Smart Farming:
Cultivating an Embedded Systems Career

A Path to Success in
Data Science

Mindfulness:
From Tibet to the Boardroom

A Lifeline for Learners
Greetings

UCI’s Division of Continuing Education (DCE) and Division of Career Pathways (DCP) are dedicated to advancing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging by fostering cultural competence in our workplace and embedding it in our organizational culture, programs, business practices, policies, and procedures.

This dedication is consistent with UCI’s land grant mission and social responsibility to provide a world-class education to talented, hardworking students, regardless of background.

Events over the last year and even the last few weeks have caused us to reconsider and refocus our efforts to bring diverse views and perspectives into our classrooms and into our organization. All staff members have taken numerous opportunities to understand racism and its many forms and manifestations and to recognize implicit bias when it appears.

As a result, our staff is committed to creating and maintaining a learning environment that celebrates diversity, and one that leverages and supports our students’ unique talents and strengths, regardless of age, gender, or race.

We know that students work better in environments where diversity is celebrated, enabling them to work productively alongside each other. This promotes creativity as well as a better education as differing viewpoints result in more creative solutions. We become stronger as a result, and our students are more capable and confident in developing robust and successful careers, throughout their lives.

Our programs are designed to serve the purpose of continuing education on a global scale and a competitive world of work. Our curriculum helps students acquire the work-ready skills they need to be successful contributors to the workforce.

We are committed to serving our diverse student population and will ensure that our efforts lead to positive and long-term change.

Gary W. Matkin, Ph.D.
Dean, Continuing Education
Vice Provost, Career Pathways
Instructor Q&A: Delia Fernandez, Personal Financial Planning

The Virus That Stole Senior Year

Introducing the 60-Year Curriculum

Alumni Spotlight: Wenwen Yang, An American and International Adventure Interrupted

Hot Careers as a Paralegal and How to Prepare for Them

Attracting and Retaining Top Talent

Certificate Programs

CareerZOT Talk: Laptop Leadership, Managing Your Team in a Virtual World

HOW TO enroll

Online: ce.uci.edu

Phone: (949) 824-5414 (Press #1)

Fax: (949) 824-2090 Download enrollment form at ce.uci.edu/enrollmentform

Mail:
UCI Division of Continuing Education
Student Services Office
PO Box 6050, Irvine, CA 92616-6050
Please allow 7-10 days for your enrollment to be processed.

SUMMER 2021

COURSES BEGIN: JUNE 21

FALL 2021

REGISTRATION OPENS: JULY 15
COURSES BEGIN: SEPTEMBER 20
The ancient practice of mindfulness provides myriad science-backed benefits for today’s stressed professionals.

Back in the year 2000, Shannon Jordan was a hard-driving professional with a relentless, insatiable focus on advancing her career. She had always been a high achiever — she graduated college early, earned a graduate degree while working full-time, and was determined to race up the career ladder at full speed.

“My life up to that point had been singular in focus and very future-oriented,” she said. “My professional work has always revolved around counseling, coaching, organizational development and training. Like so many other professionals, I was always in my head, planning or strategizing what was next, and it sounds cliché, but I wouldn’t have known a present moment if it hit me over the head.”

Then life intervened. She suddenly found herself divorced and exhausted, at a crossroads that created an existential crisis, a reevaluation of life’s meaning at the tender age of 30. That’s when she decided to take a six-month break to clear her head, travel the world and explore South America, Nepal, Tibet and Indonesia.

During her time in Tibet, she discovered meditation, or mindfulness, the ancient practice of quieting the mind to gain clarity and focus. It was a profound experience that set Jordan, instructor for the DCE course, Mindfulness-Based Strategies in Business, on a journey of self-discovery that eventually led to a new career path, teaching the benefits of mindfulness to busy professionals.

“I got an up-close view of the daily life of Tibetan monks. They seemed extraordinarily content despite the most adverse of circumstances — desolate inhospitable terrain, economic scarcity, political oppression. Their smiles, kindness and calm demeanors were moving. My curiosity was piqued.”

There was a deep sense of coming home, she said, “an admiration for the discipline the monks had mastered to manage their minds and their fears, their anxieties and discomforts. I wanted to find that same peace of mind.”

Jordan began exploring meditation methods and studying a variety of traditions, but she never connected it to her work until a colleague invited her to join a lunchtime meditation group. It was a revelation; she saw firsthand how mindfulness improved her coworkers’ performance on the job.

“I began to observe the positive impact it could have in the workplace,” she said.

“People felt better equipped to navigate difficult conversations, challenging deadlines, and the distractedness of the workday. As the neuroscience on mindfulness began to emerge, I started integrating it into my work. The neuroscience behind mindfulness is very exciting and elevating the conversation.”

It led her to study mindfulness at UCSD’s School of Medicine and train in various corporate-based programs. Today, Jordan is Product Lead for the Potential Project, bringing mindfulness training to organizations worldwide.

**Mindfulness in the workplace**

Backed by a growing body of scientific study, the practice of mindfulness has been embraced by a number of corporate giants including Apple, Google and Target. Steve Jobs claimed that his meditation practice was a major factor in reimagining the design of Apple devices in intuitive, innovative ways that changed the world.

A landmark Harvard study by Sarah Lazar, among the first to connect meditation with positive and tangible changes in brain function, found that experienced meditators had developed greater cortical thickness in areas related to attention and emotional awareness.

“This increased thickness or ‘gray matter’ is a bit akin to increased muscle mass and enables that area of the brain to be more efficient and effective,” Jordan said. “Lazar’s landmark findings have since been corroborated by more than 20 studies, several of which involved participants who practiced just a few minutes a day.”
An elective course in the HR Management certificate program, Mindfulness-Based Strategies in Business allows participants to explore science-based mindfulness practices that can lead to increased well-being, performance, and leadership effectiveness. But regardless of industry or occupation, the course is ideal for anyone interested in using mindfulness techniques to help bring clarity and focus to their own lives and workspaces.

Stress on the job is a common burden, but COVID anxiety and work-from-home mentality has amped it up considerably, Jordan said. A recent Forbes report found 89% of employees experienced decreased well-being during the pandemic, so it's no surprise that her course has experienced record enrollment.

“Our students, like most business professionals, reported feeling higher levels of anxiety and isolation. The COVID restrictions have led to remote work for most, which has completely blurred the lines between work and home, with employees working more hours while juggling children’s schooling and other responsibilities. Many are on the edge of exhaustion and burnout.”

A calming breath

Focusing on the act of breathing, the “default mode network,” is a key to mindfulness meditation, re-directing attention from the area of the brain that is constantly on alert and scanning for threats. As a result, people experience a calmer and quieter mind, a refreshed focus that can be expanded with regular practice.

“Mindfully coming back to the breath allows us to get out of our worrisome, fearful minds and back to the present moment, which is really the only place where we can perform, problem-solve, innovate or make decisions,” Jordan said. “While it’s impossible to stop worrisome thoughts completely, mindfulness helps us relate to them in a different way.”

