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United Against COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic demands innovative and creating thinking, and UC Santa Barbara's Graduate Division is answering the call with the [Multidisciplinary Research on COVID-19 and its Impacts \(MRCI\) Program](#).

Launched in May by Graduate Dean Carol Genetti, the program has made 44 new grants to 55 grad students to support their summer research and creative projects on the pandemic. The program provides a \$2,000 mini-grant to an individual or team project that explores, analyzes and responds to the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the 44 funded proposals, six were collaborative team proposals. The awards, running from June 22 through Sept. 22, may also include funding for direct project research costs (up to \$500).

"The coronavirus pandemic has changed nearly every aspect of human life, from family relationships to schooling, communication, the economy, politics and the arts," Genetti said. "This is a dramatic, historic event and today's scholars have a remarkable opportunity to bring wide-ranging perspectives and methods of 21st-century scholarship to study it in real time.

"In addition," she continued, "some graduate students have had to delay their research due to the pandemic, and some have been impacted financially. MRCI addresses all of these at once, in generating research related to the pandemic, developing new opportunities and partnerships, and providing small stipends. It's a win all around."

Mary Hegarty, who serves as Graduate Division associate dean and leads the MRCI program, says this is a unique opportunity for graduate students to redirect their research.

“Students have already received important guidance on proposal writing and will participate in collaborative groups throughout the summer to explore the perspectives of different disciplines on the current pandemic,” she said. “For some students, MRCI will lead to a new publication; for others, their MRCI project will be included as a chapter in their dissertation or will contribute pilot data for a grant proposal to a federal agency. In general, the projects speak to the resilience of our students in adapting their research and creative activities to provide new insights into the challenges of COVID-19.”

Topics that received funding ranged from projects that will use seismic data to analyze the degree of compliance with shut-down orders to an examination of COVID-19 related policies and rhetoric in a variety of contexts.

[Suyi Leong](#), a Ph.D. student in psychological and brain sciences, will be focusing on understanding how different cultural values affect the use of digital contact tracing (DCT).

“I hope this project informs policy makers and app developers about peoples’ concerns for using the tool, and address them so that DCT can be effectively implemented,” she said.

In this new world of remote engagement and research, graduate students will also explore the impact and efficacy of telehealth in the context of its greatly expanded use, and how different communities, such as religious institutions, have moved their face-to-face activities into online settings to serve their members.

Anthropology Ph.D. student [Lauren Smyth](#) is researching Southern Californian religious communities and their shift to digital and mixed digital/physical ritual sites in response to the pandemic’s stay-at-home orders and social distancing.

“With the MRCI, I’m most excited about the diverse range of incredible projects from across the university that I otherwise wouldn’t get the chance to learn directly from, and sharing our different expertise to better understand pandemic-related research.”

Statistics and applied probability doctoral student [Mingzhao Hu](#) will research the effects of COVID-19 on dialysis patients.

“My research investigates effects of COVID-19 on dialysis patients via smoothing of longitudinal patient physiology variables and analyzes deviations during the pandemic with mixed effect state-space model based on first-hand recordings from treatment clinics,” Hu said. “I look forward to the cross-discipline collaboration opportunities offered by MCRI, and the generous funding is essential for me to carry out the research and perform the analysis to the best of my abilities.”

Social justice themes also figure widely in the summer research projects, such as the analysis of the pandemic’s impact on vulnerable populations, indigenous peoples, undocumented, and economically marginalized populations.

[Sarah Alami](#), another Ph.D. student in anthropology, will be modeling the spread of the coronavirus among the Tsimane, an indigenous population living in the Bolivian Amazon, using secondary data collected by the Tsimane Health and Life History Project (THLHP).

“I am hoping this project will help assist in ongoing management of COVID-19 among Tsimane by detecting at-risk individuals and ‘hotspots,’ or areas of elevated disease risk,” she said.

Holly Carpenter, who joined the Graduate Division team as Crossroads Program Coordinator right before the March shelter-in-place order, hailed the diversity of topics and research approaches in the proposals was incredible.

“It was a wonderful reminder of the passion and creativity that UCSB graduate students bring to their work and the many ways that graduate student research contributes to understanding complex problems and finding solutions.”

Carpenter now works with Hegarty and Robby Nadler, the Graduate Division’s academic, professional and technical graduate writing development director, to facilitate multidisciplinary intellectual discourse among program participants.

“I was touched by the generous spirit of our students’ projects,” Nadler said. “They embraced this opportunity as a way to help others through their expertise, not as a mechanism to pursue their own research agendas. At the end of the day, that is what a UC Santa Barbara education is about.”

In addition to working on their research over the summer, students will also participate in the MRCI Research Collaborative, which will include presentations, small and large group discussions, and networking. To foster this community, the MRCI program in collaboration with the Graduate Student Resource Center staff and peers will hold a series of webinars as part of the proposal and research funding process.

Awardees will also participate in discussions and will share their final research findings with the community with a fall symposium where students will present short overviews of their work and outcomes. The program's organizers also hope the mini-grants will help seed the creation of future grant proposals, articles, works of art, or other scholarly products by graduate students.

Funding for the program was provided by the Graduate Division with contributions from the Office of Research; the College of Engineering; the Bren School of Environmental Science and Management; the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education; and the Divisions of Social Sciences, Humanities and Fine Arts, and Mathematical, Life and Physical Sciences.

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.