

Around the World in 56 Years

In its second half-century, CSUN alumni, faculty and students are taking their expertise and passion abroad in greater numbers — and bringing their energy back to campus. **By Olivia Herstein**

Stroll across the Oviatt Library lawn as the carillon tolls the alma mater just before noon, or pop into one of the campus coffeehouses any weekday morning, and the ear catches it immediately: the medley of languages. Mandarin Chinese. Saudi-inflected Arabic. Hindi. Korean. Farsi. Russian. Spanish. Armenian.

Today's undergrad and grad students sport the same supplies — backpack, skateboard, smartphone, earbuds — and don the same SoCal fashions — sneakers, skinny jeans, red-and-black CSUN hoodies. Despite these similarities, they hail from regions as diverse as the Korean Peninsula, the Middle East, Central America and the Indian subcontinent. In fact, this once-quiet Northridge campus has blossomed into one of the biggest magnets for international students in the nation, first among all master's institutions.

Since its founding in 1958 as San Fernando Valley State College, the university has grown into a world-class and worldly institution of higher education. The campus attracts students from six continents, with more than 38,000 students served by 4,000 faculty and staff. One of the largest campuses in the California State University system, CSUN offers a diversity that reflects Los Angeles itself.

Far from Home, Forging a Path

Yayan “Zoe” Zhou looks wistful when she talks about her favorite comfort food: the sweet, sticky bao (buns or dumplings) sold in the shops and streets of her native Shanghai. The buns sold in the Chinese restaurants of the San Fernando and San Gabriel Valleys? Just not the same — not like mom makes.

But Zhou has to admit: She's developed a serious taste for Persian food (and she's still thinking about that leg of lamb dish she ate earlier this semester at a restaurant near campus). Where else but Los Angeles, the senior finance major said, would a Mandarin-speaking Chinese undergraduate find a wealth of Persian restaurants, and the classmates to help her order off the menu in Farsi?

When she's not sharing her cross-cultural culinary

Marta Lopez, director, International and Exchange Student Center, shepherds international students through their CSUN journey.

adventures, Zhou's eyes dance when she describes her academic and career plans: She walked the Oviatt Library lawn in cap and gown at commencement this May with her David Nazarian College of Business and Economics classmates. She plans to work for an additional year on her F-1 visa and apply for a graduate program at CSUN. “More CSUN! More studying at CSUN!” she said, laughing.

Zhou meets weekly with the Cross Cultural Friendship Club, a student-faculty group committed to mixing international students, American-born students of many ethnicities, faculty advisors and community volunteers for mutual understanding and schmoozing. On a recent spring afternoon, participants included international students from Nepal, Bangladesh, China, India and South Korea, and self-described “ABCs,” American-born Chinese. The group's favorite topics of the moment? Hip-hop, K-Pop and pizza fundraisers.