Mindfulness allows us to cope with stressful or frustrating situations in a more detached way. It recently helped Jordan deal with a major disappointment — a once-in-a-lifetime trip derailed by COVID.

“Last March I had a plane ticket to go meet with His Holiness the Dalai Lama,” she said. “The Dalai Lama had agreed to host the CEO of Potential Project, a handful of mindfulness facilitators, and a group of corporate executives for a discussion on what it means to bring compassion to leadership.”

She was devastated when her trip was cancelled. It represented a rare opportunity to return to the Tibetan roots that inspired her. “And then it dawned on me that life lessons can show up in unexpected ways. I still smile when I think that this was a mindful lesson on ‘letting go,’ and that I didn’t need to actually meet the Dalai Lama to learn it.”

A Mindful Exercise to STOP Negative Thoughts

Troublesome thoughts and anxiety are major factors in workplace fatigue — especially in the age of COVID. DCE instructor Shannon Jordan shares a simple four-step S.T.O.P. technique that can calm the mind and refocus attention whenever you find yourself triggered by negative thoughts:

STOP. Pause whatever you are doing.

TAKE A BREATH. Take a slow deep inhale followed by a slow deep exhale.

OBSERVE. Notice your experience. If you find yourself focused on worrisome thoughts or uncomfortable emotions, see if you can “unhook” instead of feeding them further. To do this, notice where you feel the uncomfortable emotion in your body. This helps you create a bit of space by shifting into an observer role.

PROCEED. From this more neutral, observer role ask yourself: “What would be the best action I can take right now for the benefit of myself and others?” You might decide to get some fresh air, take a break, or call a friend, for example.

- Shannon Jordan, DCE Instructor

ce.uci.edu/hr

ce.uci.edu/hr
## Upcoming Free Events:

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<td>Tuesday, May 4</td>
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<td>Thursday, June 3</td>
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<td>COVID-19 in the Context of Data</td>
<td>Wednesday, May 5</td>
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<td>Accountability: Why It’s Needed Now More Than Ever</td>
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<td>Are Your Students Ready for College?</td>
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<td>TEFL Workshop: Encouraging a Growth Mindset in the Language Classroom</td>
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<td>High School Summer Institute in Law Information Session</td>
<td>Thursday, May 20</td>
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<td>Live-Online GMAT Strategy Workshop</td>
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<td>Live-Online LSAT Strategy Workshop</td>
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<td>Cybersecurity, The CMMC and Contract Management: What You Need to Know</td>
<td>Monday, June 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>TEFL Workshop: 7 Mistakes Language Teachers Make and How to Avoid Them</td>
<td>Friday, June 11</td>
<td>4-5pm (PDT)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESL Lesson: Speaking &amp; Listening Skills</td>
<td>Tuesday, June 15</td>
<td>4-5pm (PDT)</td>
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*Sign up at ce.uci.edu/events*
UCI Division of Continuing Education partners with a number of universities to provide you a “next step” on your educational pathway. We have articulation agreements with the universities listed. These schools accept coursework from select UCI Division of Continuing Education certificate programs as credit toward specific degree programs.

Learn more at ce.uci.edu/transfer

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<th>Certificate</th>
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<tr>
<td>Clinical Trials: Medical Device and Drug Development</td>
<td>Northeastern University, Master of Science in Regulatory Affairs for Drugs, Biologics, and Medical Devices OR Master of Science in Project Management</td>
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<td>Rutgers School of Health Professions, Master of Science in Clinical Research Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contract Management</td>
<td>Concord Law School at Purdue University Global, Executive Juris Doctor (EJD)</td>
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<td>Embedded Systems Engineering</td>
<td>University of Wisconsin-Platteville, Master of Science in Engineering</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medical Device Development</td>
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<td>Systems Engineering</td>
<td>Drexel University, Master of Science in Systems Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supply Chain Management</td>
<td>University of Wisconsin-Platteville, Master of Science in Integrated Supply Chain Management</td>
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</table>
DCE is proud to play a part in helping our students reach their professional and career goals.

View their stories at ce.uci.edu/stories
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—NIKKI SILANANDA
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**Instructor Q and A**

**Delia Fernandez**
Personal Financial Planning Instructor

**Q. Why did you decide to become an instructor?**

**A.** I love teaching and public speaking, and am energized by sharing information with people, especially in groups.

**Q. What’s your favorite lesson to teach and why?**

**A.** Case studies, when we get to examine details of a sample client’s financial situation and apply our knowledge to both protect them and help them meet their goals. It’s what I do every day as a financial advisor, and it’s what I love. Planners can make a real difference in people’s lives, helping them with such issues as buying a home, sending their kids to college, or retiring. I want my students to know they can have the same skills and realize the same satisfaction in their careers.

**Q. What’s unique about your teaching style?**

**A.** I bring an enthusiasm for the topic that I try to transmit through examples – and humor – that relate to our everyday lives and that show the difference we can make for our clients. I love it when clients call and say “Thank you for that advice you gave me, it really helped.” They often then refer their family or friends so I can help them as well. I want students to know they can do that, too. It’s a great feeling to know you’ve had such a positive impact on so many people.

**Q. What do you find most rewarding about being an instructor?**

**A.** I really enjoy seeing a student grasp concepts and apply them later in class, either to a case or a current event in the news. And it’s very satisfying to have them email me later when they leave class or approach me at a professional industry event, once they’ve graduated our program and become planners themselves, and tell me how much they enjoyed my classes. Some of them can even quote me or repeat one of my stories that illustrated a point. When I see them now in the profession and fondly remembering my teaching, I know I’ve had a positive impact.

**Q. What advice would you give to anyone interested in pursuing a career as a financial planner?**

**A.** It’s a great time to pursue a career in this field because there’s a growing demand for new planners. Talking to several financial planners about what their day-to-day experience is like would be a great place to start. If it still looks like a good fit, I recommend earning the CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER™ designation, which has become a widely recognized and respected certification for financial planning professionals.

“Planners can make a real difference in people’s lives, helping them with such issues as buying a home, sending their kids to college, or retiring.”
By enrolling in Concurrent Enrollment, you can take advantage of a full catalog of UCI undergraduate and graduate courses without formal admission to the university, based on available space and permission of the course instructor and/or department. Courses carry university credit, may count toward a degree, and are taught by distinguished UCI faculty. Registration in Concurrent Enrollment does not constitute admission to UCI.

Concurrent Enrollment is ideal for you if you are:
• returning to school
• completing degree requirements from another college or university
• a high school student wanting to get a head start on college
• considering applying for admission to UCI
• preparing for graduate or professional school
• a lifelong learner

When are Concurrent Enrollment classes offered?
Concurrent Enrollment is offered during the fall, winter, and spring academic quarters.

How many classes can I take?
You may enroll in a maximum of 2 courses not to exceed 8 units per quarter. Students intending to transfer course credit to another college or university should first verify acceptance of the course at that institution.

