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# These students have earned their degrees in building equity

Jessica Wolf | June 12, 2020



## [Students + Campus](#)

The four centers comprising UCLA's [Institute of American Cultures](#) were founded in 1969, as a direct response to walkouts and protests over access to education from communities of color over the course of 1968.

Over the last 50 years, staff, faculty and students affiliated with the [American Indian Studies Center](#), the [Asian American Studies Center](#), the [Chicano Studies Research Center](#) and the [Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies](#), have sought to create opportunities, share knowledge and conduct research that broadens academic pipelines for students of color and inspires public policy and programs that will improve lives and increase access to systems of success for all.

Their work is more resonant than ever, as huge swaths of the country have rallied around the cause of racial and social justice in the wake of protests against police brutality. Meanwhile, response to the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated structural inequalities resulting in a disproportionate share of the health, economic, emotional and social impacts afflicting communities of color.

We celebrate four students from the class of 2020 with ties to these important centers and their related academic departments. They leave behind a welcome imprint of their creativity, scholarship and experiences, and carry with them a potential for impact on the world of academia, their personal communities, and the shape of our future systems.

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## **Omar Abdulkarim: A ‘research nerd’ with a focus on diversity in higher education**



Joey Caroni/UCLA  
Omar Abdulkarim

Omar Abdulkarim always had a head for math and science, so he originally planned to pursue a degree in chemical engineering. But as a young student at Santa Monica College, he discovered his passion for sociology.

“My brother convinced me to take that first class, and I still keep in touch with the professor,” said Abdulkarim, who is graduating with double major in sociology and African American Studies.

While at UCLA, Abdulkarim was awarded an undergraduate research fellowship from the [Bunche Center](#), which provides grants for students to work on faculty-led projects to study the conditions of Black life.

Through this program Abdulkarim worked with Karida Brown, professor of African American studies and sociology, conducting research for a forthcoming book on race and segregation in

education in the 20th century. His research was centered on analyzing the role Hampton University, a private Historically Black College and University in Virginia, played in constructing and forming Black education during that time period. Through archival data, the project looks at how Hampton was able to build schools, develop curriculum, and hire the administration of Black schools throughout the world. These were largely formulated as trade schools.

“I never thought I would be a nerd for research,” he said. “But I’ve grown to love it and I look forward to doing more.”

Abdulkarim traveled to Hampton to visit libraries and pull documents related to the project, which made him feel even more passionate about the work.

“A lot of the files I pulled, the archivists told me that I was the first to ask for them,” he said. “This is information that has never been talked about.”

Part of Abdulkarim’s original spring quarter plan was to travel to Emory University in Atlanta to present early findings from his work. He looked forward to that; Emory is atop his list of possible graduate schools.

The pandemic scuttled that plan, along with others for his previously planned gap year. Abdulkarim had anticipated (and purchased tickets for) a year of travel, hitting spots in the United States and Europe as well as visiting extended family in Toronto and Ethiopia. His father arrived in the U.S. as a refugee in the 1970s, his mother joined later.

He’s thoughtful about — and grateful for — some elements of the pandemic.

“I’ve been able to spend a lot more time with family,” he said. “For me, that’s been one of the blessings to come out of this. I really do recognize how much I took for granted a lot of things. I’ve been blessed and privileged to not be an essential worker risking the health of myself and my family.”

Abdulkarim, like the rest of the class of 2020, couldn’t have foreseen that his so much of his final quarter at UCLA would be spent on Zoom calls. He never anticipated that his final weeks — and his week of finals — would be spent taking breaks from those classes to demonstrate in the streets on behalf of racial and social justice in the country of his birth.

It’s a bittersweet climax to a hard-won degree for Abdulkarim, who’s never experienced a graduation ceremony. He dropped out of Culver City High School at age 15, but quickly earned his G.E.D and enrolled in Santa Monica College at 16.

He’s grateful for that path.

“Part of the beauty of community college, and that kind of gets lost when you get to UCLA, is that it is very diverse, it’s full of people from very diverse backgrounds,” he said. “You have people fresh out of high school, but also much older people in these classes with you. It’s a

different learning experience than I would have had in high school and I think it was a very holistic learning environment.”

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## **Sarah Corona: Future archivist with a mission of more inclusion in academic collections**



Joey Caroni/UCLA  
Sarah Corona

Sarah Corona’s work with [Chicano Studies Research Center](#) has helped her see how archives serve as a bridge between past and future.

