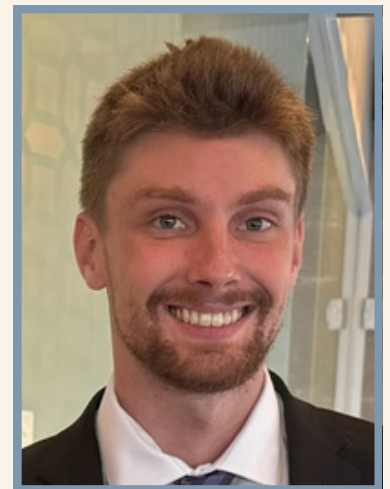## Amy Gonzales
Associate Professor
Communication

Reducing Technology Anxiety and Encouraging Digital Literacy for Low-Income Latino Residents: A Community-Based Participatory Research Field Experiment

Today digital computing skills are needed to access healthcare, employment, educational services, and more. However, technology anxiety is a major barrier to building digital literacy, especially for low-income, minimally educated, non-native English-speaking individuals. In collaboration with Partners in Education, a local digital equity non-profit, we will design and test a message-based intervention with clients to reduce technology anxiety, increase computer engagement and improve digital literacy in this population. Project goals include: 1) evaluate the breadth and quality of existing digital literacy services in the region, 2) increase resident participation in these and other social services that require digital access, and 3) refine a scalable intervention that can be disseminated to other vulnerable communities around the globe. In particular, we will design messaging that specifically addresses the digital needs of vulnerable groups in the region: low-income Latino immigrants with limited English skills. This population is dependent on digital applications to stay connected to local services (e.g. healthcare, education, employment, support networks, etc.). In short, improving digital literacy is an essential mechanism for reducing inequality for the vulnerable populations in the region.

Carson Kopper
Graduate Student
Computer Science

Mobile Broadband Performance and Access Trends in the Central Coast

Reliable, high-speed broadband is crucial for individuals to access key services, and mobile broadband access is especially important in areas where fixed Internet is unavailable. While the United States relies on provider-reported maps to determine broadband availability, these maps are prone to overstate coverage. Such maps can be challenged using ground-truth measurements from active speed tests. We evaluate the quality of mobile broadband coverage in the tri-county area, leveraging speed test data collected periodically by the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC). Using this dataset, we examine changes in download speed, upload speed, and latency over the past decade. We also compare recent speed test results to provider-reported maps to determine where providers over-report their broadband availability and speeds. We investigate whether socioeconomic variables, including income, employment, and educational attainment, have any bearing on mobile broadband performance. Augmenting this set of tests with crowdsourced data collection, we look for areas that the CPUC's active measurement campaign does not cover that are potentially underperforming. Finally, we chart cellular infrastructure evolution and compare this development with socioeconomic variables.

Fatiq Nadeem
Graduate Student
Bren School of Environmental Studies

Wildfire Smoke and Farmworkers on California's Central Coast

Farmworkers on California's Central Coast shoulder the twin burdens of wildfire smoke exposure and exclusion from formal disaster relief. This project combines atmospheric modeling with on-the-ground evidence to quantify these impacts and inform policy responses. Using the HYSPLIT dispersion model together with ERA5 climate reanalysis data, I generate hourly, high-resolution simulations of wildfire smoke plumes that capture variation in exposure across farms and communities. These exposure measures are merged with interviews conducted in partnership with local farmworker organizations to document operational disruptions, lost wages, health costs, and adaptation strategies. The integration of climate modeling and community-level data provides a unique lens on how environmental shocks affect vulnerable labor markets. Key outputs include dynamic smoke exposure maps, a mixed-methods cost–benefit analysis of extending the California Excluded Workers Program, and accessible policy briefs co-authored with community allies. Together, these contributions provide evidence to anchor state-level negotiations and advance debates on climate justice, immigrant exclusion, and labor market resilience.

