



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement
Hispanic-Serving Institutions National
Program

2025

E. Kika De La Garza

Fellowship Program

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E. Kika De La Garza

United States representative
Eighty-ninth - One Hundred Fourth Congresses
Serving from January 3, 1965 - January 3, 1997

Eligio (Kika) de la Garza was born September 22, 1927 in Mercedes, Texas and passed away at the age of 89 on March 13, 2017.

De La Garza attained his Doctor of Jurisprudence from St. Mary's University Law School in San Antonio, Texas. He was a member of the Texas State Bar Association and was admitted to practice in the Federal Courts and the U.S. Supreme Court.

De La Garza served six consecutive terms in the Texas House of Representatives before spending 32 years as a leading U.S. congressman in addition to working 12 years in the practice of law. In addition to becoming the first Hispanic congressman elected from Texas' 15th District, De La Garza also served as chairman of the Congressional Agriculture Committee during 1981-1994. He had influential roles in overhauling the agricultural lending system, implementing federal farm crop insurance, reforming commodity futures, reorganizing the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and providing numerous aid packages for American as well as international agriculture. Additionally, De La Garza co-founded the Congressional Hispanic Caucus during his time in Congress.

As an expert on national and international law related to agriculture and commerce, De La Garza played a major role in expanding trade with Japan, the former Soviet Union, China, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and the Far East. A skilled and multilingual communicator, De La Garza developed close working relationships with top-level government officials throughout the world.

E. Kika De La Garza Fellowship Program

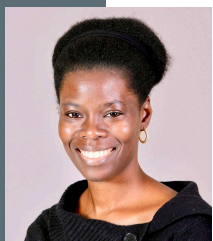


The USDA E. Kika De La Garza Fellowship Program offers faculty from Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) the opportunity to work collaboratively with USDA to gain insight into the federal government. This uniquely tailored experience brings together HSI staff and federal executives to address the spectrum of challenges faced in the development of a well-prepared Hispanic workforce.

Fellows spend their week with USDA increasing their understanding of federal programs and opportunities, particularly at the national level, and working to identify and explore mutual collaborative interests.

Education Fellows

Education Fellows learn first-hand the mission and programs of USDA by meeting with leadership and staff from each of the Department's agencies. Participants enrich the USDA with their diverse experiences and allow for on-going dialogue regarding the educational challenges facing the Hispanic community.



Adijat Adebola

Bronx Community College - CUNY, Bronx, NY

Dr. Adijat Adebola is an Associate Professor in the Biological Sciences Department at Bronx Community College of CUNY (BCC). She holds a PhD in Neurobiology and Behavior from Columbia University. Her research interests include exploring teaching strategies that seek to improve student learning and engagement in STEM fields.

She's been involved in several college initiatives that focus on increasing undergraduate research opportunities and mentorship in STEM. This includes serving as the project coordinator for an NSF Scholarships in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics grant. The ultimate goal of these initiatives is to increase the number of students from underrepresented communities entering the STEM workforce. In her current role as the program coordinator for the Horticulture Program at BCC, she's committed to exposing students, especially those from underrepresented communities to various career paths in horticulture, increasing experiential learning opportunities for students, and ensuring that students are well-prepared to enter horticulture fields.



Erik C.D. Belmal

Río Hondo College, Whittier, CA

Erik C.D. Belmal is an Educational Advisor for the TRIO Student Support Services STEM program at Río Hondo College, a Hispanic-Serving Institution in Southern California. With over 20 years of experience in higher education, Erik has a proven track record of advancing equity through academic advising, program development, and student advocacy. He practices proactive, intrusive advising con cariño, meeting students where they are and guiding them through educational and professional pathways with compassion and high expectations. Since joining Río Hondo College in 2011, he has been pivotal in connecting Latiné, first-generation students who are navigating financial barriers with undergraduate research, internships, and transfer opportunities.

A doctoral candidate in educational leadership at California State University, San Bernardino, Erik's research focuses on the role of classified professionals in supporting student success at Hispanic-Serving Institutions. His educational background includes a Master of Arts in Educational Studies and a bachelor's degree in Philosophy and Theology from Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. A first-generation college graduate, Erik considers his education a prized accomplishment and is deeply committed to helping others access and succeed in higher education.



