

UC SANTA BARBARA

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New, no-cost initiative helps undergraduates earn professional certificates and professional placement

Aiming to give current undergraduate students a competitive edge in the job market, UC Santa Barbara has introduced a new, high-impact career readiness initiative that integrates real-world experience and professional certification directly into their academic curriculum.

The program, Degree PLUS, is a limited pilot program for UCSB juniors and seniors that combines a hands-on internship with a skills-based professional certificate, all at no cost to the student. Thanks to a generous grant from the [Lumina Foundation](#) with additional support from the UC Office of the President, UCSB is one of only two campuses in the UC system offering this fully funded pathway, underscoring the university's commitment to providing accessible, career-focused education.

"We know that students from all liberal arts and sciences majors are valued by employers for their critical thinking and communication skills, their creativity and their experience working with others with diverse perspectives," said Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost David Marshall. "Adding these professional certificates in an emerging area that is of crucial concern to employers will give our students an advantage and help them apply their analytic skills to the workplace."

With an initial enrollment of 120 students, Degree PLUS officially launches the first week of January, with the start of UCSB's winter quarter. The program, part of UCSB's Professional and Continuing Education (PaCE), ultimately hopes to register 240 students in total for this two-year pilot.

The tuition-free initiative is structured to equip students with state-of-the-art skills highly sought after by employers, while the integration of professional certificates addresses a critical need for career readiness, according to PaCE Dean Denis Couturier.

"At PaCE, our mission is to ensure every graduate is equipped with the expertise to meet the demands of a dynamic workforce," Couturier said. "Degree PLUS achieves this by fusing the academic rigor of a UC degree with market-driven professional certificates, creating an undeniable competitive edge for their careers."

Structured as a bridge between what students learn and what the labor market values, the program may be especially valuable for students in the humanities and liberal arts, offering an additional layer of clarity to employers about their specific workplace readiness. The coordinated internship component provides transferable skills, professional references, and paid or subsidized work, potentially replacing the need for a separate summer job.

"This experiment is about making sure that students leave our campuses with more than a degree," said Katherine Newman, UC Provost and Executive Vice President of Academic Affairs. "It's about ensuring that they graduate with a love of learning, a devotion to ideas, demonstrable skills, meaningful experiences and the confidence to contribute to the workplace on day one."

Degree PLUS students will complete the coursework over 1-3 quarters concurrently with their degree, allowing for a flexible timetable. Upon completion, a PaCE internship coordinator will assist them in finding a professional placement. Certificates are available in high-demand fields, including Applied AI and Innovation, Foundations of Agile Project Management and Applied Business Essentials, with more to come in early 2026.

"Degree Plus is proving to be popular precisely because it gives students a sense of empowerment over the process of transitioning from student to professional," said Ery Millan-Coffey, the program's director at PaCE. "The feedback we are receiving points toward a desire for a strong entrance to the workforce."

This pioneering initiative is supported by the Lumina Foundation, which is committed to accessible, equitable learning beyond high school. PaCE will collaborate with faculty and industry experts to develop new major-specific certificate programs, which should be available starting in the fall quarter of 2026. More information on program eligibility, certificate options and application details, can be found at [UC Santa Barbara Professional and Continuing Education - Degree Plus](#).

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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.