

2026 Regents' Awards Nominees



March 5 - 6, 2026

**Nevada Regents' Scholar Award (Sam Lieberman Regents' Award for Student Scholarship)
Yan Arnaiz - Undergraduate - UNLV**

Yan Pablo Arnaiz was born in Camagüey, Cuba, and immigrated to the United States in 2004 at 9 months old. Yan is currently a senior, scheduled to graduate in December of 2025 with his Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry. He graduated with his Associate of Science in December of 2024 with a 4.0 GPA from the College of Southern Nevada. Shortly after enrolling at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, in the fall of 2023, he began working under Dr. Pradip K. Bhowmik, studying organic/polymer chemistry. His projects focused on the novel synthesis of fluorescent dye probes for biomedical imaging and photo-optic applications. Yan has been a recipient of the SNNA LSAMP grant, which awarded him \$2,500; the NSF EPSCOR grant, which awarded him \$4,000; and the NIH INBRE grant, which awarded him \$7,000. Yan has presented his research at local, regional, and national American Chemical Society (ACS) conferences and has competed in an ACS poster competition, winning first place. Yan's research has also been featured in two peer-reviewed publications, with high authorship. While doing research fulltime through the NIH INBRE grant, Yan studied for and took his Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), achieving a score in the 99th percentile (523). Throughout his undergraduate studies, Yan has maintained a 4.0 GPA. On top of his academic and research accomplishments, Yan has accumulated over 350 hours of community service working as an interpreter at a local free clinic and a food bank. Yan aspires to become a physician-scientist who not only showcases clinical excellence but also carries UNLV's mission and vision forward; a mission to be at the forefront of innovation while promoting social justice and equity in healthcare.

**Nevada Regents' Scholar Award (Sam Lieberman Regents' Award for Student Scholarship)
Alyssa Ayers – WNC**

Alyssa Ayers' life has been shaped by resilience, responsibility, and a deep desire to serve others. Growing up in a complicated and often unstable family environment, she learned early what it meant to adapt, stay strong, and step into roles many people her age never has to consider. As the eldest of five siblings, she often became the caregiver, the organizer, and the person who made sure daily life kept moving forward. While these experiences challenged her, they also built within her a strong sense of independence, empathy, and determination that continues to guide what she pursues and who she strives to be.

Alyssa is a high school senior and a Jump Start student concurrently earning her Associate of Science degree at Western Nevada College. She balances college coursework, leadership roles, and extracurricular activities with the same perseverance she developed growing up. She serves as a Senator in the Associated Students of Western Nevada and as Historian of her National Honor Society chapter. She has also held additional leadership roles, including Varsity Captain for Lacrosse and Class President through Student Council. These opportunities have strengthened her leadership skills and allowed her to give back to her school and community in meaningful ways.

Her passion lies in healthcare, particularly emergency medicine and rural patient care. Inspired by the medical professionals in her life and the needs she has witnessed in her community, Alyssa is working toward becoming a Physician Assistant who serves underserved and rural populations. Completing CNA training, shadowing PAs, and studying subjects such as anatomy and chemistry have helped shape her path and reaffirm her commitment to the future of helping others.

Every challenge Alyssa has faced has pushed her toward becoming someone who works hard, cares deeply, and strives to make a positive impact. Although she is only eighteen, her life story reflects the ambition, compassion, and strength that continues to define who she is and what she hopes to become.

**Nevada Regents' Scholar Award (Sam Lieberman Regents' Award for Student Scholarship)
Richard Chang – Graduate – UNLV**

Richard “Rich” Chang is a fourth-year doctoral candidate in the Psychological and Brain Sciences Ph.D. Program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Rich’s academic journey is driven by a commitment to advancing equity in higher education and beyond. His research examines how race, social class, and identity intersect to shape academic adjustment, psychological well-being, and experiences of belonging among historically marginalized groups.

At UNLV, Rich has contributed to research projects that bridge theory and practice, producing work that informs scholarship and social change. He has presented findings at national conferences and is preparing publications highlighting the voices and experiences of students of color and LGBTQ+ college students. Rich is also profoundly committed to mentorship, working with undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds to foster their academic growth and confidence as emerging scholars.

Beyond his research and mentorship, Rich has demonstrated leadership through departmental and campus-wide initiatives to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. These experiences reflect his belief that scholarship and service are deeply interconnected, and that creating supportive academic environments requires intellectual rigor and authentic community engagement.

Rich’s long-term professional goal is to join the professoriate as a faculty member at a research university. In this role, he aspires to conduct impactful research, mentor the next generation of scholars, and build more inclusive academic spaces where students from all backgrounds can thrive.

**Nevada Regents' Scholar Award (Sam Lieberman Regents' Award for Student Scholarship)
Elena Chau – Undergraduate – UNR**

Elena Chau demonstrates exceptional academic and leadership abilities. She is currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science and Engineering, having undertaken four internships, participated in two prestigious academic programs, and earned seven certifications. Elena has also placed in competitions such as Makerthon and the Madani-Gordaninejad Speech Contest, demonstrating her leadership qualities and dedication to roles outside of academics. In addition, Elena passionately dedicates her time to philanthropy and community service events. She has raised funds for brain cancer research, supported non-profits for STEAM educators, and held multiple officer roles in engineering and community service organizations. She currently serves as the President of the Collegiate section of the Society of Women Engineers. For Elena's broader vision, she aspires to become a full-stack developer, specializing in deep learning and data science while continually expanding her skills with a zealous and engaging attitude. During Elena's free time, she enjoys hot yoga, running, and playing guitar. Her ultimate goal is to inspire the growth of a sustainable and efficient economy through Computer Science and Engineering. Overall, Elena exemplifies the qualities of an outstanding nominee, distinguished by her academic excellence, leadership, and civic engagement.