David A. Byrd

Coastal Bend College, Beeville, TX

Dr. David Byrd is Vice President of Student Success and Engagement at Coastal Bend College in Beeville, Texas. He holds a PhD in Higher Education Administration and a MS in Agricultural Education – both from Texas A&M University.

Dr. Byrd has served in multiple administrative appointments, including Associate Vice President for Student Affairs at Texas State University, Associate Dean of Admissions and Student Services in the School of Nursing at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, and as an Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Programs in the College of Education and Human Development at Texas A&M University. Additionally, he was an Associate Professor/Research at UT Health San Antonio and served as PI on multiple US Department of Education Title III and V grants. He proudly worked with the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) as a Holistic Admissions in Academic Nursing consultant and was in the first cohort of graduates from the AACN Diversity Leadership Institute. His research agenda focuses on the transition issues faced by students of color pursuing higher education. His research has appeared in multiple peer-reviewed journals, edited books, and national conferences.



Steven Chumbley

Texas A&M University - Kingsville, TX

Steven “Boot” Chumbley is a professor of Agricultural Science and Coordinator of Teacher Certification at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. He holds a doctorate in Agricultural Education & Communications from Texas Tech University and a master's in educational administration from Texas A&M University-Kingsville. Before entering academia, he served as a high school agricultural science teacher and administrator. His research focuses broadly on technical skill development and professional leadership with diverse student populations. He published in multiple peer-reviewed national journals and has obtained over \$5 million in external funding to support research in agricultural education and applied agricultural science. He has led multidisciplinary teams of researchers and supervised multiple graduate students in projects related to advancing leadership development and technical skill acquisition in agriculture. In addition to his research, teaches courses related to agricultural mechanics and leads student teacher certification. Each year he coordinates state level service-learning events for hundreds of students. These events help students apply their technical and leadership skills.



Nicolle Fernandes

Fiorello H. LaGuardia Community College - CUNY, Long Island City, NY

Dr. Nicolle Fernandes is a professor in the Nutrition and Culinary Management Program and chairperson of the Community Health and Wellness Department at Fiorello H. LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York. She holds an M.S. in Foods, Nutrition, and Dietetics from the University of Mumbai and a Ph.D. in Nutrition from Texas Woman's University. She completed a postdoctoral fellowship on Aging Care at the Nestlé Nutrition R&D Centers in Minnesota.

Her research interests include the impact of nutrition in cancer, falls and fractures in the geriatric population, the therapeutic effects of herbs and spices, culinary nutrition, hunger and food insecurity, and food sustainability.

Dr. Fernandes currently serves as co-director of the USDA NIFA-funded project IMODEL: Inclusive Model for Developing Future Nutrition, Food, and Culinary Leaders, and is the principal investigator of the study titled Familiarity, Knowledge, and Consumption of Herbs and Spices among Colon Cancer and Melanoma Patients and Survivors.



Laura M. Fischer

Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX

Dr. Laura Fischer is an Associate Professor of Agricultural Communications and the Director for the Center for Agriscience Communications at Texas Tech University. In this role, she specializes in audience analysis, segmentation, message design, campaign strategy, and strategic communication. Her work focuses on empowering agricultural and natural resource professionals to connect with diverse audiences, inspire trust, and foster positive attitudes toward these critical industries. Through her research, teaching, and outreach, Dr. Fischer equips stakeholders with tools to craft effective, audience-centered messages that bridge the gap between science and society. Prior to joining the faculty at Texas Tech University, she served as an Assistant Professor of Integrated Strategic Communications at the University of Kentucky. She earned her Ph.D. from Texas Tech University in Agricultural Communications and Education, her Master of Science in Agricultural Education and Communications from the University of Florida, and her Bachelor of Science in Animal Science also from the University of Florida.



Pam Geddes

Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL

Pam Geddes completed the B.S. and M.S. degrees at Florida International University and the Ph.D. degree at University of Chicago. She then became an NSF Minority Post-doctoral Fellow at Loyola University Chicago. She is currently a Professor in the Department of Biology and in the Environmental Science Program at Northeastern Illinois University, a Hispanic-Serving Institution where she has been teaching for the last 15 years centering culturally relevant pedagogy in her teaching.

