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A Lot of Promise

As part of the Graduate Division's dedication to fostering diversity in graduate education, UC Santa Barbara has launched a fellowship program that will completely fund up to two years of graduate school for students who are selected.

The nascent Promise Fellowship Program is modeled on — and expands upon — the undergraduate Promise Scholars Program, which empowers high-achieving students from low-income households by providing the "promise" of guaranteed multi-year support. It will officially get underway in the 2022-2023 academic year, with two fellows in its inaugural cohort.

"There are now more than 500 students in the Promise Scholars Program, with many of them considering graduate school. My thought was: 'Why would we not want to keep these talented students at UC Santa Barbara, where they have already built a strong community?'" said John Lofthus, assistant dean of development in Graduate Division, who conceived the new program. "The Promise Fellowship extends the initial promise by providing a full fellowship for selected students to pursue a master's degree at UCSB."

Inaugural Promise Fellow Michael Zargari is today a fourth-year Promise Scholar who this week will graduate with bachelor's degrees in statistics and data science and in economics, as well as minors in both Iranian studies and translation studies. His next stop: the Bren School of Environmental Science & Management, where he's aiming for a master's degree in environmental data science.

“This fellowship to me means that UCSB is determined to bridge the gap to higher education for first-generation, low-income and underrepresented groups,” said Zargari, who as an undergrad founded and co-chaired the Promise Scholar Advisory Board. “This allows me to focus completely on my classes without having to constantly worry about taking out loans or working multiple jobs in order to stay afloat.”

“Just as the Promise Scholarship enabled me to get heavily involved and give back to my community during my undergraduate years,” Zargari added, “I plan to utilize this new aid as a Promise Fellow to do the same during my graduate years as well.”

The fellowships are primarily funded by donors, with additional support from the campus — by way of Graduate Division, the Bren School, the Gevirtz School, and the Colleges of Engineering and of Letters and Science — making it possible to provide $40,000 annually to the selected students.

Alexandra Seros and Walter Ulloa are among the program’s founding donors.

“UCSB’s Promise Fellowship is an opportunity for all students to reach their academic potential—no matter their economic, gender, or immigration status — no one is left behind,” Seros said. “It has been Walter’s and my experience that these students are always extremely intelligent, talented and motivated; valuable contributors both to California and to the U.S. overall.”

The new initiative helps to build an important pipeline of academically prepared undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds for graduate study at UC Santa Barbara, according to Interim Anne and Michael Towbes Graduate Dean Leila Rupp. Mentorship also is baked into the program: the graduate Promise Fellows will serve as role models and mentors to the undergraduate Promise Scholars as part of the fellowship.

“The Promise Fellowship program responds to the University of California’s call to ‘Grow Our Own,’ meaning take advantage of the diversity of our undergraduate population to recruit them to graduate school and then to meaningful employment in California,” Rupp said. “Students like Michael and Elena have the potential to give so much back to the community. We hope to attract more committed donors so that we can expand the program over the next years.”

Elena Barragan, a sociology major who also will graduate this week, is the second fellow in the inaugural cohort. A first-generation college student, she grew up “living in poverty with a dream of becoming an elementary school teacher,” hoping to give younger generations a quality of education she felt she never had at that age.

She completed her associate’s degree at Santa Barbara City College only to realize she couldn’t afford to transfer to UCSB — until she received the Promise Scholarship. The Promise Fellowship will be equally transformational for Barragan, covering her costs as she works toward a master’s in education and a teaching credential.

Without family financial support or an income level that makes graduate school feasible, the Promise Fellowship, Barragan wrote in her application, will “enable me to thrive at a graduate level so I can give back to this community by fulfilling my lifelong goal of becoming an elementary school teacher.”

Her story and her situation are all too common, according to Holly Roose, director of the undergraduate program.

“Our Promise Scholars can graduate undergrad debt free only to take on $40,000 or more of debt in a master’s program,” Roose said. “For students who are required to get a master’s for their career goals, such as K-12 teachers, counselors, social workers and others, these fellowships from Graduate Division have proved to be lifesavers!

“Low income, first generation and underrepresented students in our program feel a huge sense of relief that there might be opportunities to further their education down the road after they complete their undergraduate degrees,” Roose added. “Being able to tell them that this is a possibility has been a huge deal and shows how innovative and expansive our program can be for our students.”

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.