

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Asian American studies launches interdisciplinary Ph.D. emphasis

Close to a third of the student population at UC Santa Barbara identifies as Asian American/Pacific Islander. Yet the growth of emerging scholars has long been hindered by a scarcity of academic and professional training and opportunity at the highest levels. That's changing.

The Department of Asian American Studies has launched an interdisciplinary Ph.D. emphasis.

“Asian American Studies at UCSB is a leading department for the field, and we believe that formal recognition at the graduate level is essential,” said [Lisa Sun-Hee Park](#), a professor and the new program's graduate advisor. “It's an interdisciplinary field that offers a critical perspective on the histories and lives of Asian-identified people in the U.S. And in this way, the scholarship attends to the subjectivities and positionalities of communities that have historically and structurally remained marginal in other mainstream academic disciplines.”

Donna Anderson, a doctoral student in Asian American history and the assistant editor of the Journal of Asian American Studies, currently hosted by UCSB, said she benefited from the department's support of interdisciplinary scholarship.

“Pursuing the emphasis, even in these early stages, has allowed me to read scholarship outside of my field, develop thoughtful relationships with other graduate

students and Asian American studies faculty, and engage with a community of scholars who have similar investments,” said Anderson, whose dissertation is on land policy, immigration and rural Asian America from 1860–1950. “It allows my research to speak more widely by understanding the intersections of each field and reckoning with the shortcomings of varying disciplines and their methods.”

Rooted in the student activism that pushed California state colleges and universities to develop ethnic studies coursework, Asian American studies at UCSB launched in 1969 as an experimental two-year program and became official in 1972. Coming aboard as director in 1988, pioneering scholar and Professor Emeritus Sucheng Chan developed the coursework and collaborations that established the multidisciplinary framework that exists today. In January 1995, UCSB became the first major research university in the country with a department dedicated to Asian American studies.

Efforts to create a Ph.D. emphasis started as early as February 2017, Park said. “But it wasn’t until a core group of graduate students became involved that it really took shape in its final form.”

In the winter of 2019, the efforts of faculty and grad students, including Anderson, became more formalized as the department hosted its first Asian American studies graduate reading seminar, which was supported by the collaborative Pan Asian Network to highlight Asian and Asian American issues on campus.

In 2020–21, the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center (IHC) sponsored the Asian/American Studies Collective, a cohort of graduate students across various departments, to build community and generate graduate-level coursework. This network – which will be hosting a [graduate symposium and book launch](#) on May 20 at Coal Oil Point Natural Reserve – includes more than 40 graduate students who organize quarterly events to share research and engage with faculty.

The Graduate Council approved the Ph.D. program beginning in the 2023 spring quarter. The emphasis is available for graduate students in the departments of English, feminist studies, global studies, history, religious studies and sociology. All six departments were unanimous in their support of the program; it was also supported broadly across the social sciences and humanities.

“Overall,” Park said, “this was a collaborative effort of faculty and students.”

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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.