In 2022, she was awarded the Audrey Reynolds Distinguished Teaching Award. She is also an alumna of the Linton-Poodry SACNAS Leadership Institute (SACNAS is the Society for the Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science). In addition, she mentors undergraduate and graduate students in research that focuses on invasive wetland plant species as well as other ecological interactions in freshwater aquatic communities. She strongly believes in the importance of intentional mentoring, and the affirming and transformative power research experiences can have mostly for Black, Brown, and Indigenous students. To that end, she has been a lead or participant in several federally funded projects from the USDA, NSF, and Dept. of Education with the intent of increasing the participation, retention, and success of underrepresented students in STEM.



Teesta Jain

City Colleges of Chicago - Harry S Truman, Chicago, IL

Dr. Teesta Jain serves as an AMGEN Site Coordinator and lends her expertise as part-time faculty in Biology at the City Colleges of Chicago – Harry S Truman. Dr. Jain received a Ph.D. in Biochemistry from Louisiana State University and postdoctoral training at Harvard Medical School and the University of California, Davis. Her research interests span the critical areas of microbial resistance, topoisomerase and mental health.

Currently, Dr. Jain is actively engaged in lab curriculum development, empowering teachers to enrich their existing science programs through the integration of the AMGEN lab sequence. Recognizing her innovative approach, she was awarded an Innovation Faculty Grant to pursue research correlating data from Apple devices with laboratory findings. This project aims to provide data-driven insights to make informed choices concerning food, mental well-being, physical activity, and key health metrics.

Her prior experience includes serving as the ARCOS (Advancing Research and Career Opportunities) HSI (Hispanic Serving Institutions) Director. In this role, she skillfully managed the Student Activities Committee, the Research-Centered Committee, and the Curriculum and Articulation Committee. Teesta brings a wealth of experience in fostering faculty collaboration, driving student engagement, and conducting research focused on DNA-binding drugs.



Jessica M. Johnson

Central New Mexico Community College, Albuquerque, NM

Dr. Jessica Johnson is a faculty member in the School of Math, Science, and Engineering at Central New Mexico Community College in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She earned her PhD and MS in Earth and Planetary Sciences from the University of New Mexico and a BS in Earth Sciences from Central Connecticut State University. Her background includes research centering around mineral-water interactions and extensive experience in geoscience education.

At CNM, Johnson teaches geology and co-leads the curriculum development of an Environmental Science certificate program focused on preparing students to support and sustain New Mexico's agricultural and natural resources. Her curriculum development work emphasizes water management, soil science, ecosystem conservation, and pollution control, aligning with New Mexico's environmental priorities and workforce needs.

A dedicated educator and science communicator, Johnson's teaching centers on applied, place-based learning that connects students to the environmental issues impacting their own communities. She incorporates fieldwork, collaborative research, and interdisciplinary case studies into her courses to foster critical thinking and workforce readiness. By integrating real-world problems with hands-on instruction, she creates inclusive, engaging classrooms that empower students to see themselves as scientists and changemakers in their communities.



Jamie A. Levitt

California State University - Fresno, CA

Jamie A. Levitt, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Department of Food Science and Nutrition at Fresno State. He holds a Ph.D. in Hospitality Management from the University of South Carolina, an M.B.A. with a concentration in Hospitality Management, and an A.S. in Culinary Arts from Johnson & Wales University. He earned his B.A. in International Relations from Tufts University.

Dr. Levitt's research explores the intersections of food service, consumer behavior, and food culture, with work spanning topics such as restaurant authenticity, food tourism, and food policy. He is currently investigating food price gouging at event venues through an RSCA-funded study and has published on issues such as face covering regulations and the influence of local craft beverages on consumer perceptions.

He also serves as the Graduate Coordinator for the department and actively mentors graduate, honors, and MS/DI students. His students have earned national recognition, including winning the Almond Board's product development competition and presenting at IFT. Dr. Levitt brings a global perspective to his work, shaped by time spent living in the U.S., China, the U.K., Switzerland, and Turkey.



Sofía I Macchiavelli Girón

Universidad del Sagrado Corazón, San Juan, PR

Sofía Macchiavelli Girón is the Academic Leader for Science Programs at the Universidad del Sagrado Corazón in San Juan, Puerto Rico. She holds a Ph.D. in Plant Pathology from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and a B.S. in Biology from the University of Puerto Rico–Mayagüez, with a minor in Professional Ethics. Her work focuses on advancing high-impact science education through curriculum innovation, research integration, and community partnerships.

