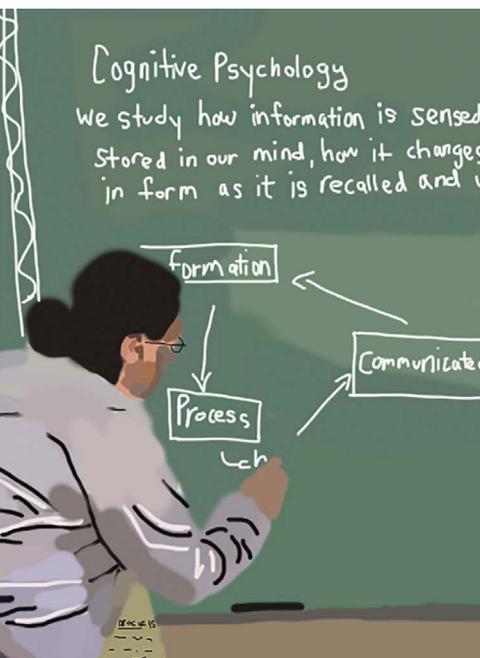


UC SANTA BARBARA
Graduate Division

Community & Collaboration

Graduate Student Research at UC Santa Barbara



THE PROJECTS & PROGRAMS ISSUE
2019-2020

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Graduate students and faculty mentors at UC Santa Barbara are working to inspire children to develop environmental awareness and literacy right here on campus through the Literacies in Environmental Awareness and Farming for Youth (LEAFY) research project sponsored by UC LINKS, a network of university and community partners, working together to develop innovative after-school programs.

Since 2017, educators from the UCSB Gevirtz School of Graduate Education and participants of the Goleta Boys & Girls Club worked together on LEAFY to create natural and digital spaces on campus for children to discover their roles as environmental advocates and

leaders in their home communities. An average of 15 to 18 children from underserved communities have joined the program every quarter, with 10 to 12 UCSB undergraduate students providing support. Program Co-Coordinators Sos Nazaryan and John Cano Barrios, both graduate students, are work under the supervision of faculty LEAFY principal investigators Diana Arya, Director of the McEnroe Reading and Language Arts Clinic, and Mary Brenner, Professor at the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education.

"I think we call ourselves an environmental education program but if you come to LEAFY you will see that it is much more than that — it's really a community," said Nazaryan. "One of the reasons LEAFY has grown into such a vibrant community program is because everyone knows that

their opinion has value — and it's respected and encouraged."

Both graduate student coordinators bring their extensive experience in educational technology and after school programs to help steer the experiences for LEAFY program participants. Cano Barrios and Nazaryan recently earned their master's degrees in Education from UCSB in 2019, and are continuing their research on campus as doctoral students in the same program. Cano Barrios's research focuses on how technology can promote engagement and motivation for learning, as well as on designing curriculum to foster digital literacy in students. Nazaryan, who also serves as a teaching assistant in the Department of Education, is working on research and practice to help create learning environments that keep students engaged.

LEAFY LEARNING

Enriching children's environmental education right here on the UC Santa Barbara campus

Story and Illustration by Veronica Torres

We are creating leaders who create with each other.

Dr. Diana Arya

Director of the McEnroe Reading and Language Arts Clinic

Through this program, children collaborate on writing and expressive projects about the natural plant life on campus. They are brought on tours to view campus plant life and work with both digital and hands-on experiences to gain writing and reading skills to empower their own self-expression. The program also collaborates with campus partners like Dr. Rick Benjamin, poet and College of Creative Studies Professor, to teach the LEAFY students about self-expression. "We are creating leaders who create with each other," said Arya.

Tasks like caring for their own plants and tracking the growth rates through diaries and QR codes combine science methodology, writing strategies, and insights about the effect of environmental factors on their projects. Yara Venegas, the mother of one of the children participating in the program, noted

how her son has been able to show his family how to care for plants at home. "The program has taught him how to plant seeds, measure the amount of water needed, and take care of the plants," she said. "He now takes care of the plants wherever he goes, and shows interest in the development of a flower or tree that he likes. I feel that the program helped him a lot to be very responsible and careful. The biggest benefit being, he is responsible and careful with nature."

One of the biggest impacts noted from the program is that participants feel empowered to speak up about their own project ideas. "We are all learning from each other," said Cano Barrios of his experience with the project. "That is the main philosophy of LEAFY. This also means that coordinators, undergrads, and kids will collaborate at the same level. We learn a lot from the kids and the

kids know that they have a lot to give to us."

The students can also suggest what activities they would like to continue doing or what they hope to gain from LEAFY in the future. "When you feel valued, for who you are right now, and what you are doing and what you have to offer, it makes you want to do more," said Dr. Diana Arya. "Through this project, they should be able to discover the power they hold as individuals and continue to recognize their role in the community."

The program's many stakeholders hope that the student-led principles and experiences provided by the program will inspire the children will view UCSB as part of the community long after their time with LEAFY. "I want them to understand that they belong at the university," said Nazaryan.