reacted to the cold temperature. "You know how people do ice baths?" he said, "that was my intention."

Xayaphonesongkham, a psychology major, said REC 87 is one of the most memorable classes he has taken. As a child, he said he became a heavy gamer after his parents got him an Xbox and "video games were my adventure." But when he was a student at Sunnyside



The field trip was Keanu Xayaphonesongkham's first time tent camping in Yosemite, and he submerged himself in the experience, taking a dip in the near-freezing lake.

To view a video about REC 87 "A Yosemite Experience," scan the QR code or visit ***today.fresnostate.edu/magazine***.

> ***"People travel here from all over the world and it's just so crazy that our students are able to wake up in their own bed and make it to Yosemite before lunch."***
>
> **– Daniel Suvanto**
> REC 87 instructor



Nursing students Crystal Vath (left) and Natalie Gonzales enjoyed the chance to step away from the classroom and get out in nature, which REC 87 makes possible for students regardless of whether they have prior experience camping.

High School in Fresno, his family started traveling more and he visited the mountains for the first time, near China Peak.

"I spent a lot of hours wishing for adventure," he said.

This camping trip in Yosemite was filled with it. "I was a little nervous about spending the night out there," Xayaphonesongkham said. "I'm in a tent, and I took clothes out of my bag and built a nest to stay warm. Suvanto was sleeping outside, he was just chilling, and it was so much colder."

Suvanto, a 2014 Fresno State alumnus, is a manager at MetalMark Climbing in Fresno, an indoor climbing and fitness gym. His goal in teaching the course is to remove any barriers that would keep students from visiting and help them feel comfortable and supported.

"If you're not outdoorsy, that's totally fine. I'll help you with it. I'm going to help you set up your tent. If you don't have the time, it's literally one weekend. You got it. I'll help you with your math homework. There's no excuse to not take one of these courses."

Xayaphonesongkham agrees. "Experiences like that help students stay in school."

Welcome to Sequoia National Park

When it comes to big trees, Sequoia National Park is home to some true giants. Established in 1890, Sequoia is the second-oldest national park and the first created to protect a living organism – the giant sequoia tree.

Sequoia National Park is home to the General Sherman Tree, the world's largest living tree by volume at 275 feet tall with a base circumference of more than 100 feet. The tree is about 2,200 years old and weighs an estimated 4.1 million pounds. Found inside the park, the "Land of Giants" forest includes five of the 10 largest trees in the world.



Adobe Stock

Crystal Cave is one of 275 marble caves inside the park, and the popular Moro Rock is a granite dome offering panoramic views of the Great Western Divide, with summits reaching over 13,000 feet high.

Above all else – literally – the park is home to Mount Whitney, the highest point in the lower 48 states at 14,505 feet.

And it's all within a park about an hour-and-40-minute drive from the Fresno State campus.

Fresno State's REC 88 course, "Rock Climbing," introduces students to outdoor adventure in a fun and supportive environment – with unforgettable views for those who make it to the top.

This year, students in the one-unit course climbed Crystal Wall, a granite cliff popular for climbers. It's the perfect blend of challenging and doable for the many students who are trying rock climbing for the first time, under the direction of Ryan Soares, the recreation administration lecturer at Fresno State who leads the course.

"It was beautiful, oh my gosh, it was amazing," said Jarilyn Weaver, a liberal studies major who was climbing for the first time. "I kept telling myself I have to make it to the top, I'm not going to start and not finish. You feel so safe the entire time. I'm really glad they have this at Fresno State."

For some students, the class ignites a new passion, or even a career direction. "In the years that we've been teaching this class, we've had multiple students who have changed their trajectory as a result of this class," Soares said. "We've had students get into climbing and want to become a part of that industry. We've had students change their major because of a spark that was ignited here and seeing the possibilities in themselves and what's out there in the world."

Even for those who don't want to pursue climbing as a hobby or career, the experience can be significant.

"It kind of reminds me of a lot of other factors in my life like exams or even personal stress, work stress," said Roxana Jarrahian, a business technology major. "Despite the pain and everything telling you you can't do it, it's about pushing through and getting to the top because everything is possible, and you can do anything. Being able to do this experience and climb a rock has been relatable to other experiences in my life, and I think it's made me stronger."

Similar to other experiential courses, REC 88 meets just twice during the semester – once for a lecture and once on the day of the trip. Despite just a few meetings, these courses create lasting bonds between the students who overcome a challenge together.

"It feels unreal," Jarrahian said. "It's really great that I have a supportive group of people that are always supporting, always pushing. I don't know if I would have ever done something like this if it wasn't for my college offering this and feeling comfortable, feeling motivated."



'DogQuest – Stop 2

Directions

Fresno State Library to Sequoia National Park -North Entrance
1 hr. 40 mins. (76 miles)
Via CA-180 & Generals Highway

Start

- Fresno State Library
- Turn left onto E. Shaw Ave. Go for 0.8 mi.
- Take ramp onto CA-168 W (Sierra Fwy). Go for 3.6 mi.
- Take the exit onto CA-180 E (Sequoia-Kings Canyon Fwy). Go for 34.6 mi.
- Turn right onto Dunlap Rd. Go for 13 mi.
- Continue on S Highway 245 (CA-245). Go for 6.2 mi.
- Turn right onto E. Kings Canyon Rd. (CA-180). Go for 4.5 mi.
- Turn right onto Generals Hwy. Go for 13.2 mi.



Students Jarilyn Weaver (right) and Melissa Jauregui scale Crystal Wall during a field trip with their REC 88 "Rock Climbing" course.

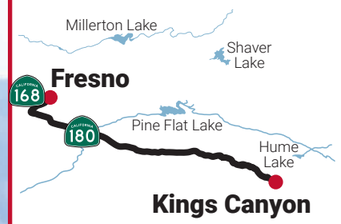


Jeff Phillips

Students Roxana Jarrahian (left) and Sergio Suarez-Flores work together to conquer a rock climbing experience at Crystal Wall.

To view what it's like to be part of the REC 88 "Rock Climbing" course, scan the QR code or visit ***today.fresnostate.edu/magazine***.

Welcome to
Kings Canyon National Park



'DogQuest – Stop 3

Directions

Fresno State Library to Kings Canyon National Park -Big Stump Entrance
1 hr. 4 mins. (55.13 miles)
Via CA-180

Start

Fresno State Library

Turn left onto E. Shaw Ave.
Go for 0.8 mi.

168 Take ramp onto CA-168 W (Sierra Fwy).
Go for 3.6 mi.

180 Take the exit onto CA-180 E (Sequoia-Kings Canyon Fwy).
Go for 50.5 mi.

Students Joseph Malcolm (left) and Carlos Flores hike to Panoramic Point Overlook in Kings Canyon National Park, overlooking Hume Lake.

Cary Edmondson

If depth is what makes a canyon grand, then Kings Canyon National Park is the grandest of all. At 8,200 feet deep, Kings Canyon is the deepest river canyon in the United States, about 2,200 feet deeper than the Grand Canyon in Arizona.

Established as a national park in 1940, Kings Canyon is also home to the General Grant Tree, the second-largest tree in the world. Designated as the Nation's Christmas Tree on April 28, 1926 by President Calvin Coolidge, the giant sequoia is over 1,800 years old, 268 feet tall and has a diameter of 33 feet at its base. To this day, a Christmas service and wreath-laying ceremony is held at the tree each year on the second Sunday of December.

In 1956, President Dwight D. Eisenhower declared the tree a national shrine, the only living object to receive such designation, in memory of service members who fought and died for the nation's freedom.

Grant's Grove features a half-mile loop trail with a dozen giant sequoia trees, plus many more in the surrounding forest. Visitors can also walk through the Fallen Monarch, a giant, hollowed-out sequoia that fell more than 300 years ago.

Kings Canyon National Park is located just north of Sequoia National Park. Though each is distinct, the adjacent parks are jointly managed, sharing a border and a single entrance fee.

Native Land

Several American Indian tribes have ancestral ties to Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks, including the Western Mono (Monache), Yokuts, Tubatulabal, Owens Valley Paiute and Western Shoshone.



Cary Edmondson

Students Kassandra Cordova Del Valle (left) and Haydee Sanchez Osorio hike past the Fallen Monarch in Grant's Grove at Kings Canyon National Park. The naturally hollowed giant sequoia fell more than 300 years ago.

In 2025, ecologist Ann Huber of the National Park Service connected with Fresno State associate biology professor Dr. Katherine Waselkov on a project to update and digitize about 8,000 plant specimens for the Sequoia-Kings Canyon Herbarium. Huber had previously visited the Fresno State Herbarium, which houses about 40,000 specimens.

Through grants to support the project, five Fresno State research assistants completed the project in the spring 2026 semester. The students worked diligently with specimens that require special handling – they have to be frozen before and after processing to ensure insects don't damage the specimens, many of which are decades old, some dating back to the 1930s.

"It's really important we have a historical record of plants and versions of plants over time because you can examine morphology and have a record of plants that have gone extinct," said Tess Aaron, a junior biology major from Chowchilla who is focusing on ecology and botany. "Digitizing is important because it's available to the public and remotely available to researchers, including plant locations and plant populations."

The students applied a barcode on each sample, put it in a light box to capture an image and used software to process and upload each specimen into a shared database for all California herbaria. This allows researchers and the public to access valuable scientific information on when and where plants were found, what was around them and what type of habitat they lived in.

"We have quite a few research opportunities for undergrads," Waselkov said. "I think the CSU system as a whole does a great job of offering research experience for undergrads. There are a lot of undergrads in our labs doing the research we want to get done and also doing local research to make a difference in our community and tie us together to the region."

Students like Aaron, Andrea Laine and Jose Camarena, who were heavily involved in the project, each enrolled in BIOL 190 for research credit. Many of Waselkov's students have also taken BIOL 125, "Plant Taxonomy," in which they collected and handled plant specimens for the Fresno State Herbarium.

