UC SANTA BARBARA

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Degrees of Excellence

The Phi Beta Kappa chapter at UC Santa Barbara has selected 131 new members students from among the College of Letters and Science 2016 graduating class.

At UCSB, as at other major colleges and universities, students don't apply for Phi Beta Kappa — they're identified by members of the chapter, who themselves were elected when they were in college. Robert Warner, a research professor in the Department of Ecology, Evolution and Marine Biology, was elected when he was a student at Berkeley, for example, and Debbie Fleming, assistant vice chancellor of student affairs, was elected at UCSB. Along with about a dozen other faculty, staff members and graduate students, they helped to select the newest members of Phi Beta Kappa.

It's not easy: Candidates for Phi Beta Kappa are the best of the best, academically speaking. Their coursework must cross all three divisions of the college (Mathematical, Life and Physical Sciences; the Social Sciences; and the Humanities and Fine Arts), well beyond the minimum requirements for general education. They must have completed at least one foreign language through the intermediate level, and have attempted their academic coursework for a letter grade. And, of course, they had to demonstrate an exceptional degree of excellence.

According to chapter president John Park, a professor of Asian American studies, those selected were among the most accomplished young scholars at UCSB. "Their average GPA was a 3.8; about a third had double majored; and nearly all of them had completed a senior thesis or other major research project under the supervision

of a faculty member," he said. "The most prestigious graduate and professional schools recognize the academic distinction necessary for Phi Beta Kappa, and so the students who've been selected will have excellent opportunities to pursue advanced degrees."

Among those elected were Jill Lester, Stacey Ward and Aria Ghasemizadeh.

Though she struggled through some courses, including organic chemistry, while working toward her bachelor of science degree in biopsychology, Lester now credits those experiences with making her stronger. "I had a tough time," she said. "I had to work hard here."

Lester praised many of her professors for helping her pull through, and for inspiring her to excel. Now bound for the National University of Ireland in Galway, where she will take summer classes in the arts and humanities, Lester is considering whether to apply for graduate school or medical school. She offered this advice to first-year students: "It's OK if you don't know what you want to do for the rest of your life, but strive to do well here because it can only help you, whatever you choose to do."

Ward, who is headed for Berkeley Law in the fall after earning degrees in English and in French from UCSB, echoed Lester's insights. "It's OK — more than OK — to ask for help," she said, noting that she took advantage of CLAS (the Campus Learning Assistance Services) and often went to faculty office hours. "Your professors are people, too!" she added, citing the particular impact, for her, of English professor Kay Young.

To younger students, Ward offered this advice: "Your professors will help you better understand their subject matter, but they'll also offer you guidance and advice about how to survive and thrive as a young person navigating life."

Ghasemizadeh was actually selected for Phi Beta Kappa last year. But now, in addition to completing a bachelor of science degree in biological sciences, he has received the Katherine Esau Honor Key, given for highest academic achievement in the sciences. Praising his UCSB professors as "some of the most caring and approachable teachers," Ghasemizadeh himself will soon be teaching. He plans to teach abroad in Japan for at least one year before pursuing graduate work or medical school — or, he said, "maybe both."

“Even if you enter college knowing what you want to do, it’s important to give other classes a chance, because you might find a subject you fall in love with,” continued Ghasemizadeh, who studied Japanese throughout his undergraduate years. “I had the most fun taking Japanese, which I started on a whim.” He said he never expected the study of another language would add so much to his life in college, but now it’s taking him to surprising, unexpected places.

Not everyone selected for Phi Beta Kappa is leaving UCSB. Nancy Alvarez, Gabriela Quintana-Garcia and Grant Chamness were eligible to graduate this spring, but they’ve each decided to stay for an additional year, to complete an honors thesis or study abroad.

Alvarez, a first-generation college student who came to UCSB from Oceanside, double majored in global studies and in communication. She said she thoroughly enjoyed the “broad and diverse courses” offered at UCSB, where she has “learned to be a better person, to appreciate the world.” She plans to finish an honors thesis in communication, and to apply for graduate schools in the fall.

Also a global studies major, Quintana-Garcia, of Pleasanton, will leave for Amman, Jordan, in the fall to pursue her intellectual interests in the Middle East, including her study of Arabic and research for her senior thesis. Of her time at UCSB, she said she’s most appreciated the wide variety of classes, noting, “I love how many interdisciplinary courses and seminars are available.” She especially enjoyed the Middle East Ensemble, she said: “Every single quarter at UCSB, it’s been my favorite social activity.”

Quintana-Garcia said she wasn’t quite sure what Phi Beta Kappa was when she’d learned that she’d been selected. After one of her professors filled her in, though, she was honored and very excited. “My family is coming for the ceremony for sure now.”

Planning to work on an honors thesis in political science, Orange County native Chamness will study abroad in Berlin during the next academic year. When he returns, he intends to complete a major project and further hone his writing and research skills. He’s come a long way from this first year at UCSB when, according to Chamness, his family “worried a little” about how he would do. “Let’s just say that my parents are overjoyed with how much I’ve gotten out of college,” he said.

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.