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***Welcome Message from Dr. Berenecea Johnson Eanes***

Presidential Sponsor, ACE Women's Network Southern California



Thank you all for being so gracious in welcoming me to the ACE Women's Conference last October. As shared then, it is a great honor to serve as the new Presidential Sponsor of the ACE Women's Network Southern California. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Cal Poly Pomona President Soraya M. Coley for her visionary leadership and steadfast commitment to advancing women in higher education.

Those of us fortunate enough to lead higher education institutions in

Southern California are blessed with great cultural and community capital. Our strength lies in boldly and unapologetically embracing that diversity as we reaffirm our core principles. It is our shared commitment to excellence with equity that pays dividends in the form of economic mobility and social transformation.

As we face complexities in today's landscape, the work of ACE—connecting women across campuses, roles, and experiences—has never been more vital. This network is equal parts a professional community and a movement. It is a space where women gather to mentor and lift each other. It is where we cultivate the courage to build a brighter and more inclusive future of higher education together.

Representative leadership matters. Where women lead, our institutions follow. When our leadership reflects the communities we serve, we create spaces of belonging and impact. I am committed to supporting this network as we continue to build pathways for women to shape the future of our region.

Thank you for your dedication, your brilliance, and your belief in the power of collective leadership. I look forward to the journey ahead—together.

– Dr. Berenecea Johnson Eanes, President, California State University, Los Angeles

*Welcome from the State Chair, Dr. Tara Giblin*

Welcome to the ACE Women's Network of Southern California (ACE WNSC) 2025 newsletter. I'm honored to begin my term as State Chair and to continue advancing our mission of supporting women and underrepresented leaders across higher education. In my role as Vice President of Instruction at Orange Coast College, I'm reminded daily of the power of community and how connection, collaboration, and encouragement can open doors and transform lives. My hope for this year is that ACE WNSC remains a place where women at every stage of their journey feel supported and inspired.



This is also a year of new beginnings. As we transition to the sponsorship of President Berenecea Eanes at California State University–Los Angeles, we welcome fresh perspectives and renewed energy. New leadership brings new opportunities and chances to reexamine our work, deepen our impact, and chart pathways forward with clarity and purpose.

Our October conference, *Unmuted: Claiming Your Voice to Advocate, Negotiate, and Lead with Power*, brought together a sold-out audience from across the region. Keynote speaker Dr. Nicole Yeldell Butts challenged us to use our voices boldly and intentionally, and our event planning team delivered a program that captured the momentum and enthusiasm across our Network.

This year, the Strategic Initiatives team launched a successful mentorship program, pairing nine mentors and mentees to foster connection, growth, and leadership development. We were also proud to welcome new institutional sponsors—including the California University of Science and Medicine, CSU Dominguez Hills, CSU San Bernardino, and Orange Coast College, who join our continuing sponsors in strengthening our collective mission.

We look forward to our Spring Lunch and Learn at Cal State San Bernardino on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2026, and encourage you to stay engaged, share your expertise, and invite colleagues to join us. Together, we continue expanding pathways for women to lead and thrive.

Thank you to our Presidential Sponsors at Cal Poly Pomona and Cal State LA, and to Dr. Olukemi Sawyerr for her leadership and vision. I'm grateful to our board, committee chairs, and institutional representatives for their commitment to ACE WNSC.

**Wishing you a year of purpose, progress, and connection.**

– Dr. Tara Giblin, State Chair, ACE Women's Network of Southern California

## Events

### *Fall 2025 Professional Development Conference*



The ACE Women's Network of Southern California hosted its Fall Conference on October 10, 2025, under the theme *"Unmuted: Claiming Your Voice to Advocate, Negotiate, and Lead with Power."* The sold-out event brought together women leaders from across higher education for a day of reflection, connection, and professional growth.

The keynote speaker and moderator, Dr. Nicole Butts, led participants through a compelling discussion on the many ways women's voices are

muted by cultural, systemic, and internalized forces. She addressed cultural narratives such as the "good girl" expectation, respectability politics, and tone policing; systemic challenges in higher education including bias in student evaluations, limited access to sponsorship, and male-dominated committees; and internalized barriers such as deprioritizing personal needs, using silence as a learned safety mechanism, and overreliance on external validation.

