UC SANTA BARBARA
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Leading Student Affairs

New Jersey native Margaret Klawunn married into a University of California family.

Her husband, the poet Rick Benjamin, graduated from UC Berkeley, which many of his other family members attended — except for those who went to UCLA, plus his cousin, who went to UC Santa Barbara.

And now, Klawunn herself is at last part of the UC club — and at that same latter campus no less. She has been appointed UCSB's new Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, effective September 1.

"Thanks in part to the family connections, I have known a lot about the UC system for a long time," said Klawunn, currently vice president for campus life and student services at Brown University, whose daughter is a student at UC Santa Cruz. "Coming to UC Santa Barbara, I am very excited to be part of an educational system that I have always admired, and really believe in."

"UC Santa Barbara is thrilled to welcome Margaret Klawunn as our next Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs," said Chancellor Henry T. Yang. "With nearly two decades at Brown University working with students both in and out of the classroom, she is uniquely qualified to serve our campus. Her tremendous depth of experience and knowledge, particularly in the areas of campus life and student services, will bring vision and strong leadership to this vitally important position."

Yang added, "I am also grateful to our search advisory committee, chaired by Professor Cynthia Stohl, for its diligent work, thoughtful advice and wisdom

throughout this extensive national search.

“I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Mary Jacob for the timely leadership she has provided the last six months,” he said.

If the UC is all in her family, education itself is in Klawunn’s DNA: her father was a public school teacher. One of her favorite childhood pastimes, she said, was “playing school — and yes I did like to be the teacher.”

“I always believed in education, and I always liked school,” Klawunn said.

Also she always wanted to be a professor. And she was well on her way — until she crossed professional paths with an associate vice president for student affairs at Rutgers University. In the midst of her graduate work in English literature (she earned a Ph.D.), Klawunn was recruited to work on a project that aspired to foster a caretaking sensibility among students as an approach to reduce dangerous drinking.

“I was hired to bring feminist theory into the project, but also to do interviews with students and run focus groups, and it was out of that listening and talking to students about the ways they make life decisions that I realized I liked this type of work,” Klawunn recalled. “And the ingenuity that was so evident in the formulation of the project itself was also inspiring. This was very creative work, and it got me thinking that I would like to pursue student affairs.

“What I discovered through that experience was that I was interested in working with students on issues that came up outside of their classes as well as their academic goals — issues of managing their lives, about their extracurricular projects, their leadership opportunities, everything,” she added. “As I finished my Ph.D., I was looking for a position where I could teach and have an administrative appointment, and that’s how I came to Brown.”

Klawunn first joined Brown in 1996, serving simultaneously in administrative and academic roles — she was a lecturer in English and gender studies — for more than a decade. She became associate vice president for campus life and dean of student life in 2004 and rose to vice president in 2008. Since 2011 she has also been senior associate dean of the college; for the 2013-2014 academic year she served as acting dean.

“I have had great opportunities here at Brown to try a variety of different positions across campus life, as well as academic administration and teaching,” Klawunn said. “It has all been interesting to me and it has all contributed to the way I think about students’ lives and what’s important in terms of what an educational institution should be providing to undergraduate and graduate students. And it was through all of that that I got interested in the role at UCSB and the ways this campus is thinking about the experiences of students, and wanting to strengthen connections between academic initiatives and student affairs. I was intrigued and engaged that UCSB enrolls a high percentage of first-generation college students and is designated a Hispanic-Serving Institution. Those factors were a draw.”

The university is happy to have her.

Said Cynthia Stohl, a professor of communication at UCSB and chair of the search committee for the position: “Margaret has proven herself a tireless advocate for all students, a champion for an integrated academic experience that ensures student success and a very able administrator. We are confident that she will be an inspirational campus leader not only for students and the very talented student affairs staff, but for the entire campus community. Her administrative experience, her commitment to the diverse needs of our growing student body and her inclusive vision regarding the transformations taking place in higher education will enable her not only to build upon the outstanding successes of the division, but to take it to new levels of excellence and innovation.”

Among the many things that drew her here, Klawunn said, the key attraction goes back to that original inspirational experience at Rutgers: simply interacting with students.

“Whether I’m talking to students about their educational goals and picking courses, or seeing students when they’re doing something they love — whatever they are passionate about — I enjoy the whole range,” Klawunn said. “Just talking to people who are thinking about what they want to do in the world and how their education is going to be transformative and having those conversations about how to put it all together — managing their parents’ expectations, their hopes for their own lives, what’s going on with their friends and roommates — I find all of those conversations enlivening.”

They are conversations she also lives at home: Klawunn and Benjamin have three kids in college. Their daughter just finished her first year at UCSC; their twin sons are at the University of Oregon and the University of Colorado-Boulder.

“Our children made the move west first, so now they joke that we’re catching up,” Klawunn said. “We’re all happy about that — Rick and I are very excited to be closer to our kids.”

Rick Benjamin is the poet laureate of Rhode Island, where he teaches at Brown, the Rhode Island School of Design and Goddard College. He is actively engaged in using art to build and bridge communities, both on campus and off, and he will pursue related projects and teaching at UCSB. He holds master’s and doctoral degrees from Rutgers University, as well as a bachelor’s degree from UC Berkeley.

Klawunn holds a bachelor’s degree from Colby College, in addition to a master’s degree and Ph.D. from Rutgers.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.