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[Harrison Tasoff](#)

Deborah Williams joins the Alaska Women's Hall of Fame for decades of trailblazing public service

Sometimes fame isn't recognizability, but impact. Systemic changes that establish someone as a fixture of a community, discipline or movement.

That's certainly the case for UC Santa Barbara's [Deborah Williams](#), whose tireless work has improved the welfare of Alaska's residents, communities and environment over the course of decades. And the state has recognized her accordingly. Williams was just inducted into the [Alaska Women's Hall of Fame](#) for her contributions to the Last Frontier.

"Deborah Williams [is ...] known throughout the state for being an environmentalist and for her work in enhancing air quality," the Hall of Fame said in its announcement. She's also recognized as a "strong supporter of Alaska youth through [the] creation of various programs."

Williams is an accomplished attorney, advocate and public servant, dedicating more than 35 years to changing Alaska for the better. She successfully advanced public health, environmental conservation, community infrastructure and youth empowerment across the state. After an impactful career in Alaska, she transitioned to California, where she continues to inspire future generations as a faculty member in UCSB's Environmental Studies Program.

"I am deeply honored to join so many extraordinary Alaskan women, all of whom have made such significant contributions to the Great Land," Williams said.

"Throughout Alaska's history, women have been empowered to make a difference, and have done so. It is both humbling and joyful to be among my heroes and role models."

"Environmental Studies students at UCSB are extraordinarily fortunate to learn about public lands from someone who has actually shaped their protection at the highest levels," said Department Chair Simone Pulver. "Deborah Williams doesn't just teach policy; she lived it. And our students are the beneficiaries of that amazing combination of expertise and experience."

A champion of clean air and healthy lungs

Williams first visited Alaska on a family vacation in 1973. She decided then and there that Alaska would be her home, and she began integrating herself into the state's civic fabric even before moving there in 1980.

Williams, who grew up in Los Angeles, was thrilled with Alaska's fresh air when she began working summers up north. "I was utterly surprised when I moved to Alaska full-time to find significant, damaging air quality issues," she said. Pollution was such an issue that Anchorage was often called "Los Anchorage," she recalled.

Thus began Williams' involvement in cleaning up Alaska's atmosphere. As a leader across multiple municipal and state health commissions, she spearheaded efforts to drastically reduce carbon monoxide and particulate pollution in the city of Anchorage.

And as the executive director of the Alaska Lung Association, she helped pass the state's first major laws restricting tobacco use and the harms of second-hand smoke. Her efforts raised the age for purchasing tobacco, restricted vending machine sales, expanded smoke-free public spaces and increased tobacco taxes to fund anti-smoking programs. She also partnered with Senator Ted Stevens to pioneer legislation establishing the nation's first smoking bans on commercial airplanes.

Williams served as the director of the Anchorage Youth Development Coalition, where she helped create and promote programs to reduce substance abuse among youth. Her accomplishments earned her the prestigious National Advocate of the Year Award from the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America.

A leader in conservation and environmental stewardship

Before moving to Alaska, Williams had just graduated from law school, and was working as an attorney in the Solicitor's Honors Program at the Department of Interior (DOI) in Washington, D.C. She was granted a transfer to represent the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at the Alaska Regional Solicitor's Office.

Williams worked with the National Park Service to write and enact comprehensive regulations to protect humpback whales in Glacier Bay National Park — a move that enabled the local whale population to increase nearly sixfold over subsequent decades.

She also represented the DOI as one of six trustees on the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council. She was instrumental in coordinating permanent protection for more than 600,000 acres of critical habitat, expanding various state and national parks, wildlife refuges and forests.

As the special assistant to the secretary of the interior for Alaska, Williams acted as a vital bridge between the federal government and rural communities, tribes and native corporations. She co-created the Alaska Land Managers Forum to foster communication among disparate state, federal and Indigenous land managers.

Williams also served as executive director of the Alaska Conservation Foundation, more than doubling the organization's staff and budget during her tenure. She created a highly successful summer internship program that has placed more than 300 college students in conservation roles statewide. She also secured critical, multi-year funding and mentorship networks for Alaska Youth for Environmental Action.

“I was always so busy ‘doing’ — often in David and Goliath battles — that I never really thought about the impact I was having,” Williams reflected. “It was always about what was at stake. And as soon as one issue was addressed, I concentrated on the next.

“Helping to assemble the information for the Alaska Women’s Hall of Fame is the first time I have really reflected on the cumulative impacts of my work,” she said.

Connecting Alaskans with records and resources

Public systems often face a familiar dilemma: providing crucial services on shoestring budgets with small teams. Most of the state’s Department of Interior bureaus had kept separate libraries, all with important public records. But by the mid-1990s, increasingly reduced budgets meant they were failing to maintain collections and make them readily available.

So in 1997, Williams co-led the task of merging several DOI libraries with collections held by the U.S. Forest Service to form the Alaska Resources Library and Information Services. This vital repository continues to serve a diverse user base, including agency personnel, university faculty, students and researchers.

Williams also masterminded the legal and regulatory strategies that dissolved long-distance telecommunication monopolies in Alaska, fostering statewide price competition and technical innovation.

From the Last Frontier to the Golden State

When personal circumstances forced Williams to leave her adopted home, she chose to relocate to Goleta, where she had family ties.

