

UC SANTA BARBARA

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UCSB's United for Education campaign leverages small acts for big community impact

In a time of seemingly constant challenges and discouraging news, the idea of creating sustained positive change may feel beyond reach. We may wonder what small acts of kindness amount to. What can donating \$5 really do? How far can giving a Candy Gram go?

For Gauchos, it can go quite far.

The annual United for Education campaign between UC Santa Barbara and United Way of Santa Barbara County in the past 30 years has garnered \$3.1 million, to directly support local service programs and educational initiatives for children in Santa Barbara County. This year, Gauchos donated over \$102,000, making 2026 its most successful campaign since 2019. From giving \$5 to spreading the word among colleagues, the campus community came together to support a cause that has lasting impact.

United for Education is a long-standing tradition at UC Santa Barbara, dating back to 1951. The campaign kicks off each January and runs for two months, with faculty and staff participating in various ways, whether donating directly, competing in the Bean Bag Toss Tournament, sending Candy Grams to colleagues or partaking in events at campus dining locations and the Campus Store.

This year, the goal was to increase participation and make contributing accessible — with people giving time, money and energy towards the cause. The campaign is more than a fundraiser, it's an opportunity for faculty and staff to build community on and off campus.

And Gauchos didn't disappoint. The UC Santa Barbara campus community had over 500 members participate this year through volunteerism, events and donations.

"If everyone pitches in a hand, then the lift isn't so heavy, right? There's really a door for everyone to access to make a difference," said Evan Curtice, the United Way of Santa Barbara County development manager and United for Education campaign lead. "It's really exciting (seeing) the collective impact and people giving where they can, amplifying the mission and support programs that make a meaningful difference for thousands of families, children and individuals."

And the combined contributions are in support of the core mission of UC Santa Barbara: educational access and academic achievement.

"(The campaign) has a special focus on academic achievement, which is so integral to both UCSB and United Way. We make sure we're closing achievement gaps so that every student has the ability to be successful or feel confident in the classroom and has the resources to thrive," said Curtice.

If this year's campaign numbers are impressive, the impact on children's lives is exceptional, she added. "You see very clearly that children are able to succeed even more in the classroom when they have the confidence to do so, and when they feel like they belong or they're in a safe place. These programs enable that confidence, teaching them how to engage with a group, how to be part of a community, how to regulate stress."

The United Way approach is holistic and comprehensive. One major focus is on improving the literacy rates within Santa Barbara County. The program also offers students social emotional learning and tools to build community and sense of self — from yoga and mindfulness to outdoor exercises like fishing and beach excursions.

"The United for Education Campaign is one of United Way's top annual campaigns and plays a vital role in strengthening our local programs and initiatives," Curtice said. "This has been a way that UCSB facilitates giving back while also creating a community around it. And I'd love to mention our campaign committee and our

department reps. We could not do it without them and their support of building excitement around community giving.”

The collaboration doesn’t end when the two-month United for Education campaign concludes. The two organizations partner throughout the year to serve both UC Santa Barbara and the broader Santa Barbara County community.

Ongoing initiatives include the [VITA Club](#), a student-led club that enables UCSB student volunteers to help with the income tax assistance program, filing taxes for community members. Another is the [Brighter Futures Child Care Initiative](#) to increase the capacity for infant and toddler childcare at the UC Santa Barbara Orfalea Family Children's Center.

“It's incredibly wonderful that we've been able to have this impact, and for so long, together,” said Curtice.

Visit the [United Way of Santa Barbara County website](#) to learn more about their initiatives and how to continue getting involved.

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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.