UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

August 28, 2025
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Town hall highlights impact of federal budget cuts on research

Novel therapeutics for lethal, chronic diseases. Containment of a particularly aggressive brain cancer. Technology that helps to determine the habitability of Europa. Imaging techniques to uncover tectonic activity deep beneath our feet.

This is just a tiny sample of the UC Santa Barbara research projects abruptly terminated by a slew of deep budget cuts to the federal agencies that support them. These and future budget cuts for science research were the topic of discussion at a Unite for Science and Research town hall meeting sponsored by the United Academic Workers local 4811 along with the campus, and featuring a visit by Rep. Salud Carbajal and comments from UCSB Vice Chancellor for Research Rachel Segalman.

“I really don’t know what’s going to happen at this point,” said Lisa Månsson, a materials graduate student researcher who was working on a promising potential treatment for glioblastoma — an aggressive type of malignant brain tumor — when both of her labs’ funding was cut. “All of a sudden there is no money left for me to continue this project, and there is no one else after me to take over this work. To watch science like this stagnate is really devastating.”

“Since the 1990s, the US public has made a massive collective investment in federally funded university research,” said graduate teaching assistant Salvador Escalante, who moderated the event. “Taxpayer dollars have saved lives. They

have led to breakthrough medicines and have mitigated natural disasters. For every dollar invested in public research, $2.50 is returned to the economy. This research has tangible impact on people's lives. This is why 70% of people support this investment. Now, none of this would be possible with all the workers who power this research."

This meeting came just as the US Supreme Court voted to lift a judge's order to block $783 million worth in National Institutes of Health grant terminations for research linked to diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives. It's the latest in an ongoing struggle over an estimated $12 billion in cuts to research at the agency, which has also disrupted critical research into diseases such as Alzheimer's and cancer.

"Thank you so much for talking about how many of you have been affected by the research cuts," Vice Chancellor for Research Rachel Segalman said to a crowd of graduate students, teaching assistants and postdoctoral students, almost all of whom have already seen their own research and that of their colleagues be defunded.

Of UCSB's roughly 3,000 graduate students, nearly 500 are paid via federal research dollars. Federal research funding also supports around 160 postdoctoral students, according to Segalman. "This science funding that is being cut, almost all of it gets used to train you to be the next generation workforce of researchers," she said of the crucial role that federal funding plays in the university's mission.

The NIH budget cuts are part of a larger series of funding and program cuts that the Trump administration has implemented across several research funding agencies critical to UCSB, including the National Science Foundation, the Department of Defense, the Department of Energy, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and NASA, as well as the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Many of these cuts took the form of employee layoffs, but also include program terminations and grant cancellations for active research projects.

"Personally, I was heartbroken because I saw my dream disappear," said Anna Parejo, whose work involved building laser instruments to detect and asses the

chemical “fingerprints” that may be present on Europa, a moon of Jupiter that may be suitable for life. She planned to continue her research at NASA before the funds dried up, she said, adding that she also was sad to see the cuts jeopardize the billions of dollars already invested by the taxpayers into the mission.

At UCSB, federal funding investment translates to future benefits to society and economy. Segalman recounted heavy federal investment in semiconductor research decades ago, research that has since spawned or improved a variety of technologies, from high-quality LED lighting to wireless communications and energy efficient power electronics. Equally important, according to her, is the workforce training at risk.

“This economy doesn’t survive…without the next generation of researchers,” she said.

Further cuts to science funding in the coming year are also cause for deep concern, amidst proposals that some federal science agencies’ budgets be slashed by half or more.

The courts have become an effective tool for resisting these actions, according to Rep. Carbajal, who has co-written legislation to help avert cuts and lent his support to ongoing legal challenges.

Though grim, the proposed cuts have yet to be approved by Congress in its upcoming appropriations process for the 2026 fiscal year, Carbajal said, which might provide opportunities to buy time and even bring back some lost funding. “I’m glad we’ve seen some of the grants reinstated, but other awards remain in limbo or are slow-walked for reinstatement,” he said.

Segalman called on the students for their “energy and passion” for research to help build an awareness of the importance of federally funded science, noting how necessary it is for the country as Congress heads into its budget-making session at the end of September.

“It’s something you can uniquely talk about,” she told them.

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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.