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First Graduating Cohort of BUILD PODER Scholars at CSUN Ready to Embark on Promising Graduate Careers

BUILD PODER at California State University, Northridge celebrated its first graduating cohort of nine seniors this May. Calvin Apodaca, Roxxette Zepeda, Ashley Ward, Adriana Mendez, Richard Gonzalez, Jose Estrada, Julie Hong, Garry Leonard and Umu Rogers reflect on their experiences as BUILD PODER Scholars, and share how the program has made a lasting impact on their lives.

Calvin Apodaca





Calvin Apodaca graduated with a B.S. in biology. With the guidance of his mentor Dr. Mariano Loza Coll, Apodaca conducted research that brought together biology, computer programming and coding. In his first year, Apodaca worked on building a mobile app that can help those who have lost control of most of their bodily functions communicate by blinking. In his second year, he worked on a computer program that simulates the interaction of certain DNA as well as another project using 3D printing to develop slides that scientists can use when studying the guts of flies.

Apodaca attended conferences like the Genetics Society of America Annual Drosophila Research Conference and the American Medical Informatics National Symposium. He completed a summer research program last year at the University of Washington and was accepted into the university to earn a PhD in biomedical and health informatics.

For Apodaca, who is the first in his family to pursue a graduate degree, BUILD PODER opened doors that he never thought were possible to enter.

“Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would be heading to graduate school, especially to an R1 research institution and do medical research,” Apodaca said. “BUILD gave me the toolset and stepping stones to make that happen. The others in my cohort at Washington went to Harvard, Stanford and Georgia Tech, but I can proudly say I am representing CSU Northridge. BUILD got me to that finish line.”

Inspired by his personal experience having spent three years in a hospital due to cancer, Apodaca wants to make health data more accessible to patients so they can make informed healthcare decisions based on knowing their own data.

“If you really want to be the change you want to see in the world, then being a scientist is probably the best way to do that,” Apodaca said. “You impact the world around you if you can show the truth that we each see everyday by putting it down on paper and proving it. And BUILD can make that possible.”

Apodaca will be attending the University of Washington this fall to pursue a PhD in biomedical and health informatics.

Roxxette Zepeda

Roxxette Zepeda graduated with a B.S. in public health. She was honored as an [Outstanding Graduating Senior](#) by CSUN in recognition of her academic excellence despite many obstacles on the journey to her success.

Zepeda conducted a wide variety of research, including research on mothers with children who have autism, substance use and STDs among college students, the regulation of medications

among African Americans and Latinos, and stress levels among nurses in accelerated nursing programs. She presented her research at the STEM/STEAM Education Conference in Hawaii and at CSUN.

While a BUILD scholar, Zepeda spent time volunteering at the Children's Hospital Los Angeles, Glendale Adventist Medical Center, and Northridge Hospital Medical Center (NHMC). It was in the neonatal intensive care units (NICU) caring for premature and jaundiced infants where Zepeda found her calling. She was accepted to the University of California, Los Angeles' School of Nursing where she will earn her Master in Nursing to become a NICU nurse and will also get her PhD to become a neonatal researcher.



For resilient Zepeda, who never let the various obstacles in her life keep her down, the support from the BUILD PODER community helped her navigate through the institutional barriers to applying to graduate school.

“Before BUILD, many people in my life told me to give up on nursing because they thought I wouldn't be able to make it,” Zepeda said. “Dr. Gabriela Chavira and Dr. Carrie Saetermoe (principal investigators of BUILD PODER) reassured me that I was fit for nursing. They saw I was meant for graduate school and took the time out of their day to look up what it takes to become a nurse-researcher and where to apply. They gave me the confidence to pursue the dream I had since I was a child, and I'm now going to become a nurse.”

Zepeda is currently helping Dr. Saetermoe complete a book to help Latino parents navigate the road to college for their children. She will be starting the Master Entry Clinical Nursing program at UCLA this fall.

Adriana Mendez

Adriana Mendez graduated with a B.A. in sociology. She assisted her mentor Dr. Elise Fenn on researching how minorities cope with stereotype threat in stress-induced situations. She presented her research at conferences hosted by the American Psychology Law Society, the Western Psychological Association and UCLA.

