

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE *Current*

November 13, 2024

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Fellows in the fight for racial justice

Continuing its commitment to amplify underrepresented voices and to support scholars driven to effect change, the Graduate Division at UC Santa Barbara has selected three new Racial Justice Fellows: Ph.D. students India Sanders, Marlene Lopez Torres and Diego Lazcano Avila will receive funding and mentorship for teaching, research and mentorship.

“The Racial Justice Fellowship program originally grew out of a commitment to address racial injustice following the murder of George Floyd,” said Leila J. Rupp, Interim Anne and Michael Towbes Graduate Dean. “Recruiting and supporting students who have a track record of research, teaching and community engagement around issues of racial justice remains critical to the Graduate Division. We are so proud of the work the fellows do and their commitment to giving back as they pursue their graduate degrees.”

Since its launch in the fall of 2020, the Graduate Division has awarded the fellowship to 17 students. All awards are supported by a cross-collaboration among academic divisions and support from private donors. Fellows are nominated by their departments during their recruitment outreach to receive an \$8,000 summer stipend for the first three years, in addition to a five-year, fully-funded support offer from their department.

“The Racial Justice Fellowship is central to our goal of creating a more inclusive and diverse campus,” said Walter Boggan, Director of Graduate Admissions, Outreach, and Diversity. “By supporting students dedicated to racial justice, we’re showcasing underrepresented voices and advancing work that leads to real social impact. This

fellowship is key to attracting and empowering scholars who are passionate about creating meaningful change."

Meet the fellows

Lazcano Avila grew up in Santa Barbara experiencing "the red-lining of neighborhoods and the subsequent drop in value as well as quality of life," he said. He chose to pursue his doctorate in the Department Chicana and Chicano Studies for its historic role as the first institution nationwide to offer a PhD in the field.

"The wonderful professors and school community were a big reason for choosing to stay in town," he said. "To me this award symbolizes not only that my community recognizes and appreciates the work and interests I have but also that I have the support to continue pursuing those goals with the mindset of helping to give back. It will be an integral tool for building my experience and knowledge."

As a single father, Lazcano Avila is motivated by the future he can provide for his children, he said. "I would like to be the role model that I wish I had when it came to academics and pursuing personal interests. Much of the positive work I have witnessed came at the hands of professors and community activists who understood what it means to uplift others, to uplift the community as a whole. My goal would be to leave an impact on my community as my community has done with me."

Sanders chose to pursue her graduate studies at UCSB for its diverse faculty and the [Department of Counseling, Clinical & School Psychology](#)'s commitment to social justice.

"When I applied, I was immediately drawn to the opportunity to work at the Healing Space, which provides therapy for addressing racial trauma and promoting resilience in the Black and African American community in the larger Santa Barbara," Sanders said. "I am incredibly grateful to have received the Racial Justice Fellowship, which allows me to fully dedicate myself to researching and advocating for Black and Brown communities."

"My research focuses on exploring the relationship between race and mental health outcomes in marginalized communities," she added. "Thanks to this fellowship, I will

be able to provide essential mental health resources to underserved communities through mentorship, community healing events and the establishment of more supportive spaces for Black and Brown communities in Santa Barbara.”

Hailing from the Central Valley, first-generation student Lopez Torres learned about the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education’s doctoral program through assistant professor Mayra Puente. “I knew that with professors such as Dr. Puente, who has a shared background as me — coming from the Central Valley, being Latina and first-generation — would assist me in feeling seen, validated and supported as I took the next steps in my academic career,” Lopez Torres said.

“It is truly an honor to receive the Racial Justice Fellowship as it will alleviate some of the financial hardships that come along with graduate school,” she added. “And it is empowering to know that this fellowship is making it possible to increase the presence of marginalized communities in academia.”

A history of impact

Looking back on the impact of his own experience, Chicana/o studies PhD student and 2021–22 fellow Ricardo Delgado Solis said the fellowship funding, in collaboration with UCSB’s Undocumented Student Services, helped him establish the Immersion Program for Academic and Cultural Training (IMPACT) for undocumented students protected under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

In September, IMPACT’s three-week travel-study program in Mexico City immersed DACA recipients in Spanish and Mexican culture, Solis said. “The program's academic focus on immigration, history, identity and language was coupled with an ethnographic component for cultural exploration. As one of the two coordinators, I had the privilege of guiding 15 DACA students, many of whom had yet to return to Mexico since childhood.”

The newest cohort will get a chance to hear past fellows present their work at the upcoming Racial Justice Symposium.

“There are consequences to conducting research; it has academic, economic, and societal impact,” said Carlos Nash, Director of Graduate Diversity Programs. “The

Racial Justice Symposium is an opportunity for us to learn from our scholars and to support their endeavors to effect change.”

For more information about the Racial Justice Fellowship, visit the [Graduate Division website](#).

Tags

[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#)

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About UC Santa Barbara

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