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UCSB program broadens STEM opportunity for underserved youth

On a recent rainy day, fourth- through sixth-grade students from Glen City Elementary made the trip from Santa Paula to UC Santa Barbara. Unfazed by the weather, they arrived at Elings Hall buzzing with excitement and ready to flex their creative muscles as the inaugural participants in UCSB's new Future Makers Program, which brings elementary and middle school students from underserved districts to campus for a day of creativity and empowerment.

Future Makers is a collaborative effort between UC Santa Barbara's California NanoSystems Institute (CNSI) and Los Ingenieros, a longstanding student organization focused on inspiring and mentoring future generations of Latin@ STEM graduates. Dedicated to professional growth, academic opportunity and community engagement, Los Ingenieros partnered with CNSI staff, undergraduate students and graduate volunteers to bring the program to life. Together, they created a welcoming, hands-on experience that introduces students from underserved communities to the possibilities of a STEM pathway — an approach that reflects CNSI's broader mission to foster curiosity, build community and inspire the next generation of innovators.

More visits, by more schools, are on tap starting in early 2026.

The program is supported by a grant from Uplift Central Coast, which will fund nine Future Makers field trips in total, bringing students from Lompoc, Santa Paula and Santa Maria to campus.

Accompanied by members of Los Ingenieros, Glen City students explored UCSB's REEF touch tanks before diving into a one-of-a-kind maker activity, using 3D printers, a laser cutter and a robotic sticker cutter to create personalized trading cards that reflected their interests and aspirations.

The activity took place in CNSI's Innovation Workshop, a rapid-prototyping facility run by lab manager Brian Dincau Ph.D. '22 and the Workshop Wizards, a team of UCSB and Santa Barbara City College undergraduates representing a wide range of majors. Behind the scenes, and ahead of the visit, the Wizards spent months refining the activity to ensure it was safe, engaging and accessible for young learners.

"A lot of thought went into designing this experience," said Dincau, who received his doctorate in mechanical engineering. "The trading cards are highly personal, featuring students' favorite animals, subjects and dreams. The goal is for them to imagine a new future — one they have the power to create." That sense of possibility was clear when one student proudly handed over her finished card and declared, "I am really powerful!"

Elina "Susy" Lopez Garza contributed to this story.

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draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.