"The students understand the importance of this. It seems like bureaucratic stuff, but it's really important to have historical records to see where things have grown over time," Waselkov said. "Because of climate change, we are expecting things to grow and flower at different stages. We can also locate rare species and where they occur in the national parks."

Both Aaron and Laine said they are always on the lookout for rare species when processing the specimens. But sometimes it is difficult to know which ones are rare just by looking at them. "I usually look up pretty ones or really colorful ones because it's interesting to see those that are really green or retain color so well," said Laine, a pre-med student who is originally from Rosamond in Kern County.

When the students visited the national park in February for a hike with plant ecologist Sylvia Haultain, they observed cones from a white bark pine. Though the tree is federally listed as a threatened species, it is common at high elevations in both Kings Canyon and Sequoia.

Waselkov said experts predict flowering time will change in a lot of species with warming and drying occurring earlier in the year, which can lead to mismatches with insects that partner with certain plants.

"Ecosystems are going to change in terms of which species live where," she said. "Some plants might go extinct in certain ecosystems or move higher up the mountains. People who study plants are expecting to see those changes, but we need historical data to study that. This information is now available online because of the students' research."

Waselkov joined the Fresno State faculty in 2015 after earning her doctoral degree at Washington University in St. Louis. She is originally from Alabama. "There is a really high diversity in plants here. I come from a really flat place so it's nice to be able to follow the bloom up the mountains," Waselkov said.

"Fresno is an ideal place for teaching about plants. There are so many places we can drive to in a short amount of time. You've got the Sierras, foothills, coast, vernal pools, alkali sinks, wetlands and Mojave Desert."



From left to right, students Tess Aaron, Andrea Laine and Jose Camarena collaborated with professional Sierra Swinney during the Sequoia-Kings Canyon Herbarium project to process and catalog plant specimens and make them available to researchers and the public.

Waselkov said every friend or family member who comes to visit her wants to go to the national parks. "A lot of them want to go to Yosemite, but I always say, 'let's go to Kings Canyon instead.' If you drive into the canyon in the area past Grant's Grove, it's really spectacular."

With so many beautiful and truly breathtaking sights, everyone has a favorite – or soon will upon visiting. The key is encouraging Fresno State students to take advantage of their close proximity to the national parks, which is what more and more classes on campus are designed to do.

"We're such a big place with access to so many national parks near Fresno," Aaron said. "In much of Fresno there's not much green space, so it's really cool we have close access to natural spaces. It's not just cities and cities and cities from hundreds of miles out."

For students, alumni and community members alike, adventure is just a short drive away. So open up that map app. Chances are, something extraordinary is right here in our own backyard.

– Eddie Hughes is the senior writer/editor for Fresno State.

Get Schooled on the National Parks



Cary Edmondson

Instructor Daniel Suvanto (left) and student Ethan Trout explore Yosemite Valley during a class field trip.

Fresno State classes introduce students to activities, research and experience at Yosemite, Kings Canyon, Sequoia National Parks and beyond

AMERICAN INDIAN STUDIES
College of Social Sciences

AIS 5: American Indian History

AIS 103: California American Indians

Description: Students learn about the formations of tribal societies, systems of governance and traditional ecological knowledge while exploring connections to the Central Valley. The courses evaluate the living relationship between tribes and their homelands, cultures, land and water stewardship and more.

ANTHROPOLOGY
College of Social Sciences

ANTH 103: Archaeological Site Survey

ANTH 128: Environmental Anthropology

ANTH 145: Cultural Resources Management

Description: Courses in the Department of Anthropology provide an in-depth examination of historic cultural resources, their significance and management in the U.S. Students get an introduction to archaeological survey methods, preparing them for careers in cultural resources management and archaeology. Students also learn about interactions between the environment and human culture, and examine the conservation and the development of national parks and forests, fire ecology and the traditional and ecological knowledge of Indigenous tribes.

BIOLOGY
College of Science and Mathematics

BIO 167: High Altitude Biology

Description: The course is a combination of field lectures and discussions surrounding the biology of plants and animals that thrive at higher elevations as well as general outdoor, environmental exposure. The one-day trips are primarily training trips to get the students used to hiking longer distances with heavy packs (including first-time hikers and campers/backpackers).

COMMUNICATION
College of Arts and Humanities

COMM 130: Environmental Communication

COMM 135: Communication of Science and Technology

Description: Students examine communication about the environment, focusing on ways that corporations, governments, scientists and citizens describe, persuade and shape human interactions with the environment. In COMM 135, students read a chapter from Dr. Robert Lull's new book, "Our Natural Lab," featuring 71 different national parks (see "Around the Parks" section). The chapter details the psychology of awe while looking at Yosemite and the Grand Canyon.

CONTINUING AND GLOBAL EDUCATION

Field trip for international students

Description: Though not an official class, the Division of Continuing and Global Education at Fresno State offers field trips to expose international students to the natural wonders surrounding the region. In April, students were treated to a trip to Yosemite, ensuring they had a chance to visit the national park that drew over 4 million tourists in 2025, about 400,000 of which were from foreign countries.

EARTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES
College of Science and Mathematics

EES 3: Geology Field Trip

EES 50: National Parks of the Sierra Nevada

EES 114: Engineering Geology

Description: From a field-investigation course exploring California's diverse landscapes; to a course investigating the geology, ecology and natural human history of the local national parks; to a course applying geological principles to engineering projects, Fresno State's Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences provides numerous opportunities for students to gain hands-on, experiential learning while visiting Yosemite, Kings Canyon and Sequoia national parks, as well as Death Valley and the California coast.

MEDIA, COMMUNICATIONS AND JOURNALISM
College of Arts and Humanities

MCJ 157: Public Relations and Advertising Agency

Description: This unique course functions as if students work for an agency serving a real client. Recent classes worked with the National Park Service in Yosemite to promote wildlife education. Past campaigns focused on bear safety, water safety, fire safety and prescribed burns. Students learn from National Park Service professionals and get opportunities to ask questions and strategize to reach their target audiences and communicate their client's desired messaging in a memorable way.

RECREATION ADMINISTRATION
College of Health and Human Services

RA 55: Foundations and Careers in Recreation, Parks and Tourism

RA 80: Lifelong Learning in the Natural Environment

REC 82: Wilderness Survival

REC 86: Backpacking the Sierra Mountains

REC 87: Yosemite Experience

REC 88: Rock Climbing

RA 145: Environmental Interpretation

RA 146: Adventure-Based Programming

RA 192T: Nature Rx

Description: Perhaps the area that most takes advantage of Fresno State's proximity to the national parks, the Department of Recreation Administration offers a variety of courses that make experiencing the national parks both accessible and challenging in unforgettable ways. Foundational courses include those offering the philosophical, theoretical and historical foundation of recreation service, and exploring the social, psychological and physiological benefits of nature-based learning. Students are exposed to national parks in a way that helps them identify personal skills as they try new things. Students can take classes in which they'll stay overnight for a Yosemite experience (see page 18); go rock climbing in Sequoia-Kings Canyon (see page 20); or learn wilderness survival skills covering fire building, shelter construction, signaling and land navigation while exploring the way people react to crises. There is something for a student in any major offered within the Department of Recreation Administration.

AROUND THE PARKS



Woodward Californiana Collection



History of National Park Research

Dr. Robert Lull, an associate professor of science communication at Fresno State, authored a book titled "Our Natural Lab: Remarkable Stories of Science from America's National Parks," which was published this year.

Pivotal to science, technology and health history, the book includes stories of lead contamination research from a remote Yosemite canyon and a half century of extreme environment research in Yellowstone's hot springs that launched the biotechnology industry.

"What's crystal clear from these stories is that national parks aren't just places where routine science occurs, but also essential settings for some of science's most important breakthroughs over the last 150 years."

For the full story on Lull's book and the research behind it, visit ***today.fresnostate.edu***.

Woodward Californiana Collection

Want to learn more about the history of the national parks surrounding the Central Valley region? The Fresno State Library houses the Roy J. Woodward Californiana Collection with books, photos, historical newspaper clippings and more. In fact, the collection was one of the research sources for this magazine story.

Woodward (1878-1940) was a prominent Fresno businessman who owned an impressive collection of books on California history. In 1950, his collection was donated to the Fresno State Library by his grandchildren, O. James Woodward III, Beverly Woodward, Barry O'Connon, Ramona Walker and Patricia Ronald.

His collection led to the creation of the Special Collections Research Center at the library and is used by students and the public.

Woven Together

How Fresno State is building lasting relationships with Tribal Nations

By Esra Hashem ('13, '16, '21)



Photo courtesy of Sandy Clark, North Fork Rancheria

In Yosemite National Park, basket weaver Dr. Julia B. Parker spent most of her life following the traditional techniques of ancestors. Each basket reflects countless hours of careful craftsmanship, high patience and tactical dexterity. In 1983, Queen Elizabeth II visited Yosemite and Parker gave the queen one of her baskets. Today, it is housed at Windsor Castle, while other examples of her work are displayed in museums across the country.

In 2021, Fresno State awarded Parker an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree in recognition of her contribution to the Yosemite area and her efforts to preserve the region's heritage.

"Her story is one President Saúl [Jiménez-Sandoval] loves to share at our Native graduation ceremony," said Kellie Carrillo, director of Tribal Relations at Fresno State, "because it's one of the many good connections we have to the people and land."

Parker's story reflects the type of relationships the Office of Tribal Relations works to cultivate between Fresno State and tribal nations. Established in 2025, the office's work includes cultural preservation and consultation, Native student access and success, education and relationship building.

Carrillo herself is a member of the Yokuts Tribe, the Indigenous people whose ancestral homeland includes the area where Fresno State now stands. Before many university events and meetings, attendees hear a land acknowledgment recognizing the Native peoples connected to the region. For Carrillo, those acknowledgments are most meaningful when they are paired with action.

