

THE *Current*

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[Debra Herrick](#)

Commencement speaker Courtney Wright reflects on a transformative journey

Courtney Wright, a Ph.D. candidate in UC Santa Barbara's Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, will address her fellow graduates as a 2025 Commencement speaker — a moment she calls “a dream realized” after five and a half years of graduate study. Her path to the podium, however, was anything but traditional.

“My research and my work have always centered around expanding access — giving people, especially in underserved communities, the tools they need to thrive,” said Wright, originally from Broward County in South Florida.

Wright's academic and professional journey spans continents and communities. She directed operations at the top private school in Leon County, Florida, consulted on statewide education programs and played a key role in the design and implementation of virtual schools. Her doctoral research focuses on community engagement, equity in education and transformative learning environments.

She arrived at UCSB in 2020 under extraordinary circumstances. “I actually came from China — we evacuated due to Covid,” she said. Initially intending to move to Spain, she received her acceptance letter from UCSB while living in Miami and changed course. “The first two and a half years were really rough for me because I came as a single mother, along with coming from another country,” Wright said.

“Essentially we didn’t have the opportunity to bring all our belongings, so it was just me and my daughter.”

That daughter — Yarah Elise Scott — is Wright’s deepest motivation. “She is my baby butterfly,” Wright said. “Every day that I wake up and put in the tireless hours of completing a dissertation has all been because of her.”

Wright’s connection to UCSB began years before her enrollment, during a summer program through the UC-HBCU initiative, while she was earning her undergraduate degree at Florida A&M University. The program exposed her to life on the UCSB campus and gave her early experience with academic publishing. “The only UC that I chose was UC Santa Barbara because I loved it so much,” she said. A fellowship from the initiative later enabled her to return as a doctoral student.

At UCSB, Wright found support in unexpected places. She credits her graduate advisor, [Rebecca Mireles-Rios](#), an associate professor in the Department of Education, with guiding her through the challenges of scholarly life. “She really took me under her wing and provided me with opportunities for publications,” Wright said. She also highlighted the role of on-campus mental health resources. “One individual I would like to highlight is my therapist, Mario,” she said. “Being able to connect and talk with him through those hard times allowed me to get to the finish line.”

Nature also played a part in her healing and growth. “The labyrinth is special to me because it provided me with a sense of healing,” she said. Isolated during the early pandemic, Wright took solace in time spent outdoors. “It allowed for me to truly conceptualize and think those happy thoughts.”

After graduation, Wright plans to write a self-help memoir, “Spiraling in Control,” and continue her mission to support others. “I’m looking forward to going out and speaking to individuals who are going through difficult times and offer them strategies to work through those challenges,” she said.

As she prepares to take the commencement stage, Wright reflected on her own transformative journey: “To be able to not only graduate but to represent my class and to give a speech that I feel will motivate the class...is something that I’m extremely excited about,” she said.

“I’m so happy that I was able to have the opportunity.”

Tags

[Commencement 2025](#)

[Commencement](#)

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