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Inauguration speakers highlight leadership, innovation, community connections

The inauguration of UC Santa Barbara Chancellor Dennis Assanis, the university's sixth chancellor and first new leader in 31 years, brought out luminaries from the public sector and private industry, and from across higher education, to help celebrate the historic occasion alongside the campus and broader communities. The event's many esteemed invited speakers reflected on their rich experiences with Assanis as college students, professional colleagues and friends, and shared perspectives on how he, with his wife, Eleni Assanis, is ideally positioned to take UCSB to new heights.

Following a greeting and traditional blessing from Nakia Zavalla, a tribal community member from the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians, nine different speakers addressed the crowd in a packed Lobero Theatre — and on the event livestream.

Santa Barbara's mayor, Randy Rowse, commended UCSB'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.

“Dr. Assanis’s infectious enthusiasm and optimism bode well for the continued upward trajectory of our campus,” Rowse said. “We alumni who somehow managed to make this paradise we call Santa Barbara our home are pleased and excited to see the recent investment in the downtown UCSB has made. This facility, which is called the Soltara building, will house personnel and activate the street level square footage within a formal former Staples store to engage the public in our relationship with the university. Chancellor Assanis fully recognizes this opportunity and the energy of the close relationship between the university and its namesake city.”

Eleni Kounalakis, Lieutenant Governor of California, who serves on the boards of the University of California, California State University, and California Community College systems, spoke about the role of education in creating opportunity, economic success and “a stronger and more vibrant society,” and how Assanis can facilitate that at UCSB.

“Dr. Assanis built a distinguished career in engineering with groundbreaking work in energy systems and sustainable transportation. But in getting to know him, I have also come to appreciate something beyond his academic and scientific accomplishments,” Kounalakis said. “His leadership reflects a belief deeply rooted in ancient Greek philosophy that education is not only about developing expertise but also about shaping character, judgment, and a sense of responsibility to society.

“UC Santa Barbara, like all our UC campuses, stands at the forefront of profound technological change,” Kounalakis continued. “Artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies are transforming nearly every aspect of modern life. But no matter how advanced technology becomes, the essential question remains the same. What kind of human beings are we preparing our students to become? Great universities do more than produce scientists and engineers. They help cultivate wisdom, ethics, curiosity, and a sense of responsibility to one another. The future will require innovation, certainly, but it will also require humanity. It will require leaders who understand that technology must ultimately serve the people, not the other way around. UCSB students are these future leaders in the making. Which is why today UCSB's future feels so bright. Its next chapter could not be in better hands.”

Janet Riley, chair of the University of California Board of Regents, reflected on the “transformative power of the University of California for students, for families, and

for entire communities," while expressing the utmost confidence that Chancellor Assanis will have that same effect at UCSB.

"Throughout his distinguished career and most recently as the president of the University of Delaware, Chancellor Assanis has demonstrated that transformative growth is possible under visionary leadership," Riley said. "His accomplishments make him an exceptional fit for UC Santa Barbara, a campus that is defined by intellectual curiosity, groundbreaking discovery and a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration. Since arriving here, Chancellor Assanis, along with his beautiful wife Eleni, has shown a genuine warmth, intellectual energy and a deep enthusiasm for this campus and for its future. He has shown himself to be not only the right leader but the right leader for the moment. We all know that there are very real challenges facing universities across our nation and UC Santa Barbara is not immune. Yet alongside those challenges come extraordinary opportunities. And it is in moments like these that we must continue to show that public universities are not merely relevant but essential to discovery, to opportunity, to economic vitality, to civic life, and to the very future of our society. And that mission has never been more important than it is today. With Chancellor Assanis at the helm, I know that UC Santa Barbara will continue to lead with boldness and with creativity and with renewed purpose."

Rita Raley, chair of the Santa Barbara Division of the Academic Senate, reflected on UCSB's search for a new chancellor and the priority of finding a leader "who understands that shared governance has particular significance in the UC system and is the bedrock of our academic freedom … who understands and is committed to sustaining our research and teaching mission and a leader whose qualities of mind and temperament are to be genuinely appreciated."

"You will not need me to recount the many uncertainties that higher education is currently navigating. They are economic, technological, cultural and political. And to call them crises or challenges could only be bureaucratic understatement," Raley said. "Yet any crisis is also a turning point, a fork in the road, and as such presents a distinct opportunity and possibility for collective imagining of the future … Throughout his first nine months, Chancellor Assanis has been a true consultative partner, regularly engaging the views of the faculty, inspiring confidence through words and action, and fostering a collaborative spirit that has been both transparent and constructive. We are fortunate to have found a leader who affirms our core

values even as we adapt to new external pressures. Indeed, we are fortunate and here we might acknowledge and thank the Regents to have found a chancellor who aspires to the idea of UC Santa Barbara as a pluralistic university in service of the public trust."

John R. Cochran III, former chair of the University of Delaware Board of Trustees, worked closely with Assanis when he was UD's president. Praising his "boundless energy and vision," he detailed the many ways in which UD flourished under Assanis's leadership — from doubling research expenditures, to rising in national rankings, to developing a dedicated science, technology and advanced research (STAR) campus that "made UD into a dynamic hub of discovery and innovation."

