

The Gonzales Community Solutions Lab (CoLab)

Combining Community and Campus Knowledge for the Public Good

There are times when wisdom cannot be found in the chambers of parliament or the halls of academia but at the unpretentious setting of the kitchen table.

What is a CoLab?

Around the world, communities and universities are inventing new ways of engaging with one another. This is not simply out of comity, or open-mindedness, or mutual accord. We need incubators not merely for business start-ups, but for collaboration to tackle society's most pressing problems. We need to harness entrepreneurial ardor in the service of long-standing, seeming intractable problems that no single institution (e.g., government), or societal sector (private, public, nonprofit) can solve on its own. We need hubs where approaches are tested, opportunities for investment facilitated, and new public policy is generated. And we need action-spaces where we meet on a level playing field and practice learning across our different gifts, perspectives, histories, and challenges. We call this new partnership a **Community Solutions Lab**, or **CoLab**.

A **Community Solutions Lab** has collaboration at its core. It is a long term commitment between universities and community actors to bring about tangible change in difficult, inter-generational challenges. Like combining carbon and iron to make steel, the mix leaves us stronger. Like combining cement, stones, and water to make concrete, we become more durable and long lasting. It is a nexus of trusting relationships that democratize knowledge generation and a space devoted to action and continuous learning. Focused on difficult, long-standing problems without magic bullet solutions, the CoLab still comprises specific and accountable action/learning goals, assessable progress markers, and transparent impact indicators. A CoLab is committed to building community capacity to solve its own challenges so that, over time, as these impact incubators phase out, new ones are born, and citizens and activists feel empowered to ask hard questions, conduct research, and problem-solve.

The Gonzales CoLab: Community-Building, *The Gonzales Way*

The Gonzales CoLab will support and build-on the innovative youth-centered community building processes currently underway in this small, rural community of 9,000 residents. The CoLab seeks to identify ways that higher education (MIIS, CSUMB, Monterey College of Law) can add value and capacity to strengthen the city's signature efforts in youth-centered community development, collectively known as [The Gonzales Way: raising happy, healthy, successful kids!](#)

There are currently a number of on-going efforts which seek to bring *The Gonzales Way* to life. Altogether, these include some 27 different programs, and represent a financial commitment by the city greater than the budget of the fire department. Some of these include:

- The Gonzales Youth Council, which provides a voice for youth in public decision-making;
- The Friends, Families & Neighbors Playgroup, which seeks to strengthen the informal network of care-givers;
- City-sponsored Afterschool and School-Break programs, which provide a full slate of educational and recreational activities for youth when school is not in session; and,
- The design of a future Youth Innovation Center.

The community-building approach also extends into the City's approach to its local economic development. The city has created a "Community Grant Program" to provide funding for projects identified and realized by neighbors and community members. This community-building ethic also

informs the city's emerging plans for the additional revenue generated by the new cannabis tax. It also guides the city's planning for the annexation of 400 acres, and the building of 1,000 new homes, as elaborated in the [2015-2023 City of Gonzales Housing Element](#).

Strengthening the Learning & Capacity-Building Process

The Gonzales CoLab will mobilize higher education's research, data-gathering, analysis and interpretation resources to strengthen the decision-making processes, quality, and positive impact of programs in Gonzales. The primary goal is to engage in collaborative inquiry to a) analyse and reflect on current efforts, and b) make changes/improvements that enhance the community's capacity to be more thoughtful and grow from their experiences in public innovation. In addition, the higher education partners will be able to identify and bring into the conversation other best practices from communities across the country and across the globe, who are similarly experimenting with innovative approaches to community-building and to enhancing the quality of life for their residents.

Finally, CoLab will bring students from MIIS, CSUMB and MCL to Gonzales as collaborators and research assistants as all CoLab research efforts will include a student research component. The presence of young college students will help connect the dots, in a very personal and human way, between the youth of Gonzales today, and their own future as college graduates and professionals.

Gonzales CoLab Leadership and Research Focus

The Gonzales CoLab will be led by a collaborative leadership team representing each of the three higher education partners and representatives from the community of Gonzales. The CoLab will focus on the following four areas, with each area being led by a collaborative team from higher education and from the Gonzales community. In the coming months, we will be looking to identify Gonzales Community Co-Leads for each of the four areas of focus.

Gonzales CoLab Leadership and Areas of Focus

Research Area	Higher Ed Co-Lead	Gonzales Co-Lead
Language and Community-Building	Dr. Netta Avineri, MIIS	
Youth Empowerment and Community-Building	Dr. Seth Pollack, CSUMB	
Equitable and Sustainable Economic Development and Community-Building	Dr. Kent Glenzer, MIIS	
Legal System and Community Building	Dean Mitch Winick and Joseph Belmont, Monterey College of Law	

For more information: Seth Pollack (spollack@csumb.edu); or Netta Avineri (navineri@miis.edu)