Participants engaged with a guided workbook to identify moments when their voices have been muted and to explore strategies for reclaiming them. Small-group discussions encouraged open dialogue and peer support. Attendees also exchanged "sparks of wisdom"—short messages of encouragement and insight—that fostered heartfelt and uplifting moments throughout the room.



A central feature of the conference involved crafting personal leadership narratives. Participants reflected on their leadership identity, formative experiences, and pivotal moments of growth, while articulating key lessons learned and defining a vision for their continued leadership journey.





The afternoon Leadership Panel, moderated by Dr. Nicole Butts, featured an accomplished group of women representing diverse experiences and leadership roles within higher education. Panelists included Dr. Terri Gomez, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Cal Poly Pomona; Dr. Shokoufeh Mirzaei, Professor and Chair of the Industrial and Manufacturing Engineering Department and Director of the NSF-funded CRET Center for Research

Advanced in Smart Manufacturing (CREST-RASM) at Cal Poly Pomona; Dr. Tari Hunter, Associate Executive Director for Equity, Programs, and Leadership, University Student Union at California State University, Northridge; and Dr. Kandy Liu, Executive Director of Audit and Advisory Services at California State University, San Bernardino.

Collectively, the panelists brought a wide range of perspectives—from academic administration and faculty leadership to organizational strategy and institutional accountability. They shared pivotal experiences that have shaped their leadership styles, the multiple roles they fulfill each day, and how their professional journeys have strengthened their voices as leaders. Their reflections emphasized authenticity, resilience, and the importance of advocating for oneself and others.

The conference served as both a professional development opportunity and a moment of rejuvenation—a space for women in higher education to connect, reflect, and reaffirm their commitment to leading with confidence and purpose. Special thanks to the ACE Women's Network of Southern California Board and planning committee for organizing this impactful event.



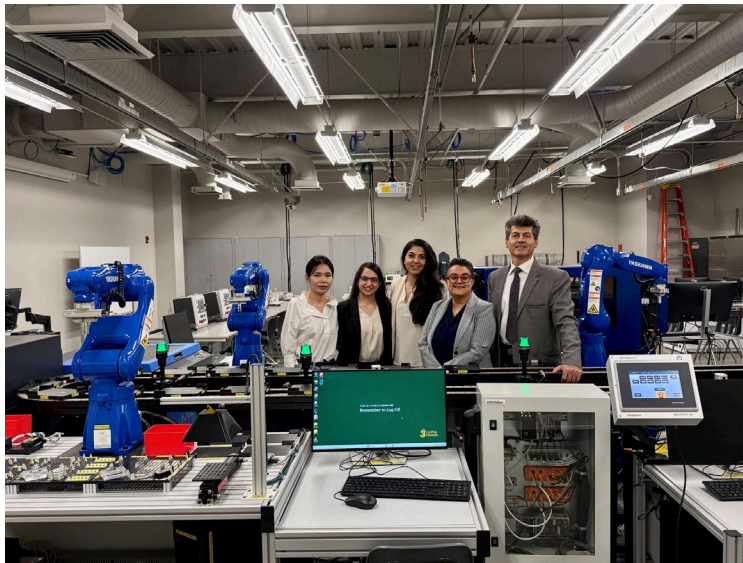
## Featured

### **ACE WNSC Member Secures \$7.5M NSF Grant**

by: Dr. Shokoufeh Mirzaei, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

Dr. Shokoufeh Mirzaei, board member of the ACE Women's Network of Southern California and Chair of Industrial and Manufacturing Engineering at Cal Poly Pomona, has secured a \$7.5 million National Science Foundation grant to establish the Center for Research Advancement in Smart Manufacturing (CREST-RASM). This grant marks one of the largest NSF research investments in Cal Poly Pomona's history and underscores the leadership of ACE WNSC members in driving technological and educational excellence across California.

