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‘Stewards of our fragile and precious environment,’ Bren students lauded at Commencement

Eager students, friends and family members convened Friday, June 16, for the Bren School’s 2023 Commencement celebration. Dean Steve Gaines presided over the event, which was held in the Bren courtyard and scored by a string quartet including graduating Bren student Cam Audras.

This year marked the second graduating class of master’s degree students in the Environmental Data Science (MEDS) program. The cohort of 31 joined their classmates in the Environmental Science and Management (MESM) program, alongside the school’s Ph.D. students. In all, 112 master’s degrees and 11 doctorates were conferred.

The event kicked off with an address from Chancellor Henry Yang. “We will always remember your courage and resilience in the face of a global pandemic that turned the whole world upside down,” he said. “We look forward with excitement and confidence in what you will go on to do in your lives and your careers. You will be tomorrow’s leaders and stewards of our fragile and precious environment.”

Heather Hochrein — founder and CEO of EVmatch, a sharing platform for electric vehicle charging — gave the keynote speech. Hochrein developed her company alongside fellow ‘Brennies,’ as they’re known, based on her 2016 MESM capstone

project, a true example of what the school's alumni can accomplish.

"It seems that every day an interdisciplinary degree becomes even more important and ever essential in solving our increasingly complex and pressing environmental problems," said Hochrein, noting that the knowledge and experience gained at Bren have prepared the graduating class to tackle these challenges. "It is our responsibility to challenge ourselves to use our Bren degrees to the greatest extent possible."

"What feels impossible alone is possible together," she added, welcoming the new graduates to the alumni community.

The celebration continued with a bevy of awards. An exuberant Sarah-Anne Rohlfing received the MESM Academic Achievement Award, while Colleen McCamy took home the MEDS Academic Achievement Award.

Newly minted Ph.D. Rachel Torres was recognized for excellence in teaching by a teaching assistant or associate.

And the recognitions didn't stop there. The graduates returned the favor, conferring Associate Professor Scott Jasechko with the Faculty Distinguished Teaching Award. "I never need to look far for inspiration here," he said. Meanwhile Kristine Duarte, director of admissions and student affairs for Bren, was tapped for this year's Staff Excellence in Service Award.

In addition, Dean Gaines recognized Distinguished Professor Arturo Keller, who had recently won the prestigious Outstanding Graduate Mentor Award from the UCSB Academic Senate. Warm wishes also went out to Distinguished Professor Frank Davis, who is retiring.

MESM class co-chair Meghna Rao joined MEDS class co-chair Colleen McCamy to present the class gift. "Bren is like a roll of toilet paper," they joked, "the closer you get to the end, the more you cherish it." The graduating master's students raised \$1,282 toward the OneBren Diversity Fellowship, a contribution matched by the school itself. This fund supports future Bren students from underrepresented backgrounds.

Student speaker Abigail Sanford addressed her classmates with words of congratulation and encouragement. “We’ve all heard the phrase, ‘We must protect the environment for future generations,’” said the MESM graduate. “But instead, we quickly learned that global warming is already here. And it suddenly became, ‘We must protect the environment for us now.’

“Life cannot always be planned for,” she continued. “All you can do is rely on your knowledge, your training and the knowledge and training of your partners” — two features that she and her classmates now have in abundance.

The event concluded with a joyous rendition of “Party in the U.S.A.” on string as attendees proceeded to celebrate on the Bren lawn.

Tags

[Commencement](#)

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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.