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Keith Hamm

UCSB Library honors standout undergraduate researchers

Now in its eighth year, the Library Award for Undergraduate Research (LAUR) at UC Santa Barbara has crowned its 2026 winners.

Samuel Liu, a senior studying communication and sociology, won the top prize and $750 with his exploration of power dynamics among resident assistants on campus. His project, “It’s Not Just a Job, It’s Literally My Housing: Resident Assistants, Job Embeddedness, and Dissent” utilized applied organizational communication theory and a host of library resources across interdisciplinary databases to produce a sophisticated work.

The LAUR judging panel, composed of UCSB librarians and faculty from across campus, commended Liu’s submission as original and relevant.

Earning $500 for runnerup, Shirley Qui’s project, “1 + 1 < 1: Large Language Models in Insight Problem Solving,” wielded psychological methods to test how “dual” AI agents compare to solo agents in creative problem solving. Judges praised her work for navigating the intersection of computer science and psychology. Qui is a junior studying psychological and brain sciences and statistics and data science.

"UCSB Library is absolutely thrilled to recognize the outstanding scholarly achievements of Samuel Liu and Shirley Qiu,” said University Librarian Todd Grappone. “In the bustle of large campus lecture halls, an individual student's

research journey can sometimes be overshadowed. However, this year's submissions served as a powerful reminder of intellectual curiosity, rigor and originality that define undergraduate research at UCSB."

"Our judges were deeply struck by the exceptional quality on display," he added, "and it is a genuine pleasure to see these emerging scholars engage so deeply with the library's collections, services and resources to drive original discovery."

As this year's winners, Qiu and Liu will be invited to upload their projects into eScholarship, UC's institutional open access repository.

The 2026 Library Award for Undergraduate Research was sponsored by Jenny Cook-Gumperz, faculty emerita.

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Media Contact
Keith Hamm
Social Sciences, Humanities & Fine Arts Writer
(805) 893-2191
keithhamm@ucsb.edu

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.