

THE *Current*

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[Harrison Tasoff](#)

The Bren School's new graduates are ready to face the challenges of the times

The courtyard of Bren Hall was packed to the gills Friday morning with jubilant grads and their families, friends and faculty. The ceremony was scored with numbers like “Wide Open Spaces” and “Have You Ever Seen the Rain,” performed by the school’s own folk band, Brengrass, a lively and cherished tradition.

This year’s graduating class includes 102 master’s students: 74 Masters of Environmental Science and Management (MESM) and 28 Masters of Environmental Data Science (MEDS). They’re joined by eight newly minted doctorates.

“This is a fraught time for universities,” said Interim Dean Sarah Anderson. “But I think these Bren students perfectly illustrate why universities are so important.” The faculty and students at Bren “engage passionately with real and pressing environmental challenges.” This year’s class has tackled issues from coral health to groundwater decline to energy transmission, “and what to do with squid ink, among many other challenges.”

Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost David Marshall carried on this motif, saying, “for the last 30 years, the Bren School has set the standard for environmental problem solving.” The school stands at the crossroads of science and social science, of research and public policy — combining the insights from many fields to address

today's most urgent problems. "Its faculty and students embody the contributions that our public research university makes to society."

"Today the university also finds itself at the crossroads, because the value and the values of research and higher education are being questioned," Marshall continued. "We can debate policies, but if science and free inquiry are politicized, the pursuit of knowledge is threatened." He urged the graduating class to "be ambassadors and advocates for the principles of our great public research university and its dedication to the common good."

Inspired advice from an investigative journalist

This year's celebration featured a keynote address by award-winning author, director and Los Angeles Times reporter Rosanna Xia. A veteran of many hard-boiled investigations, Xia also acknowledged the troubling times.

Xia reflected on how she measures the impact of her work. Journalists rarely get feedback on their stories: "When the article is finally ready to publish [...] it feels like it goes into a void," she said. Interesting news is shared, and compelling stories often garner hate mail. "Journalism is a career where you don't usually get the love mail," she said. The same is true of environmental science and policy, she explained. "Protecting the environment can be a very, very thankless job, [but] you are still making a difference."

"Change moves at the speed of trust," said Xia, quoting UCSB professor Charles Lester. Trust in the science, in government, in community leaders and policy makers. In this time when society has become so fractured, and truth itself can be challenged and distorted, "we must find ways to reconnect with each other [...] to rebuild that trust with the people you're trying to reach with your work," she added.

Responsibility, not hope, is what keeps Xia going, she explained. Responsibility and the courage she sees in others. But still, being with Bren's class of 2026, she said, gave her incredible hope.

Awards and recognitions

Each year the students vote for a TA who made the greatest difference to them. This year, they recognized Ph.D. Alessandra Vidal Meza with the Student Teaching Award for her flexibility and genuine commitment to her students' success. As the presenter, MEDS student Jay Kim said, "I could not imagine a better teaching assistant to support us through this experience."

Sara Saroka earned the MESM Student Achievement Award, presented by Prof. Jayajit Chakraborty, who extolled her early commitment to environmental justice. Before she even joined the Bren School, Saroka had reached out to Chakraborty expressing interest in getting involved in his research and outreach work. Saroka investigated social disparities in climate hazards and published a booklet on groundwater titled "Well, Well, Well."

Prof. Carmen Galaz García bestowed Sofia Sarak with the MEDS Student Achievement Award. Sarak wrangled with large spatial problems, such as whether California's electrical grid can support its carbon neutrality goals. She also explored Ukrainian sunflower oil production with incredible data visualizations. And as an assistant to the career team, Sarak tracked over 300 job postings to understand the rapidly changing career market in environmental science.

MESM student Tina Tran presented this year's Distinguished Faculty Teaching Award to Jayajit Chakraborty, himself, for his deep commitment to teaching and thought-provoking pedagogy on environmental justice. He in turn expressed his appreciation for the overwhelming support from his students and colleagues at a time when these issues are being stonewalled and suppressed.

The entire school applauded as Kelly Keogh accepted the Staff Excellence and Service Award for her work as academic personnel manager. Professor Joan Dudley called her the "keystone species" of Bren, who "keeps things moving, and solves problems before they become crises."

The Bren school also celebrated two retirements this year. First was Associate Dean Bruce Kendall, who retires after 28 years of wearing many hats at Bren. Dean Anderson offered him one more: a bear bucket hat, crocheted by Ph.D. student Renae Marshall, which he wore for the remainder of the ceremony. In his associate dean hat, Kendall "embodies the interdisciplinary that is the Bren School," Anderson said. For instance, he was instrumental in designing many programs on campus,

such as the grizzly bear research network. Kendall himself recalled his excitement



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Bruce Kendal rocks his new bear bucket hat.