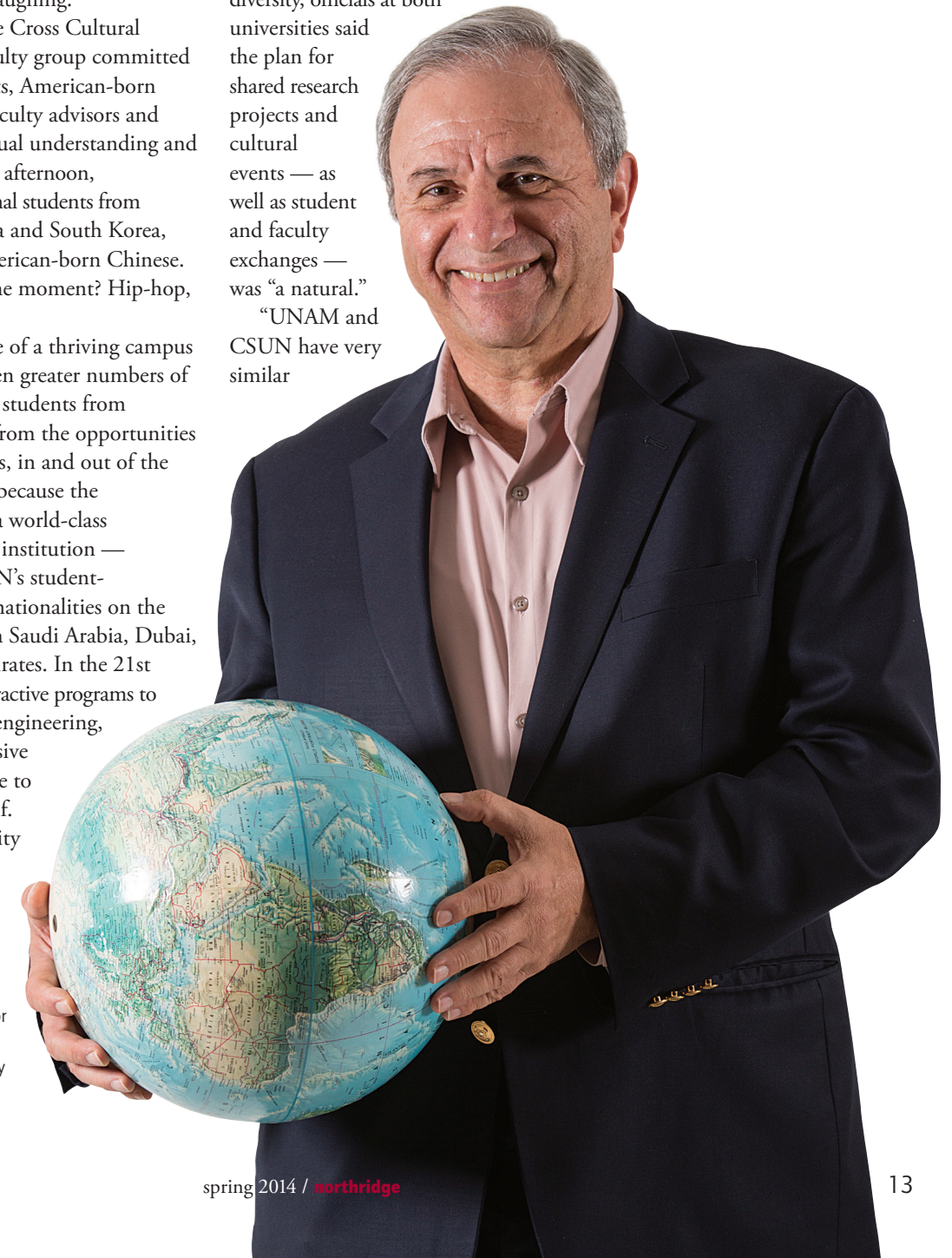
The club is just one example of a thriving campus community that's attracting even greater numbers of students from abroad. CSUN's students from throughout California benefit from the opportunities to learn from their foreign peers, in and out of the classroom. It is a true win-win because the international students learn at a world-class institution — and enhance the institution — without counting against CSUN's student-enrollment target. Among the nationalities on the rise at CSUN are students from Saudi Arabia, Dubai, India and the United Arab Emirates. In the 21st century, the university's most attractive programs to international students include engineering, business, accounting and intensive English. And there's much more to come from North America itself.

Just this March, the university announced a major new partnership with the

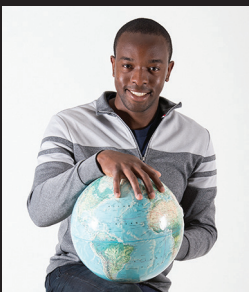
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), one of the oldest and highest-ranked academic institutions in Latin America, to create a center for scholarship and research on Mexico and Latin America at CSUN.

With this region's rich Mexican-American and Latino heritage, and CSUN's reputation for ethnic diversity, officials at both universities said the plan for shared research projects and cultural events — as well as student and faculty exchanges — was “a natural.”

“UNAM and CSUN have very similar



Professor Vahram Shemmassian, director of CSUN's Armenian Studies Program, lectures all over the globe on the history of the Armenian genocide.



missions: providing a quality education that is accessible by people from broadly diverse ethnic, social and economic backgrounds, with faculty who are respected scholars in their fields dedicated to teaching, service and research,” said CSUN President Dianne F. Harrison.

On March 3, President Harrison and UNAM Rector José Narro Robles were joined in Mexico City by numerous government leaders from the United States and Mexico at a ceremony to sign the partnership agreement.

It’s the fifth collaboration between UNAM and a foreign institution of higher education, but the only one with a U.S. university. CSUN will house the new center, expected to open this fall, in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. It will allow faculty and students from across the university to participate in cross-cultural research and scholarship.