"Our mission is to create and maintain relationships with tribal nations so Fresno State's priorities and tribal priorities align, while ensuring tribes have a voice in the decisions that matter to them," Carrillo said.

In addition, the office helps guide the university's responsibilities related to Native American cultural resources and repatriation. Sara Lively, the repatriation coordinator, first became interested in this work more than a decade ago as a Fresno State anthropology student.

"This is a shared space," said Lively, reflecting on the land she lives and works on. "I'm a guest here, and I want to learn more about the people."



Cary Edmondson

Dr. Julia B. Parker, who received an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree from Fresno State in 2021, once presented one of her hand-woven baskets to Queen Elizabeth II in Yosemite National Park. Today, the basket is housed at Windsor Castle.

Lively helps ensure Fresno State complies with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). The university houses a collection of more than 38,000 cultural objects – including baskets, beads, pottery and other items – many of which were acquired through archaeological research and teaching conducted decades ago.

"We, as a university and as an academic discipline, must be accountable moving forward," said Dr. Dvera Saxton, a professor in the Department of Anthropology and a member of the campus California NAGPRA Committee. "That has to happen through repatriation as well as evolving our teaching and research practices to respect tribal sovereignty and protocols."

Anthropology and American Indian Studies faculty recently launched a CalNAGPRA and Repatriation certificate students can complete alongside their major. Anthropology faculty also redesigned archaeology courses to center tribal protocols, perspectives and partnerships.

"Repatriation is also about nurturing our relationships with tribes and listening to how else we can best serve them as a public university," Saxton said.

Carrillo, Lively and their student assistants work collaboratively with tribal nations to facilitate the return of ancestors and cultural belongings. On a day-to-day basis, this includes storing, organizing and documenting the status of artifacts, as well as outreach and meetings with tribal members.

"Our first measure of success is going to be when all the ancestors and their belongings are returned from Fresno State to their homes," Carrillo said. "Beyond that, success means creating opportunities for Native communities on campus through community events, expanded student resources, increased Native student enrollment and coursework that reflects Native perspectives."

Like a basket being woven, the work is meticulous and rewarding. Lively recalls an early meeting with tribal leaders, wherein a Yokuts elder shared something that has stayed with her.

"Fresno State wants us here," the elder said. "They want us here, and we belong here."

The comment still brings tears to the eyes of both Lively and Carrillo.

"There are a thousand reasons why you wouldn't feel belonging in higher education," Lively said. "To hear that was a big win and a big motivator. It reinforced that this work is about more than compliance; it's about relationships, respect and making sure tribal nations know they have a place here."

– Esra Hashem is director of strategic communications at Fresno State.

From Nursing Executive to Educator

Valley Children's leader shares her expertise with doctoral students at Fresno State

By Melissa Tav ('07)

Dr. Vicky Tilton tried something new this past semester. As the chief nursing officer and vice president of patient care services at Valley Children's Healthcare, her schedule was already demanding – but she couldn't pass up the opportunity to teach a leadership course in the Doctor of Nursing Practice program at Fresno State.

"I have always believed that developing the next generation of nurse leaders is one of our most important responsibilities," Tilton said. "Fresno State has a strong connection to our region and to Valley Children's through our partnership, and the opportunity to contribute to the growth of advanced practice nurses and leaders felt both purposeful and aligned with my values. One of our core values as an organization is modeling the way, and I believe it is vital to demonstrate this."

Her online course, NURS 583 "Leadership and Professional Responsibility in Complex Healthcare Systems," was the ideal introduction for Tilton to transition into teaching. With years of leadership experience and firsthand knowledge in navigating complex healthcare systems, Tilton brought real-world insight and expertise into the classroom.

In her day-to-day role at Valley Children's, Tilton oversees more than 1,300 nurses and provides executive oversight of nursing practice across the entire network, including specialty nursing, case management and clinical education along with responsibility for patient support services like social work, interpreter services and emergency management.

Valley Children's is one of the leading pediatric specialty healthcare systems in the state and is noted for its Magnet designation, which is awarded to healthcare organizations that demonstrate excellence in nursing practice and patient care.

For Tilton, days were spent leading healthcare operations, while nights were spent grading assignments, creating curriculum and mentoring students.

"The value I gained from this experience is well worth the time and effort," Tilton said. "The students bring diverse perspectives, strong clinical foundations and a genuine desire to lead and improve care. I approach teaching much like I do leadership – creating space for dialogue, challenging thinking and connecting theory to real-world application. It has also been a reciprocal experience; I learn just as much from the students as they do from me."

Tilton's path to teaching was a natural progression and an opportunity that came after a conversation with School of Nursing chair Dr. Kathi Rindahl and Dr. Nisha Nair, Doctor of Nursing Practice program director. Both were seeking instructors and clinical nurse leaders to teach.

Tilton was already working closely with the School of Nursing on the ASN to BSN Pathway Program, which makes it possible for Valley Children's nurses to work toward their bachelor's degrees in nursing, while still working full-time as nurses.

Tilton's first course kicked off in spring 2026.

"At first, it was a bit of a learning curve for me because I've never taught," Tilton said. "One of our core values here at Valley Children's is modeling the way, and so I've been asking my team to go back and get their associate's degree and their bachelor's degree. While asking my team to advance, I thought, what better way to demonstrate this than by teaching at Fresno State?"

Using her own leadership experience as inspiration, Tilton created curriculum and assignments for the 16-week course.

The five-semester Doctor of Nursing Practice program prepares students – all of whom already have nursing experience – to serve in leadership roles and to improve healthcare systems. Graduates of the program often become nursing faculty at colleges and universities or take on advanced leadership roles in healthcare.



Cary Edmondson

One of those students is Karen Dhillon *(pictured)*, of Fresno, who is in her fourth semester of the doctoral program. Like Tilton, she balances many roles as a post-graduate student, a NICU nurse at Valley Children's Healthcare and an adjunct faculty member in the School of Nursing at Fresno State, where she has taught bachelor's-level nursing courses for the past four years.

Although Tilton and Dhillon share a Valley Children's and Fresno State connection, they had never interacted one-on-one prior to Dhillon being in Tilton's course this past semester. Dhillon said being taught by the chief nursing officer was a uniquely valuable experience.

"I find it really inspiring that Dr. Tilton has taken this next step into teaching," Dhillon said. "As her student, I found her insights to be pretty eye-opening. While our classes were mostly online, we did have opportunities to meet on Zoom or in person. As an instructor, what I have noticed is that not only is her feedback constructive, but she takes the time to validate your responses and analyze it with feedback that lets you know you're on the right path."

For Tilton, having Dhillon in her course was equally rewarding.

"Karen is a reliable and hard-working member of our Valley Children's team and I am very proud of her for working towards her doctorate and wanting to expand on her leadership skills," Tilton said. "And I hope she sees a different side of me as the chief nursing officer."

After graduating in May 2027, Dhillon aspires to become a professor, while still working at the "workplace of her dreams" – Valley Children's.

As for Tilton, she plans to return to the classroom next semester – continuing her quest to influence care and experience, while championing the next generation of nursing leaders.

– Melissa Tav is a marketing and communications specialist at Fresno State.

> ***"I approach teaching much like I do leadership – creating space for dialogue, challenging thinking and connecting theory to real –world application. It has also been a reciprocal experience; I learn just as much from the students as they do from me."***
>
> **– Dr. Vicky Tilton**
> Chief nursing officer and vice president of patient care services, Valley Children's Healthcare





The Rise to the Pac-12

Get to know Fresno State's new competition while looking back at 105 years of climbing the conference ladder

By Eddie Hughes ('05)

As Fresno grew as a community, Fresno State sports became a flagship of the city's culture and identity – a way to put Fresno on the map.

When the Bulldogs experience success, the buzz created on campus and throughout the community is palpable. Few fan bases are as loud and passionate as the Red Wave. For generations, fans have supported the university with grassroots giving and packed stadiums and arenas.

It's a tradition that dates back more than a century, when Fresno State was a teachers college and its athletes were competing in the California Coast Conference.

And now, the Bulldogs embark on their biggest challenge yet. Entering a new era of college athletics in which name, image and likeness (NIL), the transfer portal, and the massive budgets of a select few are making it more challenging than ever to aim for new heights, Fresno State is doing just that.

On July 1, Fresno State joined the Pac-12 Conference, positioning itself to compete at the highest level. The Bulldogs are joined by Pac-12 stalwarts Oregon State and Washington State, plus new members Boise State, Colorado State, Gonzaga, San Diego State, Texas State and Utah State.

Here, we present a timeline of the conferences Fresno State has competed in over the past 105 years, and capsules highlighting each of the Bulldogs' Pac-12 conference mates.

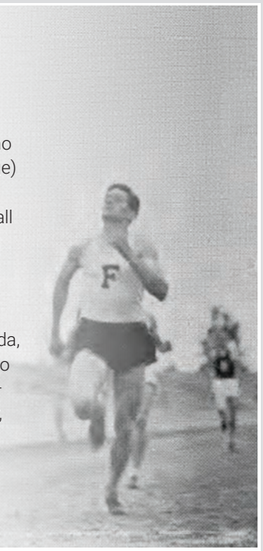


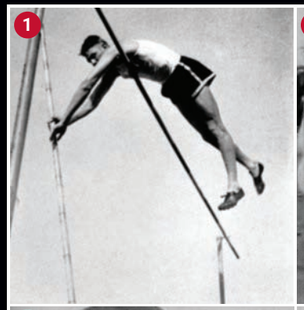
1922-24
California Coast Conference

Fresno State Normal School opened its doors on Sept. 11, 1911, and first began athletic competition a decade later in 1921. With the Bulldogs' football, men's basketball and baseball programs all in their infancy, Fresno State began competition in the California Coast Conference in 1922 against the likes of San Jose State, Cal Poly, Chico State, University of the Pacific and several junior colleges in the state. The Bulldogs football team won the conference championship in 1922, a co-championship in 1923 and reached the conference title game in 1924 *(pictured)*.