She thinks about scholars who will come later and the ways they might encounter the experiences, effort and stories of people like Sal Castro, a Mexican-American activist and educator who helped lead the 1968 walkouts from several high schools in East Los Angeles. Those walkouts served as a precursor to the founding of UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center.

Corona, who earned master’s degrees in library science and Latin American studies, has been working with the center’s archive of publications, letters, photographs and other items from Castro’s ongoing work in Los Angeles and beyond until his death in 2013. Her task is to describe and tag the items in such a way that future scholars, historians and authors will have multiple ways to discover his story.

“It’s kind of difficult to anticipate, but we try to provide as detailed of a finding aid as possible, she said. “For CSRC, a lot of our finding aids go into the Online Archive of California, which is

a very large and keyword-searchable digital repository that guides people to materials found in different archives around the state.”

Corona has learned a lot in her UCLA academic program, a very theory-heavy undertaking that has prepared her not only for how to handle and preserve materials, but with knowledge of how archives have come into existence in an American context.

“Our program also tries to be very social-justice focused, thinking about community-based archives, finding lost voices, making archives more equitable, and being very conscious of the bias that we as archivists bring into the process,” she said.

The historical legacy of big universities like UCLA, is that some communities don’t feel represented in the collections, she said.

“There is a lot of privilege associated with being on a large campus like this, with the access it provides,” she said. “That’s why I think the CSRC is very important and I feel very lucky to be working there.”

She’s grateful to have collaborated closely with CSRC archivist Xaviera Flores.

“She is very welcoming and puts a lot of effort and time into making sure she is in contact with the communities we are trying to represent,” Corona said.

Another UCLA mentor for Corona was Safiya Noble, professor of information studies and African American studies.

For her graduating project, with Noble as an adviser, Corona looked at the existence of institutions and programs that offer ethnic studies degrees alongside information studies, and examined the potential job market for people who might obtain these kinds of concurrent degrees.

She found that one-third of job postings for curator or archival positions in 2016 alone required an additional degree outside of library science or information studies.

“Ethnic studies would be a qualified field for that,” she said. “Encouraging these kinds of programs would not only be good for the intellectual fulfillment of interdisciplinary study, but also serve a practical benefit.”

Looking to the future, Corona hopes to find work as an archivist, especially somewhere with a large collection related to Chicano history, and ideally where she can support first-generation students like herself. Corona got her bachelor’s from San Jose State.

“Navigating the whole institution is a lot of work, which they don’t tell you when you get here,” she said. “I’m hoping I’ll be able to work with people and try and make a difference and help students who are like me, also while trying to work on all the issues with archives, helping people see themselves in archives if they want to, and keep refining my own lens.”

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## Meleana Chun-Moy: Community builder with an environmental justice commitment



Joey Caroni/UCLA  
Meleana Chun-Moy

A transfer student from the Bay Area, Meleana Chun-Moy knew she wanted to complete her education by leaving home, and UCLA was the most welcoming environment of the schools she toured.

At UCLA her love of history converged with a minor that furthered her passion for environmental issues.

“I was always involved in my environmental groups in high school,” said Chun-Moy, who will earn her bachelor’s degree in history and a minor in environmental systems and society on June 12. “And then when I found this minor, I fell in love with it completely. It has a lot of really great interdisciplinary aspects from history or Asian American studies, sociology, really everything.”

She also found a sense of belonging here, in fellowship with the faculty and students affiliated with the [Asian American Studies Center](#). Chun-Moy is of Chinese and Native Hawaiian descent and quickly got involved with the Pacific Islander Student Association on campus. She served on the executive board of a subgroup called Pacific Islanders for Health, which in a typical year would host a campus event designed to bring the community together to share knowledge and resources.

“With the health fairs our goal is to address health disparities on campus, but also in the community,” she said. “We try to make sure that language barriers aren’t an issue because that’s fundamental. If we can’t communicate with someone it’s really hard to assist someone.”

In November 2019, Chun-Moy traveled to Hawaii with a group of UCLA students to learn from indigenous elders of the Pu’uhonua o Pu’uhuluhulu people, who oppose construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope atop the dormant Mauna Kea volcano.

