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Shelly Leachman

University names winners of top student awards for Class of 2026

With Commencement officially underway, UC Santa Barbara has announced the newest recipients of its most prestigious student honors, awarded for scholastic achievement, extraordinary service and personal courage and persistence.

An award ceremony for winners of these and other student awards, as well as for their families, faculty and staff, was held Sunday, June 7, at Loma Pelona Center on campus.

Le Anh Metzger has won the Thomas More Storke Award for Excellence, the campus's highest honor, for her outstanding scholarship and extraordinary service to the university, its students and the community. A member of the Letters & Science Honors Program, Metzger, a triple major, graduates with degrees in global studies, communication and Spanish.

From her exemplary scholarship to her inspired leadership and service to the UCSB community, Metzger demonstrated "a rare combination of vision, integrity and effectiveness" that "fostered a culture of accountability, growth and collaboration," her nominators said. As Associated Students President for 2025-2026 — representing more than 24,000 undergraduate students and overseeing a $16 million budget — she addressed concerns including food insecurity and immigration enforcement head on, serving as "a powerful and thoughtful advocate, elevating student voices at the university, local and state levels."

Natalia Pascher has won the Jeremy D. Friedman Memorial Award, which recognizes outstanding leadership, superior scholarship and contributions to undergraduate life on campus. Pascher, a transfer student who served as Associated Student Attorney General in her fourth year, completed a degree in political science and government.

As AS Attorney General, Pascher played key roles in efforts to increase operating hours at the library, to enhance bicycle safety and to advocate for special safety lighting on campus. Independently nominated by two different vice chancellors, she was praised for her “extraordinary level of commitment, achievement and leadership. Pascher next plans to apply to law school.”

Marcellino Pena has won the Alyce Marita Whitted Memorial Award, which recognizes a nontraditional student’s endurance, persistence and courage in the face of extraordinary challenges while pursuing an academic degree. Paralyzed from the waist down, Pena navigated studies and the lab, engaging in cutting edge optical communications research while obtaining an engineering degree.

Pena beat the odds long before arriving at UCSB: a life-changing accident left him in a wheelchair. Admitted as a transfer student, he embraced the rigors of academics and undergraduate research and gave back to the community as a member of the Chancellor’s Student Council, a counselor at Junior Wheelchair Sports Camp, and a Special Olympics volunteer. His nominator praised his “exemplary degree of resilience and persistence” in demonstrating how one can excel “even in the midst of severe physical challenges.”

The Yonie Harris Award for Civility in Public Discourse was awarded to **Makayla Wilson**, the 2025-26 Stephen S. Goodspeed Intern in the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs. The honor is bestowed upon graduates who best exemplify the principles of free speech and respectful dialogue and who foster a campus climate of civility and open-mindedness.

A dedicated student leader for all four of her years at UCSB, Wilson used her access within the Student Affairs Division to uplift multiple issues raised by other students. From student staff worried about the impact of departmental restructuring to student groups concerned about bias in the A.S. budget, Wilson brought the concerns to senior leaders, making sure these matters were heard and addressed at

the highest levels. She is moving on to pursue a master’s degree in higher education at USC.

Joey Clapkin, an economics major who served as a Gretler Fellow analyzing the low-income tax credit, received the Michael D. Young Engaged Scholar Award for students who have successfully applied their scholarly knowledge and/or values to action.

Transferring to UCSB after attending five community colleges, Clapkin arrived at UCSB with extraordinary drive. He was recognized by UCSB’s highly competitive economics department as the top transfer student in the pre-econ major and became a tutor in the Transfer Student Center. His nominator said praise his “exceptional intellectual ability, genuine scholarly curiosity, and deep commitment to community.”

Prizes for the University Service Award, the University Award of Distinction, and the Vice Chancellor’s Award for Scholarship, Leadership and Citizenship were presented to multiple graduating seniors and graduate students.

Tags
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Media Contact
Shelly Leachman
Editorial Director
(805) 893-2191
sleachman@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.