1925-39
Far Western Conference

Fresno State Stadium, now known as Ratcliffe Stadium on the original Fresno State campus (now Fresno City College) was dedicated on Oct. 9, 1926, and served as the home to Bulldogs football and track and field for more than 50 years. The undefeated 1930 football team finished 8-0 and won one of the team's three Far Western Conference titles against the likes of Pacific, Nevada, UC Davis and Chico State. This era also included several track and field feats – headlined by high jumper Walter Marty, who became the first Fresno State athlete to win an NCAA title. In 1935, Elroy Robinson *(pictured)* won the NCAA title in the half-mile.





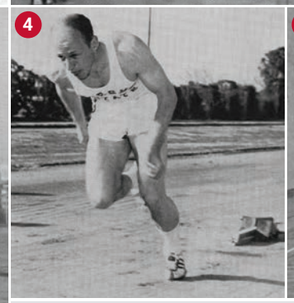
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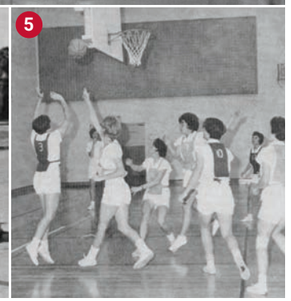
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5

1 *Cornelius "Dutch" Warmerdam*

2 *The 1951 Fresno State CCAA banner honors the legendary Diamond 'Dogs baseball team, which won the conference title.*

3 *Satoshi "Fibber" Hirayama*

4 *Darel Newman played a pivotal role in helping Fresno State capture the 1964 NCAA College Division track and field championship by winning the 100-yard dash.*

5 *Fresno State women's volleyball and women's basketball launched their inaugural varsity athletic programs in 1965. Both sports debuted on campus seven years before the passage of Title IX, establishing a pioneering legacy for women's collegiate sports in the Central Valley.*

1939-68
California Collegiate Athletic Association (CCAA)

Fresno State, San Diego State, San Jose State and UC Santa Barbara were charter members of the CCAA. On the track, Dutch Warmerdam was setting world records in the pole vault on his way to becoming the Bulldogs' Athlete of the Century as voted by fans. In 1964, the track and field team won Fresno State's first team national championship, in the NCAA College Division. In 1952, Satoshi "Fibber" Hirayama led the baseball team to its first NCAA Tournament, and the Bulldogs made their first Men's College World Series in 1959. Women's volleyball and women's basketball launched their programs in 1965, the same year Varsity Field (now Pete Beiden Field at Bob Bennett Stadium) opened for the baseball team. And in 1968, the men's tennis team won the Division II national championship.

CCAA



1969-91
Pacific Coast Athletic Association (PCAA) / Big West Conference

While Fresno State was finding its identity across the board athletically, its PCAA and Big West era (the conference rebranded as the Big West in 1988) was defined largely by dominance in the bat-and-ball sports along with a meteoric rise on the football field following the construction of then-Bulldog Stadium in 1979. This coincided with Fresno State's rise to the highest level of Division I athletics and a groundswell of support from a fan base that was growing exponentially. The success of men's basketball in the early 1980s under Boyd Grant – including a Sweet 16 appearance and No. 11 ranking in 1982 and an NIT championship in 1983 *(pictured)* – led to the fan base being nicknamed the Red Wave because of the thousands of fans traveling up and down the state to cheer on their teams. The softball and baseball programs were both national powers.

Big West



1992-2011
Western Athletic Conference (WAC)

In an era where former Bulldogs football coach Jim Sweeney had long referred to Fresno State as a "sleeping giant," the move to the WAC in 1992 was a major boost for the athletics department. Fresno State joined BYU, Utah, San Diego State, Hawaii, Wyoming, New Mexico, Colorado State and Air Force and won shares of the WAC football championship in each of its first two seasons behind quarterback Trent Dilfer and a slew of other NFL talent. The Bulldogs won their first Division I team national championship in 1998 when Margie Wright led the softball team to a Women's College World Series title behind the arm of Amanda Scott and the bats of Nina Lindenberg and Laura Berg. Ten years later, the baseball team won the Men's College World Series *(pictured)* under Mike Batesole, future Major Leaguer Justin Wilson and home run king Tom Mendonca. The men's basketball team also garnered national recognition from 1995-2002 under coach Jerry Tarkanian, with consecutive NCAA Tournament appearances in 1999-2000 and 2000-01 behind two NBA lottery picks in Courtney Alexander and Melvin Ely.

WAC



6

6 *Fresno State football won the inaugural Mountain West championship game on Dec. 7, 2013, defeating Utah State 24-17 at Valley Children's Stadium (formerly known as Bulldog Stadium).*

7 *Fresno State won its first-ever Mountain West women's basketball tournament championship in 2013, defeating San Diego State 76-70.*

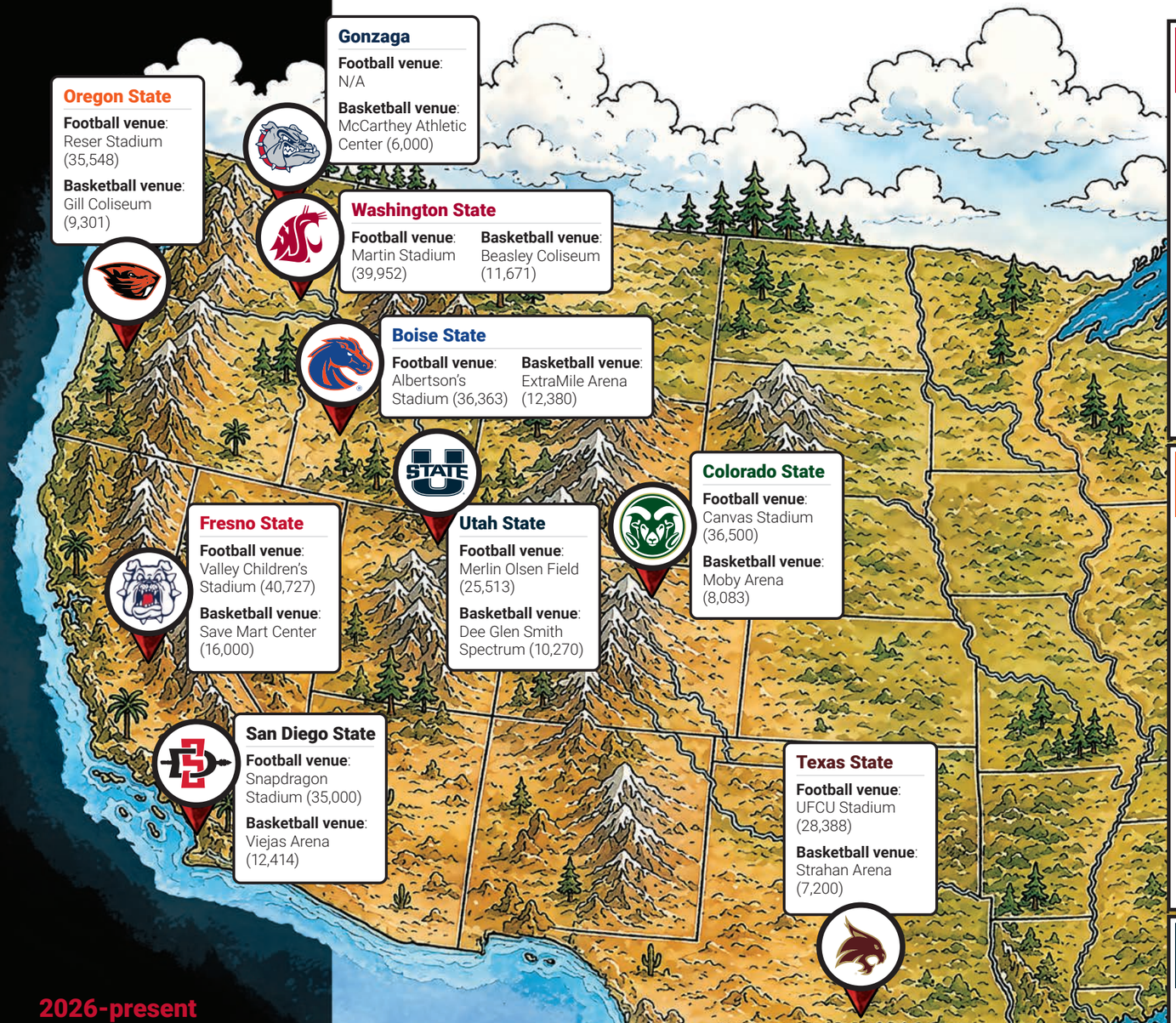


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2012-26
Mountain West

Fresno State football kicked off its Mountain West era in style, winning a share of the conference football title in 2012 and winning an outright championship in 2013 behind quarterback Derek Carr and wide receiver Davante Adams. The women's basketball team capped its most impressive run in school history with seven straight WAC and Mountain West regular season and/or tournament titles and seven straight NCAA Tournament appearances from 2008-14 under coaches Adrian Wiggins and Raegan Pebley. The men's basketball team returned to the NCAA Tournament in 2016 for the first time in 15 years, under coach Rodney Terry and Mountain West Player of the Year Marvelle Harris.

MW



2026-present

Pac-12

Fresno State enters Pac-12 play with longtime rival San Diego State, a fierce two-decade rival Boise State, a school it has never before played on the gridiron in Texas State, and a slew of other familiar foes.

Note: Affiliate conference members for various Olympic sports not listed.