**Nevada Regents' Scholar Award (Sam Lieberman Regents' Award for Student Scholarship)
Triniti Grance – NSU**

Triniti Grance was born in Honolulu, Hawai'i, and is graduating with a degree in Psychology with a 3.8 GPA. Throughout her undergraduate studies, she has balanced her academic work with her position as a student worker in the NSU Registrar's Office and her service as a Sergeant in the United States Army Reserve, where she serves as a Behavioral Health Non-Commissioned Officer.

Triniti's military service has been marked by exceptional achievement and leadership. She received an Army Achievement Medal for her work during a Soldier Readiness Processing event, where she and two other soldiers processed over 17,400 service members with efficiency and accuracy. A Specialist at the time, she demonstrated advanced technical skills in operating the Automated Neuropsychological Assessment Metrics system while maintaining and operating 20 computer stations—work that required focus and adaptability under pressure. Her dedication earned her the Army Service Ribbon and a promotion to Sergeant, reflecting her growth into leadership responsibilities.

Triniti's experiences in both academic psychology and military behavioral health have shaped her ambition to become a Clinical Psychologist serving military populations. She plans to pursue a doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology, with a focus on helping service members navigate PTSD, depression, and anxiety—the unique mental and emotional challenges that come with military life. Her path reflects a commitment to integrating her civilian education and her military service to bring specialized care to those who serve.

Beyond her professional goals, Triniti is driven by an ongoing desire for growth, knowledge, and understanding—of herself and the world around her. As she moves forward from NSU, she carries with her leadership skills, technical expertise, and compassionate purpose that will serve her well in graduate school and in her future work supporting the mental health of service members.

**Nevada Regents' Scholar Award (Sam Lieberman Regents' Award for Student Scholarship)
Joseph Warren Ogden – CSN**

Joseph Ogden is an international student from England pursuing a degree in Economics at the College of Southern Nevada. His journey to higher education has been marked by resilience, determination and grit. Joseph's studies in Politics at Newcastle University in England ended abruptly when he was struck by a drunk driver, suffering three spinal fractures that left him unable to walk for two years. During his long recovery, he was forced to withdraw from school and spent eight years on disability benefits, uncertain of what the future would hold.

A trip to Las Vegas six years later would unexpectedly change his life. There, he met his future wife, Alinne, a current CSN student. They fell in love and decided to build a family together in Las Vegas. Since enrolling at CSN, Joseph has actively pursued leadership and academic excellence. He reestablished the International Student Organization as President, serves as Secretary of Student Government, Vice President of Service for Phi Theta Kappa (PTK), and is Founder and President of the Economics Club. He is also a National Society of Leadership and Success graduate and Student Leadership Academy graduate. As the Vice President of Service for PTK Joseph has organized volunteer opportunities for over 100 CSN students, demonstrating his commitment to service and his new community.

All accomplishments earned despite challenges of balancing college and family responsibilities; perhaps best exemplified following the birth of his daughter on November 22, 2024, two weeks before his final exams. Joseph achieved all A's and was recognized as CSN's Outstanding Student of the Year in the Social Sciences Department. Joseph's GPA continues to be perfect to this day. He is the manifestation of excellence and the transformative power of higher education.

**Nevada Regents' Scholar Award (Sam Lieberman Regents' Award for Student Scholarship)
Kaycee Shulz – GBC**

Kaycee Shulz is a student in the bachelor's degree in English program at Great Basin College. She started at GBC in 2020 and earned her associate's degree while still in high school in the small rural town of Ely, Nevada. GBC is a perfect fit for her, as she is an active member of the military. In her English courses, she has developed an appreciation for hearing others' thoughts and opinions and learning new perspectives. She is always an active member of groups in her courses because she wants to help others grow their writing, just as she wants to learn from their ideas to shape her own writing.

After earning her bachelor's degree, she will continue her education by achieving her master's degree. She wants to achieve this so she can expand her learning and create opportunities to help others.

When it comes to leadership, she has had a few years of intermittent leadership experience, both at work and in her personal life. In her work life, she is a part of the Army National Guard. The Army has awarded her several medals over the years for leadership, including for aiding her squad and helping others in her unit. The most recent award was given to her by her battalion commander in the summer of 2025. Her platoon chose her as the recipient of this award for her volunteering, her qualifications with machine guns, and her help to her platoon during its Annual Training event. In her personal life, she volunteers in her community by helping at the local church she attends and by participating in town events. She finds joy in working in groups and helping others.

Kaycee is motivated to do her best on every task she takes on. The further plans she sees for herself after graduating from GBC are to continue her education at a university. She is passionate about English and passionate about learning. Furthermore, she believes she can grow as an individual at the university and advance her educational career.

**Nevada Regents' Scholar Award (Sam Lieberman Regents' Award for Student Scholarship)
Wendy Solorio Ramirez – TMCC**

Wendy Solorio Ramirez is a dedicated student who has made a lasting impact at Truckee Meadows Community College (TMCC). A proud recipient of several scholarships, including the TMCC Bender Endowment and Pennington Scholarship, Wendy has consistently demonstrated academic excellence, earning three Dean's List recognitions: Spring 2023, Fall 2024, and Spring 2025.

As a student leader, Wendy has served as Senator in the Student Government Association (SGA) for the 2024-25 year. She is also a founding member of La Raza, a student club promoting Latinx and Hispanic culture and community, being recognized for her outstanding contributions as the 2024-25 SGA Club Leader of the Year. Currently, Wendy serves as TMCC's Recognized Student Organization (RSO) Assistant, demonstrating her commitment to supporting student engagement at TMCC.

