

2026 UC ANR Cooperative Extension Position Template (Specialist)

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Position Title: UCCE Specialist in Positive Youth Development (PYD) in Evolving Contexts

Headquarter Location: UCSC Psychology Department will serve as the headquarter for the Specialist to establish an innovative program for statewide impact. The Psychology Dept. is a good fit for its research in AI-mediated adolescent development, neurobiological health, community-engaged research on youth civic engagement, leadership development, and empowerment in out-of-school places. The position will serve youth, schools, and non-profit organizations in advancing PYD, civic engagement, workforce readiness, and adolescent wellbeing through research and community dissemination efforts.

Position: This position will address challenges to and develop opportunities for PYD, integrating adolescent neurobiological science in the context of evolving technologies, including social media and AI-mediated environments. The goal is to understand and foster youth learning, identity, wellbeing, civic engagement, and readiness for work. The Specialist will conduct and translate developmental science into practical programs, curricula, and guidance for advisors, professionals, families, and community partners to foster strengths in youth growing up in a rapidly changing technological landscape. The Specialist will connect researchers studying mental and emotional health at UCSC through membership in relevant programs (e.g., Developmental and Social Psychology, Education, Global & Community Health) and groups (e.g., New Gen Learning).

The position will require a Ph.D. in Psychology or related fields with research experience in community-engaged scholarship, PYD, youth neurobiological development, and emerging technologies including AI. The Specialist will collaborate closely with the UC ANR 4-H Youth Development Program, county-based UCCE Advisors, schools, and community organizations across California.

Justification: Needs. The conditions of growing up are changing faster than youth-serving systems can respond. Pathways to meaningful civic engagement and work are also shifting. Young people must develop new intellectual and socioemotional competencies to negotiate dynamic algorithmic information environments, inequitable societies, and strained economic, democratic, and environmental systems. There is therefore a dire need to update the empirical base of PYD. The challenge and opportunity is to build the scientific infrastructure, community programs, and intergenerational partnerships, to foster young people's critical and scientific literacies, sense of purpose, and facilitate wellness, resilience, and flourishing civic engagement for positive social change. This need is especially urgent for historically underserved communities with inequitable access to developmental supports, technology resources, and culturally responsive programming. The UC system currently lacks sufficient statewide research and extension infrastructure integrating PYD, science, and emerging technologies within youth-serving systems. UC ANR programs, including 4-H, engage thousands of youth and volunteers annually. But California's schools, community organizations, and youth programs need evidence-based approaches for helping youth navigate and shape rapidly evolving technological environments. Practitioners, educators, and community organizations working with California youth are in dire need of this support.

UC ANR's Strategic Vision 2040 identifies Thriving People and Communities, Innovation, and Systemic Inequities as statewide challenges, requiring transdisciplinary and community-engaged science-based solutions. This position addresses these priorities by building statewide Cooperative Extension capacity in PYD, from K-12, for a fuller coverage of developmental science responsive to rapidly evolving AI-mediated environments. The position strongly aligns with Strategic Vision Goals related to scientific literacy and critical thinking, workforce readiness, youth leadership and civic engagement, and equitable access to educational and technological resources.

Outcomes/Impact. The Specialist will contribute to UC ANR public values of cultivating communities in California through development of equitable and collaborative science-based solutions with national and global impact. The outcomes will align with condition changes of: Improving mental and physical well-being across an individual's lifespan; Improving community health and wellness; Improving readiness and access to post-secondary education and career opportunities; Improving civic engagement; Increasing public engagement and confidence in science; Increasing equitable access to resources (e.g., information, education, technology, services, healthcare); Improving workforce development for individuals, communities, and industry; Improving community leadership. This position will connect the UCSC Psychology Dept. with UC ANR to address challenges faced by youth in California and the urgent needs for evidence-based resources to support their neurobiological health by building the scientific infrastructure and capacity in the research area. The Specialist will publish in leading journals (e.g., *Child Development*, *Developmental Science*, *Developmental Psychobiology*, *J. of Adolescent Health*, *J. of Youth Studies*, *J. of Applied Youth Studies*, *J. of Extension*), and disseminate public-facing scholarship such as policy briefs, infographics, and guides for culturally relevant best practices.