"He identifies ambitious opportunities. And then he rolls up his sleeves and he gets to work bringing people together and generating this otherworldly momentum that I would refer to as 'the Assanis effect,'" Cochran said of Assanis. "And that very much includes his incredible wife, Eleni. They are a true team and their warmth, authenticity and their passion created a profound bond within our UD community. Over nine years at Delaware, Dennis led with clarity, purpose, and a deep commitment to excellence in all things.

"What distinguishes Dennis is his ability to align vision and action and to recognize complexity and translate it into progress," he continued. "He is a change agent and a builder with a boundless imagination. He took our university to the next level and put us in position to thrive for many years to come. I know he's going to bring that same energy, discipline and vision to UC Santa Barbara. And let me just say how I believe you are all so lucky to have him here. He is a bold, courageous, and most importantly, a very persistent individual."

KR Sridhar, founder, chair, and chief executive officer of Bloom Energy, met Assanis on his very first day as a faculty member at University of Illinois, where they had neighboring labs in the mechanical engineering building. Sridhar's company would become the original anchor tenant in UD's STAR campus.

"He walks over and the very first day we just bond," Sridhar remembered of the day they met. "And that's Dennis. He just was able to talk to everybody, get to know people for who they are and extremely curious about everything and what can be better.

“What an amazing time for you all to have a leader like him, because we are at a stage of transition and change with a speed and scale we have not seen before in the modern world,” he continued. “You need a leader with empathy. You need a leader who understands inclusion. And you need a leader who thinks access and affordability is important for a lot of people. And I think Dennis brings all that in a package. But talking about packages, um, you get two for one, right? Eleni, you are the force behind Dennis and she is one of those spouses who, when he goes home after a long night, does not ask why. She says ‘Why not?’ You know, why not do more? So together, it's an unbelievable package.”

Andrea Goldsmith, president of Stony Brook University, served with Assanis on the President's Council of Advisers on Science and Technology, or PCAST, during the Biden administration. She would later join Stony Brook University, where Assanis had been Stony Brook's provost and senior vice president of academic affairs, as well as vice president for Brook Haven National Laboratory.

“Dennis was a truly transformative leader for Stony Brook. Stony Brook's loss of Dennis was Delaware's gain, where he continued his visionary leadership as their president,” Goldsmith said. “Now, because of Dennis's exceptional leadership, deep and broad knowledge, the outstanding contributions he has made to every institution he's been part of, and especially the deep caring he has for the people that he leads, I know that he will be a phenomenal chancellor for UC Santa Barbara.

“And moreover,” she continued, “now is a time of profound disruption in higher education. And for great leaders, times of disruption are also times of opportunity. Our sector and our country needs compelling leaders like Dennis to articulate and demonstrate the power of higher education for good. Dennis will not just be a transformative leader for UC Santa Barbara and the UC system, of which I'm a very proud triple alumna, he will also play an important role in ensuring that all American universities emerge stronger and better from these tumultuous times.”

Levi Thompson, dean of engineering at the University of South Florida, worked with Assanis when they both were on the mechanical engineering faculty at the University of Michigan. Thompson later joined the faculty at UD, when Assanis was president. The Assanises together make a “dynamic duo,” he said, with a proactive and progressive leadership style.

“Dennis and Eleni are truly a couple that work together, they build together. You will absolutely see that here at University of California, Santa Barbara,” Thompson said. “He's a natural leader by every stretch. He helps bring the best out of others, and that includes me. I would tell you that he saw some things in me that I probably didn't see myself uh when he invited me to consider being dean at the University of Delaware, my alma mater. He'll advance a great vision here at UCSB. He'll hire great people. He'll work to inspire this community and Eleni will be right by his side.

“What makes Dennis unusual is that he never lets the specificity of what he was working on limit the scale of his thinking,” he added. “He could see a path from efficiency for a single engine all the way to reduction of carbon in the atmosphere. from one laboratory to an entire research agenda. That's a rare mind, I will tell you — the kind that knows the details and also sees the horizon at the same time.”

James B. Milliken, the president of the University of California, who officially inaugurated Assanis, in his remarks recalled his recent visit to UC Santa Barbara. He was most struck, he said, by the “unbounded” enthusiasm and “contagious energy” Assanis displayed as they toured the campus and spoke to students, faculty and staff.

“The first conversation we had about his time at Santa Barbara, he told me he wants to build. He wants to grow. He wants to excel. He wants to win,” Milliken said of Assanis. “He wants to combine the greatest scholars, the most ambitious students, and the most consequential ideas and concentrate them right here at UCSB. These convictions align well with the distinctive character of UC Santa Barbara. He understands that knowledge should serve humanity, that access and excellence reinforce each other, that a university must never be satisfied with what it has achieved. He will continue to advance UCSB's mission and ensure that this university is a place that transforms lives, that advances knowledge and serves the people of California and the world. And for that, I thank him and I congratulate him and I wish him Godspeed.”

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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.