Wendy graduated with her Associate's degree in Construction Management (Magna Cum Laude) in May 2025 and is continuing her education at TMCC, pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Logistics Operations Management, which she expects to complete in May 2027.

**Nevada Regents' Scholar Award (Sam Lieberman Regents' Award for Student Scholarship)
Lauren Whitenack – Graduate – UNR**

Lauren Whitenack is a PhD candidate at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) in the Ecology, Evolution, and Conservation Biology Graduate Program, where she is advised by Dr. Vladimir Pravosudov. Her dissertation focuses on how extreme environmental variation in the northern Sierra Nevada mountains affects the reproduction of mountain chickadees, small resident songbirds. With her knowledge and experience, Lauren established an intensive arthropod monitoring program at Dr. Pravosudov's long-term study site, providing the data necessary to answer a variety of new questions about the relationships between climate, arthropod abundance, and chickadee reproduction. Her research provides critical insight into how resident montane species respond to climate change.

Lauren has published 12 academic papers since she began her graduate program: five as first author and seven as coauthor, including papers in *Science* and *Current Biology*. She has earned multiple student research grants from the American Ornithological Society, Western Field Ornithologists, and the UNR Graduate Student Association. In 2023, Lauren was recognized at the American Ornithological Society Conference with the Frances F. Roberts Award for Best Student Presentation. In addition to her academic work, Lauren also serves as Vice President on the Board of Trustees for the Lahontan Audubon Society, an independent chapter of the National Audubon Society located in Reno, NV. Since joining the organization in 2022, she has volunteered over 630 hours leading bird walks, giving public talks, recruiting and organizing volunteers, and forging equitable community partnerships to reach underrepresented groups. To date, she has led 56 field trips to local parks, earned \$6,000 in grant funding to increase LGBTQ+ representation in birding and community science and taught 8 free workshops on bird identification at the UNR Museum of Natural History.

Nevada Regents' Outstanding Classified Staff Award
Melinda "Mindy" Caskey – GBC

Melinda Caskey has served Great Basin College (GBC) with distinction for 30 years, beginning her career as a part-time student worker and advancing into one of the institution's most trusted and respected staff members. Throughout her tenure, she has consistently exemplified professionalism, integrity, and a steadfast commitment to student success.

Mindy's dedication to providing exceptional service is evident in her work with students navigating the financial aid process. She approaches each interaction with empathy, patience, and a deep understanding of the challenges faced by many of GBC's students. Her ability to guide students through complex financial procedures while maintaining compassion and professionalism reflects her unwavering commitment to equitable access to higher education.

A significant portion of Mindy's work focuses on supporting Native American students. She serves as a trusted advocate and mentor, helping students build confidence in their ability to succeed in college. She has collaborated extensively with tribal communities and schools in McDermitt, Owyhee, and other rural areas, assisting students with FAFSA completion and scholarship applications. Mindy also played an instrumental role in developing the Native American MTC Program in partnership with Barrick Mining Company, expanding educational opportunities for student's ineligible for Mine MTC scholarships.

In addition to her outreach efforts, Mindy serves as GBC's student loan officer, ensuring students fully understand their borrowing and repayment responsibilities. She also volunteers as a Nevada Promise Mentor, supporting students in meeting program requirements and achieving academic success. Her service to the broader community includes time on the Elko Band Council, further demonstrating her commitment to improving educational access and outcomes for Native American families.

Nevada Regents' Creative Activities Award – Community Colleges John Patrick Rice – GBC

Dr. John Patrick Rice is a professor of theatre and communications at Great Basin College in Elko, Nevada, where he has played a pivotal role in developing arts education across the rural Intermountain West. A longtime advocate for community-based performance and higher education access, Dr. Rice's career bridges academic scholarship, creative practice, and public engagement. His leadership has helped establish theatre as a vital cultural force in Nevada's Great Basin.

Born and raised in the Midwest, Dr. Rice earned his MFA in Theatre from the University of Wisconsin. Since joining the faculty at Great Basin College, Rice has focused his research on community performance, theatre history, and the evolving mission of the American community college. His academic work explores how arts education can both reflect and transform the identities of rural communities. In addition to his teaching, he has authored numerous scholarly and creative works, including *Mission Metamorphosis: The Effect of the Community College Baccalaureate on the Traditional Community College Mission*, a product of his research for his Ph.D. from Capella University.

During his long tenure at Great Basin College, Dr. Rice has directed and produced a wide range of stage productions, from classical repertory to original works written by and for the community. His creative projects often draw from local stories and regional history, fostering a sense of place and shared experience among students and audiences alike. Under his guidance, the GBC Theatre Program has become a cornerstone of the college's arts curriculum.

Beyond his teaching and directing, Dr. Rice has been deeply involved in community outreach, collaborating with local schools, arts organizations, and cultural councils to expand access to arts programming throughout rural Nevada. He is recognized for his commitment to cultivating talent and creativity in rural students, many of whom have gone on to careers in the arts, education, and public service.

Dr. John Patrick Rice continues to inspire through his dual commitment to scholarship and community. Whether in the classroom, on stage, or in his writing, he exemplifies the belief that creative activity is essential to civic life and personal growth. His enduring contributions to Great Basin College and the broader Elko community affirm his role as one of Nevada's leading voices in arts education and regional theatre.