Ben Olguin
Professor & Robert and Liisa Erickson Presidential Chair
English

Historias: Latina/o Oral Historiography, Community Theater, and Expanding the Latina/o Digital Commons in the California Central Coast

This Latina/o oral history, community theater, and digital archive project is based in the Global Latinidades Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), in collaboration with community organizations and residents of Isla Vista and Goleta in California's central coast region. The project recovers and features neglected resident stories in these underserved municipalities adjacent to the UCSB campus and surrounding affluent cities, with attention to the immigrant and multi-generational Latina/o community. The initiative seeks to bridge the racialized digital divide by enhancing pre-existing Latina/o digital agency and broader self-empowerment efforts, through collaborative deployment of their stories, images, and visions in a public-facing interactive web infrastructure. Extending a nine-month pilot, students and community members will be trained to conduct oral history interviews of residents. These interviews will form the basis of 10-minute theatrical profiles and politically-resonant performances known as "Actos" to be written and produced by two cohorts of 15 students enrolled in recurring Latina/o Theater courses taught by Latina/o literature specialists with support from playwrights, acting teachers, oral historiography instructors, digital humanities specialists, and research ethics facilitators. The plays will be presented in catered free community performances. All materials will be housed at UCSB, and digitized for an English and Spanish bilingual, public-facing, interactive archive and website equipped for digital data mapping by lay users and researchers.

Şeyma Özdemir
Graduate Student
Sociology

Invisible Childhoods of Farmworkers' Children: Child Labor and Educational Outcomes on California's Central Coast

In California's Central Coast, children of farmworkers move between fields and classrooms, where their labor sustains their families and remains legally sanctioned. This dissertation examines how U.S. child labor law produces unequal childhoods, its educational consequences, and how farmworker children experience schooling and work. The 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) established national child labor protections yet excluded agriculture—disproportionately affecting Mexican American and migrant children. While most child labor was banned, the Act permitted agricultural work for children over 12 on family farms and even for 10-year-olds on non-family farms with parental consent. These exceptions reflected political decisions about whose labor counted and whose education could be sacrificed. Such exclusions created a "tiered system of childhoods," limiting educational access for an estimated 400,000–500,000 child farmworkers nationwide. Drawing on Viviana Zelizer's concept of the "priceless child" and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian's "unchilding," this study explores how law devalues immigrant children by positioning them outside protected categories. Combining historical analysis with ethnographic fieldwork (2024–2026) in three elementary schools and a regional advocacy organization, the project examines how labor regimes shape schooling, how families balance economic need and education, and how policy might better protect vulnerable children.

Lisa Parks
Distinguished Professor
Film & Media Studies

The Satellite Coast: Community Impacts of Commercial Satellite Launching from Vandenberg Space Force Base in Lompoc, California

As commercial satellite launches from Vandenberg Space Force Base accelerate in frequency, this project examines their impacts on historically underrepresented communities who live and work adjacent to the base. Working with Chumash community members, farmworkers, and incarcerated individuals, our collaborative team investigates how satellite launching reshapes local relations to land, labor, health, and daily life. Using community-based interviews, focus groups, and archival research, we center lived experiences and local knowledges to better understand how communities interpret, navigate, and respond to the expansion of satellite infrastructure on California's central coast. The project advances equity-focused research in Science and Technology Studies and supports more just regional futures.

Haven Parker
Graduate Student
Bren School of Environmental Studies

Voices of the Transition: A Worker-Centered Just Transition Strategy for Santa Barbara County's Oil and Gas Workforce

Voices of the Transition: A Worker-Centered Just Transition Strategy for Santa Barbara County's Oil and Gas Workforce addresses the urgent need to ensure a just transition for people employed in the oil and gas sectors in Santa Barbara County as the region moves away from oil and gas production. With the County Board of Supervisors passing a resolution to initiate a plan to phase out all new and existing oil and gas operations in the County (on May 13, 2025), we are entering into a crucial period to plan an equitable and sustainable transition. The County Board of Supervisors will meet again to issue further directives to County staff for implementation.