Fresno State Bulldogs

Fresno, CA – population 560,000

Enrollment: 25,000

Most popular majors: Psychology, liberal studies, criminology-law enforcement

Tuition: $5,759 (in-state)

Notable alumni: Sam Iacobellis (developed the B1-B bomber), Ross Bagdasarian (Alvin and the Chipmunks), Malinda Chouinard (co-founder of Patagonia), Daniel Silva (author)

Notable sports alumni: Aaron Judge (MLB), Davante Adams (NFL), Paul George (NBA), Derek Carr (NFL), David Carr (NFL)

San Diego State Aztecs

San Diego, CA – population 1.4 million

Distance from Fresno State: 345 miles

Enrollment: 41,200

Most popular majors: Psychology, business administration, criminal justice

Tuition: $9,780 per year (in-state)

Notable alumni: Gregory Peck (actor), Marion Ross (actress), Raquel Welch (actress), Jim Sinegal (co-founder of Costco), Ralph Rubio (founder of Rubio's Coastal Grill)

Notable sports alumni: Kawhi Leonard (NBA), Marshall Faulk (NFL), Tony Gwynn (MLB), Stephen Strasburg (MLB)

Boise State Broncos

Boise, ID – population 238,000

Distance from Fresno State: 727 miles

Enrollment: 28,519

Most popular majors: Nursing, psychology, health studies

Tuition: $9,364 (in-state)

Notable alumni: Brad Little (Idaho governor), Steve Appleton (chairman and CEO of Micron Technology)

Notable sports alumni: Kellen Moore (head coach New Orleans Saints), Demarcus Lawrence (NFL), Ryan Clady (NFL)

Oregon State Beavers

Corvallis, OR – population 62,000

Distance from Fresno State: 693 miles

Enrollment: 28,519

Most popular majors: Computer science, psychology, business administration and management

Tuition: $13,395 (in-state)

Notable alumni: Douglas Engelbart (inventor of computer mouse), Dr. Albert Starr (co-inventor of the first artificial heart valve), Leonard Shoen (founder of U-Haul), John Young (president and CEO of Hewlett-Packard)

Notable sports alumni: Gary Payton (NBA), Chad Ochocinco (NFL), Steven Jackson (NFL), Dick Fosbury (Olympic high-jumper"), Adley Rutschman (MLB)

Washington State Cougars

Pullman, WA – population 34,000

Distance from Fresno State: 998 miles

Enrollment: 25,477

Most popular majors: Business management, psychology, nursing

Tuition: $14,270 (in-state)

Notable alumni: Paul Allen (co-founder of Microsoft), Edward R. Murrow (journalist), Gary Larson (creator of "Far Side" comic strip), Jamie Kern Lima (co-founder of IT Cosmetics)

Notable sports alumni: Klay Thompson (NBA), Drew Bledsoe (NFL), Ryan Leaf (NFL), John Olerud (MLB)

Gonzaga Bulldogs

Spokane, WA – population 231,000

Distance from Fresno State: 998 miles

Enrollment: 7,400

Most popular majors: Business, management and marketing, psychology

Tuition: $58,390

Notable alumni: Bing Crosby (musician), Tom Foley (former U.S. Speaker of the House), Julia Sweeney (actress, "Saturday Night Live")

Notable sports alumni: John Stockton (NBA), Chet Holmgren (NBA), Jason Bay (MLB)

Utah State Aggies

Logan, UT – population 56,000

Distance from Fresno State: 858 miles

Enrollment: 29,831

Most popular majors: Economics, psychology, communicative disorders

Tuition: $9,066 (in-state)

Notable alumni: Sawyer Hemsley (co-founder of Crumbl Cookies), Harry Reid (politician), Nolan Bushnell (founder of Atari, Inc. and Chuck E. Cheese)

Notable sports alumni: Jordan Love (NFL), Merlin Olsen (NFL), Bobby Wagner (NFL)

Colorado State Rams

Fort Collins, CO – population 172,000

Distance from Fresno State: 1,206 miles

Enrollment: 34,200

Most popular majors: Business administration, psychology, biological sciences

Tuition: $13,774 (in-state)

Notable alumni: Temple Grandin (animal scientist, autism advocate), Scott Carpenter (Mercury 7 astronaut), Gary Johnson (former governor of New Mexico), Leslie Jones (comedian and actress)

Notable sports alumni: Becky Hammon (basketball coach), Trey McBride (NFL), Randy Gradishar (NFL)

Texas State Bobcats

San Marcos, TX – population 90,000

Distance from Fresno State: 1,638 miles

Enrollment: 44,600

Most popular majors: Psychology, business administration and management, criminal justice

Tuition: $12,240 (in-state)

Notable alumni: Lyndon B. Johnson (36th U.S. President), George Strait (musician), Farrah Fawcett (actress), Owen and Luke Wilson (actors), Rick Riordan (author of "Percy Jackson and the Olympians")

Notable sports alumni: Paul Goldschmidt (MLB), Charles Austin (high-jump Olympian)



Cary Edmondson







Pac-12 Firsts

Bulldogs football, soccer and volleyball usher in a new era

1. Fresno State football players Truly Bell (No. 26), Croix Stewart (24), Sammie Hunter (23), Taylor Powell (33) and Darrian Anderson (82) walk the Red Mile on their way into Valley Children's Stadium for the first home game of the Pac-12 era.
2. The soccer team beat Texas A&M-Corpus Christi 2-0 on Sept. 6 to earn its first win of the season under new coach Gabriel Bolton. Senior Katie Morris opened the scoring with an assist from freshman Mariona Sene Corominas (pictured) and junior Aniston Renovato. On Sept. 3, the Bulldogs tied Sacramento State 1-1, with junior midfielder Hayden Crotty-Romero scoring Fresno State's first goal as a member of the Pac-12.
3. Fresno State officially entered its Pac-12 era on July 1, as fans were greeted by social media posts showing TimeOut at well-known locations up and down the Central Valley, including in front of this mural in downtown Kingsburg.
4. The volleyball team swept Southern Utah (25-14, 25-12, 25-18) on Sept. 3 at the Save Mart Center for its first win as a member of the Pac-12. Senior outside hitter Jenna Legault *(right)* led the team with 13 kills.
5. The Bulldogs football team treated 40,185 Red Wavers to a 49-3 victory in the home opener. Fresno State was led by Bryson Donelson's *(pictured)* 103 yards rushing and three touchdowns on 13 carries.

– Eddie Hughes is the senior writer/editor for Fresno State.

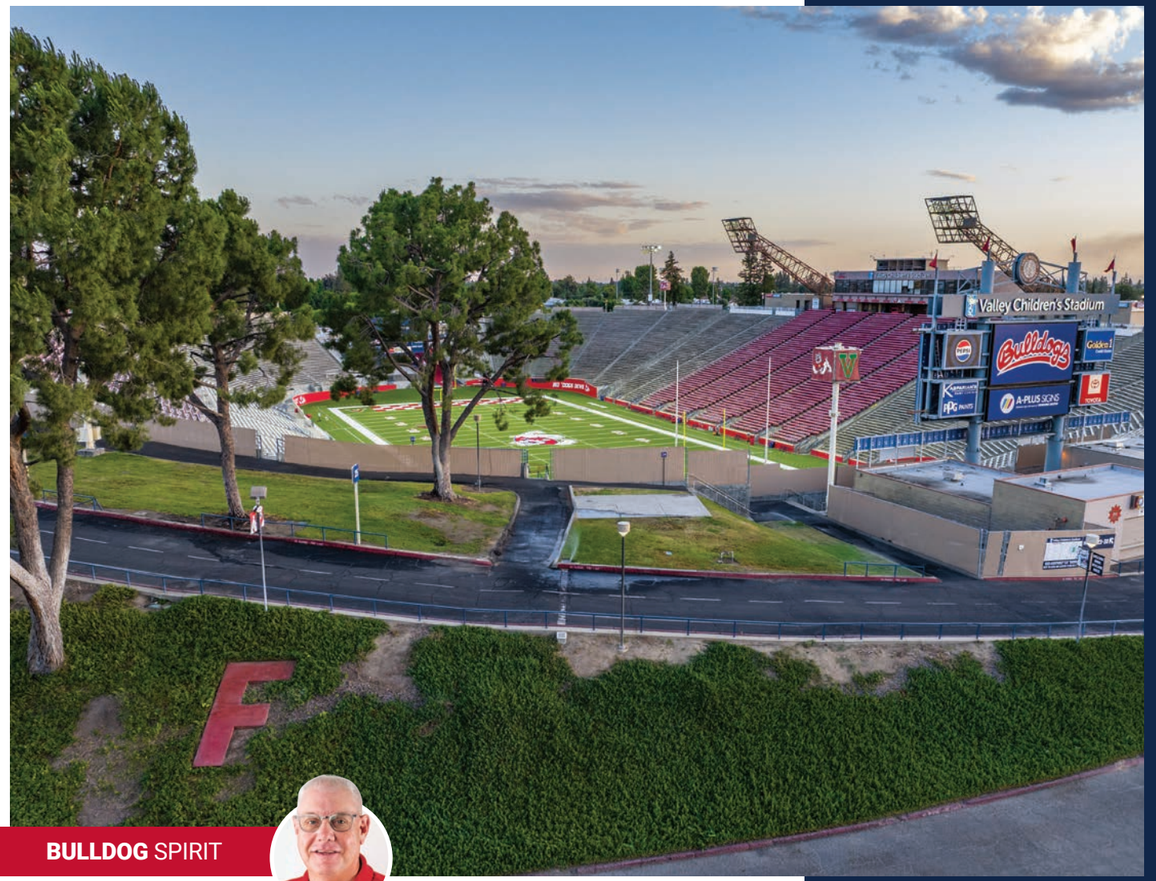






Nick Cullor

FUELED BY THE VALLEY
POWERED BY LEXUS
FRESNO LEXUS
FRESNO LEXUS
FRESNO STATE'S VICTOR E. BULLDOG
@VictorEBulldog



Michael Wootten

How the Block F Became Part of Stadium Lore

Ever driven past Valley Children's Stadium on Barstow Avenue and wondered what's up with that 12-foot-tall, red Block F on the berm along the northeast side of the stadium facade? Longtime Fresno State football associate head coach John Baxter *(pictured above)* has the story – and he's confident it's more than a campus urban legend.