**Nevada Regents' Creative Activities Award – University/DRI
Javon Johnson – UNLV**

Javon Johnson is an Associate Professor and Director of African American & African Diaspora studies. He holds an appointment in Gender & Sexuality Studies in the Interdisciplinary, Gender, and Ethnic Studies Department. Dr. Johnson's first two books, *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities* (Rutgers University Press 2017) and *The End of Chiraq: A Literary Mixtape* (Northwestern University Press 2018) critically explore art making communities. In 2021, Dr. Johnson contributed "Give Me Poems and Give Me Death: On the End of Slam" to the *Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First Century American Poetry*. That same year, he collaborated internationally on "Aural/Oral Dramaturgies" (University of London) and "Sounds of the City: Dramaturgy, Space, Identity" (Critical Stages). He was also invited to join an international cohort of leading scholars of spoken word poetry to author an essay for *Post45 Contemporaries*, a collection of the foremost thinkers on slam and spoken word poetry.

In 2020, Dr. Johnson published his first full-length collection of poetry, *Ain't Never Not Been Black*, which was awarded the silver medal at the Midwest Book Awards, and premiered his one-person show, *Still*, at the Pasadena Playhouse, the official state theatre of California. The production was nominated by the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle for Best Solo Performance and Best Writing. In 2021, he starred in and co-produced *FOX SOUL's Christmas Special Powered by Da Poetry Lounge*, which later became the first-ever poetry show on a major television channel. That same year, he was featured in PBS's *Articulate* documentary series, awarded a fellowship at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and invited to create a short film based on one his poems, *Voicemails to My Future Self: Vol. 1*. The film won Best in Show at the American Advertising Federation Triangle ADDY Awards, along with multiple golds and a bronze, and later earned international recognition with the Highly Commended Prize in Best Video at the Drum Awards in the UK. His creative practice also extends into dramaturgy, including a commission from an award-winning UK performer for his one-person show. Dr. Johnson has performed and led workshops across the U.S. and abroad. In 2025, he began coaching young poets in Las Vegas through The Spotlight, leading them to historic wins at the Chicharra Poetry Slam Festival in Albuquerque and a third-place finish at Portland's Bigfoot Poetry Slam Festival.

In addition to his intellectual and creative output, Dr. Johnson is an arts administrator. He serves on the Nevada Arts Council Board and the Spotlight Poetry Las Vegas Board. Additionally, he has served on numerous Creative Writing and Fine Arts MA thesis committees. Whether as an artist on stage, a scholar in the classroom and in print, or an administrator and mentor shaping creative communities, Dr. Johnson embodies the transformative possibilities of creative work.

Nevada Regents' Teaching Award – Tenured/Tenure Track – Community Colleges
Angela Spires – CSN

Angela Spires has been teaching for the Nevada System of Education for over 15 years. She has three master's degrees in English Rhetoric and Composition, Equity and Diversity in Education, and an MFA in Creative Writing. She began teaching Composition and still loves teaching Composition courses the most, but has also taught ALS, Communication, and multiple literature courses. Through the years of teaching, she has worked with the community to create a youth writing program in Reno, worked with homeless shelters, local libraries, and the prison system in Las Vegas. She enjoys working with the community. She has a desire to stay current on the student population and current needs. She uses multi-modal teaching and evidence-based practices in all of her courses. In addition, she uses OER textbooks to provide free texts to students so all students begin the class ready to go for the semester. While she serves on multiple committees as CSN, her commitment is to the students first and uses her service work and research to help inform her current pedagogical practices.

**Nevada Regents' Teaching Award – Tenured/Tenure Track – University /DRI
MaryKay Orgill – UNLV**

MaryKay Orgill is a Professor and Chair of the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). She has been a tutor, teaching assistant, or instructor in Math, Spanish, Music, or Chemistry since she was 14 years old and knows that teaching is her life calling. Her enthusiasm for improving chemistry teaching and learning led her to pursue a Ph.D. in chemistry with an emphasis in chemistry education research from Purdue University in 2003, working under the guidance of Professor George M. Bodner. She joined UNLV in 2004 to establish the university's graduate program in chemistry education research, and she has been using education research to improve chemistry teaching and learning at UNLV for over 20 years.

In addition to developing and using qualitative research methodologies to examine and improve undergraduate chemistry and biochemistry teaching and learning, Dr. Orgill works with the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry (IUPAC) to examine the implementation of systems thinking approaches in chemistry education contexts and has provided professional development workshops and classes to over 500 K-12 teachers and university faculty in order to increase their knowledge of STEM content and of instructional strategies that are effective for teaching STEM subjects.

Dr. Orgill has received multiple awards for her teaching, her scholarship in the area of chemistry education research, her mentorship of research students, and her service to the chemistry education community. She has held several positions in the American Chemical Society, including serving as a Chair of the Division of Chemical Education in 2017 and, currently, as a member of the Executive Board of the ACS Committee on Education. For her contributions to chemistry education research, she was named a Fellow of the Royal Society of Chemistry (UK) in 2017 and of the American Chemical Society in 2020.

**Nevada Regents' Teaching Award – Non-Tenured – University /DRI
Kelly Keselica– UNR**

Kelly Keselica is a licensed Professional Engineer with a distinguished career in engineering education and student mentorship. She holds both a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Science degree in Civil Engineering from the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), as well as a Master of Business Administration. Her academic background and professional licensure are complemented by a passion for the management and leadership aspects of engineering, which she integrates into her teaching and service.

An award-winning lecturer in UNR's College of Engineering, Keselica teaches foundational and advanced undergraduate courses, including Mechanics of Solids, Dynamics, and Introduction to Engineering Design. She also developed and currently teaches a Leadership for Engineers course, where she prepares students to navigate the interpersonal, organizational, and ethical challenges of professional practice. Recognized for her excellence in teaching, she has received the Tibbitts Distinguished Teacher Award along with multiple nominations for the Paul and Judy Bible Teaching Excellence Award.