How do I obtain a UCI catalogue or schedule of classes?
Course descriptions are listed in the UCI General Catalogue, online at catalogue.uci.edu. The schedule of classes can be viewed online at websoc.reg.uci.edu.

ce.uci.edu/concurrent
This DCE Alumna lost her marketing job due to COVID-19, but a program called WIOA helped get her a partner marketing position supporting a major tech company.

Donna Curry was well established in her marketing career at the start of 2020, working for a start-up based in Portugal, splitting time traveling between the home office and its San Francisco branch. Then COVID-19 began its relentless march across the globe, and her position, like so many others, became a victim of pandemic downsizing.

“At first it was a welcome break from my work, at least for a couple months,” she said. “I tried to stay as active as possible and take advantage of the downtime, but everything was locked down so I really couldn’t do much.”

Donna felt it was a perfect opportunity to burnish her resume and prepare for her next career move, so she sought assistance from local career workshops. She struck gold at NOVAworks Job Center in Sunnyvale where she found a wealth of resources, from resume preparation to job hunting tools.

Since it was an authorized One Stop Center, she learned of the Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA), a program that offers educational grants for disadvantaged or displaced workers who qualify through their local EDD office. It turned out to be a welcome lifeline — and a career turning point that led her to UCI and a new job with a staffing agency where she is supporting Google.

“I learned about WIOA grants through a career and training advisor at NOVAworks,” she said. “It was the right opportunity at the right time. I saw this as the perfect opportunity to update my skill set. I had a lot of on-the-job training and experience with digital marketing, but I was looking for a formal program to round out my education, provide opportunities to add to my portfolio and bring my skill set up to date.”

Getting a fresh start

The NOVAworks advisor was extremely helpful with the rigorous application process, as well as scouting the right university marketing programs for Donna’s needs.

“NOVAworks is a fabulous organization,” she said. “Without it, I would have missed out on this amazing opportunity. They explained all my options and helped with all the WIOA paperwork. It’s a very generous program. The grant paid for tuition, fees and required textbooks.”

After considering her options, Donna decided that the UCI Digital Marketing & Communications certificate program offered all the tools she needed to round out her resume and gain a new set of skills. Its leading-edge online courses allowed her to complete the program from her Bay Area home, just across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco.

“UCI has a great reputation, so it was one of my top choices,” she said. “After researching the Digital Marketing & Communications program, I was impressed with the class offerings and streamlined curriculum. Even though I had some experience in digital marketing, I wanted end-to-end formal training, with hands-on lessons from professionals.”

Her DCE program was an important step forward for Donna, and it had an immediate impact on her career. Shortly after updating her LinkedIn profile, she attracted the interest of Artech, a staffing agency that specializes in partnerships with Fortune 500 and government clients.

A recruiter got in touch and set her on a path to a marketing position at Google. Donna started her new job back in January, a month before she graduated from the DCE program on February 14th. She considered it a perfect Valentine’s present.
"The story of how I landed the role is interesting," she said. "I had updated my LinkedIn profile noting I was enrolled in the UCI Digital Marketing and Communications program, and I uploaded one of my class projects. Shortly afterward, an Artech recruiter reached out to me about a partner marketing opportunity. I interviewed and received an offer within a few weeks. I was quite excited and very happy to be returning to work, especially at Google."

**Assistance for a career relaunch**

The DCE Digital Marketing & Communications program is mainly intended for marketing, communication and product management professionals who want to master the latest digital tools and take their careers to the next level. Students are presented with leading-edge training in writing, design and analytics, addressing strategies that leverage the latest advancements in personal and mobile computing.

Taught by industry experts, the program also provides an overview of how new developments in artificial intelligence and virtual/augmented reality can connect businesses with customers and shape marketing strategies.

"The instructors are so experienced and helpful, and the projects allowed me to get hands-on experience with the latest digital marketing tools," she said. "But one of the best aspects of the program was being able to work and collaborate with such a smart and diverse group of students from all over the country. Being based in San Francisco, it gave me an opportunity I wouldn’t otherwise have access to."

Donna quickly settled into her new position, working from home like all of Google’s workforce, at least for now. "Onsite work is projected to start up in September," she said. "It’s very exciting to be supporting the Google partner marketing team, and the opportunity to put my UCI digital marketing training to work." In her free time, Donna manages to do voiceover work — audiobooks, PSAs and other projects — and volunteers for animal rescue and community projects in her area. Even with travel restrictions in place, she has maintained an active outdoor lifestyle, kayaking and hiking without straying too far from home.

But when the global lockdown is finally over, she has big plans to take some time off and get out of town.

"I love to travel, and my passport shows 44 countries and counting," she said. "After my previous job was downsized, I had all this free time but, like everyone else, I wasn’t able to go anywhere. Now I’m looking forward to when we all can travel safely again."

Learn more about the Digital Marketing & Communications certificate program and training opportunities from the Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA).

- ce.uci.edu/dm
- ce.uci.edu/wioa
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Post-Baccalaureate Premedical Program

Two-year program designed for people who are interested in applying to health profession programs and are in need of science prerequisites and guidance. This program is particularly suited to people who are career-changers and non-science undergraduates. It gives students the necessary academic preparation and competitive advantage that can help them get accepted into medical school or other desired allied health program.

Post-Baccalaureate Program in Pharmaceutical Sciences

The Post-Baccalaureate Program in Pharmaceutical Sciences is designed for individuals seeking preparation for graduate studies, career development, or a career change, who feel they need a stronger academic foundation in pharmaceutical sciences. Preparation provided by this program will benefit those interested in a PharmD, PhD, Master’s degree, or careers in areas of pharmaceutical sciences.

Post-Baccalaureate Program in Psychological Science

Designed for anyone with a bachelor’s degree (in any discipline) with an interest in pursuing a graduate degree and/or career advancement in psychology. This certificate program provides the opportunity to acquire foundational knowledge, research experience, and/or internship experience needed to make your graduate school application more competitive.

POST-BACCALAUREATE PROGRAMS

Learn about admission requirements, curriculum, and application deadlines at

ce.uci.edu/postbacc
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- Construction Management Certificate
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UCR
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- Computer Science Education
  - Introductory Supplementary Authorization
  - Specific Supplementary Authorization
- Introductory English Supplementary Authorization
- Introductory Mathematic Supplementary Authorization
- Turfgrass Management Professional Certificate

To view our entire Partner Network, visit: ce.uci.edu/areas/partner
Don’t Take Our Word for It. See what our alumni have to say about their certificate program

- 3 out of 4 would recommend a certificate program to others
- 3 out of 4 said their program helped them become more knowledgeable in their field
- 3 out of 4 are prepared to take on more responsibilities at work
- 87% are satisfied with their UCI education

Source: UCI DCE graduate survey
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  ... and more

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Contact us to build your checklist!
Corporate Services Team
Lindsay Doherty
(949) 824-7506
Lindsay.Doherty@uci.edu

ce.uci.edu/corporatepartner

**2021 Checklist – DONE**
✓ Self-serve employee training
✓ Free year-round skills workshop events
✓ New talent sourcing
✓ Measure successful learning transfer

(Thanks UCI!)
Have you ever considered becoming a licensed real estate agent?