At Sagrado, Sofía supports the continued growth and excellence of the science programs by promoting hands-on research and aligning academic experiences with a variety of professional pathways. She leads initiatives such as the institutional garden project, which connects students to applied plant sciences, sustainability, and experiential learning.

Previously, Sofía served as an Extension Agent with the University of Puerto Rico's Agricultural Extension Service, where she developed educational outreach programs for farmers, 4-H youth, and the general public in areas such as plant disease management and climate resilience. Her commitment to equity and student development is also reflected in her leadership of Líderes Boricuas en Ciencias Agrícolas (LIBCA), a professional development program supporting Puerto Rican students pursuing careers in agricultural sciences.



Pamela N. Martinez

New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico

Dr. Pamela N. Martinez is Associate Professor and Extension Specialist in Learning Technologies in New Mexico State University's Innovative Media Research and Extension Department and is part of the Learning Games Lab. She works with teams to create educational media for grant- and Extension-funded projects. With over twenty years of experience creating educational media and games, Martinez earned her doctorate in Learning Technologies from Pepperdine University, where her studies focused on social learning, communities of practice, and leadership. Martinez serves as the lead principal investigator for USDA-NIFA HSI Grant "Innovators from Marginalized Communities: Interactive Labs That Help Students See Themselves in Agricultural Careers." Since her appointment in 2017, she has been involved in over 40 nationally competitive grant proposals. She collaborates with other faculty, post-doctoral researchers, graduate students, and grant partners to enhance research and publishing efforts. To date, she has published over 32 digital media publications through collaborative projects. Her Extension work aims to provide research-based digital media educational tools and programs for both youth and adults. Martinez emphasizes context-aware design practices that promote inclusivity within agricultural sciences, food safety and other STEM education fields.



Dr. Lindsay Peelman

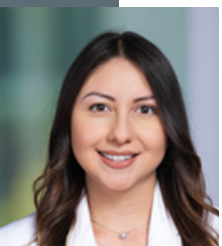
Monterey Peninsula College, Monterey, CA

Dr. Lindsay Peelman serves as the Faculty Chair of the Business and Work Experience Program at Monterey Peninsula College. She holds a Doctorate in Education with a specialization in Leadership and Innovation from New York University, a Master's Degree in Business Education from Ball State University, and a Bachelor of Science in Organizational Management from Wilmington University.

A proud community college alumna, Dr. Peelman began her academic journey by earning an Associate of Applied Science in Business Administration with a concentration in Customer Service Management. She is deeply committed to workforce development, experiential learning, and expanding access to high-quality, affordable business education in the heart of Monterey County, California, known as the Salad Bowl of America.

Her doctoral research focused on increasing internship access for Hispanic students at her community college. Through this work, she not only addressed existing equity gaps but also surpassed her program's goals, boosting Hispanic student participation in the Work Experience Education program to over 70%.

This fellowship brings her full circle, back to her roots. Dr. Peelman was born and raised in Maryland and is proud to continue her journey as both a scholar and advocate for educational equity and innovation.



Selena Plancarte-Arizmendi

California State University Monterey Bay, Seaside, CA

Ms. Selena Plancarte-Arizmendi serves as the Academic & Career Enrichment (ACE) Coordinator in the Department of Biology, Agriculture, and Chemistry at California State University, Monterey Bay. She holds a Master of Science in Counseling- Student Affairs and College Counseling, as well as a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from Fresno State University. Ms. Plancarte brings a strategic and well-rounded approach to student support services and program implementation, having worked across both the California State University (CSU) and California Community College (CCC) systems.

Currently, she leads the coordination of a federally funded U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), "Nurturing Relationships to Harvest Success..." In this role, she develops and implements enrichment activities aimed at advancing students' academic and professional success while addressing financial barriers. Ms. Plancarte also provides extensive professional development training that prepares students for internships and experiential learning opportunities within the private sector of the Agricultural industry, including USDA agencies. Her efforts have contributed to increased student retention, graduation rates, and post-graduate employment. Her continued collaboration across institutional and partner programs demonstrates her commitment to student success and workforce readiness.