Her commitment to student success extends beyond the classroom. As faculty advisor for several engineering student organizations including the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) Student Chapter and the Concrete Canoe and Steel Bridge teams where she has guided students to regional and national achievements. Her leadership and mentorship have left a lasting impact on thousands of students entering the engineering profession.

Dedicated to personal growth and wellness, Keselica recently completed her 200-hour yoga teacher training certification. Outside of her professional role, she enjoys yoga, climbing, fitness, pottery, board games, traveling, and exploring the outdoors. Through her multifaceted career and personal pursuits, she exemplifies a commitment to lifelong learning, balanced living, and the holistic development of both herself and her students.

**Nevada Regents' Academic Advisor Award – Community College
Denesha Moore – CSN**

Denesha Moore was born in Detroit, Michigan, and raised in Hawaii and Germany. Her military upbringing instilled in her a deep appreciation for cultural awareness and global perspectives. She is a proud alumna of the College of Southern Nevada (CSN) and holds a bachelor's degree in Linguistic Studies from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV).

In 2010, Denesha moved across the country to join Baltimore Community College as an International Academic Advisor (DSO) and instructor of English as a Second Language. During her tenure, she served on numerous college-wide committees across Maryland, contributing to strategic planning initiatives that supported student success.

Denesha returned to Las Vegas in 2017 and began her work as an Academic Advisor at CSN in 2018. She became an active member of the African American Heritage Council. She also collaborated with science faculty, holding area of study open houses to strengthen communication and ensure students received timely advising resources.

Beyond higher education, Denesha is committed to mentorship, service, and community engagement. She is the founder of the **Sixteen Candles Mentorship Program**, where she teaches etiquette and tea protocol to underprivileged girls while exposing them to enriching cultural and “high civilization” experiences.

Her leadership and service extend across multiple organizations:

- Second Vice President, Top Ladies of Distinction, Inc.
- Scholarship Chair, Top Ladies of Distinction, Inc.
- Community Beautification Chair, Top Ladies of Distinction, Inc.
- Scholarship Chair, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.
- Membership Chair, The Society, Incorporated Supporting Youth Arts

**Nevada Regents' Academic Advisor Award - Undergraduate - University/DRI
Monica Moreno – UNLV**

Monica Moreno was born and raised in Santa Ana, California, and relocated to Las Vegas in 2007 with her family. Shortly after moving to Las Vegas, she joined UNLV's College of Education in May 2007 where she worked as the student advising center's office manager.

Monica's passion for helping others led her to pursue a Bachelor's degree from UNLV in Human Services. As a first-generation Latina college student, she was inspired to become an Academic Advisor, seeing it as a way to pay forward the guidance and support she received while navigating her own college journey. Monica began her career as an Academic Advisor in September 2011 and has since held various leadership roles, including Assistant Director for the College of Education. In May 2018, she earned her Master of Education in Higher Education and remains committed to serving the university and greater Nevada community with compassion and dedication.

Currently, Monica serves as the Associate Director of Advising for UNLV's College of Education, where she supports students and advisors alike through mentorship, program development, and student success initiatives. In addition to her administrative role, Monica also teaches first-year seminar courses for students enrolled in the pre-apprenticeship program, further demonstrating her dedication to student development and success.

In her spare time, Monica thrives on being a busy body and enjoys watching her teenage son play basketball and doing arts and crafts with her daughter. She also loves all things related to home décor and interior design.

**Nevada Regents' Academic Advisor Award - Graduate - University/DRI –
Jenny Ouyang – UNR**

Dr. Jenny Ouyang is an Associate Professor in the Department of Biology and Director of the Graduate Program in Ecology, Evolution, and Conservation Biology (EECB) at the University of Nevada, Reno. She earned her undergraduate degrees in Biology and French from the University of California, Irvine, and her Ph.D. in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology from Princeton University. She completed postdoctoral research at Virginia Tech and the Netherlands Institute of Ecology.

Dr. Ouyang's research investigates the ecological and evolutionary foundations of physiological variation in animals, with the goal of addressing conservation challenges and improving human health. Her work has been supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF)—as a Graduate Research Fellow, Postdoctoral Fellow, and CAREER award recipient—as well as by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Fulbright U.S. Scholars Program. In 2025, she was the University of Nevada, Reno's nominee for the Blavatnik Award for Young Scientists.

An accomplished mentor, Dr. Ouyang has guided seven graduate students across three interdisciplinary programs who have collectively secured over \$700,000 in grants and fellowships. She has also mentored more than 50 undergraduate researchers, fostering hands-on experiences that bridge science and society. Beyond her research and teaching, she leads campus initiatives that promote inclusion and belonging, advises city planners and policymakers, and actively engages the public in her research.

Dr. Ouyang's innovative and collaborative approach continues to shape how we understand—and reimagine—urban environments to make them more livable for both people and wildlife.

