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Speaker series and graduate seminars explore academic freedom

What is academic freedom and why does it matter? This is the central question of a yearlong graduate seminar and speaker series, “Just Futures: Academic Freedom and Democratic Cultures,” beginning this fall at UC Santa Barbara. The Mellon-Sawyer Seminar is supported by a $300,000 Mellon Foundation grant awarded to UCSB Area Global Initiative (AGI); the course is housed in the Department of Global Studies.

Academic freedom is a key indicator of the ever-shrinking critical space essential to flourishing democratic cultures, noted Bishnupriya Ghosh, a professor of English and global studies, who is leading the effort with AGI academic coordinator Shiva Balaghi, associate professors Javiera Barandiarán (global studies) and Sherene Seikaly (history) and Mellon postdoctoral fellow Hamzah Baig.

This basic principle, Ghosh continued, was once protected for students to study histories of racial, ethnic, sexual, religious and economic differences, and to experiment with vital forms of public engagement. The intersection of academic freedom and democracy points to the university’s broader civic mission to provide a learning environment for students to become active citizens.

The guest speaker series begins at 5 p.m. on Thursday, Oct. 1, at the Mosher Alumni House. Columbia University’s Jafari Sinclaire Allen will discuss “What is Utterly Precious,” in alignment with fall quarter theme, “Academic Freedom after 9/11.”

Allen is a professor of African-American and African-diaspora studies and director of the Institute for Research in African American Studies. His talk is free and open to the public.

This fall's Mellon-Sawyer Seminar will address concerted challenges to academic freedom, Ghosh said. "Our seminar, roundtables, workshops and public lectures will bring together students, faculty, staff and administrators to ask, 'How do UCSB's institutional histories of academic freedom alongside histories of campus movements for social justice provide lessons to develop antidiscrimination policies and practices?'"

The coursework is designed to tackle challenges to ethnic and area studies programs, which run the gamut from new policies, such as curricular mandates, to institutional neglect, such as defunding language programs, that undercut the infrastructure of academic freedom, Ghosh said. "We propose to enhance the alliance between ethnic studies and area studies to enrich the scope of histories of racial exclusion and privilege taught at the university, as well as the forms of speech and action that enact racial harm."

"This alliance," she added, "will be uniquely positioned to analyze and calibrate what anti-discrimination practices would look like when they are based on antiracist methodologies critical of racial, ethnic and religious subjects. Building on UCSB's strengths, the focus on racial justice as a core horizon in U.S. democratic cultures. We hope to foster collaborations between students, faculty, staff, administrators and the university community that dynamically reshape normative academic freedom so crucial to the very survival of vibrant democratic cultures."

During winter quarter, the seminar and speaker theme is titled "Locations of Difference," with programming tuned into independent media and libraries as they shape knowledge production. From 5–7 p.m. on Feb. 18, at UCSB Library, Emily Drabinski, associate professor and chair of the School of Information Studies at Queens College, City University of New York, will present "Win the Library, Win the World."

In the spring, the series will address "Campus Climate for Just Futures," delving into the underlying values shaping academic institutions that mandate policies and procedures to protect all university citizens, and conclude with a public lecture, "End Times Fascism: And the Fight for the Living World," by Naomi Klein, a professor of

climate justice at the University of British Columbia.

For more information, visit Just Futures.

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About UC Santa Barbara

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