Daniela Sarmiento Hernández
Graduate Student
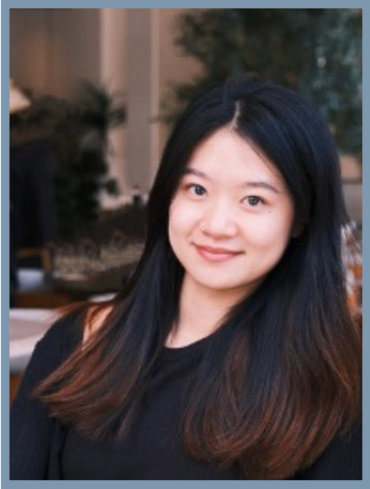### Counseling, Clinical, & School Psychology

Feasibility, acceptability, and effectiveness of Digital HEROES: An online resilience program with Latinx families

Prevention programs are crucial for reducing the burden of mental health challenges, particularly in underserved communities. Digital Mental Health Interventions (DMHIs) offer scalable and cost-effective solutions to address barriers such as provider shortages, stigma, and accessibility issues. However, DMHIs often fail to reach racial and ethnic minorities, including Latines in the U.S., due to cultural misalignment, language barriers, and limited digital literacy. Latine families face significant disparities in mental health access and outcomes despite high rates of smartphone and internet use. Culturally tailored digital prevention programs that strengthen resilience, mindfulness, and family relationships hold promise for improving outcomes in this population. This mixed-methods study evaluates the feasibility, acceptability, and effectiveness of the digital HEROES family resilience program (theheroesprogram.com) with Latine caregiver-child dyads at the local Boys & Girls Club. Grounded in Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR), the Cultural-Ecological-Transactional Model and the Digital Health Social Justice Framework, the study uses a pre/post design to measure resilience, mindfulness, family relationships, and well-being changes in youth and their caregivers. Qualitative interviews further explore program usability, cultural relevance, and youth's experiences. Findings aim to address gaps in DMHI implementation and inform culturally responsive, evidence-based prevention strategies to promote health equity among Latine families.

Yuyang Wu
Graduate Student
Geography

Understanding the Spatiotemporal Evolution of Local Labor Market Areas (LLMAs) in California's Central Coast: Implications for Inequity in Commuting, Job-Housing Allocation, and Economic Growth

This project investigates the spatiotemporal evolution of Local Labor Market Areas (LLMAs) in California's Central Coast and their implications for commuting equity, job–housing balance, and regional economic growth. Unlike administrative boundaries, LLMAs represent functionally integrated labor markets defined by actual commuting flows, offering a more realistic framework for analyzing urban systems. Using the LEHD Origin–Destination Employment Statistics (LODES) dataset, the study applies a modularity-based community detection algorithm (Leiden) to delineate LLMAs across multiple years and industries, examining how their structure and boundaries have evolved over time. It further analyzes how morphological and demographic characteristics of LLMAs influence commuting inefficiency, access to employment, and local economic performance through excess commuting indices and regression models. Preliminary results from the Santa Barbara case study show that LLMA-based analysis reveals distinct commuting inequalities across income, race, and industry groups. Expanding the study to San Luis Obispo and Ventura Counties will enhance understanding of cross-county mobility and provide policy insights for improving job accessibility, housing balance, and equitable regional development.

The Central Coast Regional Equity Initiative (CCREI), a signature program of UCSB's Blum Center on Poverty, Inequality, and Democracy, funds community-engaged research addressing pressing equity challenges across Santa Barbara, Ventura, and San Luis Obispo counties. The 2025-26 CCREI cohort brings together nine faculty and graduate student awardees whose projects span critical issues affecting the region's most vulnerable communities—from digital literacy barriers facing low-income Latino immigrants and mobile broadband inequities in underserved areas, to wildfire smoke impacts on farmworkers, child labor in agricultural communities, and the community effects of expanding satellite infrastructure near Vandenberg Space Force Base. Additional projects focus on culturally responsive mental health interventions for Latino families, worker-centered just transition planning as the county phases out oil and gas operations, commuting and job-housing equity, and a Latina/o oral history and digital archive initiative centered in Isla Vista and Goleta. Together, these projects exemplify the CCREI's commitment to bridging rigorous academic research with community engagement to advance regional equity.

The Blum Center will host a colloquium during Spring Quarter 2026 featuring this year's outstanding CCREI cohort as they share their research findings and community engaged approach.