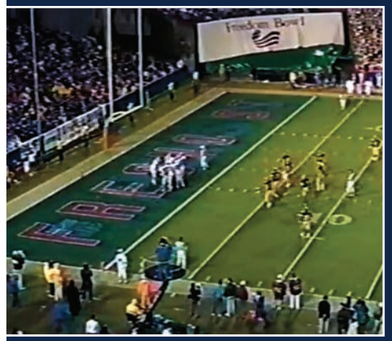
Baxter is currently in his second stint as a Fresno State assistant coach, rejoining the program under Jeff Tedford in 2022 after previously serving on Pat Hill's Bulldogs staff from 1997 to 2009. When Baxter first arrived on campus in the '90s, coaches who remained from the Jim Sweeney era shared a "knowledge transfer" with him about the origin of the Block F.

According to the story, after Fresno State's landmark 24-7 Freedom Bowl win over USC at Anaheim Stadium on Dec. 29, 1992, an unknown person or persons dug up the "F" from the "FRESNO ST" lettering in the end zone, *(pictured right)* brought it back to Fresno and planted it on the stadium berm.

"Evidently, when the game was over there in Anaheim, whoever went out there with square-tip shovels dug up the 'F' in the end zone, drove it back and planted it right there on the hillside," Baxter said. "So to cement the memory, they formed it up and put it in concrete, and they either stained the concrete or painted it red. It's there, but it's a semi-lost piece of Bulldog lore."

Now, as a veteran coach on the Bulldogs staff, Baxter shares the story widely to make sure the legend – "it's true," he said confidently – lives on and is embraced as part of Fresno State tradition.

– Eddie Hughes ('05)

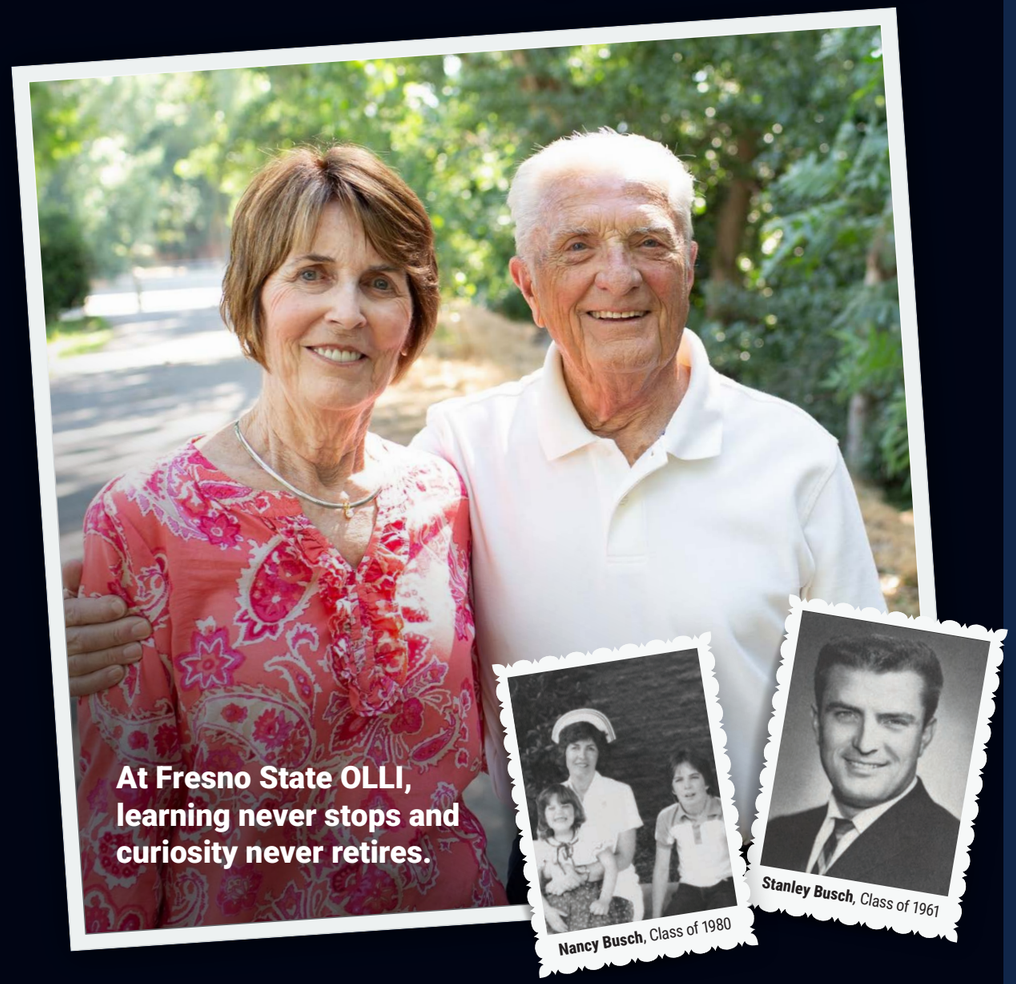


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Inside an Award-Winning Classroom

Fresno State alumna named 2026 California Teacher of the Year

By Benjamin Kirk ('22)

When students enter Chrizia Dela Rosa's ninth-grade classroom, they spend the first few minutes filling out a Google form to check in and report how they are feeling, their mood and whether they ate breakfast and slept well. Looking for patterns, Dela Rosa uses that information to inform her classroom approach for the day.

"How silly should I be in class? Or is it just straight business today?"

The form also allows her to see if a student is struggling and gives her the opportunity to connect without singling them out in front of the class.

"I try to hook students in with building culture, building connections and building on those relationships. It gives me an understanding where they're coming from and knowing who they are," Dela Rosa said.

This data-centric approach, which fosters engagement while providing personalized learning and attention, is one of the reasons Dela Rosa was selected as a 2026 California Teacher of the Year – an award given to just five K-12 teachers statewide.

Dela Rosa's teaching philosophy was shaped by her own experiences as a young immigrant.

Born in the Philippines, she moved to California when she was 6 years old. As a child, she struggled with English and dreaded school until one teacher, Miss Tran, connected with her and created a welcoming classroom environment.

"I really enjoy being able to create spaces where students belong and find their footing and get that confidence – similar to what Miss Tran did for me," Dela Rosa said. "I always go back to Miss Tran because she's one of the reasons why I became a teacher."



Cary Edmondson

After high school, Dela Rosa attended Fresno State, earning her bachelor's degree in liberal studies with a concentration in mathematics in 2012.

Dela Rosa is one of thousands of K-12 educators trained at Fresno State, which has been preparing teachers to serve the Central Valley and beyond for more than a century. Reflecting on her time at the university, Dela Rosa said she strives to create the same sense of belonging she experienced as a student.

In acknowledgment of this achievement and her impact as an educator, the Kremen School of Education and Human Development at Fresno State honored Dela Rosa with a commemorative brick on the Teachers and Friends of Education Honor Wall outside the Kremen building.

"There's that huge sense of Bulldog pride and culture that's always stuck with me," Dela Rosa said.

– Benjamin Kirk is a marketing and communications specialist at Fresno State.

> ***"I really enjoy being able to create spaces where students belong and find their footing and get that confidence ..."***
>
> **– Chrizia Dela Rosa**
> 2026 California Teacher of the Year

Did a teacher change your life?

To learn more about how to commemorate their impact with an engraved brick on the Teachers and Friends of Education Honor Wall, scan the QR code or visit ***teachershonorwall.com***.

CLASS NOTES

'Thy Sons and Daughters Hail Thee Great, Our Alma Mater, Fresno State'

1960s

Robert Oliver (1966) was honored with the Community Legacy Award in recognition of his decades of service to the legal profession.

1970s

Donald Lee Andrews (1973) and **Rick Soto** (1974) opened an exhibit titled "Almost True Stories," featuring a variety of paintings using the 19th-century technique of pointillism at the Cherry Center for the Arts in Carmel.

Ken Hampian (1978) was awarded the Distinguished Service Award from the International City and County Managers Association.

Jerome A. Thomann (1971), a 2023 Northern California PGA Hall of Fame inductee, was honored for 50 years of dedication and service to the game of golf.

Christine Vartanian Datian (1974, '77) is a columnist for the Armenian Mirror-Spectator newspaper in Watertown, Massachusetts.

1980s

Jeff Atmajian (1983), arranger and conductor, hosted a fundraising event with North Fresno Rotary and Cultural Arts Rotary, discussing his work on the movie "Wicked: For Good."

Ben Rivera (1989) is now director of commercial millwork sales for Building Products Inc., a family-owned distributor of millwork and building materials that serves the Midwest.

1990s

Steven Michael Albanese (1996) will retire as chief of police for the city of Pittsburg, California after 29 years of service.

Brandon Bakke (1995), a longtime principal and educator and former Fresno State basketball player under coaches Gary Colson and Jerry Tarkanian, authored the book "Lessons from the Bench: Unlocking the Impact of Bench Players in Teams and in Organizations."

Reed Birnbaum (1997) is chief financial officer of DataHub, a leading open source context platform.

Sonja M. Brown (1996, '98), higher education administrator, was appointed interim provost and senior vice chancellor for academic affairs at Fayetteville State University in North Carolina.

Robin Johnston McGehee (1998) is the inaugural LGBTQ+ liaison for the City of Fresno.

Lane Kiffin (1999) is now head football coach for Louisiana State University.

Sandra Mendez (1995) is now chief probation officer for the County of Santa Cruz.

Tricia Marie Protzman (1991, '94) is now Madera County superintendent of schools.

Brian Terrizzi (1991), co-owner of Giornata Wines and Etto Pasta, was named the 2025 Wine Industry Person of the Year by the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance.

Henry de la Torre (1992) is now Fresno postmaster after 34 years as a postal employee.

Shannon Wentworth (1993, '97) was honored as an outstanding pro bono attorney by Project First Step, presented by Central California Legal Services, Inc.