As the principal investigator and director, Dr. Mirzaei will lead multidisciplinary research in the center will integrate AI into four key research areas — robotics and automation (Associate Professor Ellips Masehian), digital twin technology (Aerospace Engineering Professor Zahra Sotoudeh), extended reality (Computer Science Assistant Professor Fatemeh Jamshidi) and cybersecurity (Computer Science Assistant Professor Mingyan Xiao) — to propel Industry 4.0, the digital transformation of industrial and manufacturing processes through technologies such as AI, the Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT).



CREST-RASM Research Team From left to right: Assistant Professor Mingyan Xiao, Assistant Professor Fatemeh Jamshidi, Professor Shokoufeh Mirzaei, Professor Zahra Sotoudeh, and Associate Professor Ellips Masehian of Cal Poly Pomona at Vy and Tim Li Automation Laboratory

“CREST-RASM will provide faculty and students with opportunities to engage in cutting-edge research and develop advanced technical expertise that drives innovation and strengthens America's industrial competitiveness,” said Mirzaei.

## **Translating Leadership: A Mentorship Journey from Athletics to the Executive Suite**

by: Dr. Shokoufeh Mirzaei, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

In a recent ACE mentorship spotlight, Dr. Shokoufeh Mirzaei, Chair of Marketing Committee of the ACE Women Network of Southern California, sat down with Melissa Norrbom Kawamoto, Executive Director of Strategic Initiatives for Student Affairs at Cal State Long Beach, and Miriam Merrill, Chief of Staff and secretary to the board of trustees at Hamilton College, to explore how mentorship can empower women navigating career transitions in higher education.



Their conversation unfolded as a story of transformation and shared learning—one that began when Miriam, formerly the director of athletics and chair of the department of physical education at Pomona - Pitzer Colleges, decided to pursue a new professional direction. Through the ACE Women's Network mentorship program, she was paired with Melissa, whose background in strategic leadership offered valuable insights into the complex dynamics of higher education administration.

Melissa admitted to feeling initial hesitation about mentoring someone with Miriam's leadership experience, describing a brief moment of imposter syndrome. Yet as their conversations deepened, they discovered remarkable overlap in their professional skills—from managing high-pressure situations to maintaining objectivity in organizational decision-making. "We both understood the importance of presenting information clearly and staying calm under pressure," Melissa noted.

For Miriam, the mentorship came at a pivotal moment. "Melissa helped me see how the skills I'd developed in athletics—like media relations, donor engagement, and strategic planning—were not only relevant but essential for a Chief of Staff role," she shared. The pair met regularly, holding consistent monthly meetings despite busy schedules. Over time, those sessions became a space for reflection, validation, and strategic growth.

The mentorship eventually culminated in Miriam's successful transition to her new Chief of Staff position. Melissa emphasized that Miriam's success stemmed from her own preparation and qualifications, while Miriam credited the mentorship with boosting her confidence and reframing her career possibilities. Together, they highlighted how mentorship fosters both personal and professional development—helping women break through self-imposed limits and explore new paths in higher education.

This mentorship exemplifies the transformative power of connection and encouragement. The relationship between Melissa and Miriam underscores how mentorship not only bridges experience gaps but also builds lasting confidence and community among women leaders.

**What We Lose, What We Learn:**

**Grief, Anger, and the Work of Holding Space**

by: Shannon Couey

Grief and anger seem to be the themes controlling both my professional life and my personal life. Let me explain.

In 2025, I thought I knew what the year would hold. My husband and I found out in February that we were expecting our second child—a Halloween baby. But in April, we learned that we had lost the pregnancy at twelve weeks. I underwent a D&C, and the days that followed were an education in grief I never expected to receive.

I am fortunate to live in a state that recognizes reproductive care as essential health care, and to work for an organization that granted me protected leave to heal. Even so, I was unprepared for how grief works. It isn't linear. It ebbs and flows. It shows up in both obvious and unexpected ways—like breaking down in tears while assembling a balloon garland for my sister-in-law's baby shower or finding myself crying in the Halloween aisle as I imagined the costume my would-be baby would never wear.

