



Founder Region Fellowship, Inc.



Awards Dinner and Gala
May 1, 2026

Solving Puzzles by Degrees!



Fellowship Awards Dinner and Gala

Celebrating the
2026 Award Recipients

Friday, May 1, 2026

7:00 PM - 9:30 PM

San Ramon Marriott



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2024-2026 Fellowship Board

Vicki Ham

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Danelle Tegarden

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History

Founder Region Fellowship is the Founder Region's identifying project, which was started in 1948. The Founder Region Fellowship is a non-profit 501(c)(3) program that provides awards to women in the final phase of their doctoral studies. It is almost entirely supported by the Soroptimist members and clubs within the Founder Region. A byproduct of this support is the affirmation of the importance of the recipient's work and value as an individual. We support women working in fields traditionally held by men or in fields of great social significance to the world. We hope the recipients will reflect and further Soroptimist ideals by becoming a strong voice for all women.

The program began in 1948 as a committee in the Pacific Region. In 1952, the Pacific Region was divided into three regions, one of which was the Southwestern Region. The Southwestern Region administered the program until 1976. In 1976, the Southwestern Region was divided into three separate regions, Sierra Pacific, Sierra Nevada, and Founder, with the Fellowship program staying with the Founder Region. On March 17, 1986, Founder Region Fellowship, Inc. was formed, and the board of directors was elected by conference action. The first president of Founder Region Fellowship, Inc. was Julia" Bess" Combs, a past Governor of Founder Region and SI/Oakland-The Founder Club member.

These are just a few of the fields of study in which the candidates are seeking a doctorate: Anthropology, Botany, Chemistry, Clinical Psychology, Comparative Biochemistry, Computer Science, Disease Ecology, Education, Educational Leadership, Electrical Engineering, Fungal Ecology, Integrative Biology, Law, Marine Biology, Political Science, Social Welfare & Zoology. Applications are accepted from schools within the boundaries of the Founder Region that offer doctoral programs.

385 Grants Awarded to Deserving Women

\$1,939,625 Awarded in Total Funding

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2026 Award Recipients

Breanna Bullard	UC Berkeley
Arianna Bunnell	UH Mānoa
Sara Stone	UC Berkeley
Kuuleianuheia Awo-Chun	UH Mānoa
Johanna Reyes Ortega	UC Berkeley
Allie Hall	UH Mānoa
Leyi (Joy) Zhou	UC Berkeley
Josefa (Sefa) Munoz	UH Mānoa

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2026 Award Recipients



“ We won!

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2026 Awards Agenda

- 7:00 PM **Doors Open to Main Ballroom**
Dinner begins with Salad
- 7:10 PM **Call to Order** Governor Elise Balgley
Presentation of Colors Girl Scout Troop #30491
Community Welcome Candace Anderson, District 2 Supervisor
Official Response Governor-elect Jackie De Vries
Inspiration Cindy Rasmussen, District V, FRF Director
Welcome Kay Kelley, District II, FRF Director
Presentation of Platform Governor Elise
- 7:30 PM **Entrée Served**
Please enjoy your entrée and dessert during the program.
- 7:45 PM **Fellowship Awards Program**
Opening Remarks President Vicki Ham
Recognition of Past President Vicki
Fellowship Presidents
Presentation of 2026 Fellowship Board
Fellowship Recipients
- 9:30 PM **Closing Remarks** President Vicki
Table Drawing FRF Treasurer Danelle Tegarden
Announcements Conference Coordinator
Kris Chorbi
Recess Governor Elise

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Colleges/Universities

Institutions offering doctoral degrees in Founder Region:

California State University, East Bay - Hayward
Dominican University of California - San Rafael
Graduate Theological Union - Berkeley
Life Chiropractic College West - Hayward
Mills College - Oakland
Saint Mary's College - Moraga
Samuel Merritt University - Oakland
San Francisco Theological Seminary - San Anselmo
The Sanville Institute - Berkeley
Saybrook University - Oakland
Touro University California - Vallejo
University of California, Berkeley
University of Hawaii at Mānoa - Honolulu
The Wright Institute - Berkeley
Chaminade University of Honolulu