**Nevada Regents' Researcher Award – Mid-Career
Arya Udry – UNLV**

Arya Udry is a professor at UNLV in the Department of Geoscience. She is an igneous (=magmatic) petrologist, who specialized on extraterrestrial magmatic rocks. After graduating with a PhD in Earth and Planetary Science from the University of Tennessee in 2014, she joined the faculty of UNLV. Her research program seeks to better constrain the interior composition, magmatic processes, and general evolution of the planet Mars through meteorite and rover data analyses. Her martian studies include comprehensive petrological analyses of martian samples to mimic the scale of terrestrial geological studies. Her group also analyzes martian rover data to understand the formation of rare martian rocks with silica-rich compositions. In addition to martian igneous rocks, Dr. Udry's group has studied the asteroidal enstatite-rich meteorites, including aubrites and enstatite chondrites, which are geochemical analogs to Mercury, to better constrain elemental partitioning at highly reduced conditions. Dr. Udry uses a variety of classic petrological tools, such as microscopy, as well as electron and ion microprobe analyses, Laser Ablation ICPMS, and thermodynamical modeling. Dr. Udry became a participating scientist on the Mars 2020 Perseverance rover mission in 2020 and will continue on the mission as a co-Investigator on the SuperCam instrument. Dr. Udry authored 66 publications during her time at UNLV, and received ~\$2.6M in external grants. She received the Nier Prize from the Meteoritical Society and the Paul Niggli Medal in 2022 for her work on martian rocks.

**Nevada Regents' Researcher Award – Distinguished
Andrey Khlystov – DRI**

Dr. Andrey Khlystov, Research Professor and Director of Organic Analytical Laboratory in the Division of Atmospheric Sciences (DAS), Desert Research Institute (DRI) has obtained his M.S. in Physical Chemistry at Novosibirsk State University, USSR in 1992 and his Ph.D. in Atmospheric Sciences at Wageningen University, The Netherlands in 1998. His career spans fundamental atmospheric chemistry, instrument innovation, and applied environmental health research. A pioneer in developing artifact-free, high-time resolution instruments for aerosol characterization, Dr. Khlystov's innovations have been commercialized and deployed in air pollution monitoring networks worldwide. His groundbreaking research encompasses electronic cigarette emissions, where his team first demonstrated the link between flavoring compounds and toxic aldehyde production, and wildfire aerosol characterization, including the first quantification of individual compound contributions to light absorption and brown carbon effects on snow albedo.

With over 100 peer-reviewed publications, over 8,500 citations, and an H-index of 45, Dr. Khlystov has secured more than \$15 million in competitive research funding from NSF, NIH, EPA, DOE, and international agencies. His excellence has been recognized through the DRI Science Medal (2023), NSF CAREER Award, SRNT New Investigator Award, and invitations to deliver keynote addresses at major international conferences. He serves on editorial boards for *Atmosphere and Toxics*, teaches in the UNR Atmospheric Sciences Graduate Program, and has mentored over 20 graduate students and postdocs throughout his distinguished career.

**Nevada Regents' Researcher Award – Humanities and Social Sciences
Valerie Fridland – UNR**

As a sociolinguist, the main thrust of Dr. Fridland's work has been on variation in vowel production and perception across American regional dialects as part of a decade long NSF funded project called Vowels In America (VIA). Her goal is to understand the social and linguistic triggers behind vowel changes that, in subtle ways, have been moving regional dialects further apart, affecting not just the way people speak, but also what they hear. Her co-authored book, *Sociophonetics*, introducing and examining the emerging field of sociolinguistics and phonetics, was published as part of the Key Topics Series with Cambridge University Press and has just been tapped for a Chinese translation. Her research has also regularly been published in leading linguistics journals such as *American Speech*, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, *Language Variation and Change*, *Journal of Phonetics* and *Lingua*. She also edited (as lead editor) three volumes exploring vowel changes occurring in speech in the Western states (Duke University Press) and have been serving as series co-editor for the *Elements in Sociolinguistics* series for Cambridge University Press since 2021. Over the past several years, her research interests have broadened to include more engaged scholarship, with a goal of synthesizing the interests and concerns of researchers with those of everyday speakers.

Supported by a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, her first more publicly accessible book, *Like, Literally, Dude: Arguing for the Good in Bad English* came out with Viking/Penguin Press in April 2023, receiving strong positive reviews in the press while also eliciting praise from colleagues interested in her approach to studying language in the new space of public linguistics. In that vein, she was recognized with the Linguistics, Language and the Public Award by the Linguistic Society of America in 2023, the leading organization in her field. Her latest book project, *Why We Talk Funny* is also supported by an NEH fellowship, and will be coming out with Viking/Penguin on April 21, 2026. Her work has been featured in a variety of media outlets including the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, Armchair Expert, Entrepreneur, Marketplace and NPR which has enabled her to build awareness of linguistics research by writing for popular magazines/media including a monthly blog for Psychology Today, regular contributions to the Grammar Girl Podcast and via a biweekly radio segment on KTRS radio in St. Louis.

Nevada Regents' Rising Researcher Award
Scott Allen – UNR

Scott Allen is an Assistant Professor and interdisciplinary scientist in the Natural Resources and Environmental Science Department at UNR. Scott grew up in Baltimore, Maryland and pursued a B.S. degree at University of Maryland, College Park. At UMD, Scott initially took courses in civil engineering and physics, and found passion in leading trips for the outdoors club. After sophomore year, Scott worked summers as a wildland firefighter in Wyoming; this experience in natural resources cemented Scott's interests and lead to him switching to the Environmental Science and Policy program. Scott next pursued a M.S. degree in Water Resource Engineering at Oregon State University, working in a tree ecophysiology lab and studying the evaporation of water from forest canopies. This work connected ecosystem processes to surface-atmosphere interactions, which continues to be a focus of Scott's research.