In addition to CSUN’s new program with UNAM, it boasts partnerships with more than 100 universities in 22 countries, according to John Binkley, associate dean for graduate, international and mid-career education at The Tseng College. The college also coordinates logistics such as insurance for visiting scholars working on research projects at CSUN.

Taking Their Show on the Road

Engineering professor Nhut Ho is more than a distinguished faculty member teaching in Northridge and his native Vietnam: He’s a Matador at heart. After settling in 1988 with his family as refugees in Southern California, the professor of mechanical engineering earned his bachelor’s degree at USC. He went on to earn his master’s and doctorate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and arrived at CSUN to teach in 2005.

In 2008, the Fulbright Scholar traveled to Vietnam to help academics design and bolster

From top: Mechanical engineering Professor Nhut Ho works to improve engineering curricula in his native Vietnam. Maria Cartaya, an international student from Venezuela, is studying journalism at CSUN. Ayotunde Alele, whose parents are immigrants from Nigeria, is a Valley native studying at CSUN and plans to pursue a career in international relations. Senior film major Hailey Graves is setting sail from London this summer for a semester at sea. International student Jonathan Lo hails from Hong Kong.

engineering curricula to improve Vietnamese students’ skills in the global marketplace.

Ho’s work since has spread to major universities in Vietnam, including the country’s top institution, Vietnam National University-Ho Chi Minh City. During summer and winter break trips to the Southeast Asian nation, the professor has worked tirelessly to help scholars there implement a curriculum model called Conceive-Design-Implement-Operate (CDIO).

“CDIO is one of the game-changers for higher education in Vietnam,” said Ho, who grew up near Ho Chi Minh City. “Vietnam is moving to a new-age technology. Intel has built a billion-dollar chip manufacturing facility in Vietnam. Many multinational companies are coming to Vietnam. One of the demands for that is that you need a skilled workforce. Vietnam has a population of 86 million people, and half of this population was born after 1975. It’s a phenomenal challenge — how do you translate such a young population into a skilled workforce?”

“In Vietnam in particular, like other Asian cultures, they place a lot of emphasis on academic achievements,” he said. “The education system needs to continue to improve so these multinational companies can keep coming to Vietnam. ... You open any major newspaper in Vietnam, and there’s a column on education, talking about this problem.”

Back at CSUN during the academic year, Ho is working with his mechanical engineering students and colleagues to study those higher-education benchmarks for their engineering and computer science peers across the Pacific. Ho first brought the CDIO approach in 2007 and applied it to benefit CSUN undergrads, helping them prepare for engineering courses and retain them in the program. Growing up in the Valley, the professor said, he feels especially close to the needs of Matador students.

“At CSUN, we have a lot of students who are first-generation immigrants, who come from a disadvantaged background,” he said. “I understand the needs of developing countries, and I really want to help reform higher education — not just in Vietnam, but everywhere. This is a fantastic opportunity to try out new ideas. It means a lot to me, because it really makes a difference for the students.”

On the other side of the Asian continent, in the Middle East, professor Vahram Shemmassian is representing CSUN and the massive Armenian diaspora with prolific lectures on the history of the

Armenian genocide. The force behind the Armenian Studies Program in the Department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures, Shemmassian grew up in Lebanon and heard the stories of his grandfather’s fight in the battle of Musa Dagh, Turkey (now Saman Dagh, Hatay province). He has returned to Lebanon several times to speak about the genocide — and organizations and universities from Montreal to Prague invite the professor to speak on his people’s history and diaspora.

CSUN, with about 10 percent of its student body of Armenian heritage, is a natural fit for Shemmassian’s

program. Established in 1983, the Armenian Studies Program has grown from one course to 14, and it boasts a language minor and a languages and cultures major with Armenian as an option.

“Los Angeles is the only place where we see all sorts of Armenians mingle for the first time — from Eastern Armenia, near Russia, and others from Lebanon and the Middle East,” he said. “It’s a mixture, with all their regional influences — even the foods are somewhat different. UCLA, USC and Cal State L.A. also draw [Armenian students], but CSUN is one of the largest campuses. We also have about 170 Armenian staff



International CSUN students (R-L): Chisato Murata, Tahir Rizwan and Jonathan Lo play with CSUN student and Valley native Erik Flores in front of the Oviatt Library.

