UC SANTA BARBARA

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Sonia Fernandez

Symposium celebrates UCSB's academic excellence

On the morning of UC Santa Barbara Chancellor Dennis Assanis's inauguration day, Wednesday, May 27, 2026, UCSB's sixth chancellor highlighted the campus's strengths in facing the challenges of today's world.

"UC Santa Barbara has never been daunted by the challenges of a changing world," he said to the audience of dignitaries and scholars that filled the Lobero Theatre in Santa Barbara for his inauguration ceremony. "Instead, we make breakthroughs, we dream, we innovate, we lead."

In the afternoon, at the campus's Corwin Pavilion, the audience got a taste of the work behind the breakthroughs and innovations, with an academic symposium that covered the many directions that UCSB researchers have taken — research and collaborations that not only have advanced their fields but, in many cases, have translated into practice, with fruitful results.

"The colleagues that we are proud to feature today…are just a representative sample that reflects some of the disciplinary and interdisciplinary strengths that characterize UC Santa Barbara," said UCSB Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost David Marshall. "They embody the spirit of inquiry and innovation, the spirit of experiment and enterprise and the quality of mind that makes great researchers and also great mentors and teachers."

Speakers included materials scientist and Materials Research Lab Director Ram Seshadri, who wove together the work of Alan Heeger, Herb Kroemer and Shuji Nakamura — three of UCSB's six Nobel laureates in physics — that resulted in the development of white LEDs, which revolutionized lighting all over the world. Resource economist Christopher Costello discussed the work of his group, the Environmental Markets Lab, which has introduced creative, sustainable market-based solutions to many countries; while chemical engineer Michelle O'Malley detailed her research into anaerobic gut bacteria in large herbivores, which has yielded many microbes and enzymes that biotechnology can use to create important products from the often "wasted" parts of plants.

"We collaborate across departments at UCSB, have outside scholars that are part of the team, and we also work with practitioners, NGOs, governments and companies around the world to implement environmental markets," Costello said. "UCSB, in my opinion, rewards both scholarly contributions and this kind of high impact applied work."

Also giving eight-minute presentations were English professor Alan Liu, whose work in digital humanities bridges data and storytelling; cell biologist Denise Montell, who reported on her work and collaborations that promise exciting new directions in cancer immunotherapy; and Professor of School Psychology and Graduate Division Dean Janine Jones, who gave insights on her work studying the mental health and resilience of schoolchildren.

Rounding out the cohort were physics professor and Eddleman Quantum Institute Director David Weld, who shared his work as an experimental physicist working in the realm of quantum mechanics and discussed the past and potential future of physics research at UCSB; and Chicana and Chicano Studies department chair and professor Dolores Inés Casillas, whose work has revealed the important role that radio plays in the lives of the Latino community.

The speakers credited their accomplishments to the hard work of their students and research groups, to collegial and interdisciplinary collaborations and also to a campus atmosphere that, in the words of Montell, motivates people "to be creative and curious, and to be bold enough to trace that arc from curiosity to consequence."

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Materials scientist and Materials Research Lab Director Ram Seshadri
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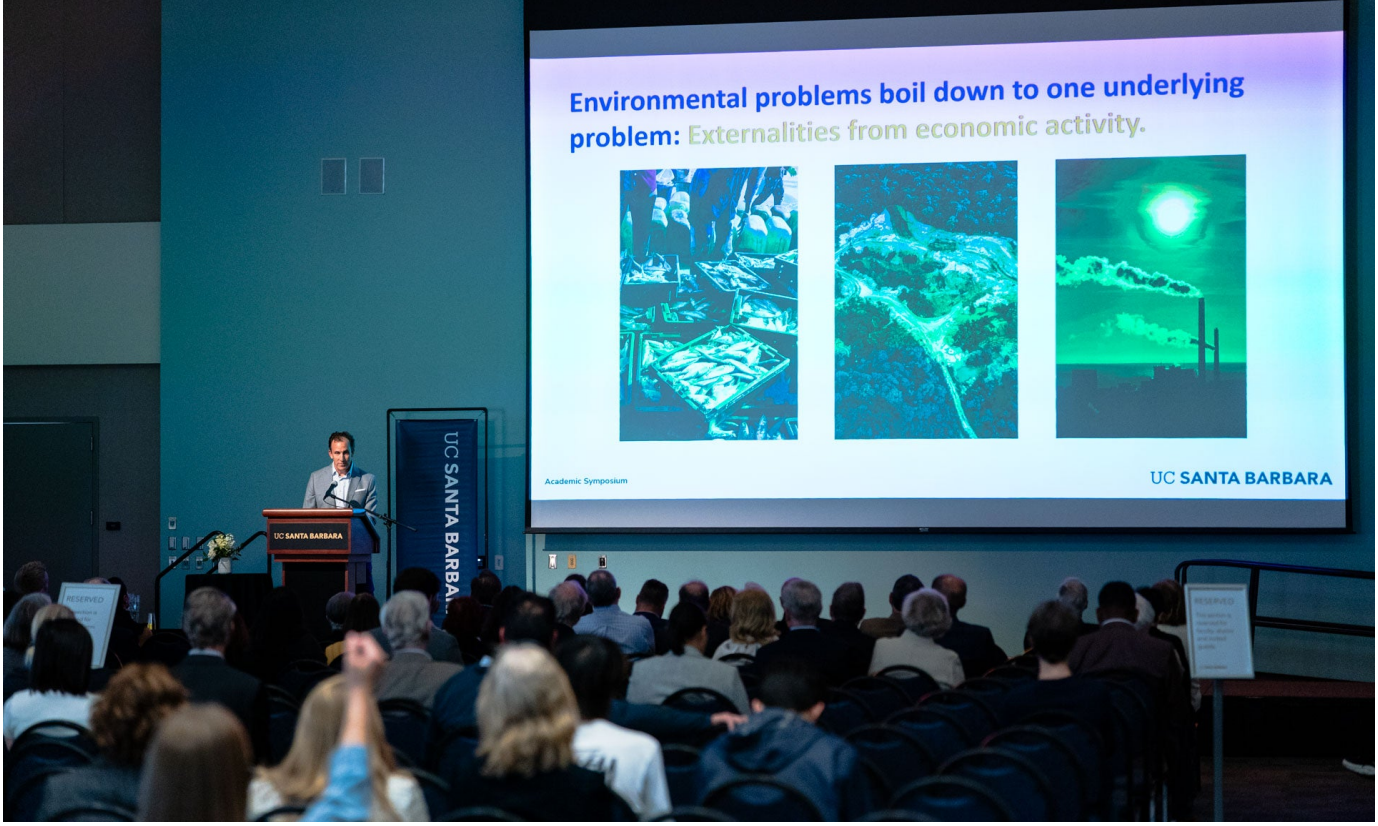