Always eager to explore new environments, Scott was drawn to Louisiana State University to study how flooding affects carbon and water fluxes in under-studied swamp forests of the southeastern US. After completing his PhD in 2016, Scott was a postdoc at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH Zurich) and studied controls over plant-water availability. This was followed by a next postdoc at University of Utah in 2019, initiating Scott's interests in Great-Basin desert ecosystems that Scott continues to study. As a member of UNR's faculty since 2020, he teaches Watershed Hydrology, Wetland Ecosystems, and Isotope Techniques in Hydrology, and leads a research group that studies how water interacts with vegetation across diverse systems. In his free time, Scott pursues hobbies that parallel his research, exploring environments of the western US and making mixed-media art using found, natural materials.

Nevada Regents' Rising Researcher Award
Nathan Chellman – DRI

Nathan Chellman grew up in Reno, NV and received an undergraduate degree from Brown University before returning to Reno and completing MS and PhD degrees from the Graduate Program in Hydrologic Sciences at UNR. Nathan works in the DRI Ice Core Lab where his research specializes in the collection, processing and analysis of ice cores — cylindrical samples of ice drilled from glaciers and ice sheets around the world. The trace concentrations of elements in these ice cores inform our understanding of past climates and events in ancient times that changed human history. Collecting these ice cores requires living for extended stays in remote areas such as on glaciers in Greenland and other locations. Nathan received his private helicopter pilot license in 2014 and volunteered as an EMT while he was an undergraduate. In his free time, Nathan enjoys running, skiing, and backpacking in the Sierras and central Nevada.

Nevada Regents' Rising Researcher Award
Kara Christensen Pacella – UNLV

Dr. Christensen Pacella is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at University of Nevada Las Vegas. She received her doctoral degree in clinical psychology with a specialization in quantitative psychology from The Ohio State University in 2019 after completing her doctoral internship at the Medical University of South Carolina. Dr. Christensen Pacella completed a three-year postdoctoral clinical research fellowship in eating disorders at the University of Kansas and joined the faculty of UNLV in July 2022. Her research focuses on developing and testing innovative ways to improve eating disorder treatments and make them more accessible to the people who need them. In addition to her innovative basic science research, she is the co-developer of two mobile applications currently being tested to treat eating disorders. She has authored 61 peer-reviewed journal articles, three book chapters, and more than 100 conference, research, and outreach presentations.

In 2025, based on her innovative contributions to the field, she was named an Association for Psychological Sciences Rising Star. Her work has been funded by American Academy of Sleep Medicine, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institute of General Medical Sciences, and the Department of Defense. She is an Associate Editor of Journal of Clinical Psychology, an elected member of the Eating Disorders Research Society, and Co-Chair of the Assessment and Diagnosis Special Interest Group for the Academy of Eating Disorders. She is also a licensed clinical psychologist with advanced training in eating disorders and evidence-based therapies for sleep disorders, anxiety, depression, and trauma.

Nevada Regents' Rising Researcher Award
Samantha John – UNLV

Dr. Samantha John is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Brain Health at the Kirk Kerkorian School of Medicine, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where she directs the Cognitive Aging & Neuropsychological Equity (CANE) Lab. She is a geriatric neuropsychologist and cognitive aging researcher who is passionate about reducing disparities in the prevention, detection, and treatment of Alzheimer's disease and related dementias (ADRD). Her program of research employs advanced psychometrics, longitudinal modeling, and community-based methods to increase representation in research, explain variability in cognitive aging, and analyze patient disease outcomes.

Dr. John has produced an impressive body of scholarship, including 36 peer-reviewed manuscripts, six book chapters, and 87 conference presentations. Her work has appeared in leading Q1 journals in neuropsychology and dementia research and has been cited over 1,012 times (Google Scholar impact metrics accessed August 2025: h-index=17; i10-index=21). She is active in professional service, serving as a grant reviewer for the National Institute on Aging at NIH and an editorial board member for the flagship journal of her discipline, *Neuropsychology*. She has secured more than \$1.35 million in research funding, including over \$1.1 million in federal support from the National Institute on Aging and the National Institute of General Medical Sciences. She has mentored 10 doctoral students across 3 graduate degree programs in her lab and supported 29 total students through committee membership on thesis, dissertation, and qualifying committees. Most of her published works since joining UNLV have trainee coauthors (15/23 manuscripts & chapters, 27/36 conference presentations since 2019). Through her scholarship, service, and mentorship, she is shaping the future of ADRD research and bringing recognition to UNLV as a hub for innovative, equity-driven brain health science.

Nevada Regents' Rising Researcher Award
Holly Martin – NSU

Holly Anne Martin, PhD is an Assistant Professor of Microbiology in the School of Liberal Arts, Sciences, and Business (LABS) at Nevada State University. Dr. Martin teaches Intro to Cell and Molecular Biology and Microbiology courses and is actively involved in undergraduate research mentorship. Her research centers on stress responses and mutagenesis in bacteria, with a particular focus on the role of the transcription-coupled repair protein Mfd in *Bacillus subtilis* and *Staphylococcus aureus*.

Dr. Martin has mentored students through INBRE and NSF-funded programs, including the REU and EPSCoR UROP, with several of her mentees presenting at regional conferences. She has received competitive research awards such as the INBRE Pilot Grant (\$10,000), Pilot+ Grant (\$20,000), and an NSF ROA (\$14,720). She is also co-PI on a pending NIH R16 proposal in collaboration with UNLV. Her scholarship includes more than a dozen peer-reviewed journal articles in journals such as *Frontiers in Microbiology*, *Journal of Virology*, *Methods*, and *Genes*. Dr. Martin serves as the secretary for the Arizona-Southern Nevada Branch of the American Society for Microbiology and is committed to supporting student development through research, regional engagement, and inclusive mentorship. In her free time, she enjoys hiking with her dog, watching football, and visiting national parks.