Mendez said she enjoyed the professional and personal support she received through the program.



“My mentors helped me see my own ability--they are always available to talk and genuinely want to see me succeed,” Mendez said. “BUILD is also a community. The people you meet, the friends you make, they experience the same stresses that you do and you end up bonding. They become your family.”

BUILD PODER provided Mendez with a roadmap to a future she didn’t know was truly possible.

“I didn’t really think of pursuing a doctoral degree until BUILD and even while I was in the program, I still struggled with self-doubt,” Mendez said. “Dr. Phen encouraged me to keep applying to different universities, and when I got accepted into the Master of Psychology program at CSU Los Angeles, I finally felt the gravity of all my accomplishments.”

Mendez will study forensic psychology through CSULA’s Master of Psychology program this fall.

Ashley Ward

Ashley Ward graduated with a B.S. in biochemistry. Working with her mentor Dr. Eric Kelson, Ward did her undergraduate research on terpyridine-based anti-tumor agents. She also participated in a summer research program at the University of Colorado, Denver last year, studying glucose uptake mechanisms in breast cancer cells.

Ward said her BUILD-provided mentor made a huge impact on her research capabilities.

“The program prepared me for a future in science by connecting me with Dr. Kelson,” Ward said. “Without that initial connection, I wouldn’t



have had guidance from a professional within my desired discipline. My mentor taught me how to design my own experiments, how to develop questions from data instead of merely obtaining a result, and most importantly, he showed me that researchers are the explorers of science. This made research attractive to me as career because you will never be bored! There will always be questions that need to be answered, and those answers could potentially save lives.”

Ward said BUILD PODER helped expand her horizons when it came to her future.

“I used to think the only way to engage in scientific study was to become a medical doctor, but BUILD opened my eyes to what a research career looked like,” Ward said. “The program’s guidance is the sole reason I will be attending graduate school straight out of undergrad. I think I would have eventually found my way to a graduate program, but many years later. BUILD PODER helped me fine-tune my career goals, which made the grad school application process approachable and productive.”

Ward presented at conferences such as the Annual Biomedical Research Conference for Minority Students and the CSU Program for Education and Research and Biotechnology conference. She will attend the University of Colorado, Denver this fall to pursue a PhD in cancer biology. She hopes to do cancer research in her profession and eventually start her own company developing cancer therapeutics.

Richard Gonzalez



Richard Gonzalez graduated with a B.A. in psychology. Under the guidance of his mentor Dr. Scott Plunkett, Gonzalez’s undergraduate research focused on neighborhood and familial contexts and how they determine student academic outcomes and mental wellbeing. Gonzalez also completed a summer research program at the University of Michigan last summer. He presented at conferences hosted by the Association for Psychological Science and the Society for Personality and Social Psychology’s annual convention.

Gonzalez said the program taught him the skills necessary to work in professional environments, both in the lab and out.

“I feel I am now adequately prepared to work at a graduate student capacity and beyond,” Gonzalez said. “Before BUILD, any reality where I would be able to contribute to something greater and equally important, be able to support my family seemed more of a fantasy. Now that I am a part of BUILD I feel that I have contributed to a lot of meaningful research and in time, following my graduate degree, I will be able to support my family and pay them back for all of the support they have given me.”

Gonzalez will attend the University of Maryland this fall to begin his Master’s in Industrial Psychology

Jose Estrada

Jose Estrada Graduated with B.A. in psychology. Estrada also worked with Dr. Scott Plunkett, focusing on neighborhood and familial contexts and how they determine student academic outcomes and mental wellbeing. Estrada completed a summer research program also at the University of Michigan last summer. He attended conferences hosted by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, and the Association of Psychological Science.



Estrada was awarded the [2016-2017 Sally Casanova Pre-Doctoral Scholarship](#) in 2016 and is currently at his second summer in Michigan researching the influence of social and biological factors on human behavior.

Estrada said BUILD PODER introduced him to a calling and purpose he never knew was available for him. Estrada worked on a variety of types and topics of research in the past, including analyzing survey data and studying addiction in rat populations. He said that after working on experiments across the research spectrum, he knows exactly what it is he will spend the rest of his life researching -- hormones and neuroscience.