Before this year, I'd been fortunate to avoid much loss in my life. I didn't understand that grief could live quietly inside you, altering the way you experience everything else. But in the months since, I've noticed how that grief has changed me as a professional—and as a leader.

I serve as the Communications Manager for Associated Students, Inc. (ASI) at California State University, Long Beach, where I help guide messaging around student programs and services. This year, our organization is facing an especially difficult challenge: the closure of our University Student Union (USU) for a major renovation and expansion, and the implementation of a new student fee to fund the project.

Many students have responded with frustration and anger. The loss of a central campus space, combined with a fee increase, has understandably created stress and resentment. For months, my instinct as a communicator was to “change the narrative.” I spent countless hours thinking about how to explain that the USU fee doesn't just fund a building—it supports an entire ecosystem of student life: recreation and wellness, student government, our food pantry, student employment, and more.

But as Halloween approaches and my personal grief resurfaces, I'm beginning to understand the students' feelings in a new and more nuanced way. If I told someone how angry I am about losing our would-be child, it would be unhelpful for them to respond, “But look at all the things you still have—your wonderful husband and your two-year-old son.” Of course, I am grateful for both. But gratitude doesn't erase grief. Having so much to be thankful for doesn't make the loss hurt any less.

In the same way, when students express anger about what they've lost—a gathering place, a sense of stability, a piece of their campus identity—it's not helpful to



immediately redirect them toward what remains. The things they still have don't negate the validity of what they've lost.

As women professionals in higher education, we often find ourselves navigating this tension between acknowledgment and optimism—between holding space for pain and pushing toward progress. We're taught to manage emotions, to make smooth transitions, to lead with positivity. But grief has taught me that leadership isn't about changing how people feel; it's about meeting them where they are.

Across the country, students are grieving and angry—not only about construction projects or campus changes, but about the larger world they're inheriting. They are confronting political polarization, economic instability, global conflict, and an uncertain future. Their anger and grief are not isolated emotions; they are responses to the profound sense of instability that defines our moment.

So, I've started asking myself a new question. Instead of "How do I change the narrative?" I'm asking, "How do I create community and spark joy while still acknowledging the pain that exists?"

Because maybe the work of leadership—especially for women in higher education—is not to fix grief or to spin anger into hope, but to honor those emotions as part of our shared humanity. To sit beside our students in their loss, rather than standing above it.

Grief, after all, is just love with nowhere to go. And when we allow that love to guide us, we can transform even our hardest seasons into spaces of understanding, compassion, and connection.

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## Book Review and Recommendation

by: LaKeysha Carter

In *From Proems to Poems*, Keyawn Cook crafts verses that pull at your heart and challenge your mind. Each one capturing your attention and stimulating your mind. From the first page, Cook's language is both vulnerable and real, inviting its readers to really pause and reflect deeply.

In this debut collection it traces Cook's evolution as both a writer and a person with a unique lived experience. The collection has themes of social justice, challenging the status quo, and often saying the things that go unsaid. The poems balance raw honesty and lived experience in a way that is universal.

Reading Cook's work allowed me to reflect and challenge my own ways of thinking. This book speaks to any person who chooses to be even slightly aware and present with what the human experience in America is like. If you choose to be honest with yourself, you won't be shocked by the raw honesty that is provided. As a Black woman in higher education poems like *On the Backs of Blacks* spoke a raw truth of the lived experience of



Black people in America. There are also poems that speak to the tender side of the author and allow readers to connect with the universal love of a father and son in the poem *The Love of a Father for His Son*. Or the expressed desire of a romantic partner featured in the poem *Intoxicating Seduction*.

*From Proems to Poems* isn't just a collection, it's truly an experience. It's not your typical "rose are red, violets are blue" type of poetry. It may challenge you; it may make you question, and it will definitely have you thinking. Cook's debut collection is a reminder of how powerful poetry can be and how important it is for us to challenge ourselves no matter what our lived experience. A must read for anyone seeking meaning in both words and work.

Found on Amazon & Barnes & Noble

## Network Updates & Upcoming Opportunities

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