Lisanette Rosario

Hostos Community College - CUNY, Bronx, NY

Lisanette Rosario is the Director of Career Services at Hostos Community College of the City University of New York (CUNY) and Co-President of the Career Services Association of CUNY. She holds an M.S.Ed. in Higher Education Administration from Baruch College and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Literacy at St. John's University. Her research examines how literacy development and career readiness intersect for community college students, particularly those from historically underserved communities.

Lisanette leads institution-wide efforts to embed career-connected learning across academic programs. She is currently spearheading the development and implementation of Career-Infused Degree Maps, a guided academic planning model that links coursework to career milestones. Her work ensures that students receive targeted, equitable preparation for both academic and professional success.

A key area of her leadership includes building partnerships for success, collaborations with industry, government, and nonprofit organizations that expand student access to internships, jobs, and mentorship opportunities. Previously, she played a central role in launching initiatives such as the Grow with Google Career Readiness Program and the Career Closet. Lisanette also contributes to system-wide initiatives that promote experiential learning and advocate for structural reforms designed to better align educational pathways with evolving industry demands.



Janitza Saavedra Lugo

University of Puerto Rico -Mayagüez, PR

Dr. Janitza Saavedra-Lugo is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Agricultural Education at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus. Dr. Saavedra-Lugo holds a Doctorate in Curriculum and Teaching, as well as master's and bachelor's degrees in Agricultural Education. Her areas of expertise include curriculum development, youth mentorship, educational leadership, and professional development for educators. She has served in multiple roles within agricultural education, including teaching, supervision, and coordination of FFA programs. Her current research focuses on teacher development, student recruitment and retention in agricultural sciences, and workforce preparation. Dr. Saavedra-Lugo has developed several activities that aim to strengthen agricultural education across Puerto Rico. With over 20 years of experience in K-12 and postsecondary education, she has demonstrated a long-standing commitment to empowering students through innovative, inclusive, and career-focused learning experiences. She currently leads outreach initiatives that connect students with career opportunities in food, agriculture, and natural resources, focusing on early exposure, mentoring, and academic support to increase recruitment and retention in agricultural science programs.



Sonali Saha

Miami Dade College, Miami, FL

Sonali Saha is the department chairperson of Biology, Health, Wellness and Funeral Service Education program at the North Campus of Miami Dade College. She holds a Ph.D. in biological science from University of Illinois at Chicago and has completed her postdoctoral tenure at the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University, and Archbold Biological Station, Lake Placid, Florida. She was a plant ecologist at Everglades National Park and a Fulbright Teaching Fellow in 2015-2016 teaching Environmental Science and Ecohydrology in St. Anthony's College, Shillong, India. At Miami Dade College she oversees departments that have 12 faculty members and a student population of ~3500 students. Her research and teaching experience has led to USDA funded student internship programs at MDC, and she is actively engaged in creating a pathways program in Agriculture.



Ken G. Sweat

Arizona State University West Valley, Glendale, AZ

Ken G. Sweat is a teaching professor in the School of Mathematical and Natural Sciences at Arizona State University West Valley in Glendale, Arizona. He holds a Ph.D. in plant biology from Arizona State University and an M.S. in botany from Arizona State University. His research broadly focuses on plant biology, environmental science, forensic botany, and science education.

Currently, Ken is a co-PI on a US Department of Agriculture grant that is exploring how to leverage resources such as community gardens, pollinator gardens, and a desert restoration project into experiential learning opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students. His previous research has engaged both undergraduate and graduate students in projects that examined the boom and bust of high-CBD hemp agriculture in Arizona, investigated the suitability of native flora to phytostabilize an abandoned uranium mine, summarized existing scientific literature on the effectiveness of four plants (sunflower, hemp, castor bean, and bamboo) at removing elemental pollution from soil, and the use of course-based undergraduate research experiences (CUREs) to better engage undergraduate students, especially those from populations that are commonly not able to participate in traditional scientific educational opportunities.



