

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Schmidt Family Foundation renews multi-year funding of UCSB's Environmental Solutions Fellows Program

In its continuing effort to advance solutions to today's most pressing environmental problems, the Schmidt Family Foundation has renewed a multi-year grant to continue funding the Schmidt Environmental Solutions Fellows Program at UC Santa Barbara. This funding, which marks nine years of support from the foundation, will enable early career scientists to conduct high-impact research while developing and designing innovative solutions to real-world environmental problems.

"The generous renewal of this program is wonderful news. The Schmidt Environmental Solutions Fellows Program has helped hundreds of brilliant students take research out of the lab and into the real world," said [Douglas McCauley](#), who is one of the faculty leads for the Environmental Solutions Program. "From overfishing, to mega-fires, to droughts and famine, the planet is squaring off against some significant environmental challenges. But investments like this in next generation scientific leaders should give us all hope. These fellows have both the will and the ways to solve these problems."

In addition to its cornerstone grants for student-led research across a variety of topics, the 2025-2028 program has expanded to include additional postdoctoral

fellows, and will also focus on fostering mentorship opportunities between more senior fellows and junior graduate and undergraduate participants. To date, over 200 UC Santa Barbara students have received support from the Schmidt Family Foundation. Schmidt Environmental Solutions Fellows have worked on problems ranging from agricultural sustainability and carbon sequestration to innovations addressing coral bleaching and restoring overfished populations. This research is not only developing critical knowledge about environmental systems, but is also exploring and applying solutions to the gravest threats facing our planet today.

The funding comes at a critical time for environmental science research. Significant cuts in federal funding for university research and training opportunities over the past year could slow progress toward solving serious environmental issues and hinder the careers of the young scientists who can find and implement these solutions. The Schmidt Environmental Solutions Fellows Program allows its fellows to continue their high-impact work, acquire essential skills and even embark on a new career in the environmental sciences.

“This fellowship has afforded me the opportunity to conduct field work at an international field station, attend various training sessions for data analysis and communicate my research findings to diverse audiences at research conferences and at UCSB,” said Shalanda Grier, who received her postdoctoral fellowship in 2023 to investigate coral reef community trait dynamics in response to disturbances and anthropogenic factors. “As a fellow I have been able to grow my network and fine-tune my research skills.”

For fourth-year undergraduate Macey Hartmann, who received the mentorship fellowship her freshman year, the program opened the door to a new and meaningful career.

“Before receiving the fellowship, I had never considered myself a scientist, but the program’s funding and mentorship empowered me to pursue research and graduate school, achievements I never imagined possible,” said Hartmann, who researched giant sea bass in Southern California through the Schmidt Fellowship. “Now, I feel excited and confident about my future in science.” Just recently, Hartmann earned the prestigious University of Miami Fellowship and will be matriculating as a Ph.D. student at the University of Miami Rosenstiel School of Marine, Atmospheric, and Earth Science in Fall 2026.

Because the best decisions and innovations come from diverse minds, the program also works to support students from underrepresented groups – people who traditionally do not have the exposure to or support for a career in environmental science, but whose untapped potential could lead to major breakthroughs.

“As a first-generation, minority and financially independent college student, I found this program was instrumental in keeping me engaged in the scientific work that fuels my passion,” said alum Marian Walker, who studied wildfires in the California foothills with a graduate student mentor and who, with the Schmidt Fellowship, gained access to research and educational opportunities. “It allowed me to focus on building a future in environmental science, and for that, I am deeply grateful.”

In addition to research support, the program also provides science communication workshops that prepare the fellows to effectively disseminate their research to journalists, decision-makers and the general public. Led by Carlie Wiener, director of communications for Schmidt Sciences, these popular, immersive workshops allow participants opportunities to practice their pitches and receive feedback on how to translate their research into concise, persuasive stories to increase impact. These workshops also provide the fellows opportunities to fine tune their skills for media, with pitch sessions led by reporters from high-profile outlets including NBC, Science Magazine, The New York Times, NPR and MIT Technology Review.

“Before the Schmidt Science Communications Workshop, I struggled to bridge the gap between the technical details of my research and a message that reporters and the public actually care about. This experience gave me concrete, practical tools to tell a compelling story about my work without losing scientific accuracy. The interactive pitch session with the reporter panelists allowed me to refine my message, and I now feel equipped to successfully pitch my science to a broader, non-specialist audience,” said Sadie Cwikel, a Ph.D. student at the Bren School of Environmental Science & Management, whose research advances coral reef conservation with insights from how reef connectivity affects tolerance of reefs to heat.

Participation in the program has raised the profile for many of the fellows, whose timely and high impact work in the program has been recognized by prestigious institutions and journals, from NASA to Science magazine to the Aquarium of the Pacific. Alumni have gone on to become professors, CEOs of private environmental

startups, scientists in governmental agencies and key figures in civil society organizations using their expertise to understand the changing state of the environment as well as developing strategies for just and equitable climate adaptation.

The expanded program for 2025-2028 will focus on mentoring opportunities that will pair postdoctoral researchers with junior researchers to work on a variety of specific topics or methods in environmental sciences, from data visualization to art for science, to grant writing and more. Schmidt Fellow “lab meetings” will spotlight research and allow the participants to share updates on their projects.

The Schmidt Environmental Solutions Fellows Program will also fund a field immersion program that gives UCSB undergraduates an opportunity to take their research outdoors. One of the flagship field trips in this experience involves undergrads traveling to UCSB’s Sierra Nevada Aquatic Research Laboratory over the summer to receive hands-on training in research skills such as using camera traps to track bears and other wildlife, measuring microplastics in the watersheds that serve Los Angeles, and tracking endangered frogs in remote, high alpine lakes.

“I’m so excited about this new addition to the Schmidt Environmental Solutions Fellows Program,” McCauley said. “We know that some of UCSB’s most inspirational teachers are mountain meadows, ancient trees, and cathedral-like kelp forests. For many students, this program will represent their first opportunity to do science in nature. I have no doubt many new environmental leaders will be minted.”

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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.