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2026 Award Recipient

Breanna Bullard

Clinical Psychology

University of California, Berkeley

Dissertation: The Impact of Dementia Symptoms on the Well-Being of Informal Caregivers



Breanna is pursuing a PhD in Clinical Psychology, with a dissertation entitled, “The Impact of Dementia Symptoms on the Well-Being of Informal Caregivers”. Breanna’s dissertation investigates how various dementia symptoms affect caregiver well-being. Her research addresses the heterogeneous nature of dementia symptoms and their impact on caregivers. Breanna aims to identify primary stressors and their effects on caregivers, with outcomes highlighting gender differences, primarily women, and the mental health aspects of being the primary source of care. Her research findings will inform targeted interventions to alleviate caregiver burdens. Breanna aims to enhance understanding of caregiver experiences and improve mental health services.

Breanna had a challenging background, leading her to pursue a PhD. She highlights the importance of resilience and the mentorship she received. As the first in her family to pursue higher education and earn a B.A. in Psychology, her story highlights perseverance and dedication. Currently, she is engaged in clinical work at the VA Hospital with older female veterans and couples, demonstrating her commitment to impactful service.

2026 Award Recipient

Arianna Bunnell

Computer Science

University of Hawaii at Mānoa

Dissertation: Concept Bottleneck Models with Expert Ontologies for the Diagnosis of Cancer from Medical Imaging



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Arianna is pursuing a PhD in Computer Science, with a dissertation on AI methods for cancer diagnosis. Her Dissertation Title: "Concept Bottleneck Models with Expert Ontologies for the Diagnosis of Cancer from Medical Imaging." Arianna's dissertation investigates explainable AI methods for cancer detection in medical imaging, with a focus on concept-based explainable AI for breast and skin cancer detection. Her target is to enhance interpretability of AI decisions for medical professionals. The research includes integration of clinical knowledge systems through existing reporting guidelines. Arianna's work builds AI systems for accessible breast cancer screening through the Makawalu Project and validates AI models to enhance breast cancer risk assessment in rural areas and for Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander women. Arianna's work also seeks to build trust in AI systems used in medical settings, particularly for underserved populations, through bioethical analysis.

Arianna grew up in Tooele, Utah, and was strongly influenced by her father's love of statistics and her mother, who has a PhD in higher education.

2026 Award Recipient

SI/East Bay, Cathy Jastram Award

Sara Stone

Educational Leadership

University of California, Berkeley

Dissertation: Constructing Meaning: How White Women Superintendents Navigate Whiteness, Gender, and Transformational Leadership



Berkeley
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA



Sara is pursuing a Doctor of Education degree, with a dissertation focused on the intersection of race, gender, and leadership. Her dissertation title is: "Constructing Meaning: How White Women Superintendents Navigate Whiteness, Gender, and Transformational Leadership." Sara's research explores one of the least discussed but most influential dynamics shaping public education: the role of White women superintendents in sustaining or disrupting inequitable systems. Women make up more than 70% of public-school teachers but remain significantly underrepresented in the superintendency. Fewer than one in four superintendents are women, and the vast majority are White. This reality exposes a complex tension in which White women in education experience both privilege and marginalization.

Sara grew up in Oakland, California, facing instability and poverty. She has over 32 years of experience in various educational leadership roles, including as a principal and a superintendent. She is currently the Superintendent of Albany Unified School District, where she focuses on creating inclusive and equitable educational environments. In her various roles in education, she has worked to empower women and girls through education and mentorship.