There are many reasons to choose real estate as your career: you can set your own schedule, be your own boss, knowledgeably invest in rental properties, and collect commissions for home sales.

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Our coursework is modeled after the curriculum created by the California Department of Real Estate (CalDRE) and the National Association of Realtors (NAR). This program is ideal if you are interested in pursuing a real estate license and meeting the other requirements outlined by the CalDRE.

Program Benefits

• Demonstrate and apply the content mandated by the CalDRE
• Satisfy the 135-hour education requirement necessary to sit for the Real Estate License exam
• Exhibit knowledge of agency and fiduciary responsibility, and an understanding of real estate opportunities and risk

Summer Courses Start June 21, 2021

• Real Estate Principles
• Real Estate Finance
• Real Estate Practice

ce.uci.edu/realestate

Career Insight

Occupational summary for real estate sales agents.

Source: Economic Modeling Specialists Intl.

161,089
ANNUAL JOB OPENINGS
(2019)

11.8%
PROJECTED GROWTH
(2019-2029)

$48k
MEDIAN SALARY
(HIGHLY EXPERIENCED WORKERS CAN EARN UP TO $112K)
Cultivating an Embedded Systems

Smart Farming is among the fast-growing segments in the embedded systems and Internet of Things (IoT) connected world.

The digital revolution has transformed virtually every aspect of modern life, so it's only natural that agriculture, one of the earliest elements of civilization, would be long overdue for a major upgrade — a new high-tech way to produce crops. Get ready for Smart Farms, sustainable indoor systems that cultivate the highest quality harvests in tightly controlled conditions.

Think hundreds of wireless, embedded sensors interfacing with Internet of Things (IoT) technology, monitoring and controlling every element of crop cultivation with the help of small drones, sealed off in hydroponic farm spaces. Smart Farms are increasingly popping up in abandoned urban spaces, producing bumper crops of fresh lettuce and other leafy greens.

Smart Farming is a lucrative field with strong growth potential, according to Rana Basheer, instructor in the UCI Division of Continuing Education (DCE) Embedded Systems Engineering certificate program and Co-Founder of the Irvine startup Edyza.

“At Edyza, we design Smart Farm systems for a number of clients in the U.S. as well as British Columbia and across Canada, where a lack of natural daylight and climate irregularities makes outdoor farming difficult,” he said. “Our clients grow medical-grade cannabis, lettuce, and leafy vegetables, which are all very well-suited for indoor farming.”

According to a recent report by Grand View Research, Inc., the Smart Farm (or precision agriculture) market is expected to reach $43 billion by 2025. Amazon is backing an indoor farming start-up called Plenty that invests in large-scale vertical farms. Several other companies, including Agrowatcher and Mothive, are emerging in the U.S. and worldwide.

Smart Farming is one of the most exciting sectors in the embedded systems field, which encompasses a wide range of applications. “Think of how interconnected your home is today,” Basheer said. “Embedded systems and IoT involve everything from home security to refrigerators and washing machines.”

UCI students are migrating to embedded systems engineering and design with great success, Basheer notes. DCE’s certificate program is designed to help open the door to this emerging sector.

**High-tech ecosystems**

With traditional outdoor farms, where vast acres of crops are subjected to the whims of nature, billions of dollars’ worth of product can be destroyed by drought, insect infestation and bacterial infection such as E. coli. Increasingly unpredictable weather patterns make it more challenging than ever.
By contrast, Smart Farming systems offer the ability for greenhouses to create a fully contained, sealed ecosystem operated entirely by 200 to 300 wireless sensors that communicate seamlessly. The farms are monitored with indoor drones that operate in conjunction with the sensor network, deploying seeds, spraying fertilizer, and collecting data on temperature, crop health and much more.

The entire system is visualized and monitored through a dashboard control that provides real-time data on every element of the operation. Smart Farms are so tightly controlled that humans are not even allowed inside the indoor ecosystems without biohazard suits and foot coverings.

“One of the biggest problems it eliminates is contamination from outside sources, which most commonly comes from workers and inspectors,” Basheer said. “Humans bring in bacteria and that can create these large-scale infections that result in recalls of lettuce and other produce.”

As a result, Smart Farming yields the highest quality crops with minimal waste, and each node is designed to be as energy efficient as possible. The system can also maximize use of relatively small spaces, a boon for urban farmers.

“Entrepreneurs are finding that empty spaces like malls are excellent for converting to Smart Farms,” Basheer said. “The typical indoor farm is about 1,500 to 2,000 square feet, but there are also much larger indoor-outdoor operations that have tightly contained greenhouses.”

**A smart career**

The DCE Embedded Systems Engineering certificate program is designed for working professionals in the tech sector who are considering a career in the embedded systems or system-on-chip (SoC) fields. The fast proliferation of IoT systems has created great demand for embedded systems engineers and designers, and this program can help open the door for candidates seeking to specialize.

Experienced instructors lead students through a range of practical, hands-on courses that utilize industry automation tools and design kits. Basheer’s course, *Motor Control Systems and Applications*, allows students to learn theory and then test it against real, self-built motors. He decided to join the Embedded Systems program as an instructor in order to share his knowledge, help shape curriculum and groom the next generation for success.

Learn more about the Embedded Systems Engineering and Internet of Things (IoT) programs.

- [ce.uci.edu/embedded](ce.uci.edu/embedded)
- [ce.uci.edu/iot](ce.uci.edu/iot)

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“UCI students are migrating to embedded systems engineering and design with great success. DCE’s certificate program is designed to help open the door to this emerging sector.”

— Rana Basheer, instructor
COVID-19 poses huge challenges for new grads, making Independent Educational Consultants more essential than ever.

Of all the aspects of daily life disrupted by the pandemic, none has been more impactful or consequential as losing a year of on-campus education — especially for high school seniors transitioning to college. With students stuck at home, forced into endless months of remote learning, think of all that has been lost, and not only in terms of classroom instruction.

COVID-19 has forced teachers, students, and parents to adapt and fashion a new normal on the fly. And while the experience has highlighted the ingenuity and resourcefulness of everyone involved, the effects of a year of isolation for teen students can’t be minimized, said Mark Sklarow, advisory committee member for DCE’s Independent Educational Consultant certificate program.

The impact is being felt in numerous ways, he said. Imagine being cheated out of your senior year, graduation ceremony, the excitement and apprehension of leaving the nest for college, to say nothing of the lack of social gatherings, hanging out with friends.

“Let’s start with the emotional impact,” Sklarow said. “Transitioning from high school to college is always fraught. Students worry about everything from interesting professors to making friends to sharing a room with a stranger. Even the most excited student has moments of doubt and anxiety. Now let’s layer on top that the Class of 2021 will not have had a typical senior year with its rites of passage and reminders of what lies ahead.”

As a result, the role of the Independent Educational Consultant has become more prominent than ever. IECs are increasingly essential to help students and their families navigate the new challenges of transitioning to college life — meeting the educational, financial, and emotional needs of students at a very crucial juncture in their lives.

Sklarow, CEO of the Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA), recently took time to offer his observations on the changing landscape for students and families planning for college — and what it means for the growing ranks of IECs.