Williams was surprised to learn that UCSB didn’t offer a course on public lands. So she offered to create one, reaching out to Professor Carla D’Antonio, the department chair at that time. “Deborah and I met in person and I was really impressed with her care, expertise and dogged determination,” D’Antonio recalled, “as well as her deep commitment to educating generations to come and to sharing her deep hands-on expertise in public lands protection and law.”

Williams was thrilled. “After devoting 50 years of my life to defending and protecting these resources, I was excited to create the Public Lands and Waters – Law and Policy class for the Environmental Studies Program,” she said. Her goal is to help

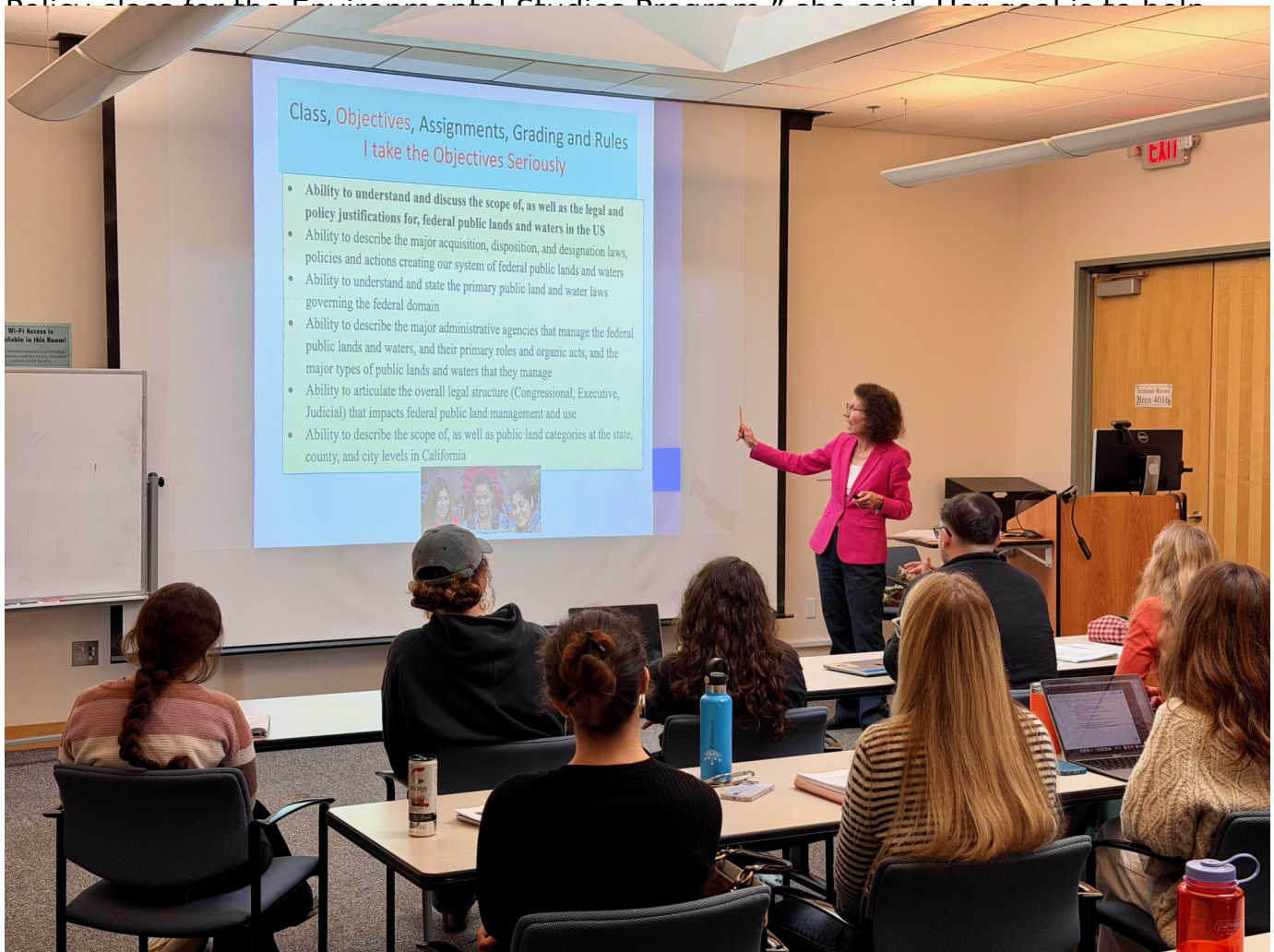


Photo Credit

Eric Zimmerman

UCSB students have the privilege to learn about public lands from someone who spent her whole career protecting, defending and enhancing them.

Williams has since become a fixture in the Environmental Studies Program. “She’s been a devoted and passionate instructor and influenced the lives of dozens of students who have gone on to careers in environmental law,” D’Antonio said.

She has particularly enjoyed the opportunity to mentor students over her time at UCSB. “What exceptional students I have had, and I continue to stay in touch with so many of them,” Williams said.

Williams is still involved in Alaskan issues on a daily basis. She recently helped re-establish the group Americans for Alaska to protect the state’s national public lands heritage. And she continues to support other initiatives, like Alaska Youth for Environmental Action, and the conservation efforts of her friends and colleagues up north.

“I will always be directly engaged in the Great Land,” Williams said, “while at the same time sharing Alaska knowledge and stories with my students.”

Tags

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