

THE *Current*

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[Shelly Leachman](#)

University names winners of top student awards for Class of 2025

With Commencement week officially underway, UC Santa Barbara has announced recipients of its most prestigious student honors, awarded for scholastic achievement, extraordinary service and personal courage and persistence.

- **Cassidy Miller** has won the Thomas More Storke Award for Excellence, the campus's highest honor, for her outstanding scholarship and extraordinary service to the university, its students and the community. Miller earned a bachelor of science degree in biopsychology, with minors in applied psychology as well as poverty, inequity and social justice.
- **Ethan Lord** has won the Jeremy D. Friedman Memorial Award, which recognizes outstanding leadership, superior scholarship and contributions to undergraduate life on campus. Lord completed a degree in religious studies, with a minor in LGBTQ+ studies.
- **Max McKinney** has won the Alyce Marita Whitted Memorial Award, which recognizes a nontraditional student's endurance, persistence and courage in the face of extraordinary challenges while pursuing an academic degree. McKinney will graduate with a bachelor of science degree in molecular and cellular biology with an emphasis in pharmacology.

An award ceremony for winners of these and other student awards, as well as for their families, faculty and staff, will be held at 3:30 p.m. Friday, June 13, in Corwin Pavilion.

The Yonie Harris Award for Civility in Public Discourse will be presented to sociology major [Jaz'myne Gates](#). The honor is bestowed upon graduates who best exemplify the principles of free speech and respectful dialogue and who foster a campus climate of civility and open-mindedness. **Ali Muller**, who has received a Ph.D. in education, will receive the Michael D. Young Engaged Scholar Award for students who have successfully applied their scholarly knowledge and/or values to action.

[UPDATE June 16, 2025: Announced at the June 13 ceremony, the winner of the 2025 Mortar Board Award, which recognizes the student who earned the highest cumulative GPA of the graduating class, is **Ron Kibel**, who majored in mathematics and computer science. Also [presented at the event](#), to multiple graduating seniors and graduate students: prizes for the University Service Award, the University Award of Distinction, and the Vice Chancellor's Award for Scholarship, Leadership and Citizenship.

As a scholar in the College of Letters & Science Honors Program, **Miller**, the Storke Award winner, conducted extensive interdisciplinary research focused on neurodiversity, autism and positive psychology. She presented her work at academic venues at UCSB and across the UC system, and currently has eight academic publications in progress — two of which list her as first author.

Beyond academics, Miller has demonstrated immense leadership both on campus and off, working with peer support organizations, Associated Students, her sorority and the Stanford Neurodiversity Project's Research, Education and Advocacy Camp for high school students. She was deeply engaged in advocacy with Students for Reproductive Justice, and co-founded the UCSB Neurodiversity Task Force. Miller plans to relocate to Washington D.C. and pursue graduate school.

Friedman Award winner **Lord** has been a champion for LGBTQIA+ students at UCSB, advocating for a gender-inclusive housing application process and helping queer and trans students navigate concerns in their living situations. As the campus's first LGBTQIA+ housing coordinator, Lord collaborated with departments across campus, created resources for students and demonstrated strong leadership in programming and advocacy. For three years he was an RA in the SAGE Living Learning Community

for sexual and gender expansive identifying students.

McKinney, winner of the Whitted Award, returned to UCSB in 2024 after a 10-year absence. He became a tireless volunteer with Gauchos for Recovery, determined to help students struggling with substance abuse. In his work with the peer-driven program, he led weekly recovery meetings for graduate and non-traditional students, and forged a connection between Gauchos for Recovery and UCSB's fraternity community.

In addition to the overall university awards, the College of Letters & Science also has recognized some of its graduating students for scholastic achievement in the sciences, social sciences, humanities and fine arts.

- **Riley Berman**, a triple-major in economics, applied mathematics and history, has received the Dean's Award for Outstanding Senior, in recognition of his outstanding scholarship and contributions to the campus community. The award is given on behalf of the deans of the College of Letters and Science. Nominated for his excellence as a student and a research assistant, and for his efforts to improve undergraduate instruction, Berman was cited in particular for his intrinsic motivation to learn just for the sake of learning.

- **James Wangjin Xie**, a philosophy major, has received the William R. Reardon Undergraduate Award for outstanding academic achievement in an arts or humanities discipline. The award is named for Reardon, a professor emeritus of dramatic art and former associate dean in the College of Letters and Science. Describing Xie "a model student," his nominator said, "Were he in our Ph.D. program, he would immediately be among the best early-career students." Xie captained the department's successful Ethics Bowl team, frequently attended colloquia and wrote an honors thesis characterized as "as good of an honors thesis as I have read in the past few years."

- **Riya Nilkant**, who majored in biological sciences, has received the Frances Colville and Terry Dearborn Memorial Award for outstanding academic achievement as an honors student majoring in the sciences. The award was established in memory of Colville and Dearborn, associate professors of physical education at UC Santa Barbara. Her nominator described her as a "one of the most capable and gifted scientists I have met during my experience as a faculty for 20 years." Nilkant also received a 2025-2026 Churchill Scholarship for one year of graduate study at

Churchill College, Cambridge. The nationally prestigious award covers full tuition, a competitive stipend, travel costs and the chance to apply for a \$4,000 special research grant. Nilkant is one of only 16 Churchill Scholars nationwide selected in science, math and engineering.

- **Sebastian Cox**, who will graduate with degrees in economics and environmental studies, has received the Luis Leal Award for outstanding interdisciplinary achievement in the social sciences. The award was established in honor of the late Luis Leal, a professor emeritus of Chicana and Chicano Studies, whose presence and scholarship greatly enriched the UCSB campus. He was lauded by his nominator for his “deep and genuine passion for energy systems and climate change mitigation,” as well as his “passion for solving environmental problems using social science research methods.”

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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.