**What are your thoughts on the current and future landscape for students transitioning to college?**

This could be answered in dozens of ways. No office bulletin board congratulating seniors on where they are heading. No senior classes filled with students in college sweatshirts. No prom. All these rites serve a purpose to begin the separation from local high school to life in college and they disappeared for so many. So, I worry about the added emotional toll, the added uncertainty.

**Is there anything positive they can take from this?**

Students realized that they could learn virtually. And they learned to appreciate what they had: family with a home, a job, food to eat, rather than what they wish they had. So, while I worry about the emotional toll of COVID, there’s a piece of me that thinks many may have discovered inner strength and inner knowledge that will help them. Maybe, just maybe, there was a lesson on resilience as well. Students may be thinking: ‘I survived being stuck at home for a year with only my parents—if I can do that, I can do anything!’

“The key to the success DCE has had is that it helps IEC students build on the successes they have and fill in the voids.”

— Mark Sklarow, IEC advisory committee member
What are some of the temporary and permanent changes you foresee?
The application landscape has certainly changed, and I suspect the changes will be largely ongoing, especially growth in schools who made standardized test scores optional. And we can’t ignore the economic realities of COVID. Where professionals and the wealthy have largely fared well, too many others were left in serious financial difficulty. Families that scrambled to meet college tuition in May of 2020 may be unable to find the resources in May of 2021. Colleges, financial aid officers, IECs and families will need to recalibrate.

How is this affecting the role of the IEC?
Independent Educational Consultants have been perfectly situated for times such as these. They have long talked about ‘great fit’ over name brand. They have always advocated for students as being far more than their test scores and GPAs. All of these are growing in importance as a result of COVID. Additionally, IECs regularly do career exploration, Myers-Briggs personality indicator tests, and learning-style examinations as part of the intake and review process. These have all grown in value as a result of the suspension of schools, clubs and jobs. I believe this is why the use of IECs has grown over the past year and the number of IECA members has soared. The unique student-centric approach IECs take in working with families has never been more critical.

How does the IEC certificate program prepare candidates to succeed in this space?
It begins with the basic premise that IECs don’t work to get students into a specific school. They help to understand the students fully and guide them to consider opportunities by casting a wide net — often colleges they never thought of previously. Everything flows from that. From financial aid knowledge to counseling skills and college knowledge, the IEC certificate program ensures that all bases are covered, with an emphasis on managing an ethical and successful practice. It also stresses that success requires training in both business and counseling to succeed.

What type of student is the program intended for?
Most entering the program are career changers, and sometimes significant changes, from attorneys to nurses, and sometimes more subtle changes within the academic world. The key to the success DCE has had is that it helps IEC students build on the successes they have and fill in the voids. Whether your background is that of a school counselor, a mom who helped their children through the process or a marketing genius who wants to help kids, virtually everyone entering this field should find what they need at UCI. It seems like it would be an especially fulfilling and rewarding career.

Ask anyone who is an IEC and be prepared for the grin that will appear and excited sharing of stories of watching teens blossom and succeed, especially when worried students discover a school they never heard of where they thrive. Want proof of the field’s appeal? Most come to independent educational consulting mid-life — our average IECA member is probably 55 years old. They could stop at 65, or 70, or 75. But they keep working because the work itself, and the colleagues who become friends along the way, make working so much more rewarding than not.

ce.uci.edu/iec
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A Path to Success in Data Science

Four programs designed to provide a unified career track, from data analytics to machine learning.

As the old analog world fades into history, it's clear that global commerce is increasingly powered by data science — gathering, analyzing and interpreting massive amounts of it to drive innovative business solutions. Leveraging data and analytics is key to making the most informed decisions, whether it's crafting effective marketing campaigns, smarter investments, or improved healthcare.

Data science encompasses a wide range of high-demand specializations, and the Division of Continuing Education addresses the growing need with a series of four certificate programs that provide a career track, a roadmap of sorts that can guide students to success in several areas of data science, from predictive analytics to the emerging field of machine learning.

"Data science and analytics are among the wildest growing fields and there is a strong demand for graduates and professionals who can apply data science to solve business challenges," said Majed Al-Ghandour, PhD, instructor and DCE advisory board member. "DCE offers a great roadmap, four related programs that chart a career path, and all four are designed to be taken in a particular order."

The key is taking that big first step — learning the basics and then figuring out where your data science skills can take you from there, he added. "As far as career possibilities, the big three are data analyst, data scientist and data engineer. Students need to figure out which path is right for them, and our certificate programs can help lead the way."

Al-Ghandour recommends Data Analytics for Business as the perfect entry point, a comprehensive certificate program that provides a strong foundation for career advancement. The program is designed for working professionals from a range of backgrounds who are seeking a solid understanding of how to interpret organizational data and processes to drive business strategies.

Students learn to excel in the essential elements of data analysis: collecting, selecting, and preparing data to create decision plans that streamline business processes and guide the most effective data-based decisions.

The certificate can propel candidates to move ahead in their own organization or strike out for other opportunities. Quite often, it's a launching pad for continuing education to broaden their knowledge base for further advancement.

"We design these certificate programs for any student without any business or analytics background, to start them on the path and lead them to the end point of their journey," Al-Ghandour said. "It's all about empowering the students to learn and support their real-world business insights from data, whatever their career specialty might be."
Consider that data science-related positions in the U.S. are projected to grow by 18.7% through 2029, with a median annual salary range of up to $183,000 for highly qualified candidates, according to Economic Modeling Specialists Intl.

A roadmap to success

Once candidates have gained a solid background in data analytics, many enhance their skillsets with the Data Science certificate program. With guidance from Al-Ghandour and other expert advisors, the curriculum is continually evolving and updating to keep up with the latest advancements in the field.

Data scientists are increasingly in demand for collecting and analyzing data to discover new insights that can drive innovation, employing a “hacker” mentality of sorts to uncover new ways to extrapolate and capitalize on existing data. The program addresses the latest tools and theories for designing, modeling and managing large databases.

After taking a deep dive into data science, the next step along the path would be Predictive Analytics, the science of using data and statistical algorithms to predict future outcomes, an emerging skillset that’s increasingly coveted in numerous fields. If a candidate is only able to complete one of the four programs, Al-Ghandour recommends taking this one.

“All four programs are awesome,” he said. “But if I had to pick and choose, if a student has time for only one, I suggest taking the Predictive Analytics certificate program. It’s very much in demand, a way to build models and to predict future trends and use them to inform business strategy.”

For those who want to take the next step, the Machine and Deep Learning program puts students on the leading edge of artificial intelligence, a vastly more efficient way to mine and analyze data. These technologies are able to recognize hidden patterns and continually learn from gathered data, providing highly advanced competitive advantages.

Machine learning methods are applied in a growing and diverse range of fields — traditional ones like criminal justice and advertising, as well as emerging industries like autonomous vehicles and smart homes.

“The key is taking that big first step — learning the basics and then figuring out where your data science skills can take you from there.”