Nevada Regents' Rising Researcher Award
Sandhya Narayanan – UNR

Sandhya Kritika Narayanan is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Nevada, Reno. She is a linguistic anthropologist, who specializes in theorizing the management and maintenance of linguistic complexity as it intersects with the mobilization of racialized and gendered subjectivities. Her published research contributes to broader understandings of the relationship between language contact and multilingualism and gender, language revitalization and maintenance and political movements, and theoretical discussions concerning language change and the dialectic between linguistic innovation and the reproduction or creation of new social and cultural practices and forms.

Dr. Narayanan completed her BA in Linguistics and in Anthropology at Brandeis University (Magna Cum Laude). She completed her MA and Ph.D. in Anthropology (Linguistic) at the University of Michigan. She is the author of *Mother Tongues of the High Andes: Language, Gender, and Indigenous Difference in Peru*, published in November 2025 with the University of Arizona Press. She is also the co-editor of *Linguistic and Discursive Constructions of the Gendered Subject: Beyond Woman's Talk*, co-edited with Dr. Ashlee Civitello Dauphinais. This book is currently under contract with Bloomsbury Press.

Her research has been funded by the National Science Foundation, the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad (DDRA) Fellowship, the National Geographic Society, the American Philosophical Society, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation. She is also the recipient of the prestigious NSF CAREER award for her project, "Analyzing Determinants in Shaping Language Restoration and Development".

Dr. Narayanan currently serves on the Nomination Committee for the Executive Board for the American Anthropological Association (AAA). She is also the co-editor for *Gender and Language*, the flagship journal for the International Gender and Language Association (IGALA).

Nevada Regents' Rising Researcher Award
Katrina Nicholas – NSU

Katrina Nicholas, PhD, CCC-SLP, is an assistant professor of Speech Language Pathology at Nevada State University in the School of Education. She started her position in Fall 2023. Dr. Nicholas completed her PhD in Psychology with an emphasis in Developmental Psycholinguistics and a clinical Master of Science degree in Speech Language Pathology from the University of Arizona. She is a licensed and certified pediatric Speech-Language Pathologist having worked closely with culturally and linguistically diverse families in Early Intervention services (birth through five) in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Dr. Nicholas has almost two decades of experience working with young children in a variety of research and clinical settings. Her research applies principles of learning and memory to improve therapy techniques for children with late language emergence and developmental language disorders. Dr. Nicholas's most recent work focuses on verb and adjective learning in typically developing, late talking, and bilingual children.

Nevada Regents' Rising Researcher Award
Elnaz Seylabi – UNR

Elnaz Seylabi is an Assistant Professor of Civil & Environmental Engineering at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), where she directs the Computational Geostructural Dynamics Lab. Her research blends physics-guided machine learning with high-fidelity simulation and large-scale experimentation to advance the seismic safety of critical geostructural systems, including energy infrastructure, transportation structures, and soil–structure systems under extreme events.

Dr. Seylabi earned her Ph.D. in Civil Engineering (Structural Mechanics, minor in Mathematics) from UCLA in 2016, after completing an M.Sc. in Earthquake Engineering (2009) and a B.Sc. in Civil Engineering (2007) at Sharif University of Technology. She then served as a postdoctoral scholar at Caltech for three years before joining UNR. Her recognitions include the NSF CAREER Award (2025), UCLA's Dissertation Year Fellowship (2015), the Martin Rubin Scholarship (2013), and Dr. Tavakoli's Award (2012), among others.

At UNR, Dr. Seylabi mentors a diverse cohort of Ph.D., M.S., and undergraduate researchers and embeds open-source, hands-on computational modules into the civil-engineering curriculum. She is an active member of national technical committees, a frequent reviewer for leading journals, and an organizer of conference sessions on physics-informed machine learning for dynamical systems.

Nevada Regents' Rising Researcher Award Shengjie Zhai - UNLV

Dr. Shengjie (Patrick) Zhai is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). His interdisciplinary research integrates bioengineering, electronics, and artificial intelligence to address critical challenges in healthcare technology.

He is recognized for pioneering work in developing micro-engineered multichannel organ-on-a-chip systems that model human physiology, AI-driven biomimetic biosensors capable of real-time health monitoring, and innovative biomaterials for next generation personal health wearable bioelectronics. Dr. Zhai has authored over 20 peer-reviewed publications in leading journals such as *Advanced Optical Materials*, *ACS Applied Materials & Interfaces*, *Advanced Science*, *Frontiers*, and *IEEE Transactions on Neural Systems and Rehabilitation Engineering*. He also holds nine patents spanning organ-on-chip platforms, micro/nano-bioelectronics, and advanced biosensing technologies. His research excellence has been acknowledged through multiple prestigious awards, including three National Science Foundation (NSF) Awards (2019, 2021, 2024), two Nevada Governor's Office of Economic Development Fund Awards (2020, 2024), a NASA-Colgate Research Award (2019), a U.S. Department of Energy Research Award (2023), and a NASA Research Award (2024).

Beyond research, Dr. Zhai is an active contributor to the scientific community and a dedicated mentor to the next generation of engineers and scientists. He regularly serves as a reviewer for high-impact journals and as a panelist for major federal funding agencies, including NSF, DOE, NIH, and NASA. Equally committed to advancing diversity and inclusion in STEM, he has successfully guided minority and female students toward securing nationally competitive scholarships and fellowships, many of whom have advanced to Ph.D. programs, medical schools, and leadership positions in the Department of Defense and industry. Through his combination of technical innovation, academic leadership, and mentoring excellence, Dr. Zhai continues to shape the future of bioelectronics, biomedical devices, and AI-enhanced healthcare technologies.