ALL PHOTOS: LEE CHOO

BY THE NUMBERS: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS OF CSUN

Growing in numbers on all fronts, CSUN's more than 38,000 students come from many backgrounds. The university's population of international students is unique in the numerous countries of origin and large variety of degree pursuits.

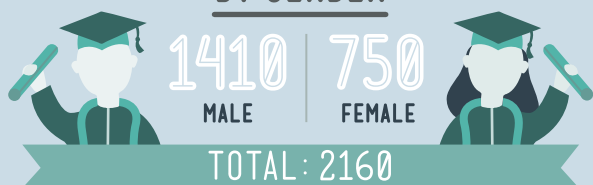
THE BASICS

Ranked first in the nation among master's institutions for greatest foreign student population, CSUN is a large attraction for the college-bound from around the globe.

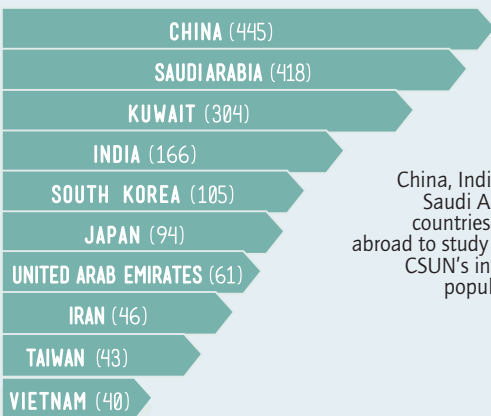
BY CLASS LEVEL



BY GENDER



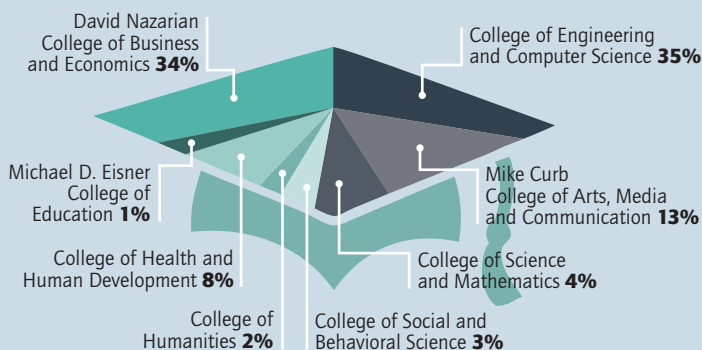
TOP 10 COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN



China, India, South Korea and Saudi Arabia top the list of countries that send students abroad to study at U.S. universities. CSUN's international student population reflects these national trends.

WHERE THE DEGREES ARE BEING EARNED

At CSUN, most international students earn bachelor's degrees in engineering fields, science, technology, business, management and marketing.



Around the World in 56 Years

and faculty working here. ... We're trying to make students conscious about their identity, their culture."

Shemmassian teaches a full load of courses, including Armenian 440, "Armenian-American Child and the schools," which fulfills a requirement for a bilingual teaching credential.

Hands Across the Water

CSUN sends full-time undergraduates for study abroad in 18 countries, including Chile, China, Denmark, Ghana, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Spain and Sweden. Students pay as little as CSUN's own tuition to earn full academic credit for their overseas studies. What sets CSUN apart from other universities, however, is the high number of master's-level students it sends to the Peace Corps.

The Peace Corps Master's International Program offers students Peace Corps service combined with a master's degree program — in mathematics or secondary education, curriculum and instruction. Participants teach or work in other education projects while abroad. The Peace Corps, an independent government agency that traces its roots to 1960, when then-Sen. John F. Kennedy challenged university students to serve their country by living and working in developing countries, provides volunteers for countries around the world.

Matador alumni also may study abroad in the world's most populous country, China. This academic year, seven CSUN students and alumni received the prestigious China Scholarship Council award. The scholarship, funded by the Chinese government, covers a year of tuition and living expenses for study at the country's top universities.

Brandon Violette, who graduated in 2013 with a bachelor's degree in cinema-screenwriting, is using the award to study at the Beijing Film Academy.

"I've packed my life into two suitcases and made that blind leap to a foreign country to start over, make a few friends and see walks of life I'd only read about," he said. "Once you go through that, with all the excitement and anxieties that go with it, it humbles you. It reminds you that you're not at the center of the world like you once thought you were."

Carmen Ramos Chandler and Alaa Bitar contributed to this story.

Graphics reporting by Chelsea Turner.