UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

September 9, 2025
Marge Perko

Donor-driven summer funding advances graduate student research

More than two dozen student researchers across 11 disciplines at UC Santa Barbara have received awards through Research Accelerator, a donor-funded Graduate Division program that connects financial support from alumni, faculty and the private sector to students pursuing advanced degrees.

Since 2015, the fellowship program has provided top graduate students with the opportunity to advance their dissertation and thesis research. This year, the 25 awardees are master's and doctoral students in the Robert Mehrabian College of Engineering, Bren School of Environmental Science & Management, and in the divisions of Mathematical, Life, and Physical Sciences and Humanities and Fine Arts.

"Donor generosity sparks discovery, and with Graduate Division matching funds, its impact grows," said Janine Jones, UCSB's Associate Vice Chancellor for Graduate Affairs and Anne and Michael Towbes Graduate Dean. "Together, we're giving brilliant minds the freedom to pursue the research that shapes our future. The Research Accelerator program is a powerful force for innovation and makes groundbreaking research possible."

The program amplifies the impact of donor gifts by way of supplemental support from the Graduate Division, which offers an additional $3,000 to donor gifts of $5,000 to provide a full summer research fellowship. Open to all graduate students

across disciplines who are not working as researchers during the summer, the fellowship provides funding for travel, housing at their research site and specialized equipment.

“This program began because many students have no funding in the summer,” said Leila Rupp, who served as Interim Dean of the Graduate Division from 2020 through spring 2025. “That is the case for most students in the humanities and social sciences and some STEM fields. Support from donors makes all the difference in their ability to finish their dissertations.”

Komal Na, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Chemistry & Biochemistry, is among this summer’s awardees.

“Receiving this award has been a source of both encouragement and motivation,” she said. “It has not only provided me valuable financial support but has also affirmed the importance of the work I am doing in the lab, in mentoring and through community outreach.”

Na and her co-awardee, Elisabeth Rothman, a doctoral student in bioengineering, are researching how the inheritance of epigenetic modifications, such as histone methylation, regulates transcription and maintains cellular identity across divisions. “Given that widespread epigenetic dysregulation is a hallmark of cancer and developmental disorders, I hope to uncover the mechanisms that can ultimately inform new diagnostic or therapeutic strategies,” Rothman said.

The fellowship also provides support for international students, such as Kwabena Agyare Yeboah, a graduate student in the Department of History. Yeboah received the 2025 Christine Adams Research Accelerator Fellowship to help fund summer research for his dissertation project, “Relational Beings: Multispecies and Riverine Geography in the History of West Africa,” which integrates environmental and social histories into the history of science and stages human-non-human relations. “As a West African scholar based in the United States and with limited access to funding, this generous grant allowed me to travel back to Ghana for summer dissertation research in multiple archive locations,” he said.

Charles Dana Research Accelerator Fellow Oindrila Chatterjee, a master's student in electrical and computer engineering, is working on developing electrochemical aptamer-based (EAB) sensors for therapeutic drug delivery systems. “These sensors

could one day enable real-time monitoring and regulation of medication levels in patients, contributing to safer and more effective treatment options," she said. "It's exciting and meaningful work, and I feel incredibly fortunate to be pursuing it. As an international student who came here full of hope and ambition, this opportunity has meant so much to me."

Chatterjee's co-awardee, Vikas Kalagi, a computer science master's student from Bangalore, India, is working on projects related to data privacy. "This support allows me to fully focus on research in data privacy, including vertical federated learning and privacy-preserving inference for large language models," he said. "This opportunity is helping me make meaningful progress without the added burden of financial worries."

Electrical and computer engineering Ph.D. candidate Monsij Biswal is the sole recipient this year of the Bo Hu & Xi Qiao Research Accelerator Award. His research primarily focuses on video compression in general and its application to point cloud compression standardisation efforts.

Alumni donor Liz Decolvenaere (Ph.D., '17) recalled how fellowships helped her achieve career goals at UCSB.

"I donate because I believe strongly in the importance of the academic work being done by UCSB graduate students," she said. "When I was a grad student myself, a last-minute fellowship helped me salvage an important conference attendance when the original funding source pulled out. I want to give back and help other graduate students be able to continue doing great science, and the Research Accelerator program helps me feel like I'm making an impact."

The fellowship support arrived at a significant life moment for Alexis Topete, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences, who received the Liz Decolvenaere Research Accelerator Award.

"I have been so grateful for the Research Accelerator Program at UCSB, and want to extend a special thank you to Liz Decolvenaere for her generosity and commitment to research for underrepresented graduate students in STEM fields," Topete said. "With the current uncertainty surrounding funding opportunities for graduate students and universities, I have had peace of mind through this program to know that my dissertation work would not be impacted or delayed by lack of funding. The fellowship I received allowed me to purchase all the necessary materials I would

need to assay hormones and complete analyses for my work investigating spatial cognition from the lens of women's health. It also gave me the flexibility, as a student parent, to bond with my newborn over the summer without the stress of needing to apply for a teaching assistant position. Thanks to this program, I can confidently say that I've made substantial progress, both as a researcher and as a mom to a new baby.”

Tags
Awards

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.