

UC SANTA BARBARA

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## **UCSB names new dean of its prestigious Bren School**

UC Santa Barbara has appointed Elena Irwin as the new dean of the Bren School of Environmental Science & Management, a leading environmental graduate program, effective September 21, 2026. Irwin comes to UCSB from The Ohio State University, where she is currently a distinguished professor in the Department of Agricultural, Environmental, and Development Economics and founding director of the Sustainability Institute.

“With a strong record of collaboration and consensus building, interdisciplinary teaching and research, and extensive experience translating sustainability scholarship into policy and practice, Dr. Irwin is ideally suited to lead the Bren School in the years ahead,” said Chancellor Dennis Assanis in announcing the appointment with Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost David Marshall. “She has a reputation for innovative program building and the development of major initiatives through strategic research development, as well as corporate and philanthropic partnerships. We are confident that she will work with her colleagues at Bren and throughout the campus to develop an ambitious vision building on campus strengths and priorities.”

Since launching the university-wide Sustainability Institute at OSU in 2019, Irwin has overseen interdisciplinary efforts that bring together 25 core faculty and more than 370 affiliated faculty, researchers and instructors across the natural, physical and social sciences, public health, engineering, business, planning, policy, law, and the humanities. The institute focuses on key areas of sustainability science, including

healthy land water and air systems, sustainable and resilient communities and sustainable energy. Under her leadership, the institute has supported interdisciplinary teams and leveraged internal investments to secure more than \$90 million in external funding for sustainability research and education initiatives.

She will bring that expertise and vision to the Bren School.

“The Bren School represents the very best of what a school of the environment can be: intellectually rigorous, highly interdisciplinary, and a mission to solve environmental problems. Together with UCSB's extraordinary culture of excellence and collaboration, Bren stands apart,” Irwin said. “What inspires me most is the potential to define the future of environmental science, management, and sustainability — through groundbreaking research, transformative education, and deep engagement with communities, organizations and decision-makers. The chance to work alongside this remarkable community of students, staff, faculty, alumni and partners is incredibly exciting. I am honored to join the Bren community and can't wait to get started.”

Irwin’s research addresses the sustainability of human-natural systems at local and regional scales, including land use and ecosystem services across urban and rural areas. An expert in spatial models of land-use change, her current research focuses on integrated modeling of land and water systems and the sustainability assessment of subnational regions. She has secured more than \$30 million in externally funded research, published extensively, mentored postdoctoral scholars and doctoral students, and led interdisciplinary research teams throughout her career.

Elena Irwin is a fellow of both the Association of Environmental and Resource Economists (AERE) and the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association (AAEA). In 2021, she was appointed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator as an advisory member of the chartered Science Advisory Board for a three-year term, including service as a member of the Environmental Justice Science and Analysis Review Panel. She has served on multiple national research committees with the National Research Council and National Science Foundation (NSF), including as a member of NSF's Advisory Committee for Environmental Research and Education subcommittee on Sustainable Urban Systems. She is president-elect of the National Sustainability Society and previously served on the boards of AERE, AAEA and the North American Council of Regional Science.

Irwin has undergraduate degrees in history and German from Washington University in St. Louis and a doctorate in agricultural and resource economics from the University of Maryland.

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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.