Richard T. Wiedenmann

Southeast New Mexico College, Carlsbad, NM

Rick Wiedenmann is a Professor of Biology and Chair of Natural Sciences and Engineering at Southeast New Mexico College (SENMC) in Carlsbad New Mexico. He received an MS in Biology, a BS in Biology (Ecology), and a BA in Museum Studies from Baylor University. He started teaching full-time at New Mexico State University at Carlsbad in 2000. In 2021, NMSU-C became an independent community college, SENMC. His primary teaching assignments are introductory biology classes, environmental science, and human anatomy and physiology. Prior to coming to Carlsbad, he taught biology courses at Jacksonville State University and Gadsden State Community College (both in Alabama). He has worked collaboratively with faculty at NMSU campuses in getting grant funding to promote community college students to continue to get 4-year degrees in resource management. He has worked closely with SENMC's HSI Office on STEM and other events and with InSpired by Science. He has attended Alliance for Hispanic Serving Institution Educators best practices conferences in 2023 and 2024 and participated in an ESCALA workshop. He has presented workshops and posters at the Association for Biological Laboratory Education and the American Meteorological Society.

High School Fellows

Fellows share their expertise with students at their respective HSIs, motivating Hispanic students to pursue careers in agriculture, science, research, and technology.



Claudia Villalobos

IDEA College Preparatory San Benito, San Benito, TX

Claudia Villalobos is a College Counselor at IDEA College Preparatory San Benito, located in San Benito, Texas. With 20 years of experience in education, she has dedicated her career to serving students in rural and underserved communities throughout the Rio Grande Valley. Ms. Villalobos earned a Bachelor of Science in Biology from the University of Texas at Brownsville in partnership with Texas Southmost College.

Ms. Villalobos is passionate about college access and equity in education, working closely with students and families to navigate the college admissions process and achieve post-secondary success. Throughout her career, she has played a vital role in increasing college enrollment and readiness among first-generation and low-income students. Her commitment to student advocacy and educational equity continues to shape her work as a counselor and mentor.

At IDEA San Benito, she collaborates with educators, college representatives, and community partners to support a college-going culture and ensure that every student has the resources and guidance they need to succeed beyond high school.



Daniel Delcher

Essex County Schools of Technology, West Caldwell, NJ

Daniel Delcher is a Teacher of Agriculture in the Animal Science Program at the Essex County Schools of Technology in West Caldwell, NJ. He holds a B.S. in Secondary Education: Agriculture (K-12) from Delaware Valley University. Within his school, He serves as a Teacher Leader and as the chapter FFA Advisor. In the local and state community he serves as a 4-H Club Leader and President of his counties 4-H Leaders Association; Secretary / Treasurer of the Essex County Board of Agriculture; Board of Director of the New Jersey Farm Bureau; and Northern Region Vice-President of the New Jersey Association of Agricultural Educators.

Mr. Delcher's Animal Science Program is a 9th - 12th Grade choice-high school program designed to prepare students for careers in the animal science - agriculture industry sector. Students participate in the National Curriculum for Agriculture Science Education (CASE), earn important credentials valued by the industry, and develop essential employability skills. Students have the opportunity to network with local and state professionals including veterinarians, veterinary technicians, zookeepers, beekeepers, breeders, and more. Some students have had the opportunity to gain employment and internships with some local animal related businesses and institutions like the Essex County Turtleback Zoo.



Rafael Iniguez

Parlier Unified School District, Parlier, CA

Dr. Rafael Iniguez is the Superintendent of Parlier Unified School District, a role he has held since 2022. A proud product of the district, Rafael grew up in Parlier as the child of migrant farm workers and graduated valedictorian from Parlier High School in 2002. He earned a full-ride scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania, graduating with honors in 2006. Rafael went on to earn a master's degree from Fresno State University in 2008 and completed his doctorate in Educational Leadership in 2022. His dissertation, *Community Cultural Wealth and the Inspirational Narratives of First-Generation Elite University Mexican American Students*, was published that same year.

As a first-generation college graduate, Rafael is passionate about inspiring and empowering students to pursue higher education and career pathways. Now leading Parlier Unified, Rafael is committed to advancing opportunities for students, staff, and the broader community. He believes in the transformative power of education as well as leadership and works in partnership with families, teachers, and administrators to elevate the district to the next level.

Science Fellows

Science Fellows collaborate with leading scientists from either USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) or Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Participants learn about state-of-the-art agricultural research that solves problems affecting Hispanic Americans and the rest of our nation daily.

Fellows share their expertise with students at their respective HSIs, motivating Hispanic students to pursue careers in agriculture, science, research, and technology.