2000s

Paul Amador (2004) is now government affairs and community relations manager for Kootenai Health in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

Josh Amaya (2007) is a consulting partner with Essentials Health Plan and Revive Health.

William A. Brown (2000), superintendent of Lone Pine Unified School District, is now on the board for the Small School Districts' Association.

Kuyler Crocker (2008) is now the city manager of Lindsay.

Michael Duartes (2002) is now deputy executive director of Fresno Housing, an affordable housing organization.

Ronda Hamm (2000, '02), director of the Food, Farm and Energy Experience at Conner Prairie Living History Museum, was featured in a Future Farmers of America article highlighting her academic and career journey.

Jesse Katz (2007), founder and winemaker of Healdsburg's Aperture Cellars, was named 2025 Winemaker of the Year by Wine Enthusiast.

Evonne (2000) and **Matt Shinn** (2001) are the owners of Block 21 Winery in Lodi.

Stephy Terrizzi (2005), owner of Giornata Wines and Etto Pasta, was named the 2025 Wine Industry Person of the Year by the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance.

Mary Thornton (2004) was reappointed to the Board of Parole Hearings by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

Matthew Treber (2005) is now chief administrative officer for Madera County.

2010s

Ben Amuku Drati (2010, '20), a former Fresno State football player, is now deputy superintendent for Fresno Unified School District.

Peter Krumeich (2010), a former javelin student athlete, was featured in the Escalon Times as the father of four siblings who will compete in the Junior Olympics.

Jon Porter (2018) is now director of finance and operations for Central Valley Scholars, a nonprofit student resource center.

Eric Santos (2011) is now principal for agency partnerships for QuestionPro, an Austin, Texas-based survey software company.

Ryan M. Simone (2010) is now a partner at Higgs Fletcher & Mack in the business litigation and healthcare law practice groups.

Salvador Solorio-Ruiz (2019) is now mayor of Delano.

Derick (2015) and **Megan Webb** (2014), owners/operators of Lumberyard Cellars in Escalon, earned Small Business of the Year honors for California's Ninth Assembly District. They were featured in 209 Magazine.

Aarón Zavala (2015) is now assistant to the city manager for the City of Pleasanton.

Bulldog Born, Bulldog Wed

1. **Bernadette Failla** (2020) and **Donovan Failla** (2018) welcomed their first child, Tessa, on Aug. 20, 2025.
2. **Samantha Ford** (2024) and **Jaden De Vore** (2023) are engaged to be married on May 5, 2027.
3. **Tanvi Jithendran** (2013) and her husband welcomed their first child, Emma Z, on Oct. 3, 2025.
4. **Johnny Martin** (2016) and Kayla Martin welcomed their second child, Savannah Grace, on Jan. 7, 2026.
5. **Aubree Reyes** (2022) and Andy Reyes welcomed their second child, Adalynn Beth, on March 6, 2026.
6. **Danny Souza** (2018) and **Luke Teixeira** (2020) were engaged on July 19, 2025, at Shark Fin Cove Beach.
7. **Amanda Steinhauer** (2020, '22) married **Charel Wanderscheid** (2020, '22) on April 3, 2026, in Flaxweiler, Luxembourg.
8. **Amanda Yang** (2017) married **Luke Vang** (2018) on March 14, 2026, in Clovis.

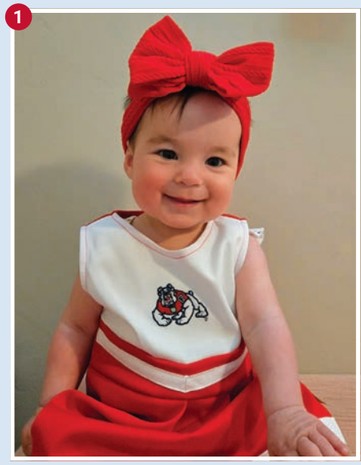
2020s

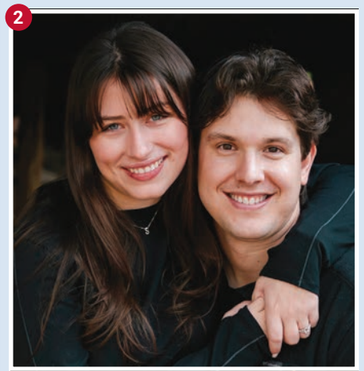
Francisco Abendano (2020) is now director of operations for the Nisei Farmers League, a nonprofit farmers coalition.

Alison Garibay (2022) completed the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute Health Postgraduate Fellowship with the U.S. House of Representatives and the Biden-Harris administration.

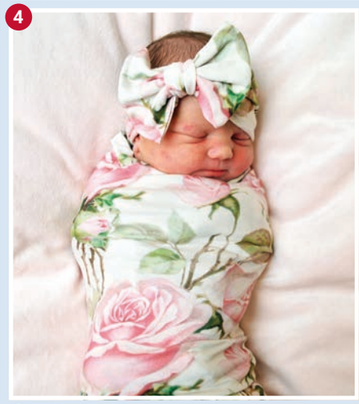
Courtney Hill (2020, '23), who performs as Ivanna Strange, was elected empress of the 52nd Reign of Imperial Dove Court, a nonprofit organization that serves the LGBTQIA+ community.

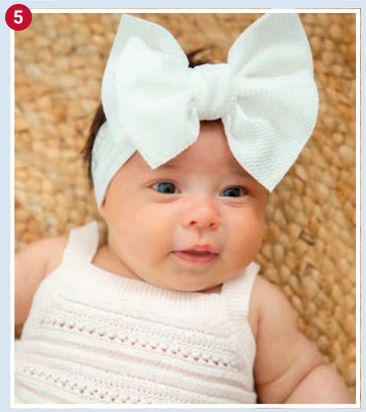
– Compiled by Eddie Hughes ('05), Angel Langridge ('20) and Daisy Thao (student)



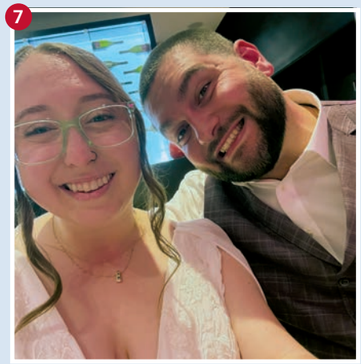


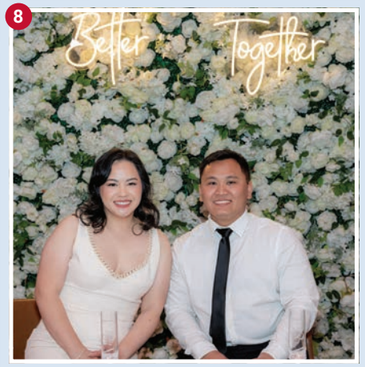












In Memoriam *'For thee, our hopes and memories'*

Delores Aguiniga (1972), Oct. 14, 2025, Fresno.

Jon Anabo (1963, '78), Sept. 15, 2025, Fresno.

David Charles Anderson (1980), Nov. 3, 2025, Vallecito.

David Peter Arnold (1959), Aug. 14, 2025, Woodbury, CT.

Joanna Arredondo (2013, '16), Jan. 18, 2026, Salinas.

Celia Maldonado Arroyo (1967, '75), Jan. 28, 2026, Fresno.

Mary Theresa Johnson (Bennetts) (1965), Nov. 25, 2025, Fresno.

Anita Louise Bragg (1960), Sept. 6, 2025, Visalia.

Mike Briggs (1985, '91), Aug. 31, 2025, Fresno.

Lynne Sharon Lipscomb Brumit (1968), Dec. 9, 2025, Westport, CT.

Diane Buckalew (1965), Aug. 4, 2025, Broomfield, CO.

Ryan Castillo (2011), Nov. 17, 2025, Fresno.

Robert Wendal Clerico (1960), Sept. 2, 2025, Bakersfield.

Wilburn Cowin (1954), Dec. 19, 2025, Bend, OR.

Mary Ann Cunial (1961), Sept. 27, 2025, Livermore.

Andrew Darby (1953), Dec. 28, 2025, Bakersfield.

Aaron Donald Davis Jr. (1954), Aug. 15, 2025, Coeur d'Alene, ID.

Ronald Max Davis (1961), Sept. 9, 2025, Dayton, OH.

Mary Ann Dews (1970), Sept. 22, 2025, Fresno.

Sarah Katherine Eiland (Ponder) (1984), Feb. 18, 2026, Spring Hill, TN.

Aaron Ray Epperly (1963), Oct. 9, 2025, Monterey.

Christian Anthony Fontana, Oct. 6, 2025, Susanville.

Joseph Fraga (1961), April 21, 2026, Fresno.

Robert E. Fraley (1961), Dec. 30, 2025, Fresno.

John Gahvejian (1957), Sept. 17, 2025, Fresno.

Anthony Kenneth Galassi (1973), July 11, 2025, Fairfax Station, VA.

Jimmie Gene Garrett (1960), Jan. 30, 2026, Visalia.

Jere Donn Gauss (1973), Feb. 4, 2026, Fresno.

Verna Carol (Nikolauson) Gaylord (1958), Sept. 23, 2025, Turlock.

Ronald Keith Headlee (1959), Sept. 14, 2025, Trinidad, CO.

Joseph Alan Healy (2000), Aug. 2, 2025, Healdsburg.

David Gilbert Hedgecock (1972), Jan. 7, 2026, Fresno.

Sandra Grace Henry (1965), April 12, 2026, Henderson, NV.

Herbert Joseph Hernandez (1969), Sept. 11, 2025, Carencro, LA.

William H. Henry (1952), Aug. 14, 2025, Fresno.

Larry Howard (1974), Dec. 22, 2025, Fresno.

George Pete Isaak (1954), Dec. 1, 2025, Redlands.

Rodger Jensen (1941, '10), Aug. 5, 2026, Fresno.

Olden Johnson Jr. (1958), Aug. 21, 2025, Fresno.

