UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

February 19, 2020
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Keeping a Promise

Nearly all of them — 96% — graduated on time, and they did so with a cumulative grade-point average 3.23. One of them earned the Thomas More Storke Award honoring the university's highest-achieving undergraduate student. Several went on to prestigious graduate programs at top institutions including Harvard, Yale, Duke and UC Berkeley.

These are among the impressive statistics representing the first group of UC Santa Barbara Promise Scholars — high-achieving, low-income Californians selected for four-year scholarships to UC Santa Barbara in a unique program created by the campus.

That inaugural cohort of 122 students graduated in June 2019; a new group arrived on campus in fall 2020. Currently there are more than 400 Promise Scholars at UC Santa Barbara, originator of the first financial aid package in the nation to guarantee multi-year, up-front financial support.

Philanthropy plays a huge role in the program's success — and the student scholars have now inspired a significant gift. Betty Elings Wells, longtime benefactor of the campus and current chair of the UC Santa Barbara Foundation Board of Trustees, has donated $500,000 to support Promise Scholars.

"When I attended a presentation given by the Promise Scholars I was so impressed with their capabilities, their backgrounds and just how great they were," Wells said. "They talked about how they had applied and were accepted, but needed financial

aid. When they were awarded these scholarships — a full ride — they couldn't believe it. I was really touched by how much it did for them."

Student support is a core focus for the trustees under Wells' leadership.

"We are so grateful to Betty Elings Wells for her passion and generosity in supporting our Promise Scholars, a dynamic group of high-achieving first-generation and low-income California students, and ensuring that they have access to a world-class education and a vibrant UC Santa Barbara experience," said Chancellor Henry T. Yang. "We also appreciate Betty's leadership as Chair of our UC Santa Barbara Foundation Board of Trustees, as well as her long-standing philanthropy and friendship to our campus."

Promise Scholars was born of frustration with traditional financial aid models, which seek a four-year commitment from students who often know only how they'll pay for the first year — and 97% of whom will remain low-income for the duration of their college careers. That's according to Michael Miller, assistant vice chancellor for enrollment services at UC Santa Barbara, who conceived the idea for the program.

"So it occurred to me, 'Can we make a four-year promise, assuming these students remain eligible?'" Miller said. "The beauty of Betty Wells' gift is it allows us to bring more amazing students into the Promise Scholar program. We really appreciate her vision and desire to help students thrive while at UCSB.

"The Promise Scholar program is unique in many ways," he added, "but what really makes it special is how many people within the campus community contribute to its success — and this gift is a perfect example of that."

Of the 500-plus Promise Scholars — all California high school graduates — who have come to UC Santa Barbara since the program's inception, 87% are first-generation college students. Their average family income is $25,380.

The students selected for the scholarship are promised, for incoming freshmen, a minimum of $120,000 in grants and scholarships over their four years at UCSB, and $60,000 for transfer students over two years on campus. They must maintain a minimum 2.75 grade-point average and remain income eligible for the duration.

In addition to financial support, Promise Scholars also receive coaching in time management and direct connections to campus resources, as well as healthy

amounts of motivation and guidance. The latter largely come courtesy of program director Holly Roose, who says the accompanying benefits are often what seal the students' success.

"You can't imagine how special it is to have the opportunity to tell low income and first generation students that they are about to graduate college with minimal debt, that they can now afford to study abroad, that they don't have to work thirty hours a week while juggling 12+ units per quarter," Roose said. "It is life changing. When students find out that Betty Elings Wells has just selflessly funded their education, they become really emotional. Her gift has made them feel incredibly lucky and supported by the community."

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.