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[Keith Hamm](#)

First-generation college students awarded Promise Fellowships to ease financial stress as they pursue advanced degrees

Their career goals may range widely from teaching to data science but what they all have in common is a mindset to create brighter futures for themselves — and others — through higher education. To help them succeed, a new program at UC Santa Barbara will be covering costs.

Now in its second year, the Promise Fellowship Program has announced its latest awardees, each pursuing an advanced degree at UC Santa Barbara with financial support from a program dedicated to empowering first-generation college students from low-income households.

“Promise Fellowships open the doors to graduate degrees for motivated and talented Promise Scholars,” said Leila J. Rupp, the interim Anne and Michael Towbes Dean of the Graduate Division. “These are exactly the kinds of students we need to recruit to our graduate programs. By providing full financial support, we make the dream of a graduate degree a reality for students who otherwise would not have had that opportunity.”

The 2023–24 cohort of master’s degree students is Lesley Figueroa (environmental science and management), who is also the first awardee pursuing a doctorate, Anthony A. Botros (materials), Erik Magaña (Gevirtz Graduate School of Education) and Rosemary Juarez (Bren School environmental data science).

“Our scholars have worked incredibly hard over these past four years,” said Holly Roose, program director of the [UC Santa Barbara Promise Scholars Program](#). “They are very excited to start the next journey through the Promise Scholars graduate opportunity provided to us through the Graduate Division and the amazing donors who help fund us. We are incredibly grateful to everyone who has supported and continues to support our scholars.”

Through generous donors, divisional deans and the Graduate Division, Promise Fellows pursuing advanced degrees in education, data science, technology management, computer science, global studies and art, among other fields of study, will receive \$40,000 annually over the span of their degree work. In addition, doctoral student applicants who are fully funded by their departments receive \$8,000 during each of their first three summers.

The first in her family to pursue higher education, Figueroa said she is driven by the memory of her parents’ sacrifices.

“My father was only able to attend college for one week before he had to drop out to be able to provide money for his mother and siblings,” Figueroa said. “He had dreams of completing college and becoming a teacher but had to give that up and move to a different country to be able to support himself and his family. Knowing my parents left everything behind in Mexico to have a better future for me has been my biggest motivation throughout my life.

“There were moments I believed that I wasn’t going to be able to attend graduate school due to financial constraint,” she added, crediting Roose and Graduate Diversity Programs Director Carlos Nash with fundraising efforts to “complete the missing piece from my puzzle — the financial plan for my academic journey. I will forever be grateful for their help.”

Botros, as well, initially believed that pursuing a graduate degree would be out of reach financially.

“I grew up in a low-income household so money has always been tight and while I always knew I was going to college, I wasn't sure how I was going to achieve that financially,” Botros said. “When I first got accepted to UCSB I was lucky enough to become a Promise Scholar and that helped ease my financial burden significantly. I wanted to continue onto graduate school but I was afraid I wasn't going to be able to fund it without taking significant loans and burdening my parents.” The opportunities presented by the award are timely, said Juarez, who shared how the COVID-19 pandemic hindered potential in-person research opportunities during her undergraduate years as a geography major.

“I look forward to connecting and interacting with industry leaders and collaborating with my cohort at the Bren School,” she said. “I believe that obtaining my masters degree in environmental data science will allow me to pursue greater opportunities that not only broaden my knowledge, but allow me to accomplish and provide technical support in the environmental field. I cannot wait to learn what graduate school has to offer.”

UCSB alum Nien-Tsu Shen and her husband Ching-Chih Hsiao also provided support for Juarez and Botero.

“I believe that higher education makes society better, in all aspects,” said Shen. “In particular, it helps to close the gap between the haves and have nots in a capitalist world. I have always liked to see people at all ages seeking higher education, especially at the graduate level. When I learned about the Promise Fellowship Program, I felt that as a former UCSB graduate student, I needed to support it.”

While working toward their advanced degrees, the Promise Fellows will also provide mentorship and support to undergraduate Promise Scholars preparing for and applying to graduate school.

These acts of giving back are at the heart of the program, said Magaña, who served as a student leader and peer mentor in El Congreso de UCSB, Comunidad Latinx Graduación, Mesa Directiva and the MultiCultural Center, and has worked with migrant students as part of the California Mini-Corps.

“Serving my peers and the community has always been my passion,” he said. “I prioritize the needs of others and know that working with youth is important to build our futures as a community together.”

“The Promise Fellowship has given me the opportunity to fully focus on my goal of becoming a high school Spanish teacher,” Magaña added. “Teaching credential programs require student teaching hours that are uncompensated outside of course credit, so attending the Teacher Education Program here at UC Santa Barbara would have required me to take out extensive unsubsidized loans and work on the weekends and holidays to cover expenses.” With the fellowship, however, he could focus on his studies.

For more information on the [Promise Fellowship Program](#), visit the Graduate Division website or contact Assistant Dean of Development [John Lofthus](#).

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Media Contact

Keith Hamm

Social Sciences, Humanities & Fine Arts Writer

keithhamm@ucsb.edu

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