

2025-2026 Outstanding Thesis Awardee Michael Zepeda



Michael Zepeda

A recent graduate of the M.S. in Biology program, Michael Zepeda wears many hats: CIRM Bridges Fellow, researcher, health advocate, teaching assistant, and community volunteer. The Office of Graduate Studies is proud to add 2025-2026 Outstanding Thesis Awardee to his impressive list of accomplishments.

Zepeda's winning thesis, [*Comparative Assessment of Developmental Fidelity In hPSC-Derived Neural Crest Cells*](#), makes a significant

contribution to the field of stem cell biology. By evaluating five protocols researchers use for differentiation of hPSC stem cells into neural crest cells, Zepeda developed a framework of standardized protocols that yield consistent results. Researchers can apply the protocols to obtain neuronal crest cells with the characteristics needed for their particular research area, including disease modeling, regenerative medicine, and developmental toxicology.

Zepeda discovered his love of research as an undergraduate in CSUSB's biology program. While working as a summer research intern in the lab of Dr. Nicole Bournias-Vardiabasis, he decided to pursue a career in toxicology. "I'd never thought about how researchers were contributing discoveries that directly impact individuals' lives," he said.

As a master's student he developed his skills both as a researcher and as a community health advocate. He landed a fellowship in the prestigious California Institute of Regenerative Medicine (CIRM) Bridges training program, which provides hands-on training in stem cell research labs. An internship at the Smoke and Tobacco Outreach and Prevention Program provided the opportunity to give back to the community. As a program advocate, Zepeda spoke at San Bernardino high schools about the potential dangers of e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches.

"What I got out of that program was all the advocacy work I got to do," Zepeda said. "It was a really enriching experience learning how to make people receptive to information that might sound like a buzzkill and relate it to them in a way that they can grasp it."

Zepeda is now pursuing a Ph.D. at U.C. Irvine and plans to study the health effects of nicotine pouches. He says he enjoyed working as a teaching assistant at CSUSB, and looks forward to teaching in the future.

"Education's kind of special to me, because my mother is a teacher, and my older sister is a teacher, and so I've had a lot of really good educational influences in my life, and that's really shown me the value of how these positive educational influences really do make an impact."