By Christine Clark and Darlene Lopez   May 12, 2016
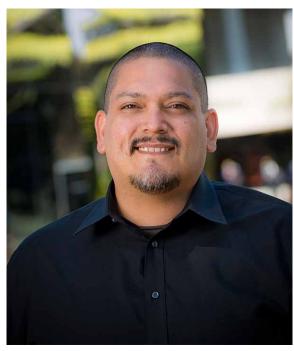

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Student Speakers Selected to Address Graduates at All Campus Commencement Ceremony

A father of four who went back to school at age 29 to provide a better future for himself and his children and a psychology major whose post-graduate plans include eradicating poverty have been selected to inspire new graduates to give back, as the student speakers for this year's All Campus Commencement ceremony.

The event, at 10 a.m. on Saturday, June 11, will mark the first time in 16 years that UC San Diego will convene all of its graduating undergraduate and graduate students for a campuswide commencement ceremony.

As part of the revival of this campus tradition, there will be a graduate student speaker, Alberto "Beto" Vasquez, and undergraduate student speaker, Karina Mohajerani, who will share their personal stories and encourage the class of 2016 to be of service to the community and the world. Their speeches will echo sentiments of the event's keynote speaker, Nobel Peace Prize recipient Muhammad Yunus, a social entrepreneur, economist and founder of the global microfinance movement who was selected for embodying UC San Diego's ideals of public service, social mobility and global citizenship.

Mohajerani shares Yunus's passion for helping others. As this year's undergraduate student speaker, Mohajerani wants to convey to graduating students that they are equipped with the tools to make a difference in their community and in the world, no matter which path they choose. Originally from San Jose, Calif., Mohajerani

Alberto "Beto" Vasquez

transferred from a California Community College to UC San Diego to major in psychology and minor in business. Along with participating in four research laboratories on campus, she volunteers for various student organizations. As such, Mohajerani volunteers with UC San Diego Intervarsity's Homeless Ministry in which she and other students make weekly trips to downtown San Diego to distribute sandwiches and water, as well as blankets umbrellas and other supplies as needed. They also converse and engage with members of the local homeless community.

"Since attending UC San Diego, I have immersed myself in campus life and have tried to become a part of as many organizations, research laboratories and societies as I possibly could," she said. "I am so grateful for all of the opportunities this campus has presented me."

Mohajerani is inspired to be of service to the world by empowering others and plans on working with social businesses to address poverty after graduation. Muhammad Yunus helped define social businesses in his book, "Creating a World without Poverty: Social Business and the Future of Capitalism." Similar to nonprofit organizations, social businesses designate all profits to be reinvested in the business itself (or used to start other social businesses), with the aim of increasing social impact; for example, expanding the company's reach, improving the products or services, or in other ways subsidizing the social mission.

Not surprisingly, Yunus has had a big influence on Mohajerani. Yunus is known for pioneering the concepts of microcredit and microfinancing and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for founding the nonprofit Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, which is credited for lending billions of dollars in loans to impoverished entrepreneurs in an attempt to eradicate poverty.

Karina Mohajerani

"When I first read the announcement that Muhammad Yunus would be speaking at the All Campus Commencement ceremony, I was absolutely enthralled," she said. "Having a Nobel Peace Prize recipient as this year's guest speaker is already a noteworthy experience; furthermore, his work with social businesses is exactly what influenced me to take the career path that I have chosen."

Graduate student speaker "Beto" Vasquez wants to create futures in STEM education for women and people of color

Being of service to the community is not only a theme, but a way of life for Vasquez. He transferred to UC San Diego from San Diego City College and, after earning his bachelor's degree in biology at the campus, is now earning a master's degree in the same field.

As a first-generation college student, Vasquez's educational journey has been both challenging and rewarding. Nearing 30, he returned to school to change the trajectory of his life. "I decided to return to school to better provide a better future for my children and myself," Vasquez said.

He then found his passion when a professor at San Diego City College taught him about what he refers to as the "beauty and magnificence of biology."

"When I first enrolled at San Diego City College, I was overcome with a sense of clarity and direction unlike any other time before," said Vasquez.

His speech will focus on his personal journey, the importance of being genuine and why individuals should give back to themselves, their families and their communities.

Vasquez also works for the City of San Diego as a council representative, where he strives to meet the needs of, and develop relationships with, various groups within the region. Additionally, he works with the San Diego Community College District (SDCCD), educating the public about the accessibility and affordability of higher education.

Vasquez hopes to become a community college biology professor, and ultimately an administrator in higher education. He plans on pursuing a doctoral degree in education and leadership, identifying practices to optimize the enrollment and retention of students from underserved communities. Vasquez is constantly looking for ways to increase interest in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) research among students of color and women who are underrepresented in these fields.

"I am aware of some of the issues that often hinder the ability for more students to embrace and be successful in STEM degrees, and am prepared to address them," he said. "I am continually collaborating with numerous campuses and community groups to enhance educational outreach efforts, and validate students to increase their sense of belonging in these disciplines."

More about UC San Diego's All Campus Commencement

The All Campus Commencement is designed to strengthen the sense of community among UC San Diego students and families. The event will include the conferring of degrees for approximately 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Following the ceremony, the colleges and graduate programs will host personalized graduation events, where students will walk across stage as their names are read.

At the All Campus Commencement, there will be a hospitality village located on the field with a number of food vendors, as well as the UC San Diego Bookstore, Alumni and flower vendors. It will provide a space for family, friends and graduates to get refreshments and relax between ceremonies.

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