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THE Current

Campus + Community

UCSB celebrates inaugural graduation of PROPEL scholars

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A pioneering program designed to uplift and empower social science students reached a new milestone with the graduation of the inaugural class of PROPEL scholars at UC Santa Barbara.

The PROPEL program, whose acronym stands for Promoting Opportunity and Equity in Learning, is a donor-funded initiative in the Division of Social Sciences meant to empower social science majors to enhance their academic, personal and professional experience at UCSB. PROPEL scholars create an academic plan to graduate in 4 years while maintaining a 2.75 GPA/quarter and meeting with staff regularly to ensure their success. In addition to receiving financial assistance, PROPEL scholars also benefit from social events, future work and career advice, and shared experiences with a close-knit community.

“I am filled with gratitude for the over 80 scholars who have walked this journey with us,” said Bryan Zuniga, PROPEL’s director and advisor, and a graduate of UCSB’s Department of Communication. “What began as a pilot four years ago has blossomed into a thriving initiative that now celebrates 20 graduates. Their

perseverance and courage inspire us all.”

Zuniga emphasized the importance of community and support in the program’s success. “This moment reminds us how far we’ve come — how much potential lies ahead,” he said. “Our graduates have shown unwavering determination, and I am immensely proud of what they have achieved.”

Reflecting on the significance of the program’s first graduating class, Zuniga added: “PROPEL is more than a scholarship — it’s a movement to democratize opportunity, foster leadership, and build a more equitable future. These graduates exemplify what it means to persevere and lead with purpose.”

At the graduation ceremony, Charlie Hale, dean of social sciences, acknowledged the vital contributions of donors and campus partners. “The support from donors and development professionals has been essential in making PROPEL a reality. Your investments help ensure that every scholar is seen, valued, and empowered to succeed,” he said.

Hale also expressed his enthusiasm and pride in the program’s growth. “This is a momentous occasion — not just for these graduates, but for our entire campus community,” he said. “You are the pioneers of PROPEL, the first cohort to graduate, and your success paves the way for future scholars. I remember when we first envisioned this program, inspired by the Promise Scholars Program and driven by a desire to serve social sciences. Seeing it now, just five years later, is truly inspiring.”

The 2025 PROPEL graduates are:

Micah Gerola, Global Studies

Jazmin (Jam) Miranda, Political Science and Chicana/o Studies

Esther Mejia, Political Science and History of Public Policy and Law

Ingrid Lopez Higuera, Political Science and Linguistics

Mark Isidro, Political Science

Dominick Rodriguez, Political Science

Danika Cifuentes, Political Science and Film and Media Studies

Sydney Williams, Political Science

Juliana Tejada, Political Science and Sociology

Arianna Nunez, Sociology, double minor in Applied Psychology and Spanish

Whitlee Anessa Dolloway, Political Science and Chicana/o Studies

Joana Perez, Sociology, minor in Applied Psychology

Jaeden (Jade) Poelman, Sociology.

Aaliyah Raquel Kennedy, Sociology, minor in History

Jayden Evens, Sociology and Economics

Veronica Acevedo, Economics

Stanley Liu, Economics and Accounting

Ajani Washington, Communication, minor in Applied Psychology

Samantha Hernandez Gastelum, Communication

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