“BUILD made me take a chance to do something I never thought I could do,” Estrada said. “Doing experiments and learning the in’s and out’s of research has been amazing. Before I was pulled into research, I didn’t know what I wanted to do five or ten years or now and now I see myself being

a professor, mentoring students and maybe coming back to CSUN and establishing a biopsychology department.”

For Estrada, not only did BUILD provided him a pathway to his research future, it also helped him to engage in learning at the undergraduate level in a meaningful way.

“Research taught me how to learn,” Estrada said. “In the past, felt like I was memorizing and regurgitating and forgetting things, but it wasn’t until I was theorizing and making connections that I felt like I actually understood something deeply and truly. Not only was I capable of learning, but I was capable of engaging. It felt really nice knowing that I was very good at something this complex.”

Estrada will finish his summer at the University of Michigan and intends to pursue his PhD at the university.

Julie Hong

Julie Hong graduated with a B.A. in child & adolescent development. Hong initially ran into challenges while doing her undergraduate research on pancreatic cancer in a biology lab, but with the help of her mentor, Dr. Jonathan Kelber, she persevered and excelled.

“It was an empowering experience,” Hong said. “Working on my own project was really overwhelming at first. I had to work on my time management and try to understand it on my own, but I soon took ownership over my work and didn’t hold back.”

Hong presented at several conferences including the West Coast Biological Sciences Undergraduate Research Conference, and others hosted by the American Association for Cancer Research and the American Society for Cell Biology. Hong said presenting at conferences through BUILD PODER helped her solidify a researcher identity.

“I thought maybe I could do research, but I never thought I could actually present,” Hong said. “My public speaking skills improved and it taught me not to be afraid to speak up in networking settings.”



Hong will be pursuing a post-baccalaureate research experience and is preparing to apply to MD-PhD programs.

Garry Leonard

Garry Leonard graduated with a B.S. in biochemistry. Leonard did his years of undergraduate research on atropisomers in pyridine isomers. Through working in the lab with his mentor Dr. Taeboem Oh, Leonard said he gained many technical, professional and even life skills.

“I learned how to use technical equipment in the process of making different compounds using machines like the NMR, HPLC and Mass SPEC,” Leonard said. “But I also learned how to work with others in the lab, since it’s not just you. It’s very important to ask questions in you don’t understand something. And probably most importantly for me, my mentor taught me how to do things months in advance, not days or weeks in advance.”

Leonard said that as a first-generation college student, the financial and institutional support from BUILD PODER allowed him to focus on his studies.

“I wouldn’t have made it this far if it weren’t for BUILD,” Leonard said. “I was able to hone my skills and hold onto my motivation--it made my dreams go from an abstract idea to a concrete reality”

Leonard has presented at conferences at CSUN and UCLA, and is currently working on a manuscript with his mentor over the summer on their research on atropisomers.



Umu Rogers

Umu Rogers will graduate later this year with a B.S. in biochemistry. Rogers assisted her mentor, Dr. David Bermudes, on his research on how salmonella might be used to target tumors by isolating protease inhibitors. Rogers said she learned a broad range of skills while working in her lab, such as doing tissue cultures, designing primers and working with DNA, but the most important skill she learned was patience.

“Working in a microbiology lab, the experiments take a very long time,” Rogers said. “I learned not to try to do things in a hurry and how to repeat things as many times as necessary to get it

right. I got much better at time management, paying attention to details and being exhaustingly thorough.”

Rogers said that the social justice framework of BUILD PODER helped inform her that as a minority woman, she does not have to accept racism in the workforce.

“I now understand how to approach situations where you are facing discrimination or microaggressions,” Rogers said. “I know I’m going into a mostly white, male-dominated field, and BUILD PODER has helped me to prepare for the challenges to come.”

Rogers said the program made a big impact on her college experience and the way she views herself as a young scientist.

“I came into college knowing what I wanted to do, but to hear so many others say they believe me in and tell me that my goals are within reach, solidified my vision for myself,” Rogers said.

Rogers presented on the progress of her research at three different conferences hosted by the CSU Program for Education and Research and Biotechnology. She is intending on applying to MD-PhD programs and graduate programs in biomedical sciences or biochemistry.

