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Keith Hamm

Young students tap UCSB archive to reflect on century-old Fiesta celebration

A yearlong archival project by students in Santa Barbara junior high and high schools culminated over the summer with “Finding Fiesta,” an exhibit exploring the diverse communities and current events reshaping the city’s annual Old Spanish Days summer celebration.

The exhibit, on display at Casa de la Guerra in downtown Santa Barbara, evokes nostalgia for Fiesta’s traditional food, live music and family outings to rodeos and flamenco performances. At the same time, the show’s reimagined Fiesta flyers and scale-model parade floats call for more recognition of wide-ranging cultural histories and speak to underlying anxieties tied to federal immigration enforcement actions.

“There are as many opinions about Fiesta as there are residents of Santa Barbara,” said Anne Petersen, executive director of the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation (SBTHP), which teamed up with UCSB to provide primary source material for the students’ projects during the 2025–26 academic year. “We are pleased to present several points of view about this complex tradition, created by our local students. We can all find inspiration in their creative interpretations of Fiesta.”

A “Community in Action” installment of the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center (IHC) at UCSB, the project began in summer 2025 as 11 teachers from six local junior high and high schools convened for a three-day workshop at SBTHP and UCSB Library’s Special Research Collections. The teachers brainstormed learning opportunities as they pored through archival boxes of newspaper clippings, festival brochures, vendor lists and recipe books, among other materials. As they formulated lesson plans, the teachers kept in mind how Santa Barbara’s colonial past has shaped Fiesta over the decades and how many of the city’s diverse communities may have modified Fiesta to reflect their own experiences.

“We created the Community in Action program so that K-12 teachers could explore the role that students can play in shaping the public narratives of the entangled histories of their local communities,” said Susan Derwin, IHC director. “During the Finding Fiesta workshop, it was inspiring to see the teachers research and discuss the history of the celebration as they developed lesson plans. We are grateful to our partner organization, the Santa Barbara Trust For Historic Preservation, for designing an exhibition around the creative and insightful work that students produced.”

“Through our collaboration with the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center and talented teachers, we created an opportunity to lift up the too-often unheard, diverse and powerful voices and viewpoints of local students about Fiesta,” added Kevin McGarry, SBHTP’s associate director for public engagement.

The show features more than two dozen pieces on wall display, with dozens more accessible in a bound volume centered in the exhibit. Essays, drawings, interpretations of traditional *corrido* ballads and photographed *cascarones* (confetti-filled eggs), share exhibit space with poster collages of traditional Fiesta scenery — Old Mission Santa Barbara, for example — layered with rows of masked ICE agents and acknowledgment of the region’s Chumash origins.

Image

MISSING GRANDMOTHER
MISSING FATHER
IMMIGRATION NEWS
Old Spanish Days to Proceed Despite Concerns over Immigration Enforcement
ICE
"recent increase of federa
immigration enforcement
Santa Barbara County, and
concerns voiced by
community members
worried that U.S.
Immigration and Customs
Enforcement (ICE) could
show up during the week of
festivities."
POLICE
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BARBAR
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DAYS Aug 3·4·5
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Fiesta Aug 13
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“I'm always interested in opportunities that invite us to critically examine history and texts,” said Bridget Sepulveda-Sandoval, an English teacher at Goleta Valley Junior High. “Having the opportunity to share space with and hear from members of our community that don't often have a platform to share their Fiesta experiences not only reinforced my understanding of the celebration as a complex event with many inherent tensions, but it also gave me the inspiration to center the voices of our immigrant and Mexican American community.”

“It was such a joyful lesson,” she added. “My students were truly engaged with the film and articles we analyzed, and enjoyed expressing their creativity through designing their own *cascarones*. They held meaningful conversations around cultural imagery, *cascarón* vendor rights and how to best approach their art.”

The “Finding Fiesta” exhibit is open 12–4 p.m., Thursday-Sunday, and runs through Sunday, Oct. 25, at Casa de la Guerra, 15 East De La Guerra St. in downtown Santa Barbara.

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