Tolulope A. Agunbiade

Texas A&M University -Kingsville, TX

Dr. Tolulope A. Agunbiade is an Assistant Professor of Citrus Entomology at the Texas A&M University-Kingsville Citrus Center. She earned a BS in Crop Protection and Environmental Biology from the University of Ibadan, an MPhil in Entomology from the University of Ghana, and a Ph.D. in Entomology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She completed a Postdoctoral Fellowship at the School of Medicine, Yale University, and later served as an Instructional Assistant Professor in the Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and Biosecurity program at the University of Florida.

Her current position at Texas A&M University-Kingsville Citrus Center, includes leading research, teaching, and outreach initiatives to manage arthropod pests and disease vectors affecting citrus crops. Her current position focuses on developing innovative, sustainable, and environmentally friendly strategies to address critical challenges in the citrus industry. She is also passionate about teaching and mentoring the next generation of scientists. Through hands-on learning, critical thinking, and real-world applications, she equips her students with the tools to tackle agricultural challenges. Her outreach efforts include organizing workshops, field demonstrations, and extension publications to promote sustainable pest management practices. She has published extensively in peer-reviewed journals, providing practical solutions for growers, industry stakeholders, and the wider community.



Alicia V. Barriga

University of Puerto Rico - Mayagüez, PR

Dr. Alicia V. Barriga is an assistant professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez. She earned both a M.S. and a Ph.D. in Agricultural and Resource Economics from the University of Connecticut. Her current research lies at the intersection of agricultural economics, natural resource management, and rural development. Currently, she leads projects that explore the behavioral and educational determinants influencing farmers' economic decisions, such as the choice of farming systems to manage crops and livestock, soil quality, and climate variability. Her work aims to expand and deepen the understanding of Conservation Agriculture (CA) practices outcomes, such as agroforestry and shade cultivation, in terms of production and ecosystem services in regions rich in natural resources and of significant agricultural interest. She also collaborates with other projects studying the implications of the most prevalent diseases and the economic impacts of energy access in rural communities.



Jenny C. Fisher

Indiana University Northwest, Gary, IN

Jenny Fisher is an Associate Professor in the Biology Department at Indiana University Northwest. She earned a B.S. in Civil & Environmental Engineering from Duke University and a Ph.D. in Marine Science from the University of Georgia. Her research focuses on environmental microbiology, specifically the impacts of urban and rural wastewater systems on aquatic resources. Her recent work includes Microbial Source Tracking of septic system effluent and antibiotic-resistant bacteria in tributaries of Lake Michigan and wastewater surveillance for emerging antibiotic resistance. She also serves as an Associate Editor for the Journal of Great Lakes Research.

Jenny is currently a Co-PI on a US Department of Education HSI grant called TRINUFOS: Transforming Indiana University Northwest for Opportunities in STEM. This project introduced a suite of novel approaches to improving STEM education, with a focus on faculty training in equitable and high impact teaching practices and developing new avenues for undergraduate research. Jenny developed three new research-based courses as a part of this program, including a course-based undergraduate research experience (CURE) in an upper-level Microbiology lab, a research-focused First Year Seminar, and a Research Experience in STEM methods course.

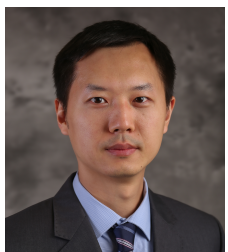


Simeng Li

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, CA

Dr. Simeng Li is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Civil Engineering at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona (Cal Poly Pomona). He earned both his Ph.D. and M.Eng. degrees in Civil Engineering from Florida State University and is a licensed civil engineer (P.E.) in the State of California. His research interests focus on water system resilience, waste-to-resource technologies, and the remediation of environmental contaminants. His current research projects include the development and field evaluation of biopolymer-based water conservation technologies for sustainable agriculture. These include hydrogel-enhanced soil amendments derived from food and green waste to improve soil moisture retention, reduce irrigation frequency, and minimize nutrient leaching in arid and semi-arid environments. He also investigates the environmental applications of engineered biochar for nutrient recovery and contaminant removal, as well as resource recovery from municipal sludge and solid waste.

Dr. Li is deeply committed to student success and actively promotes experiential learning by offering research-intensive and project-based opportunities for students at Cal Poly Pomona. He has mentored numerous students through research projects, theses, and national conference presentations, fostering academic growth and career readiness. His mentorship has led to student co-authored peer-reviewed publications and recognition at both regional and national levels.