Dave Parker, the school's executive director of career development and alumni relations, also bid a formal farewell after 29 years at UCSB, 27 at Bren. His journey began alongside Bren's very first class, and he "quite literally helped shape the future of every single graduating class at the Bren School," Anderson said. Over the years, he blended his background in economics with expertise in human resources and career counselling. Dean Anderson extolled Parker for helping countless Brennies find their dream jobs and make the most profound impact possible on the world. Already the author of the book "Slam Dunk Job Search" — which will help carry on his legacy here at Bren — Parker will continue his passion for writing with a book exploring the artwork of Palm Springs.

New doctorates

Each graduating doctoral student received a heartfelt, and personalized address from one of their advisors.

- Anna Boser tackled the pressing challenge of water use, overuse and management at the intersection of machine learning and agro-hydrology.
- Sean Denny investigated the overexploitation of animals in Africa, and how to address this wildlife crisis in a way that respects the needs of local communities.
- Leonardo Manir Feitosa focused on how the interactions between economics and ecology affect species like sharks, and how to create proactive, rather than reactive, policy around luxury animal products.
- Nathan Grimes studied fishery insurance, an underused safeguard against fish stock variability much more promising than the costly disaster relief currently in use.
- Annette Elizabeth Hilton applied herself to understanding where groundwater is and how it's changing. At the same time, she pursued her passion in science education from NGOs to prison gardens.
- Risa Lewis used economics to tackle the palpable issue of climate anxiety, developing a first-of-its-kind experimental approach on the effect of information consumption on mental health.
- Mukta Kelkar investigated the mounting challenges posed by the expanding human use of the ocean and the role of MPAs in this management.
- Cali Pflieger studied the large-scale climate effects of aerosols, drawing from techniques in paleoclimate, biogeochemistry and climate dynamics.

"Congratulations new doctorates of 2026," Dean Anderson said.

Image



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Bren's graduating doctoral students await their degrees.

Masters of their fields

True to his Bren training, MESM class co-chair Kyle Alves immediately conducted a survey-by-applause as to whether to share the happy or sad news first. After sad news carried the day, he chose to share the happy news anyway, exclaiming, “The models did not predict this.”

Alves extolled his class’s quick thinking and good communication. “We are the cohort with the largest concentration of double specializations, focuses and side hustles this program has ever seen,” he said. They were also the first to host a Bren prom (Brom) both years: The first celebrated all that is terrestrial while the second dove into the fantastical marine realm. “Let us be as empowered by our achievements today and the knowledge we carry as the connections and affections we’ve had for each other these past few years.”

MEDS co-chairs Lucian Scher and Megan Hessel gave a shoutout to the school's intramural soccer team, the Bren Ballers. Short, sweet, collaboration, tired, pain, silly and spirited were some of the words they had for their graduating cohort.

MESM graduate Lenaya-Aiden Gonzales addressed her classmates with a speech titled "(Re)imagining hope in environmental science." She researches adaptive management and how it can further the cause of environmental justice.

It's not an easy time to be in this field, Gonzales acknowledged:

I wish we didn't need to cite more peer-reviewed articles to prove how our climate is rapidly changing. I wish we didn't need years of data and models to show how environmental burdens continue to put marginalized communities at the frontlines of a fight they didn't start. I wish the laws and the protections that much of our work here was built upon were not being dismantled.

These obstacles make environmental goals and reality seem farther apart than ever, she said.

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Lenaya-Aiden Gonzales gave her classmates a message of grit and determination in the face of historic recalcitrance toward science, environmentalism and public wellbeing.

But Gonzales quoted civil rights professor and icon Angela Davis as a rallying cry: “I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change,” Davis had said; “I am changing the things I cannot accept.” These words, Gonzales said, remind us to transform our frustration, helplessness and pain into empathy, courage and action. “They remind us that we cannot stay comfortable, or dare to accept the notion that we have no power to change the status quo.”

Gonzales implored her classmates to recall the drive that brought them to Bren, and to harness that in the tough times ahead. “This is an all-hands-on-deck situation,” she said. “We must work together to be proactive, not reactive, to the challenges we’re facing.”

Finally, Gonzales encouraged the graduates to celebrate, but then rest and recover. “Because, class of 2026, we’ve got a lot of work to do,” she said.

Tags

[Commencement 2026](#)

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