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# The President's Associates

in support of the Student Research Scholars

## Donor Profile: Dr. Brian Nowlin

Dr. Brian Nowlin, President's Associates member and CSUB alumnus has donated \$35,000 to CSUB to establish a personal endowment for the President's Associates, the Dr. Brian Nowlin Student Research Scholars Endowment, that provides an annual scholarship to students participating in the Student Research Scholars (SRS) program.

"I've seen how working on a research project enhances students' education experience, their employability. They just get so much out of that," said Dr. Nowlin, a Bakersfield native who worked for over 35 years at the CSU Long Beach Research Foundation. "Sponsored research dollars are never easy to come by. At a time when public research funding is more fragile than ever, I believe more private research funding is needed. It feels good to support student success at CSUB."

While Dr. Nowlin had donated to CSUB prior to creating the endowment, they were one-time gifts that were used to meet the immediate needs for students. He wanted to find a way for his giving to have a more long-term impact on students.

"Through an endowment, it's not current-year dollars. The university will get the benefit of the investment earnings," he said. "This money will be there forever. Students years from now will still be able to benefit from this."

Dr. Nowlin said he was excited to learn about the SRS program. He is familiar with student research projects through his work with the CSULB Research Foundation, a nonprofit auxiliary organization that provides accounting and administrative services for programs that support research and training projects.

"They are running their own project and, to me, that experience is just golden for any student," he said about the SRS program. "When they leave the university, they have a degree and they can put on



their resume that they ran a research project. We had so many students (at CSULB) who worked on our research programs who went onto doctoral programs because they got to do hands-on research."

Dr. Nowlin said he wouldn't have had such a successful career without the educational foundation he received from CSUB.

"CSUB set the stage for me. It gave me a desire to learn," he said. "It taught me how to plan, research, organize and execute. I think I've carried those principles with me throughout my career and in my life. When you have a plan of how to approach things, even if it's something you've never done before, it's not as daunting of a task."

Dr. Nowlin said his donations to the university are his way of giving back and supporting the next generation of leaders. He plans to continue adding to his endowment so that more CSUB students will have the opportunity to conduct their own research.

"I feel a debt of gratitude to Cal State Bakersfield," he said. "If the endowment benefits even one student, it's worthwhile. I hope it continues to help students for many years to come." ■





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# The President's Associates

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College of Arts and Humanities, Faculty Mentor: Dr. David Melendez

## Yelitza Amador Arozco

***Dirt Under Her Nails: Performance Rooted in Defiance.  
Researching Theatre for Social Advocacy***

Yelitza Amador Arozco is a senior at CSUB majoring in Biology and Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies with a minor in Theatre. Growing up in Arvin, she chose to stay close to home during the pandemic and attend CSUB, a designated Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Today, she works in Admissions while pursuing her passion for theatre and social change and is considering graduate studies in theatre.

### Giving Back to Her Community

When asked why she chose CSUB instead of a UC or another university, Yelitza says “it was the hardworking students who are willing to do whatever it takes to make their dreams possible. Seeing their determination inspires me to stay in Kern County and work to uplift my community.”

### Research with Purpose

Yelitza’s research explores how theatre can be used as a tool for social advocacy, especially regarding women’s reproductive rights. Her goal is to create a play that can be performed anywhere—making social issues accessible to broad audiences. She also seeks to connect theatre to nature, conducting research in an edible garden setting rather than a traditional black-box theater.

### Resilience and Growth

As a first-generation student, Yelitza faced challenges during her early college years, struggling academically at first. But her research gave her the confidence to take on more, proving to herself—and others—that she was capable of much more than she imagined. With encouragement from her faculty mentor, Dr. David Melendez, she has pushed beyond her comfort zone and grown into both a scholar and an advocate.



### Looking Ahead

Yelitza hopes to pursue a career in social work after graduation, following in the footsteps of her siblings who also studied social work at CSUB. Growing up in a small immigrant community, she has seen the American Dream firsthand and is determined to help make that dream possible for others.

### The Power of Opportunity

Programs like the Student Research Scholars Program provide students like Yelitza with life-changing opportunities. Coming from a background that taught resilience and grit, she never imagined being able to pursue research or express her creativity the way she discovered at CSUB. The support of donors gives students like her freedom to explore their passions and develop their full potential.

