For over 16 years, Lourdes Rivera has led evaluation efforts on UC San Diego (UCSD) projects addressing health disparities and improving health and education equity. These National Institute of Health (NIH) and Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA) funded projects have focused on promoting diversity in the healthcare workforce by training and mentoring disadvantaged and underrepresented students in underserved communities. Ms. Rivera has tirelessly worked on strengthening the workforce and education pipeline for thousands of middle and high school, community college and undergraduate students across San Diego and Imperial counties. She has developed innovative and impactful programs that enable students to complete each level of education, advance to the next, and enter the clinical, behavioral and biomedical professions. Her commitment to a diverse healthcare workforce comes out of her own experiences as an immigrant to the United States, overcoming many of the same challenges disadvantaged and underrepresented students face in their pursuit of higher education.

Ms. Rivera was raised in Mexico and worked as a migrant farm worker in California. She earned her bachelor’s degree from the University of Baja California, Mexico, becoming the first person in her family to obtain a college degree. After working at a public educational institution in Mexico, she moved to California’s Central Coast with her family, where she worked with children of migrant farm workers. This experience inspired her to pursue a graduate degree in education at UC Santa Cruz (UCSC) and become an educator with this community. While at UCSC, she conducted research and evaluation on the links between home, school and community factors in low-income Mexican-American and European-American young adolescents, which greatly influenced her passion for health and education equity.

Ms. Rivera exemplifies many of the standards of UCSD’s mission in all of her roles: evaluation specialist, champion for students, faculty and staff preparing to compete for university positions, and advocate for change in educational policies and procedures. She has worked tirelessly to achieve the University’s mission to transform San Diego and the nation by generating and disseminating innovative, effective and impactful evaluation and program models to develop a well-trained, competitive and community oriented diverse student body and healthcare and science workforce. In 2000, she participated in the design and evaluation of Moving to Work, a community university partnership with San Diego County Office of Housing and Urban Development, designed to help families achieve independence of federal subsidy through educational interventions. Since then, she has worked on projects that promote diversity in the healthcare workforce that have significantly impacted the careers of thousands of students, faculty and staff. Due in no small part to her efforts, the long-term impact of these programs is available on over 1,800 disadvantaged and underrepresented students. This data has influenced and provided guidance to projects at UCSD and across the state and nation as how best to track students, improve benchmarks and increase individual and program outcomes. For example, the evaluation of the Research Methodology Training Lab demonstrated the importance of early access to laboratory science and training, mentoring and ongoing academic support. Reaching over 700 high school, community college and undergraduate students, 98% of students advance to the next level of education and over 55% have entered a graduate or professional school in the sciences. Another example is the long-term evaluation of the UniversityLink Medical Science Program (ULMSP), focused on the identification, training and successful transition of disadvantaged community college students to a four-year university. To date, 98% of ULMSP students transfer to a 4-year university, 85% transfer to UCSD and 60% of program alumni are currently enrolled in a health profession school. As part of the approach to eliminating health disparities, she helped create and evaluate a faculty development program that increased the retention rate of underrepresented minority faculty. She has worked with faculty on abstracts, conference workshops, poster presentations and published articles that describe the success of the pipeline, faculty development and community university partnership programs. These efforts speak to Ms. Rivera’s commitment to UCSD’s students, families and communities.

Ms. Rivera’s extraordinary service encompasses a long list of federally, public and privately funded projects, which include the ten-year NIH-funded UCSD Comprehensive Research Center in Health Disparities and the HRSA-funded Hispanic Center of Excellence and the Health Careers Opportunity Program/San Diego Regional Consortium. In addition to overseeing all pipeline evaluation activities, she has evaluated programs in housing, health, workforce training and education. Under her guidance, UCSD led evaluation activities have been recognized regionally and nationally, influencing RFA development, educational policy and program development. Ms. Rivera’s life and work experiences along with her commitment to underrepresented and disadvantaged students make her an ideal candidate to receive the UCSD Exemplary Staff Employee of the Year Award.