2026 Award Recipient

Kuuleianuhea Awo-Chun

Education

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

Dissertation: Aloha Aina Education: A Phenomenological Study of Kanaka Oiwi Teachers in Hawaiian-Focused Charter Schools



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Kuuleianuhea is a native Hawaiian woman residing in Kailua, Hawaii, with a strong commitment to education and community service. She is focusing her dissertation on aloha aina education through a phenomenological study of Kanaka Oiwi teachers in Hawaiian-Focused Charter Schools. She has spent her career in Hawaiian Focused Charter Schools and advocates for Hawaiian education through the Office of Hawaiian Affairs. Kuuleianuhea's research addresses the role of teachers in Hawaiian Focused Charter Schools, focusing on their experiences and the importance of aloha 'āina (love of the land). Kuuleianuhea feels the historical backdrop of Hawaiian education is crucial for understanding the impact of Hawaiian Focused Charter Schools. Hawai'i was once an independent nation with high literacy rates before the illegal overthrow in 1893. The U.S. occupation led to the assimilation of Native Hawaiians, including the banning of the Hawaiian language in schools. Hawaiian Focused Charter Schools play a vital role in teaching Hawaiian knowledge and strengthening the community.

As a single mother of three daughters, she serves as a role model, demonstrating resilience and commitment to cultural advocacy.

2026 Award Recipient

Johanna Reyes Ortega

Political Science

University of California, Berkeley

Dissertation: Promises and Perils: The Expansion of Women's Rights in Revolutionary Regimes



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Johanna is a dedicated doctoral candidate in Political Science at UC Berkeley, with a strong focus on women's rights, social justice, and policy impact, complemented by extensive mentorship and research experience.

Johanna's dissertation is titled "Promises and Perils: The expansion of Women's Rights in Revolutionary Regimes." Her research examines women's rights reforms during political upheavals, with a focus on Latin American case studies. She uses evidence from Mexico, Cuba, Bolivia, and Guatemala to analyze the impacts of policy on violence reduction and women's participation. She investigates why some government revolutions produce lasting improvements in women's rights, while others do not. At its core, this research seeks to identify institutional strategies that reduce violence against women, expand women's political voice, and improve their access to social and economic opportunity.

Johanna is a first-generation Mexican immigrant who has overcome significant economic and language barriers to pursue higher education. Her resilience and determination are evident in how she navigated the college application process on her own while also supporting her family. This impressive perseverance has earned her admiration and respect from her research colleagues and potential mentors.

2026 Award Recipient

Allie Hall

Fungal Ecology

University of Hawaii at Mānoa

Dissertation: Functional Complexity of Island Dwelling Fungi: Elucidating Microbial Community Dynamics and Impacts of Fungal Symbiosis



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Allie's dissertation highlights the importance of integrating microbial ecology into conservation efforts. Allie's research investigates the ecological roles of microbes, particularly fungi, in Hawaiian ecosystems. She explores microbial community dynamics and their impact on biodiversity and ecosystem function. Allie's dissertation aims to investigate how microbes, especially fungi, shape biodiversity and ecosystem function across spatial and ecological scales in Hawaii's rapidly changing and sacred landscapes. By integrating microbial ecology into studies of biodiversity, conservation, and invasion, her dissertation highlights the need to consider ecosystems holistically. By understanding the microbial relationships that underpin plant communities, we can develop more effective, place-based strategies to protect biodiversity. She feels it is an essential approach to be used not only in Hawai'i but also in other island systems and vulnerable ecosystems globally.

Allie overcame childhood adversities and trauma, which fostered her resilience and deepened her motivation to contribute to conservation and microbial ecology. Her personal journey fuels her dedication to understanding microbial relationships that underpin ecosystem health and biodiversity. Allie's life experiences have shaped her dedication to education and mentorship, especially for women and girls in science, inspiring confidence in her leadership and support for future generations.

2026 Award Recipient

Leyi (Joy) Zhou

Social Work/Social Welfare

University of California, Berkeley

Dissertation: Co-Designing Age-Friendly Artificial Intelligence: Exploring Older Adults' Roles as Citizen Tech Scientists and Catalysts of Equitable Innovation



Berkeley
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA



Leyi (Joy) is a PhD candidate in Social Welfare at UC Berkeley, with a focus on social work and community engagement. Leyi's academic work centers on improving aging services through community engagement and technology. Her Dissertation Title: "Co-Designing Age-Friendly Artificial Intelligence: Exploring Older Adults' Roles as Citizen Tech Scientists and Catalysts of Equitable Innovation".