Yelitza reflects on her journey with gratitude “being chosen for this program has shown me that I should never give up on the dreams I had as a child.” And through the challenges and mentorship she’s experienced, she has gained not only academic growth but also the vision that one day, she too can mentor and inspire future scholars. ■





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College of Business and Public Administration, Faculty Mentor: Dr. Rich Ryan

## Ashlee Kresha

### *Taxes Collected in Kern County, California, and the Price of Oil*

Ashlee Kresha always valued family and community growing up in Bakersfield. As a first-generation college student, she is proud to represent her Salvadoran and Kern County roots while pursuing her academic and athletic passions at CSUB.

Ashlee began golfing during her sophomore year of high school and quickly found that it became a way to bond with her dad after he retired during COVID. Now, as a member of CSUB's golf team, she continues to grow her love for the sport.

Originally an engineering major, Ashlee decided to pursue economics after discovering a passion for understanding how major industries shape local communities. She was invited by Dr. Rich Ryan, professor of economics, to collaborate on research exploring the critical role of oil and gas tax revenues in Kern County.

### **Research Focus**

Chevron is the single largest taxpayer in Kern County, contributing \$55 million annually. In total, the oil and gas industry generated nearly \$300 million in tax revenue just last year, helping fund essential government services. With California moving toward zero emissions, these tax revenues could drastically decrease, creating significant impacts on public services. Ashlee's research with Dr. Ryan investigates how the volatility of oil prices directly influences tax revenue and the local economy.

### **Mentorship Experience**

Working alongside Dr. Ryan has been an invaluable experience. "It's really been a smooth experience working with him—he's so educated, and I've learned a lot just by having conversations and picking his brain," Ashlee shared.



### **Future Goals**

Looking ahead, Ashlee plans to merge her love for golf and business. She currently works with a commercial real estate brokerage, where she has seen firsthand how many deals and relationships are forged on the golf course. Her long-term goal is to become a commercial real estate agent after graduation.

Balancing her academic schedule, golf tournaments—most of which take place in the spring—and her research commitments hasn't always been easy. But Ashlee is determined, seeing each challenge as an opportunity to strengthen her skills in time management, teamwork and leadership.

"Golf has given me opportunities to connect with people in business and economics. The Student Research Scholars Program has given me opportunities to grow academically. Both are helping me build toward a career I'm excited about," Ashlee said. ■





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# The President's Associates

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College of Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Engineering, Faculty Mentor: Dr. Amy Gancarz-Kausch

## Kelbi Banducci

### ***Fueling the Mind: Exploring the Relationship Between Caffeine, Stress, and Academic Performance among CSUB Undergraduate Students***

Kelbi Banducci was born and raised in Bakersfield, CA, and is a proud first-generation college student. After earning her associate's degree in psychology from Bakersfield College, she transferred to CSUB where she switched her focus to biology. She is now a senior majoring in biology with a concentration in biotechnology and a minor in psychology. She is set to graduate in Spring 2026. Her passion for neuroscience and desire for a strong scientific foundation inspired her academic path and future aspirations toward medical and graduate school.

Kelbi has been involved in research for nearly three years at CSUB. Beyond CSUB, Kelbi broadened her research experiences through prestigious summer research opportunities at UC San Diego/Salk Institute, the University of Rochester and Stanford University, where she contributed to projects in behavioral neuroscience, child neurology and molecular neurobiology.

### **Giving Back to the Community**

Outside the lab, Kelbi has mentored students as part of the NSME Career Pathways Program, tutored chemistry and biology, and volunteered at Kern Medical through the Emergency Medicine Research Associates Program. She has also served as a URISE Program Scholar and volunteered at Caring Corner, a pediatric day health center.

### **Research Topic**

Kelbi's current research focuses on the relationship between caffeine consumption, stress, GPA, and study habits among college students. "Many students use caffeine to cope with stress, but high caffeine intake can actually worsen anxiety, insomnia, and health problems. Most studies only focus on coffee, tea,

or energy drinks, which excludes a large number of students who use other caffeinated products. My project surveys students at CSUB to explore the bigger picture – stress levels, academic performance, study habits, and overall caffeine use."