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Resource economist and Environmental Markets Lab Research Director Christopher Costello
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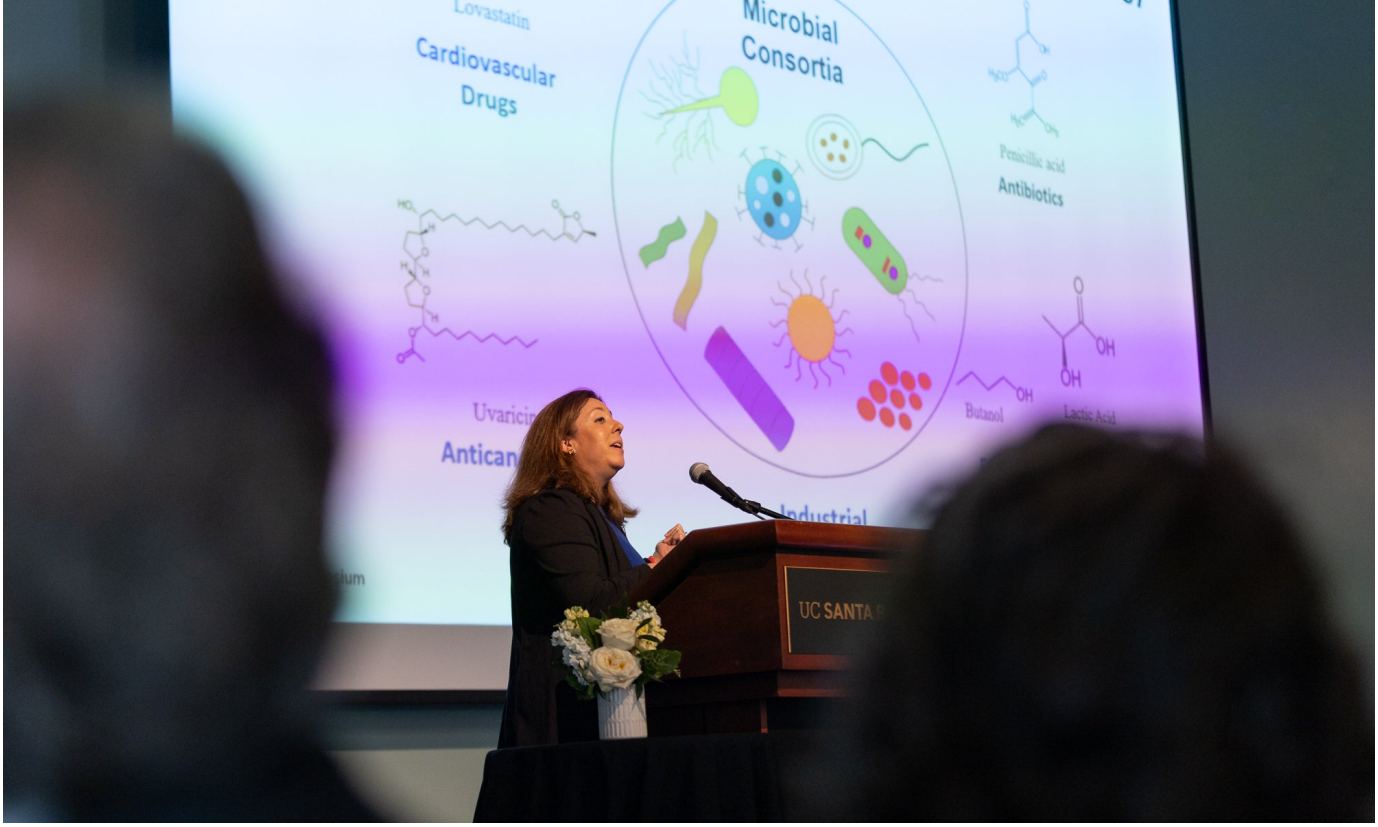

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Chemical engineering professor Michelle O'Malley
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About UC Santa Barbara

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.