Majed Al-Ghandour

Designing the future

The DCE Data Science career track provides a steady progression that broadens and deepens a student’s background along the way. Each program is periodically revised to maintain the most up-to-date curriculum, and Al-Ghandour was involved in not only designing and developing the programs but he also teaches several courses.

“I was honored to be one of the subject matter experts to develop the layout and road map for the four DCE certificate programs,” he said. “I had the wonderful experience of seeing it from beginning to end, putting my experience and skills to use to help students understand the applications and values of data science within different businesses and industries. I want to prepare our students to be ready to go to work with minimal learning curve on the job.”

The quartet of certificate programs can help guide a journey to success in virtually any industry, regardless of one’s specialized career interests, he added. “At the end, students from these programs will enjoy exciting new careers and expanded roles dealing with top CEO management to optimize business strategies.”

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The 60-Year Curriculum (60YC) is gaining recognition across institutions as an important theme that is guiding university continuing education, and the entire university offering, from the time students enter college as a freshman until after they graduate and then later, retire.

The 60YC objective is to provide a resource that binds students to the university particularly at significant life transitions points, as they enter college, leave college for the world of work, prepare for and enter careers, improve themselves in the workplace, gain and maintain skills that are needed to stay current, upgrade or change careers, and finally, retire.

The Division of Continuing Education (DCE) is leading the way by recognizing the concept of the 60YC as being important and by developing curricula that address real-life transition points.

Beyond its importance to guiding students, the 60YC recognizes the demand for increased accountability of universities, the need for greater learner-centeredness in pedagogy, and the fact that adult students usually turn to education to help them through life transitions.

Whereas “lifelong learning” expresses the need for an individual to continue learning, the 60YC represents the necessary response from an institution to provide lifelong learning opportunities in the form of formal education courses and programs.

Most importantly for undergraduate students, the adoption of the 60YC theme fosters learner-centeredness. Surveys clearly indicate that both freshman students and their parents, overwhelmingly, see a college education as a pathway to meaningful careers and employment. Therefore, a truly learner-centered institution, like UCI, must take this primary motivation into account in its curriculum and its services.

Introducing students to real world experiences, using case studies, and requiring group work, are examples of how learning might be adjusted toward the 60YC goals. The 60YC theme helps students achieve better academic outcomes. A very large body of research indicates that undergraduate students with a strong intentionality toward what they will do after graduation results in better grades, less time to completion, reduced stress, and greater satisfaction after graduation. The earlier that this intentionality is defined, the greater the benefit. Students are aided in choosing not only the appropriate program, but also individual classes and activities, including jobs and internships. There is strong evidence that the 60YC is a powerful enhancer of academic quality.
For continuing education students, the 60YC is consistent with and supportive of learner-centeredness. It also is supportive of another trend in higher education, “active learning.” DCE courses are focused on balancing the theoretical with the applied, and strive to be highly relevant to working professionals, providing skills that are immediately and actively employed daily. As pedagogy shifts toward a more active role of students in their learning, through projects and experiential learning, the 60YC has a place.

Thus, for students who are matriculated in degree programs and for continuing education students pursuing post-graduate educational experiences, the 60YC provides the framework for a natural lifelong association between the institution and its graduates.

The chart shown here is divided into sections corresponding with common life transitions. Each section has information about current programs offered to help people deal with major changes in their lives just when they need it. For instance, behind the section labeled “Be Effective in the Workplace,” students will find courses on written and oral communications, critical thinking, decision making, and problem solving. The section on being digitally competent offers a curation of courses providing training in common digital skills such as Excel, Microsoft Office, and PowerPoint. The courses vary in length and depth, some are free, and some require a fee. This pie chart guide will grow dynamically as more courses and services are added.

The 60YC is not a fad or the latest way of emphasizing the importance of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is already recognized as playing an active and necessary role in people’s lives. No one who wishes to improve themselves can escape the investment in their own learning.

The 60YC is an expression of the university response to lifelong learning, the need for offering formal programs of education and training, not only during the years of formal matriculation, but also after graduation.

Universities cannot maintain their institutional relevance without a 60YC commitment. UCI has made that commitment and is rapidly expanding its programs from our courses on how to be a successful college student to our Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) for retired people, with the bulk of our offerings focused on upgrading or changing careers. In addition to these educational programs, we are combining career services with our courses to provide an additional layer of support as people search for and prepare for careers.

Continue to look to the DCE as a guide and counselor, as well as an education provider, as you face an ever-changing world.
College Ready

Programs for High School Students

UCI faculty and industry experts provide high school students with hands-on learning opportunities to advance their academic and professional skills. These programs provide students with a meaningful way to gain a college experience, enhance their college resumé, and explore an area of study.

[ce.uci.edu/highschool]
Experience University Research

Year-Round Online

This program allows students to take college-level courses alongside local and international peers. Choose from hands-on courses in some of UCI’s most popular academic areas of study, including Engineering, Business, Environmental Policy, Esports, and more.

High School Summer Institute in Law

Summer

Offered through UCI School of Law, this program introduces students to the legal system in the context of students’ rights while they gain practice in public speaking, persuasion, negotiation and legal analysis. Personal interaction with faculty and law students not only engage and inspire participants in the study of law, but also help them explore a possible career as a lawyer.

Higher Education 101

Year-Round Online

This webinar series helps students learn about admissions, programs, career planning, and more, to get tips for making their application competitive and preparing for academic success.
An American and International Adventure

Wenwen Yang came to UCI from China to learn English and experience American campus life — then COVID hit.

There’s something special about DCE alumna Wenwen Yang, a quality of kindness and caring that encompasses everyone in her orbit as well as the world at large — a quality that can leave a lasting impression, even remotely.

A native of China, she came to the U.S. to experience American culture, make friends and eventually study pedagogy and child psychology, two passions of Wenwen’s, the doting mother of a 7-year-old son. But first she needed to learn English. It was important not only for her studies but also so she could participate in her son’s education.

So, after doing a bit of digging as a reporter for a large-circulation newspaper in Guangzhou, she decided to enroll in UCI DCE’s ESL program.

"My previous experience as a reporter with Yangcheng Evening News allowed me to get exposed to a lot of information on my education options," she said. "Based on that, after discussing it with my husband, I chose UC Irvine, hoping to build a solid language foundation before starting graduate school, hopefully at UCI. My time studying English at UCI turned out to be an unforgettable experience for me."

Wenwen was loving her on-campus experience, the classes and all the extracurricular activities, then COVID reared its ugly head and shut it all down. Her ESL courses were intended to be mainly onsite, but the transition to remote learning wasn’t quite as traumatic as expected, said Bob Betts, a longtime ESL instructor.

Each class is capped at 18 students, so it was easy to get to know all the students — and Wenwen was a standout from the start.

“She worked very hard, but what really stood out was that she answered questions in a very well-thought-out manner,” Betts said. “She seemed to care so much about other people and for the world situation. I can only describe her as having a spiritual quality, and she really appreciated the opportunity to learn and study. She ended up becoming one of my most memorable students, for sure.”