### **Mentorship Experience**

Kelbi has worked with two faculty mentors at CSUB. She spent over two years in Dr. Gancarz's lab and is now mentored by Dr. Isabel Sumaya. Their established relationship through the URISE program has grown into a strong faculty-student partnership. Dr. Sumaya encouraged Kelbi's independence by naming her the student principal investigator (PI) on their IRB-approved study.

### **Impact of the SRS Program**

Kelbi's project lost previous NIH funding in 2025. However, SRS provided crucial support, giving her the opportunity to pursue her current project. "This program has helped me gain new skills that I wouldn't have learned otherwise, and it's teaching me how to think about research in an entirely different way," Kelbi said.

### **Future Goals**

Kelbi is currently interviewing for Medical Scientist Training Programs (MSTPs), which will allow her to earn both an MD and PhD. Her research interests lie in molecular and developmental neurobiology, while clinically she is drawn to pediatrics, particularly child neurology. Long term, she hopes to lead her own biomedical research lab while caring for patients.

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# The President's Associates

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## Kelbi Banducci (continued)

### Why Support Matters

Kelbi emphasizes the importance of the SRS Program and donor support. "The SRS program gives students the foundation to conduct research and the chance to work closely with faculty mentors. For students at CSUB, where research funding is limited, this program is vital. It provides opportunities that otherwise would not exist and helps students develop skills that will benefit them in any career."

### Message to Donors

"I would like to thank the President's Associates donors for their generous contribution to my academic and research success. Without this program, I likely would not have been able to pursue my current research project. Your support has made a lasting impact on my career and future research endeavors." ■





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# The President's Associates

in support of the Student Research Scholars

College of Social Sciences and Education, Faculty Mentor: Dr. Heidi McLaughlin

## Brenda Cortez

***Beyond Access: Understanding How Beliefs, Barriers, and Cultural Norms Shape Health Decisions in Disparate Economies***

Brenda Cortez is a second-year master's student in counseling psychology, pursuing licensure as a marriage and family therapist. Brenda is part of the largest cohort in her program, with just 18 students accepted. Dedicated to her studies, she maintains the required academic standards while also conducting impactful research through the Student Research Scholars Program.

### From Arvin to CSUB: A Journey of Resilience

Growing up in Arvin and attending Arvin High School, Brenda faced significant challenges, including financial need and educational gaps. These hardships caused her to drop out of Bakersfield College, taking a nearly three-year gap before resuming her studies. With encouragement from her parents, who always pushed her to pursue higher education, she earned an associate's degree and later transferred to CSUB to continue her journey in counseling psychology.

### Mentorship and Community

Brenda's first Spanish-speaking client, a 64-year-old woman, reminded her of the importance of diversity, connection and community. With guidance from her Spanish professor, Brenda saw how bilingualism and cultural identity could expand her ability to serve others. She credits her mentors for pushing her growth and for believing in her, especially when she struggled with imposter syndrome and doubted whether she belonged in higher education. "I knew I would have to heal within myself to be able to help others," Brenda said.

### Research with Purpose

Brenda's research focuses on understanding how people in low-income countries experience health and healthcare. Specifically, she is researching Dominica to study how social and economic inequalities impact

health outcomes. By identifying gaps in healthcare access and comparing them to third-world standards, her work aims to shed light on global health disparities. Her motivation is deeply personal—mentors and the program have inspired her to become the best version of herself and to believe that her goals are achievable.

### Looking Forward

Brenda plans to obtain her license as a marriage and family therapist and dreams of pursuing a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. As a Latina scholar, she admits it feels unusual to dream that big, but she has found confidence and comfort through CSUB's supportive environment as a Hispanic-Serving Institution.

### The Power of Donor Support

Being a part of the President's Associates program has transformed Brenda's life. Her opportunities would have been limited without it. Now she can fully focus on her research and coursework. Donor contributions provide students like Brenda with the freedom to pursue bold ideas and take the time necessary to succeed academically and professionally. Brenda hopes that community members see the value in supporting students who will one day return to serve and strengthen Kern County. "There's wealth in giving to others," she said. ■

