

THE *Current*

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Opening New Doors

For students who are the first in their families to pursue higher education, the unfamiliar rituals and routines of daily college life can seem downright foreign. Research shows that dropout rates are higher among these first-generation students, who sometimes struggle to find their place at a large university.

At UC Santa Barbara, the [ONDAS Student Center](#) (Opening New Doors to Academic Success) helps ease that transition. As fall quarter begins, the center is launching a new wave of programming and activities, kicking off with an ONDAS Celebration slated for Thursday, Oct. 5, from 2 to 4 p.m. Free and open to all, the event will give visitors an opportunity to meet the center's staff and to explore the resources it offers.

Malaphone Phommasa, the director of academic success initiatives for the College of Letters & Science, Division of Undergraduate Education and the ONDAS director, believes that the key to the center's success is that it provides students both practical advice and a home away from home. "The biggest thing we do here is to offer a community of support," she said. "We want to make sure that as soon as our students get here, they can ask any question and not have to worry about judgment or having someone turn them away."

To that end, the center provides a wide range of services, including peer mentoring and study groups, a mentor-in-residence program and a series of dinners with faculty members. It also serves as a safe and quiet place for students to study, gather and find the answers to all of their questions, no matter how trivial.

“It’s a space for our underrepresented and underserved students to find a community and to find academic support, and to find a sense of belonging at UCSB,” said Phommasa. “Even though our primary focus is on academic support, our whole focus is to make sure the students we serve find a place and find support here, because it is such a large institution that is challenging to navigate.”

First-generation student Sabrina Delgado, a junior majoring in communication, believes that the center and its services have been crucial to her personal and academic development. “The ONDAS Student Center offered opportunities for me to establish a solid footing at UCSB by fostering a sense of community and connection with resources across campus,” she said. “With the support offered, I have been able to plan and direct the solid route of my future alongside my peers.”

Funded by a grant from the Department of Education, the ONDAS center is open to all students, though its primary goal is to provide comprehensive services for underrepresented students. One way they do that is by leveraging all of the resources available on the UCSB campus.

“One thing we are looking forward to, as a new center, is building collaborations with different entities across campus to work together toward the same goals,” said Stephanie Ramos, student activities coordinator. Staff members at the center are trained to answer questions about all aspects of student life, from exams to housing to social clubs and activities.

Delgado has found this wide-ranging approach especially helpful as she navigates the complex systems of the university. “As a low-income, first-generation college student, I arrived at UCSB with fewer resources and more academic and personal needs,” she explained. “I am proud to say that ONDAS Student Center resources like peer mentor office hours, the first-generation forum, open study space and free printing helped boost my academic and social experiences.”

“The ONDAS Student Center provides streamlined access to critical services and resources that are uniquely focused on our growing population of first-year, first-generation students,” said Barbara Walker, ONDAS Program Director and Special Assistant to the Executive Vice Chancellor for Diversity Initiatives. “The center is a timely addition to the diversity and inclusion initiatives that UCSB has implemented in recent years.”

Phommasa and Ramos hope that first-year students who use their services will return to mentor younger students. “It’s important for our students to know that, even though a lot of the programming targets first year students, we will continue working and serving our students as they matriculate,” explained Phommasa. “We help them build the community in the first year and then we hope they continue to see this as a space they can come to take part in that community.”

For more information about the ONDAS Student Center, visit <http://ondas.ucsb.edu/>.

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.