Leyi's objective is to bridge the gap between older adults' needs and AI product design, which focuses on involving older adults as co-designers in AI development. Her intention is to create guiding principles for ethical AI design that reflect the needs of older adults.

Leyi was born and raised in China and was the first international student in her family. Her parents instilled in her the belief that "positive and confident people are the strongest," shaping her into an optimistic and resilient individual who overcame many challenges.

After earning her social worker license, she became a geriatric psychotherapist, providing telehealth services to older adults. This work highlights the challenges of the age-related digital divide, which limits access to mental health care for older adults with lower digital literacy. Witnessing these barriers motivated her to pursue research in geriatric mental health service delivery, aiming to bring lasting changes to the aging community.

2026 Award Recipient

Josefa “Sefa” Muñoz

Marine Biology

University of Hawaii at Mānoa

Dissertation: From Mating to Feeding Grounds: Establishing life history baselines for endangered green sea turtles in the Mariana Islands



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Josefa's dissertation, “From Mating to Feeding Grounds: Establishing life history baselines for endangered green sea turtles”, focuses on establishing critical data of Mariana Islands green sea turtles to inform conservation efforts. Her interdisciplinary methods, including field observations, molecular studies, and satellite tracking, aim to support community-led conservation initiatives for green sea turtles, which are a culturally significant species for the indigenous CHamoru/Chamorro peoples of the Mariana Islands. Her research promotes collaboration among local communities, scientists, and policymakers to bridge the gap between data and action. Josefa’s goal is to inform local and regional conservation strategies for endangered sea turtles, thereby enhancing community engagement and indigenous-led stewardship. Born and raised in Guam, Josefa is guided by the CHamoru culture and values of inafa'maolek (to make good). Her personal journey, including overcoming challenges like caregiving for her late mother, transformed her approach to science, instilling a deep sense of empathy, compassion, and a commitment to uplifting other women in the field. This unique blend of resilience and cultural groundedness enhances her credibility and connection with local stakeholders and indigenous communities.

Past Presidents

Founder Region Fellowship was incorporated on March 17, 1986.

Kris Chorbi 2022-2024

SI/Eureka

“Bee” the Dream through Education

Pam Parker 2018-2020

SI/St. Helena Sunrise

“Empowering Change through Education”

Carol Steele 2014-2016

SI/Fort Bragg

“Share the Joy of Learning & Education”

Joyce Strand 2010-2012

SI/Oakland-The Founder Club

“Keys of Knowledge”

Dion Weaver 2006-2008

SI/Antioch

*“Investing In The Future,
One Woman At A Time”*

Linda Mc Doniels 2000-2002

SI/St. Helena Sunrise

Dorothy Avila 1996-1998

SI/Oakland-The Founder Club

Norma Rhodes 1988-1992

SI/Oakland-The Founder Club

Cheryl Poncini 2020-2022

SI/Oakland-The Founder Club

“Education Inspires Big Dreams”

Bobbi Enderlin 2016-2018

SI/Benicia

“Education Creates Shining Stars”

Linda Sue Hansen 2012-2014 & 2002-2004

SI/Vallejo Gateway

“Shining the Light on Education”

Barbara Lanier 2008-2010

SI/El Cerrito

“Reach For The Stars”

Mary Ann Redden 2004-2006

SI/Antioch

“Getting It Done Together”

Nancy Walker 1998-2000

SI/St. Helena Sunrise

Del Nickerson 1992-1996

SI/Oakland-The Founder Club

Julia “Bess” Combs 1986-1988

SI/Oakland-The Founder Club

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**Thank you for your continued support of
Founder Region's identifying project,
where we empower the outstanding
women leaders of tomorrow.**



**President Vicki,
Treasurer Danelle,
Directors Amelia, Kay, Laurie,
Tess, & Cindy**

**For more information, please visit
www.FounderRegionFellowship.org**