

UC SANTA BARBARA

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UCSB launches bachelor's degree for incarcerated individuals at Corcoran State Prison

For prospective transfer students, the route to UC Santa Barbara is as wide-ranging, varied and, in many cases, non-traditional as the students themselves. And now, to that point, a new education byway is cutting straight through the California State Prison (CSP) system.

UC Santa Barbara is offering a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree in comparative literature to qualified students incarcerated at CSP-Corcoran in California's Central Valley. It is the first B.A. in literary studies to be given by a UC in a California prison. The inaugural group of students will begin in fall 2027, and a second cohort will be admitted for fall 2028. The students will take four courses per quarter for six quarters.

As measured by both the number of people incarcerated and the number of prisons in the state, California is home to one of the largest prison systems in the country. In the past decade, the California State Legislature has funded community college associate degree programs as well as in-prison B.A. degrees offered by the California State University system.

In 2022, the legislature took the first steps to introduce the University of California into the state's offerings of higher education prison programs, ensuring that all

qualified California residents have access to the highest tier of California's postsecondary educational system. The state allocated \$1.8 million to support LIFTED (Leveraging Inspiring Futures Through Educational Degrees), a UC Irvine-based prison B.A. program. The award also earmarked funding for the development of similar programs at other UC campuses. Currently, that includes UC Riverside and now UC Santa Barbara.

"Our campus is proud to be part of UC's LIFTED program," said UCSB Chancellor Dennis Assanis. "The value of a bachelor's degree cannot be overstated, and this innovative initiative goes straight to the heart of the university's teaching mission and its commitment to making a UC education available to every eligible student in the state. Through rigorous study in the humanities and related academic disciplines, UCSB LIFTED students will acquire skills and resources that enable them to impact their communities in immeasurable ways."

LIFTED is made possible through a partnership with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR); the UCSB LIFTED program is supported also through funding from grants, foundations and other non-profit organizations. The students are eligible for Pell Grants, which the federal government reinstated for incarcerated individuals in 2023. This provides them with access to federal financial aid for post-secondary education.

"CDCR is proud to partner with UCSB LIFTED students at CSP-Corcoran with access to a quality university education," said Rebecca Silbert, deputy superintendent of higher education in the Office of Correctional Education. "Our incarcerated students have limitless potential, and we're thrilled to add another education option for them."

Noted Daina Ramey Berry, the Michael Douglas Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts at UC Santa Barbara, "A degree in the humanities is more than an academic milestone; it is a profound act of empowerment. Historically, education and literacy have been powerful forms of resistance and vital tools for individuals to claim the power of their own stories. By bringing the UCSB LIFTED Bachelor of Arts program to CSP-Corcoran we are continuing that legacy. We are ensuring that systemic barriers do not stand in the way of intellectual growth, and we are equipping incarcerated students with the critical thinking and leadership skills needed to rewrite their futures and uplift our broader community."

UCSB LIFTED students will have completed their associate degrees at community colleges, either through correspondence or through in-person instruction in the prisons. They will continue their studies for two years through UCSB LIFTED, and graduate with a B.A. with a major in comparative literature.

“The program will offer an education that will enable the students to thrive and to contribute to their communities wherever they are, including the communities in which they live while incarcerated,” said UCSB LIFTED Director Susan Derwin, director of the campus’s Interdisciplinary Humanities Center (IHC) and a professor of comparative literature and of German.

Statistics demonstrate that individuals who pursue an education while incarcerated are 43% less likely to return to prison within three years of their release than incarcerated individuals who do not participate in correctional education programs, and that they are 13% more likely to be employed following their release. Every \$1 spent on prison education programs saves the state \$5 in reincarceration costs.

“Providing opportunities for higher education in prison not only breaks the cycle of recidivism, it also supports justice-impacted families and their communities,” Derwin said. “When a loved one pursues a college degree while serving a prison sentence, they become role models for the young people in their lives — their children, sisters and brothers, nieces and nephews. Their individual educational journey reinforces the value of higher education, and it strengthens the fabric of our entire society.”

UCSB, and the IHC specifically, is no stranger to teaching in California’s prison system. For the past decade, the IHC’s Foundations in the Humanities program has offered a correspondence program in literary studies, serving 200 incarcerated individuals annually in all 31 California prisons. The program is funded by the university and through multiple grants from the CDCR.

“Through Foundations, we had worked at a prison in the Central Valley — CSP-Corcoran — where many of the participants communicated to us their desire to pursue a university degree, but there were no opportunities for them to do so,” Derwin said. “The prison warden and education team also were eager to bring a university degree program into the prison. We wanted to be at CSP-Corcoran in particular because there was so much interest.”

Distance, however, poses a challenge. CSP-Corcoran is over 200 miles from the UCSB campus. To overcome that obstacle, UCSB LIFTED employs a hybrid format,

with faculty teaching their students in the prison classroom via Zoom. Additionally, they will visit the prison at least once per quarter for sessions of in-person instruction.

Why comparative literature? At UCSB, Comparative Literature is a program rather than a department. That means it draws faculty not only from literary studies but also from other areas of the humanities and humanistic social sciences, such as history, communication and classics.

“When you are a student of literature you hold an internal dialogue with yourself as you puzzle over the meaning of a text,” Derwin explained. “The iterative process of questioning and formulating interpretations is very much aligned with the rehabilitative journey of people who are serving sentences and seeking to understand the complexities of their own lives and histories.

“Because of its interdisciplinarity and breadth,” she continued, “the comparative literature major also will include courses that examine the systemic factors that underlie the penal system, a system that has so impacted the lives of the LIFTED students as well as their families and their communities.”

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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.