“I have family in Hawaii and it was really special,” she said. “It was very powerful to hear the elders speak and hear what they have been fighting for, having them educate us so we can continue educating others.”

Chun-Moy also revealed in a study abroad program in Seoul, South Korea, where she took courses in sustainable development and the history of relations between North and South Korea.

Chun-Moy’s college experience was both expansive and inclusive. Her future goals are set on helping others and the planet.

“I want to be a lawyer,” she said. “Right now, I plan to go into public interest law potentially with an environmental lens, because I just think it’s about people and people’s fundamental lives could be changed. I think it’s really important to advocate for and help people have a voice, help empower them.”

Chun-Moy was born with a genetic condition that inhibited her ability to walk, run or crawl, but it has stopped her from little else. She can trace her desire to become a lawyer back as young as 7 years old. A voracious reader, she spent much of her hospital-bound youth devouring the books her parents brought for her. Once she ran out of those, nurses would hand her copies of U.S. News & World Report, igniting her passion for social and political issues.

It’s been hard to be away from campus, she said, especially as a transfer student.

“It just all ended so quickly,” she said.

Still Chun-Moy is filled with joy at the experiences she had at the UCLA and the mentors and professors she cherishes.

“I do miss seeing my professors during office hours and in class,” she said. “As a research institution, I think we’re in a really unique position and I have had a extraordinary opportunity to work with renowned scholars. I love just to sit and listen to them talk about what they love.”

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**Elaina Corbin: Going back to the reservation to give back to the next generation**





Joey Caroni/UCLA  
Elaina Corbin

Growing up on the Morongo Indian reservation in Banning, California, Elaina Corbin was never that interested in her history classes.

That changed many years later when she took a course on American Indian history at Pasadena City College as a history requirement for her associate's degree in social sciences.

"It was all just so fascinating and interesting," said Corbin, who will graduate from UCLA with a degree in American Indian studies. "It made me wonder why we aren't taught these things in school."

Corbin's path through higher education isn't traditional. She's graduating at the age of 31, having spent many years working in Los Angeles, before going back to school.

"I'm glad I went later in life, I don't think I would have pursued an American Indian studies degree when I was younger," she said. She senses a different and progressive ethos in our current cultural climate, both around the study of indigenous cultures and histories and in the way people relate to Native Americans.

"The whole narrative of decolonization is very prevalent," Corbin said. "There's so much more now which is coming through for young Indians — a revitalization of who we are."

American Indian studies at UCLA is a small program, so students wind up taking a lot of classes together, which helps build a sense of community. And she appreciates all the interdisciplinary scholars who are involved in UCLA's coursework.

But there are challenges too, primarily because there are so few native scholars teaching in academia.



“It’s a problem across Indian country,” Corbin said. “There are not enough Native teachers to teach Native students. And there is such a disconnect between American history and Native history. So much more personal insight can be relayed from an internal perspective.”

She plans to return to her reservation to help with that effort.

“I want to do something in the education area or something for my tribe,” she said. “And maybe later I would like to work with my tribal government. My aunt has been on tribal council for years.”

One of her passions is in language reclamation. She can see through the passing of elders among her own immediate family how the Cahuilla language might potentially fall away. Her great-grandmother’s generation was the last in her family to speak Cahuilla fluently.

Now there are language classes on the reservation, which younger people are attending.

“They teach the kids certain words and phrases,” she said. “It’s small but impactful.”

And she said members of her tribe are starting to give their children Cahuilla names, which is heartening.

She wants to encourage young people on the reservation to think big about the future.

“I really want to go back and work with our youth,” Corbin said. “I feel it’s not very common that Native kids get off the reservation and go to college. For me, me a lot of my cousins are like ‘you’re doing it for all of us,’ but I want them to know they can do it too. And that they can go out and come back. Something America does is group us into ‘on the reservation or off,’ and we don’t have to think of ourselves that way.”

During her final quarter at UCLA Corbin carried a lot of courses, which she joked she might have reconsidered if she knew she would be learning online. And, not being able to gather with fellow [American Indian Studies Center](#) graduates and the larger student body is tough.

“I didn’t want to think it was such a big deal because I know we don’t put in all this work just to walk across the stage,” Corbin said. “But it’s like running a marathon and anticipating getting to hit that ribbon at the end; it’s still exciting and feels like such an accomplishment to graduate.”

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