Betts was surprised and delighted when Wenwen introduced herself with a Donald Duck puppet. "That was really surprising and funny," he said. "So, when I gave her my feedback video, I used a puppet that I have at home for the kids. I think the students enjoy getting to know an American teacher."

Wenwen graciously found time to share thoughts on her study-abroad experience and plans for the future.

Let’s start with your background. What led you to study in the U.S.?

I graduated from Qingdao University of Science and Technology in 2005, and after that I worked in big cities throughout China such as Qingdao, Beijing, Guangzhou and Shanghai. Then I met my husband and moved to Kunming with him, so he could study in the field of investments and group management. More recently I decided to come to UCI with my son to build a solid English language foundation, and then do further study in pedagogy and psychology for children. I did four quarters of ESL study, including two semesters of online courses and two semesters of in-person courses.

What are your thoughts about transitioning from in-person classes to online?

I think that in either case, good teachers can always make learning engaging and interesting. I enjoyed my time in the classroom, on the beautiful campus with abundant extracurricular activities, face-to-face communication with classmates from different countries. It’s great to experience teachers and their different teaching methods such as group tasks, games and debates. There was always something new; it all made me full of expectations and excitement for each day.
Interrupted

With online classes, it's more about creating a sense of ritual. Don’t become lazy just because you are at home. Get up early and put on clothes you’d normally wear in class. Take a look at the homework you need to learn today. The sense of ritual allows me to maintain a steady routine for my studies.

Bob Betts certainly holds you in high regard. Can you tell us about your experience in his course?

I like Bob very much. If you use one word to describe him, it must be sincere. He is always gentle and firm, knowledgeable and patient. Even on Zoom, he’s the type of teacher who makes students feel inspired. My spoken English is not very good, but Bob is very patient and helped guide me to learn more, step by step, and he’s like that with all his students. A good teacher is like a ray of sunshine. We can’t describe it, but you know, you accepted its shining.

Your Donald Duck puppet intro sounds inspired, by the way. Tell me about that.

Bob has his students do a self-introduction in the first week of the remote semester, so I did mine as an interview between me and Donald Duck. In response, he uploaded his comments as a furry toy. He might seem old school, but he’s also quite humorous.

Tell us about your family. Do you plan on building a life in the U.S.?

My husband still works in China for now, and I’m still living here with my son. He is one of the driving forces for my continuous growth — I want to be a role model for my child. He is currently preparing for first grade in a private elementary school. He’s very happy studying here, which makes me very happy. This may be the difference between Chinese education and American education. As for whether we will stay in the United States in the future, we have not decided yet.

How would you characterize your overall experience with UCI?

Every day of studying at UCI is very fulfilling, and I’ve learned a lot. I’ve benefitted from every teacher I’ve had. More importantly, I saw a different world, experienced a different culture, opened up my mind, and anticipated more possibilities for my future. I really hope to be admitted as a graduate student at the university because I have become a big fan of UCI!

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It’s never too early to start preparing for your best career fit — a top legal recruiter shares the latest opportunities ranging inside and outside law firms.

Studying to be a paralegal is an attractive and popular career path, one filled with opportunities for anyone willing to take the leap and acquire the proper educational background. But students and recent grads often don’t consider all the options that are available — and that can be a missed opportunity.

There’s more to success than just getting a certificate. Several often-overlooked strategies can give aspiring paralegals an advantage in the marketplace, and it’s never too early to start preparing and looking at all the possibilities, inside and outside law firms, said Jennifer Evans, executive legal recruiter and co-founder of Access Talent Solutions.

“I’ve found that so many new graduates and students think of only searching paralegal and assistant paralegals jobs, but that’s a mistake,” she said. “It’s really important to be aware of all the opportunities that are often overlooked in law firms or in-house legal departments, like docketing case clerk, compliance support, contract specialist and legal operations coordinator, to name a few.”

A rather new and promising position for paralegals, legal operations, didn’t exist five years ago, she added. It’s a fast-growing career option that involves managing the day-to-day functions of a law office or corporate legal department — connecting all the dots, scheduling, dealing with outside vendors, and more.

“New paralegals should also consider looking into intellectual property law, which is a hot market right now,” Evans said. “But to find the best fit, you need to discover which area you’re best suited for. Corporate law and litigation roles require totally different skill sets and personalities.”

Interested in breaking into this wide-ranging field? Demand in California has increased across the board and is projected to grow even further. Evans lists litigation, intellectual property law, and estate planning as among the hottest practices today, and increased hiring in corporate and real estate law may well be on the horizon as the COVID-19 situation becomes clearer.

Proper preparation is key to landing a dream job in any of these areas. Before starting out on a paralegal journey, consider the following expert advice from Evans, a frequent guest speaker for the DCE Paralegal certificate program.
Start your LinkedIn network as early as possible

It’s never too early to start networking, Evans said. In fact, when you’re studying to be a paralegal, consider every conversation, every classmate and instructor as a networking opportunity. Each one could eventually open doors for you down the line.

“Always be networking, starting as early in your education as possible,” Evans said. “Consider every relationship you have in class as potentially part of your network and start building out a professional-looking LinkedIn profile. Most people don’t even think about networking until they absolutely need to.”

One of the best ways to expand your network is by joining a group like the Orange County Paralegal Association. Students can apply for membership online and join any number of specialized groups. It’s easy to apply for a student membership on the OCPA website.

Volunteering can be a strong career move

Consider volunteering with a local organization like Community Legal Aid SoCal — it can be a great way to gain experience and tons of connections. It might even lead to a full-time position down the line.

“Volunteering is absolutely a great opportunity for aspiring paralegals,” Evans said. “There is a wide variety of organizations in the local area where you can get your feet wet. And right now is a great time to start.”

Because of economic hardships caused by COVID-19, a number of attorneys are volunteering to help with foreclosures, evictions, issues involving job losses and other legal matters. It’s a good opportunity for students and new paralegals to connect with them, find out about the legal profession and get experience.

Aside from Legal Aid, Evans recommends Public Law Center and American Bar Association as outstanding volunteer organizations for anyone pursuing a career in law.

Conduct informational interviews

Request an informational interview with attorneys and legal professionals in fields you’re interested in. It’s an effective but often overlooked way for students to be proactive in their career journey.

“Consider sending an email saying something like, ‘My name is <Your Name>, and I’m a college student at UCI who is interested in <area of law that interests you>. Your career path is very inspirational to me, and I wondered if you would be open to speaking with me. As an aspiring paralegal, I’d love to learn more about which skills you’ve used the most and tips you may have for someone looking to work in your similar field of work.’ Evans said. ‘Make it clear you aren’t asking for a job, you’re just a student who’d like to know some background, explore traits needed to be successful in that field, and get an idea what a typical day is like.’

You might discover the field isn’t a good fit, and you can move on to a more suitable option. Either way, be sure to follow up afterward by requesting a LinkedIn connection to expand your network. Like Evans said, ”ABN” — Always Be Networking.

Leverage your non-legal experience

Many people have a hard time seeing how their current experience might transfer to the legal world, but focusing on specific transferable skills and key accomplishments from other fields can pay off with a job that opens the door to a paralegal career, Evans said.

