

UC SANTA BARBARA

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‘Agent of change’ Dennis Assanis inaugurated as UCSB chancellor

California dignitaries and scholars from across the country filled the Lobero Theatre on May 27 for the inauguration of UC Santa Barbara Chancellor Dennis Assanis, widely praised as an energetic leader and agent of change. Assanis arrived in September as UCSB’s sixth chancellor, assuming the helm from Henry Yang, who served for 31 years before stepping down last summer.

As the 600-seat Lobero in downtown Santa Barbara reached capacity, the midmorning [ceremony](#) included elected officials, the UC Board of Regents, student and staff leaders, and members of UCSB’s Academic Senate and Assanis’s executive leadership team, plus many friends and colleagues. Assanis sat next to his wife, Eleni, who he described to the audience as his “partner, collaborator and first lady.”

“Over the past nine months, I have been listening carefully and witnessing the sheer brilliance of this academic community,” said Assanis, who started his position as chancellor on September 1. “Eleni and I have spent time with our outstanding faculty, touring labs and classrooms to better understand your dynamic scholarship, teaching and research. We have seen the ingenuity and unmatched dedication of our staff who power every aspect of our campus operations.”

Many of the visiting [speakers](#) who’ve worked closely with the Assanises over the years described them both as supportive leaders.

“They are a dynamic duo,” said former colleague Levi Thompson, dean of the University of South Florida College of Engineering. “This is who they are. They work together. They build together.”

Santa Barbara Mayor Randy Rowse — a UCSB alum — commended the university’s track record of producing Nobel laureates, top-tier athletes and efforts to overcome the challenges of its town-and-gown relationship with the city in part by purchasing downtown real estate and moving forward with mixed-use portfolios that include housing and community spaces. Among those who chimed in via prerecorded video were Second District County Supervisor Laura Capps, Assemblymember Gregg Hart, Senate President pro Tempore Monique Limón and Congressman Salud Carbajal.

At the podium, Lieutenant Governor Eleni Kounalakis — who, like Assanis, is Greek-American — pointed out that if California were its own country, its economy would be the fourth largest worldwide.

“What makes that possible is not only our innovation, our natural resources, but our systems of public higher education,” she said. “Across the University of California, the Cal State University and the community college systems nearly 3 million students are pursuing an education and almost 40% of them are the first in their family to go to college. I serve on all three governing boards, and I see every day how these institutions expand opportunity and strengthen California’s future. At a time when immigrants and higher education are under attack, California continues to demonstrate something very powerful. When you combine talent, education and opportunity, you create not only economic success, but a stronger and more vibrant society. So it feels especially fitting that you see UC Santa Barbara will once again be led by an immigrant to the United States.”

With a wave to the camera, Assanis noted that his 98-year-old mother was watching [the event’s livestream](#) from her home in Athens, Greece.

Born and raised in Athens, Chancellor Assanis earned his bachelor’s degree in marine engineering from Newcastle University in England. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he earned three master’s degrees — covering naval architecture, marine and mechanical engineering and management — and a Ph.D. in power and propulsion. Before coming to UCSB, Assanis served as the president of the University of Delaware for nine years.

UC President James Milliken called on 2004 Nobel laureate and UCSB physics professor David Gross to present Assanis with the Chancellor's Medal as part of his installation.

Since joining the UC system in the 1950s, Assanis said in his address, UCSB has experienced "continuous evolution, reinvention, innovation, excellence, and the deepening of collective knowledge" shared throughout the public realm over the decades.

In the 1960s, UCSB founded its Marine Science Institute, College of Creative Studies and joined the foundation of the modern internet as one of the first institutional nodes of the original ARPANET. With the 1970s arrived the UC's first Chicano and Chicana studies department, the nation's gold-standard interdisciplinary environmental studies program and the Kavli Institute for Theoretical Physics, the catalyst for the university's rapid ascent in the field. The '80s and '90s drew top physicists and engineers to campus, setting the stage for groundbreaking work in organic electronics, semiconductors and the establishment of the Materials Research Lab, ranked among the top five such facilities worldwide. Along the way and into the 21st century, UCSB deepened its leadership in humanities, autism assessment and support services, quantum research, as well as its value within the greater Santa Barbara community.

"Throughout my life and career, I have been inspired by the Ancient Greek ideal of ἀρετή — excellence — which Socrates notably linked with the acquisition of knowledge," Assanis said. "And when I reflect on the UC Santa Barbara story through the decades, I am struck by how much this university has accomplished in a relatively short stretch of time, how our educational mission has been refined to meet the moment and how this gorgeous stretch of land between the sea and the mountains has always helped to define and shape who we are.

"The success of our students is the most sacred aspect of our mission," he added. "We have watched our students thrive, excelling in the classroom while gaining experiences that will shape them for the rest of their lives. As a first-generation college graduate, I deeply understand the unparalleled impact higher education can have. It is a ladder of opportunity.

"Let me be very clear — our commitment to inclusive excellence will play a key role in making everything we do at UC Santa Barbara possible," Assanis said to a round

of applause. “It is central to our values. I have always strived to cultivate a campus climate where students, faculty and staff from all backgrounds feel welcome, engaged and free to express competing ideas, beliefs and perspectives. Empowering diverse communities to realize their talents and dreams for societal impact and transformation is an undeniable force of nature.

“Today, our world is in need of solutions to numerous challenges — energy, disease, discrimination, climate change, economic prosperity, housing, cybersecurity and much more,” he continued. “At the same time, the rise of artificial intelligence is reshaping our society—from the workforce and economy to the ways we communicate, connect, teach, and learn. This is a moment for big ideas. A moment for the expansion and preservation of knowledge. A moment for pure creativity and imagination. A moment for ambition. A moment where UC Santa Barbara can make a lasting impact on society.

“Now, the next chapter at UC Santa Barbara is beginning.”

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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.