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Navigating the Vast Unknown

In the Samala Chumash language, the word “kalašpi” means “breathe on.” It also is the title of the speech Nicolasa (Niki) Sandoval will deliver as the keynote speaker at the Graduate Division’s 2019 commencement ceremony. A lecturer in the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, Sandoval earned her Ph.D. at UC Santa Barbara in 2007.

“Kalašpi,” Sandoval explained, is inspired by the work of graduate student and optical oceanographer James G. Allen. “As a scientist who draws from cartography, meteorology and geography, Allen’s research represents the currency and relevance of a rich, interdisciplinary graduate education that is unique to UC Santa Barbara,” Sandoval said. “I am utterly captivated by the fact that the ocean is breathing. The deeper the breath, the more turbulent the churning that happens in the darkness of the abyss, the more productive for life on earth.”

There are clear parallels with the process of engaging in advanced study and the extraordinary contributions of UC Santa Barbara’s graduates. “The churning they have set in motion through their work, their persistence through the enormous swells, and the new knowledge they are breathing into our world, illuminates our way forward,” she said.

Sandoval is no stranger to the concept of illuminating the way forward. As the first descendant of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians to earn a doctorate, she said she “learned to navigate a vast unknown, with the assistance of good-hearted people who held high expectations for me, and is committed to being of service to

others.”

Twice appointed by former California Governor Jerry Brown to the State Board of Education, where she currently serves, Sandoval says that her perspective and voice as a Native person and a Latina from the Central Coast region are important, but her primary task is to listen to diverse stakeholders. “Through my life experience and advanced study at UC Santa Barbara, I am keenly aware of inequities and systemic dysfunction that have plagued our educational systems,” she noted. “I hold open the possibility that growth occurs through conflict and that addressing the root cause of the conflict has a restorative effect. This transforms the challenge into an opportunity for growth and positive change.”

She acknowledges this is an uncomfortable but necessary tension to hold. “As a member of the California State Board of Education I am one of 11 people who set policy for more than 6 million students in grades K-12,” Sandoval said. “We adopt curricular frameworks and materials you see in classrooms and we aspire to make sure that all students are graduating ready for college and a career.”

Sandoval is also the education director of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians, where she oversees a staff of 47 and works with elected tribal officials to guide educational policies and strategic investments to improve academic outcomes, promote self-sufficiency and nurture the next generation of leaders from birth through career.

In addition, as a lecturer at UC Santa Barbara, she has worked with more than 1,000 students seeking to become teachers, school psychologists or guidance counselors.

“Inviting out each person’s gifts requires connection, deep listening, and a lot of time. It also requires an understanding that there are different pathways through the educational process that are valid,” Sandoval said. “The ability to help others advance in their education, career, and fulfillment is a powerful reward.”

The Graduate Division Commencement Ceremony will take place Friday, June 14, at 1 p.m. on the Commencement Green.

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.