Shirley Hallam Karabian (1973), Dec. 23, 2025, San Jose.

Jeff Kragh, Sept. 6, 2026, Fresno.

Janet Stoll Lee (1980), Sept. 12, 2025, Fresno.

Arley Dale Loeffler (1972), Oct. 17, 2025, Hesston, KS.

Thomas A. Lutton (1962), Nov. 21, 2025, Clovis.

Karen Major (1969), April 3, 2026, Fresno.

Blossom Malkasian (1960), Sept. 15, 2025, Fresno.

Samuel Richard Manske, Sept. 19, 2025, Hillsboro, OR.

David P. McCauley (1952), Feb. 20, 2026, Fresno.

Kevin Scott McCully (1988), Aug. 25, 2025, Fresno.

Margaret Claire McDougal, Oct. 9, 2025, Fresno.

William M. McMahon (1979), Dec. 21, 2025, Grangeville, ID.

Christine Johnson McPhail (2004), March 1, 2026, Darlington, SC.

Andra Johnson Munson (1955), Aug. 25, 2025, Yuba City.

Janice Nikoghosian (1968, '69), Aug. 18, 2025, Hanford.

Cleo William Norris, Sept. 21, 2025, Fresno.

Patricia J. Oji (1974), Sept. 29, 2025, San Rafael.

Gary Julien Olson (1962), Aug. 20, 2025, Turlock.

Adelle Carolyn Orton (MacDonald) (1988), Nov. 15, 2025, Paso Robles.

Sam Paregian (1950), Dec. 3, 2025, Fresno.

Betty Jane Pash (1972), Oct. 6, 2025, Fresno.

Harriet Joann Perkins (1954), Feb. 22, 2026, Fresno.

Grace Edith Pope (1956), Aug. 3, 2025, Fresno.

Gary Anthony Poulsen (1987), Jan. 16, 2026, Las Vegas.

Ronald Anthony Radish (1967), Oct. 28, 2025, Visalia.

John David Ratliff (1960), Aug. 25, 2025, Redding.

Lydia Rebecca Rodriguez (1987), Oct. 17, 2025, Clovis.

Ramon Rodriguez III (2005), Dec. 26, 2025, Fresno.

Eric John Rystad (1983), Aug. 28, 2025, Fresno.

Julie Miller Salmon (1985, '89), Oct. 24, 2020, Fresno.

Jan L. "John" Shade, Oct. 24, 2025, Madison, WI.

Hollis Douglas Shannon (1954), March 10, 2026, Bakersfield.

Dennis Michael Shaves (1964), June 15, 2025, Scottsdale, AZ.

Michael Edward Simpson (1982), Aug. 23, 2025, Bakersfield.

Rose Marie Smith (1948), Sept. 11, 2025, Fresno.

Susan Pamela Smither (1970), Dec. 10, 2025, Modesto.

Marybel Svigos (1998), Nov. 30, 2025, Fresno.

Barbara Farrington Thomas (1977), March 10, 2026, Fresno.

Vernon Jack Tracy (1962), March 9, 2026, Fresno.

Clemens Van Beurden (1964), Feb. 28, 2026, San Luis Obispo.

Ed Vegely (1960), Sept. 1, 2025, Mariposa.

Earl Cole Vickers (1969, '75), Jan. 11, 2026, Fresno.

Frederick Vaughn Webb (1977), Oct. 13, 2025, Port Angeles, WA.

W. Dean Weidner (1967), March 17, 2026, Kirkland, WA.

John Jack Wise (1957), Nov. 8, 2024, Fresno.

Jim Witherow (1974), Dec. 28, 2025, Fresno.

Judith Anne Wright (1957), July 14, 2025, Livermore.

Nyla Jane Zender (1965), Oct. 1, 2025, Fresno.

Faculty/Staff

James "Jim" Aldredge, Oct. 17, 2025, Fresno.

Veronica Arroyo, March 2, 2026, Fresno.

Mark Baldis, Feb. 25, 2026, Fresno.

Manuel Q. Bersamin, Oct. 26, 2025, Watsonville.

Steve Magarian, Sept. 22, 2025, Fresno.

Gary Keith McCurry, Jan. 1, 2026, Fresno.

Joseph Melamed, Sept. 11, 2025, Carmichael.

Mike Nourian, Sept. 26, 2025, Fresno.

Jenna Sawdon-Bea, May 19, 2025, Fresno.

Roy Thornton, March 4, 2026, Fresno.

Donald Alfred Vasconcellos, Sept. 6, 2025, Fresno.

Friends

Arnold Gazarian, June 16, 2026, Fresno.

Larry Kragh, Sept. 26, 2025, Fresno.



Getting Down to BUSINESS

From the fields to a multimillion-dollar auto empire, Jay Gill fulfills his family's American dream



Jay Gill

Cary Edmondson

By Eddie Hughes ('05)

When Jay Gill helped facilitate a $5 billion merger in April between United Security Bancshares and Community West Bancshares – the largest publicly held company headquartered in Fresno – he paused to reflect on how he got to this point in his career.

Gill owns 12 car dealerships, a real estate development business and a farming operation. He is a founding board member of Monterey Community Bank and an investor in American Savings Bank in Hawaii. His businesses employ more than 500 people in California and Hawaii. His many successful ventures were the result of hard work, vision and belief in himself. But perhaps none of it would be possible without the man he calls the "family patriarch," his uncle Mukhtiar "Mike" Brar.

Brar was the first of the family to immigrate to the United States in 1959. He was born in Malaysia, lived in Punjab, India and settled in Clovis. And he developed a plan to move the rest of his family – including his parents and five siblings – so they, too, could pursue the American dream.

For Brar, that dream was sparked when he enrolled at Fresno City College and later joined the Army, becoming a paratrooper. He used the money he earned from enlisting to attend Fresno State from 1965 to 1967 and became a naturalized citizen. While at Fresno State, he met his future wife, Norma (Surian) Brar, who graduated in 1966 with a bachelor's in social work. A criminology major, he lived in the now torn-down police barracks and worked as a campus police officer.

In 1973, he helped bring his sister (Gill's mother) to America. "Back then, it took many years once you sponsored somebody to bring them over," Gill said. "He had a plan for how he was going to bring everyone over. It's expensive, so he couldn't bring everyone at the same time. So he brought my mom, and the plan was each person would sponsor the next."



Jay Gill's uncle, Mukhtiar "Mike" Brar, was the first in the family to immigrate to the U.S. He graduated from Fresno State in 1967 and served as a campus police officer.

Brar went on to work for the California Department of Health, as a regional manager dealing with childhood immunizations. His daughter, Karen Gonzales, followed in his footsteps by attending Fresno State and is now a fourth-grade teacher at Fort Washington Elementary in Fresno. Her son, Dylan Gonzales, also graduated from Fresno State and is now a reporter at The Business Journal. All together, about eight family members attended the university.

By all accounts, Brar was a true champion for his family and their successes, up until the day he passed away from a stroke at age 68 in 2009.

"I don't think my dad would believe, Jay, where you are now," Gonzales said to her cousin. "Jay is the story, and I fully want him to be. My dad is just a part of it."

Gill, the entrepreneur

Gill, who now lives in Kerman with his family, remembers the exact date he moved with his mother from India to the U.S. It was June 14, 1973, and he was 8 years old.

At the time, his family lived and worked in the fields. He remembers getting his first taste of Uncle Mike's fondness for Fresno State, particularly the baseball, basketball and football programs. "He liked to watch Bulldogs football games so much that, when we lived in the fields, he would come visit, and he gave us a black and white TV," Gill said. "We'd be out there trying to get a clear picture."

Like his uncle, Gill went on to study at Fresno State, graduating in 1988 with a degree in industrial technology. He took an engineering job in Silicon Valley, but quickly realized he had the entrepreneurial spirit.

> ***"What college does is it teaches you about the world, about dealing with people, about life."***
>
> **– Jay Gill**

His first taste of it came in college, when he said he used to buy cars for around $1,000 and turn around and sell them for $2,000. "What college does is it teaches you about the world, about dealing with people, about life," Gill said. "More than education itself, it's the real-world people you meet. My passion has always been building something, growing something."

In 1989, he partnered with another uncle to open a convenience store in Biola.

Then, in 1995, he wrote a business plan and got approved for a $200,000 small business administration loan to start a used-car business, Alpha Motors, in downtown Fresno. In 2003, he bought a Chevrolet dealership in Tranquility. In 2004, Gill bought a Ford-Mercury dealership in Coalinga. Over time, Gill expanded the business to 12 dealerships, with a variety of makes, in Central California, Northern California and one in Kailua, Hawaii.

In the midst of growing Gill Automotive Group from the ground up – and inspired by his mother working in the tomato and garlic fields – he also purchased an 800-acre almond farm in west Fresno County. "I did it for my father back in India," Gill said. "The Punjabi culture is very proud of land ownership. To not own land, to work on someone else's land, is looked down upon."

CNBC did a story on Gill in 2015 and featured him in an online segment called "Blue Collar Millionaire," in which they touted his rise "from the fields to an auto empire." He was also honored in 2015 as the White House's minority business Entrepreneur of the Year and was chosen as one of 32 U.S. delegates to attend the Asia Pacific Economic Conference in Manila, Philippines with the Obama administration.

Gill, who is 61 years old, hopes his story will inspire the next generation. "It's not what I have and things I acquired. It's the journey that's most important," Gill said.

And he knows his Uncle Mike, one of his biggest supporters, would take great pride in the family's success. "He showed how proud he was of you," Gill said, smiling at the thought of those Saturday mornings when his uncle would ride with him to visit his dealerships throughout the Valley.

"It's a typical American story that started when someone came in and laid the foundation. My Uncle Mike came and got it started, and we took advantage of that," Gill said.

"I'm grateful I had the opportunity to come to a country and build a life for myself. We attribute all of this to Mike – he had the foresight and wisdom."

– Eddie Hughes is the senior writer/editor for Fresno State.

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