UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

February 20, 2026
James Badham

UCSB computer science department to offer undergraduate major in AI

In response to student and industry demand, as well as to announcements at both federal and state levels suggesting the United States needs to move ever more forcefully into the AI space, UC Santa Barbara is launching an undergraduate major in artificial intelligence. Courses in the new major, based in the Computer Science (CS) Department, will be offered starting in the 2026-2027 academic year.

The proposal for a new bachelor of science degree program was developed primarily by CS professor Tevfik Bultan, teaching professor and department vice chair Diba Mirza, and CS department chair and distinguished professor Divy Agrawal. First submitted in fall 2024, it was approved by the UCSB Academic Senate in January 2026, following near-unanimous approval by the Faculty Legislature earlier that month. The proposal had been endorsed by UCSB Chancellor Dennis Assanis and approved by the Undergraduate Council.

“The origin of artificial intelligence can be traced back to Alan Turing’s famous question, ‘Can machines think?’ which he posed in 1950 in his classic treatise ‘Computing Machinery and Intelligence,’” said Agrawal. “It has taken nearly three-quarters of a century of technological advancements in AI to start to answer this question, and to arrive at an inflection point when AI begins to profoundly transform society. Over the next 75 years, AI will be integrated increasingly into all aspects of life, a process that will require future generations of scientists and engineers who are well-versed in AI technologies and able to push the frontiers of knowledge. The

Bachelor of Science in Artificial Intelligence curriculum at UCSB is designed to achieve precisely this goal.”

Bultan, who proposed the idea of establishing a new degree in AI to Agrawal and Mirza about two years ago, noted, “Artificial intelligence is the most recent computing revolution that is causing drastic changes to human civilization. Advances in statistical machine learning and deep neural networks have significantly broadened the scope of problems that can be addressed by computing and AI. The new degree will enable us to provide in-depth education to our students in these rapidly progressing areas. I am particularly excited to see the interdisciplinary education and research opportunities that the new degree will create across the College of Engineering and UCSB, since artificial intelligence can be applied in any area of study. Two years of effort, and strong collaboration among our outstanding faculty across the college and the campus, enabled us to develop an exceptionally strong undergraduate program. I am very excited for our prospective students in artificial intelligence.”

Mirza, too, sees an enormous possibility for AI students. “I am excited that the BS in AI will bring together students who are passionate about shaping the future of artificial intelligence,” she said. “This major enables them to tackle a broad range of interdisciplinary problems by working alongside faculty whose research spans AI security and systems, robotics, brain-computer interfaces, cognitive science and the ethical dimensions of AI. Our goal is to give students a rigorous foundation and to help them develop the innovative mindset needed to drive the field forward and in the right direction. I strongly believe that UCSB's collaborative and close-knit community offers the perfect environment to create the next generation of AI leaders.”

Coursework for the new degree, expected to begin in the fall quarter for 2026, will reflect the need for specific training and be broken down into three main areas: AI foundations, including computing and AI principles, statistics, and optimization; domain-specific coursework, including machine learning (ML), natural language processing, computer vision, and deep learning; and field electives in AI and related areas offered in engineering and the humanities. The latter component includes a capstone sequence.

“Artificial intelligence has rapidly risen to become perhaps the most important technological advancement of this decade, so it is fitting that UCSB, which has already built an impressive collection of entities around AI, now has a major dedicated to the subject,” said Umesh Mishra, dean of The Robert Mehrabian College of Engineering. “AI holds the promise of immense possibility to do good; yet, it also requires abundant care to ensure that it is used responsibly and does no harm. This burgeoning field will require an abundance of people who have the specialized training to develop and maintain AI platforms that will operate to benefit all people.”

Students in the degree program will also have access to the growing number of initiatives and research centers on AI across the UCSB campus, including:

- The Center for Responsible Machine Learning (CRML)
- The NSF AI Institute for Agent-based Cyber Threat Intelligence and Operation (ACTION)
- The Data Science Initiative
- The Mellichamp Initiative in Mind and Machine Intelligence
- The Center for the Humanities and Machine Learning (HUML)

About 20 freshmen are projected to enroll in the major next fall, with increases each year. By 2029, it’s anticipated that some 200 students will be working their way through various phases of the major.

Tags
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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.