Her mother is a great example, a successful architect who leveraged an entry-level temporary clerk job, bate stamping documents, into a paralegal career. “She was able to network and use the firm on her resume to land her first paralegal position.” More recently, Evans helped a new graduate who had no legal background whatsoever prepare to apply for a law position. They focused on reworking her resume to reflect all her relevant skills from her current job.

“She had not worked in a legal position before, but that didn’t matter. She was super bright and had done well in her current office job. We used that experience! We also worked on leveraging her network. I gave her a lot of tips, but she did the work. She called me a couple weeks ago to let me know she was offered a role in legal operations at a top Fortune 500 company. Super excited for her.”

“Demand [for Paralegals] in California has increased across the board and is projected to grow even further.”

– Jennifer Evans, executive legal recruiter and co-founder of Access Talent Solutions
Expert panel weighs in on best practices for recruiting the most qualified candidates.

HR professionals are faced with a challenging task in this era of flexible schedules and remote workspaces — how do you recruit, and retain, top talent in a global pool of candidates? Technology has made it all too easy for the most highly qualified candidates to shop their skills to companies located far outside their local areas, giving them a big advantage in the marketplace.

Desirable headquarters location isn’t the perk it once was. Job seekers on the West Coast, for example, can expand their search to companies anywhere in the U.S., throughout the Pacific Rim and beyond. And competition is due to intensify. By most projections, the economy is poised for significant expansion once the COVID pandemic is over, with potentially explosive job growth.

Regardless of the economic climate, employee retention is always important to the bottom line. High turnover is expensive and prevents a company from moving forward. It dulls competitive advantage along with company morale. It’s simply a bad look all the way around.

So how do companies attract and retain top talent in 2021 and beyond? Here are five keys to success, shared by an expert panel on HRTalks, a free webinar series sponsored by UCI DCE.

1) Build a strong, positive culture

Projecting a distinct, values-based culture creates an inviting environment for top-level talent, the right type of employees who can perpetuate that culture. So, don’t recruit candidates based on competencies and skills alone, but also the values they project, said Ann Rhoades, President and Founder of People Ink.

"I really believe that you have to customize and create an environment that is based on a set of values that ultimately creates your culture, the collection of behaviors of an organization," she added. "I’ve discovered that great organizations become great places to work because they attract people who want to work for an employee-centric and customer-centric organization."

Rhoades points to JetBlue, Salesforce, Procter & Gamble and Southwest Airlines as excellent examples of employee-centric companies with strong cultures that are equally appealing to customers. "If you fly Southwest Airlines, one of their values is fun. They’re always having a great time on a flight, and that happens because it was designed specifically that way."

2) Showcase an inclusive workforce

Conversations about equality and race have moved front and center for corporate America, but while most companies endorse these values, they don’t necessarily showcase them in their own organizations. That can be a deal breaker for many highly qualified individuals, according to Damon Jones, Chief Communications Officer at Procter & Gamble.
"We’ve seen the organizations that say Black lives matter, for example, yet don’t necessarily have the right culture inside their own walls," he said. "Black employees don’t feel that the leaders live those values. Not only will that potentially impact the bottom line, it can also impact your ability to recruit and retain the best people."

Don’t rely on ads or commercials to tout the importance of inclusive policies, showcase your own workforce as a living example. Signaling support for gender and racial equality isn’t enough. Keep in mind, it’s easy to scour company websites to see who’s really running the shop.

3) **Offer a remote, flexible lifestyle**

Companies that aren’t open to flexible lifestyles for their employees run the risk of being left far behind more proactive organizations. The tide is irreversible; companies that said a year ago they’d never go remote are now fully remote, and it won’t change post-pandemic, said Tue Le, VP of Global Brand at Remote Year.

“It’s an employee market right now, and employees are shopping around for companies with the best lifestyle benefits. The idea of flexible work is no longer a perk or a benefit — it’s an expectation and a norm for everybody.”

Beyond an attractive employee enticement, a remote workforce can increase morale and even boost productivity, Le added. She knows from experience. “I don’t care where employees work, all I care about is being results-driven. So, as we deliver as a team, I don’t care if you’re calling me from a boat in the middle of Vietnam.”

4) **Solicit employee feedback**

Encouraging regular, targeted feedback from employees is an effective way to improve conditions, measure satisfaction and stay abreast of current trends management might not otherwise be aware of. But it’s important to let the employees know why the survey is being given, its purpose and how the company might benefit, Tue Le said. “It’s important to create an environment and a culture where you’re welcoming feedback and showing people why it matters.”

Le spends an hour after each survey creating a presentation, an action plan she shares with the entire organization. Often, employees will sign up to give an extra one or two hours of their time to share feedback directly with Remote Year’s leadership team.

“If you show employees the actions and behaviors that have changed as a result of their feedback, they’re going to be extremely open and welcoming to giving you further feedback.”

5) **Encourage creative input**

Inviting members of your team to ideate, brainstorm and take part in the creative process contributes to a positive, employee-centric environment and helps improve the final result. One of the best ways is through the prototyping process, one of the creative tools recommended by Tamas Lengyel, Founder of DOERS Conference and former VP at DHL Express.

“It’s an effective way to visualize, outline and revise an intangible such as a service or process from its inception.

“Prototyping is really important,” Lengyel said. "If you create the prototype, then you can share it with people so they can react to it, offer their own ideas. Then you can redesign and refine it. What’s important to remember here is that it’s a first draft, an early attempt to build something in the low-fidelity format.”

Like any first draft, it’s a rough cardboard sketch of sorts that gets the creative juices flowing and encourages revisions — in this case leading to a polished vision that everyone can share in.

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Managing Your Team in a Virtual World.

The pandemic that we are experiencing together has potentially changed our working environment for the long term. In fact, it might change the entire framework of an office setting completely.

Plenty of research shows that our ability to connect meaningfully with others is less satisfying when we are not physically present. There is an unconditional feeling of connection that we have lost – and that connection is buried in the idealism that we are bonded by similar priorities, interests, and attitudes.

Our traditional reality was based on our close and comforting office relationships, and those foundational interactions built and sustained our belief and engagement in the organizational structure. Perhaps we all took it for granted and now we are trying to navigate a culture that has been pushed completely online – out of necessity.

So as leaders, we need to ask what to do now. What is the cultural fabric that shapes our workforce? How can we reimagine our new identity, inclusive of social responsibility, and remote working? And with that, how do we make this an imperative that lasts over time and generations?

This is going to take reflection and a thoughtful approach.

**Get Back to the Basics.**

Culture needs to serve a place in our remote and daily routines. The challenge is to acknowledge that culture can no longer be forged in the same way as it was in an office-centric model. We need to redefine what matters most and that is the personal and professional ties that bind us together.

**Set the Tone and Steer the Culture.**

Our leadership goals need to stress open communication and confirm the spirit of accountability. It is essential to support the belief in the mission and our people—and this needs to be more important than financial gain right now.

**Use Disruption to Change.**

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