Extension: Outreach methods include in-person and virtual meetings, educational venues, electronic tools such as social media, online learning formats, blogs, and media outlets. Research collaboration beyond UC ANR and UCSC is expected. The nature of these activities may include, but are not limited to, raising awareness and briefing, supporting organizations to develop and implement best practices for youth civic engagement, PYD, and youth leadership support. Additional outreach may include hosting workshops with government agencies and nonprofit organizations to evaluate their practices, assisting school districts across California to implement SB 997 (requiring school districts to engage middle and high school youth in school budget planning), and informing legislators and the public via high-profile media interactions. The Specialist will be a resource and collaborator for UCCE Advisors, school-based and out-of-school youth programming, decision-making bodies with a youth liaison/board member, etc.

Research: The research will take strengths-based approaches and incorporate PYD frameworks (e.g., social justice model of youth development, critical childhood studies) and offer the scientific foundation for transformative work. Neurobiological research confirms extraordinary neuroplasticity in pre-teens and adolescents, where young people are exquisitely sensitive to social feedback, motivated by belonging and contribution, and primed for the kinds of identity-shaping experiences community programs are uniquely positioned to provide. Yet, the same developmental sensitivity that offers a window of opportunity also causes youth to have heightened social comparison and threat sensitivity, making them vulnerable to the effects of structural inequity, chronic stress, and environments that communicate that they do not matter (Dahl, 2014). For example, difficulty managing such stressors in adolescence, layered with new stressors of technology-mediated environments, can reshape biological systems (Gunnar & Vasquez, 2015) and have downstream consequences for physical and mental health later in development (Rahal et al., 2022; Rush et al., 2025). We are in an evolving context where the previous research on PYD may have limited applicability. For example, mental health concerns among

adolescents are rising because youth face an increasingly challenging technological and sociopolitical landscape; rates of persistent sadness, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation among high school students rose 36-40% between 2009 and 2019 and doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jones, 2021).

The strengths-based PYD frameworks begin with the recognition that young people possess assets, including curiosity, relational capacity, moral imagination, and the drive to matter that can be cultivated in supportive contexts to generate thriving. With critical updates to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model, PYD can be harnessed to understand how youth can contribute to strength, innovation, and resilience through challenging the status quo and social injustices they and their families experience as adversity. Cultivating aspects of PYD such as a sense of purpose in life can promote resilience and support youth in managing day-to-day stressors (Rahal et al., 2025). Because PYD is concerned with the whole young person in context, it provides an ideal theoretical scaffold for building interdisciplinary collaborations across subfields of psychology, connecting research on health disparities and biomarkers of stress, on learning and educational pathways, on community empowerment and social justice, and on the neurobiological science underlying adolescent development, into a coherent science of PYD.

UC ANR network: The Specialist will be a key force to build the new AES at UCSC and develop collaborations with UC ANR Specialists and Advisors across the Central Coast region and throughout California. The Specialist will develop strong ties to ANR Program Teams (e.g., *Positive Youth Development and 4-H; Science Literacy and Critical Thinking*). At UCSC, the Specialist will interact with colleagues in the Psychology Dept. and the Institute for Social Transformation. Beyond UCSC, the Specialist will engage with the University-Community Links (UC Links) network, an international network of university and community partners working together to develop and sustain after-school programs that connect K-12 young people from historically underserved communities with university faculty and students in engaging learning activities focused on literacy, digital literacy and critical thinking and global citizenship. The Specialist will work with the statewide 4-H program to apply expertise toward co-development of curricula with program staff such as club leaders, help guide applied research of 4-H advisors, recommend strategies for integration of PYD and best practices for adolescent development into all program delivery models, support strategic planning and professional development of 4-H personnel and volunteers. The Specialist will participate in UCSC and UC ANR leadership activities, through committees, policy task forces, and other formal and informal structures.

Network external to UC ANR: The Specialist will build a strong network between 4-H programs and youth-serving community-based organizations across California, likely including collaborations with: United Way Santa Cruz County; Life Lab; University Community Links; Boys and Girls Clubs; Futures Without Violence; Bay Area Affective Science; Neurobiology Affinity Group; Santa Cruz County Health Services; and UCSF Weill Institute for Neurosciences, and the NextGen project.

Support: The Specialist will be provided office space in the Psychology Dept. at the UCSC main campus. UCSC is highly collegial, with considerable shared interdisciplinary collaboration within and across programs. The UCSC AES provides research funding for all of our Specialists as possible.

Other support: The Specialist will pursue external funding from federal, state, and foundation sources related to youth development, digital literacy, AI and society, education, mental health, and workforce development, including NSF, NIH, USDA, Spencer Foundation and other sources as appropriate. The Specialist will also be expected to compete for internal research funding available from UC ANR.