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The Promise Fellowship Program supports graduate first-gen students from low-income households

Now in its third year, the graduate division [Promise Fellowship Program](#) at UC Santa Barbara provides first-generation college students from low-income households with financial support to pursue advanced degrees.

“If anyone ever doubted the impact the Promise Fellowship Program would have, all they have to do is follow the recipients of the first fellowships,” said Leila J. Rupp, Interim Anne and Michael Towbes Graduate Dean. “The program has shown what it means when students who might never even have dreamed of getting a graduate degree have the opportunity to show what they can do.”

The new cohort of fellows are all incoming master’s degree students: Zackary Glazewski (computer science), Joshua Hopkins (Technology Management Program), Gina Milan (Teacher Education Program), Esmeralda Morales (education) and Gil Sia (electrical and computer engineering). Promise Fellows pursuing master’s degrees receive a stipend and have their tuition and fees covered; doctoral student applicants who are fully funded by their departments receive an additional \$8,000 in each of their first three summers.

Promise Fellowship alumni have gone on to pursue jobs and further academic study in their chosen fields. “The fellowship funded everything from tuition and fees, to

housing expenses and other personal expenses, for the duration of my program,” said Erik Magaña, a 2023 Promise Fellow who now works as a Spanish teacher in the Santa Barbara Unified School District. “As TEP has an extensive time commitment there was very little time to work outside of the program. Although I did have a small part-time job for additional expenses, the fellowship fully funded the essentials I needed to be successful in the program. This also meant I did not need to take out loans.” Magaña said that thanks to the Promise Fellowship program, he is graduating debt free.

Elena Barragan, one of the first two 2022 Promise Fellows, is now a kindergarten teacher in Riverside, Calif. “Growing up in poverty with a dream of becoming an elementary school teacher to strengthen the education system for students like me, but having no financial means to do so remained a challenge throughout my life,” she said. “I was fortunate enough to be graciously awarded a Promise Fellowship in a pivotal moment in my life that would allow me to receive my master’s in education while earning my teaching credential.”

Like Barragan and Magaña, new awardees Milan and Morales are considering careers in education. “After grad school, I hope to head straight into full-time teaching at an elementary school here in Santa Barbara,” said Milan, who received support to finish her undergraduate degree through the [Promise Scholars Program](#) for undergraduates. “All of my coursework and my student teaching experience within the UCSB Teacher’s Education Program thus far has been absolutely enlightening and encouraging. My love for my career has only grown exponentially, and I couldn’t be more in awe of the opportunity to keep learning valuable knowledge and skills from my dream school all over again.”

Morales currently works at UCSB as an undergraduate advisor in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences. “My personal experiences have instilled in me a profound appreciation for the role of education in breaking the cycle of socioeconomic challenges and fostering understanding among diverse communities,” she said. “I am eager to bring my unique perspective to the academic discourse, with a commitment to promoting empathy, inclusivity, and equitable educational opportunities for all, especially rural Latinx students.”

With an advanced degree, Morales feels empowered to help undergraduate students. “The ability to guide Chicanx/Latinx students from rural backgrounds with their transition into higher education and throughout their college education, while

maintaining their familial connections and practice of cultural traditions, is of great importance to me and is an understudied area in educational research,” she said. “I look forward to generating scholarship that answers my research questions alongside faculty in the Department of Education.”

Two of the 2024-2025 fellows, Sia and Glazewski, are pursuing master’s degrees in engineering. Glazewski thrived during his undergraduate years through participation in the Early Research Scholars Program and working as an undergraduate learning assistant. As a student in the five-year MS/BS program in the Department of Computer Science, he noted that receiving the Promise Fellowship helped alleviate concerns about pursuing his advanced degree. “I come from a low-income background, so my first thought when making a decision to continue education is whether or not it is financially feasible,” he said. “This fellowship gives me the time, security and confidence I need to achieve success in my academic endeavors.”

According to past awardees, the fellowship also provides the freedom to explore career options in their respective fields while in graduate school. Anthony Boutros, a 2023 fellow, is now pursuing his doctorate in materials science at the University of Southern California. “The fellowship allowed me to focus on my research and classes without needing to worry about getting a job to pay rent,” he said. “It really made it easier for me to be able to focus on school without any other distractions, which I am really grateful for.”

That sentiment is shared by Michael Zargari, a 2022 Promise Fellow who graduated with his master’s degree in environmental data science in 2023. “The fellowship allowed me to focus on my studies and apply to positions early in the year,” he said. “I was able to come out of my master’s program with great footing since I did not have any debt to worry about! This is what allowed me to succeed in my program while still participating on campus and being able to secure a job in fall quarter.” He now works as a quantitative analytics associate at Wells Fargo.

Rosemary Juarez, an alum of the Bren School of Environmental Science & Management, who received a 2023 Promise Fellowship, said it gave her the confidence to complete a rigorous program. “I cannot emphasize enough how monumental receiving a Promise Fellowship was not only to my educational path, but to the outlook in my future,” she said.

Helping future generations succeed is a goal for 2024 awardee Hopkins. After graduating with a degree in statistics and data science, he decided to apply to the Technology Management master's program. "Though my daughter tells me I'm the best dad in the world (a bit biased, but I'm honored), receiving the Promise Fellowship made me feel as if I were being recognized at the highest level," he said. "I was also relieved to know that I could focus on my studies without the constant worry of financial survival."

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About UC Santa Barbara

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