

THE *Current*

January 13, 2016

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Service and Experience

When Janet Afary launched an internship program as part of the [Iranian Studies Initiative](#) (ISI) at UC Santa Barbara last year, she wasn't sure what to expect. The unique program put undergraduates to work online with Iranian-American community organizations in the Los Angeles area that provide a wide range of social services. She was pleasantly surprised: 25 interns provided roughly 1,300 hours of service in 2015.

"It's really been remarkable, because I had very modest expectations about this," noted Afary, who holds the Mellichamp Chair in the Department of Religious Studies and is a professor of religious studies and of feminist studies.

The program's success will allow for its expansion. Annual contributions from individuals and a \$100,000 gift from the Gramian-Emrani Foundation will make it possible for ISI to add a second-year Persian class at UCSB and to fund classes for five years.

The idea for the internship program started to take shape after Afary moved to California from Purdue University in Indiana. She discovered a number of Iranian-Americans in the Los Angeles area had started nonprofit organizations providing much-needed services, but with limited staff. At UCSB, meanwhile, she saw a number of students who struggled to find internships. "So I said, how do we bring these two together?" recalled Afary, a native of Iran. "These foundations need help; can students help?"

After a year of research, Afary launched the internship program in 2015. It was small at first, with just half a dozen students who had taken courses in Persian, Iranian studies or Middle East studies. By the end of the year, 25 students had joined.

The interns' work is online, and includes creating and maintaining websites, generating and translating informational brochures for immigrants and more. Some of the organizations served include A More Balanced World, Pars Equality Center and the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE). "These are rather modest operations but they're doing a lot of good work," Afary said.

The Baha'is, Afary noted, are second-class citizens in Iran and aren't allowed to attend university. In response, the religious minority created the BIHE, with support from American and European universities, which offers the Baha'i community access to higher education. "Teaching is done at home, typically, and classes are online" she explained. "And these students in Iran, some of them have done quite well. In fact, some of them have graduated and come to UCSB. I have met a couple of them."

The internships give UCSB students the opportunity to acquire real-world experience, often in mid-career tasks. Intern applicants must have taken courses in Iranian or Middle Eastern studies, hold a 3.0 GPA and commit to 80 hours of service over the quarter.

"We're looking for really good students, because they're on their own and they need to be self-motivated," Afary said. "Also, we give them an option in terms of which organization they want to work with. So when they sign up they have some idea of what they'll be expecting."

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.