Luotao Lin

University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM

Luotao Lin is an Assistant Professor in Nutrition and Dietetic Program within the Department of Individual, Family, & Community Education at the University of New Mexico. He received his Ph.D. in Nutrition Science from Purdue University and his M.S. in Nutrition Science from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He is also a Registered Dietitian.

His research focuses on food insecurity and nutrition equity, impact of food incentive program on healthy weight/obesity among children, adolescents, and their families, as well as precise nutrition, with a particular emphasis on temporal dietary patterns. He is currently co-leading a randomized control trial examining the effect of food scholarship on academic performance, food security status, and diet quality among undergraduate students at University of New Mexico. Additionally, he is investigating the health impacts of consistent versus inconsistent temporal dietary patterns across weekdays and weekends, with a focus on outcomes such as obesity and type 2 diabetes. He is currently a member of the American Society of Nutrition and Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics as well as a board member of New Mexico Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.



Juliana Rangel

Texas A&M University, College Station, TX

Juliana Rangel is a Professor of Apiculture in the Department of Entomology at Texas A&M University (TAMU) in College Station, TX. In 2010 she obtained a Ph. D. in Neurobiology and Behavior from Cornell University in Ithaca, NY. She was an NSF Postdoctoral Research Fellow from 2010 to 2013 at North Carolina State University.

Juliana's research program focuses on the biological and environmental factors that affect the reproductive quality of honey bees (*Apis mellifera*), the behavioral ecology and population genetics of feral honey bee colonies, and the quality and diversity of honey bee nutrition. She recently obtained a USDA-NIFA grant to study how the macro- and micro-nutrient composition of pollen collected by honey bee foragers in different agricultural landscapes affects overall colony health. She is an active member of the Texas Beekeepers Association and has been invited to speak at dozens of scientific conferences and beekeeping association meetings across the USA and internationally. She teaches the courses Honey Bee Biology, Introduction to Beekeeping, and Professional Grant and Contract Writing.



Noemí Rodríguez

New York City College of Technology - CUNY, Brooklyn, NY

Dr. Noemí Rodríguez's research addresses nutritional outcomes among low-resourced children. She is currently working on the association between family meals and childhood obesity utilizing USDA's FoodAPS data. Prior investigations focused on the food environment, food retail, and food shopping behaviors among SNAP beneficiaries in collaboration with the Section on Health Choice, Policy, and Evaluation in the Department of Population Health, NYU School of Medicine. Dr. Rodríguez, the founding director of the Healthcare Policy and Management BS program in the Health Sciences Department at the New York City College of Technology/CUNY, has taught health policy and management undergraduate and graduate courses for nearly 20 years. Previously, she served as a Special Assistant to the Chief of Staff of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and worked on quality assurance projects at the NYC Bellevue Hospital Center, at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia in Pennsylvania, and at the San Juan De Dios Hospital in Barcelona, Spain. Dr. Rodríguez holds a Master of Public Administration in health policy from the NYU Wagner Graduate School of Public Service and a Doctor of Public Health in health policy and management from the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy.



Nadim Zgheib

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Edinburg, TX

Nadim Zgheib is an assistant professor in the Department of Mechanical Engineering at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) and serves as the lead computational faculty at UTRGV's Institute of Advanced Manufacturing. He holds a joint Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering from the University of Florida and the Institut National Polytechnique de Toulouse in France. His research specializes in high-fidelity simulations of turbulent multiphase flows, with applications in fluid-sediment and fluid-surface interactions, ice accretion, frost formation, and aerosol dispersal.

Dr. Zgheib is a co-principal investigator on several interdisciplinary projects, including an Ocean Energy Safety Institute (OESI)-funded study led by the University of Florida in partnership with AtkinsRéalis, a U.S. Department of Energy-funded digital engineering project led by the University of Texas at El Paso, and an Army Research Lab-funded initiative on advanced manufacturing led by UTRGV. He also leads an NSF-funded program focused on enhancing computational skills and undergraduate research. As part of this effort, he is launching UTRGV's first Computational Fluid Dynamics summer camp in June 2025, targeting high school students from historically marginalized communities in the Rio Grande Valley.

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