



Tribute to Gail Vawter

The Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics' (ARE) cherished colleague and beloved friend, former Graduate Student Advising Officer **Gail Vawter**, passed away peacefully on October 12, 2024. Gail's career spanned four UC Berkeley Chancellors, during which she guided and supported hundreds of students. Gail was hired in June 1985 during Gordon Rausser's tenure as department chair. Speaking to Gail's distinct value and contributions to the ARE graduate program and the Environmental Economics and Policy (EEP) undergraduate program, all subsequent chairs passed on the wise advice to the next department chair to *"make sure Gail does not retire while you are chair."*

Gail insisted on supporting both undergraduates and graduate students, even though her job title called for her to only work with graduate students. She viewed her responsibilities as supporting her students' academic and other needs. She did not believe that she had a 9 to 5 job.

When it came to faculty, Gail always conveyed that *"you may be a big shot and solve world problems, but here [in ARE], students come first."* She could be heard saying to a professor, *"you can tell Obama to wait because you have to attend Steve's oral,"* or *"it's nice that you try to prevent the third world war, but you should write the field exam first."* Her advice to faculty on how to communicate with students and handle tough situations was always on the money, and the consensus was that Gail was a 'mother' to ARE's graduate students and EEP undergraduate students.

As numerous alumni messages from around the world are pouring into the department upon hearing of Gail's passing, they speak of Gail as the "heart and soul" of the department. Several alumni emails comment on Gail's vital role in the department, providing counsel, support, wisdom, warmth, humor, and chocolate candy. Many remembrances reference the new student orientation picnic lunches that featured fun and competitive volleyball games shared with Gail and her husband, Buzz.

Since her retirement in 2013, Gail's presence in the department has been sorely missed. Upon her departure, in a uniquely generous gesture and appreciation of her time in ARE, Gail graciously donated two large display-boxed-frames that feature current department faculty and graduate student photos, proudly displayed on the wall next to her old office space, 203 Giannini Hall.

Gail left an immeasurable mark on the lives of her colleagues and the many students she worked with. We will always remember Gail with deep affection and gratitude for her devoted service to ARE and U.C. Berkeley, and a friendship filled with wit and kindness.

Giannini Hall, University of California, Berkeley, October 16, 2024.

Gail's very popular office counter



Photos, Kate Foreman- May 2013

Messages from Gail's ARE Family

"Gail was an ally through it all. So sad. RIP."

Camile Antinori, Class of 2002

"Sad news. Gail was a wonderful person who ran the graduate program brilliantly and made us look great. My condolences - we will never forget her."

David Zilberman, ARE Distinguished Professor

"She played such a wonderful and supportive role in my life!"

Daniel Osgood, Class of 1999

"Gail was a kind, supportive, informative, friendly, hard-working, empathetic person who helped to make things run smoothly and humanely. We always knew that we could go to her for help and she would do her best to help us solve a problem. I feel quite sad about her passing."

Scott Templeton, Class of 1994

"This is very sad news. Gail was extremely helpful and supportive during my time as a graduate student. Very nice and very organized. She helped countless people make it through our Ph.D. program at Berkeley, even on days when we were close to giving up ..."

Troy G. Schmitz, Class of 1995

“She was such a wonderfully stabilizing, supportive and fun person during graduate school. I always enjoyed checking in on her during subsequent visits.”

Steven Helfand, Class of 1995

“Gail was a remarkably special person. What a tremendous loss. Gail was the best!!!”

Josh Zivin, Class of 1998

“So sad to hear about it. I will offer an eternal happiness mass for her at my church. May she rest in peace. I pray that God will grant her family peace and comfort during this difficult time.”

Bessie Ditico, former ARE staff

“Gail was one of the most wonderful [persons] I have ever met . She was always cheerful, supportive and kind . Any time I went to her office, she somehow always managed to help me. Your memory will live on forever in our hearts, Gail.”

Biswo Poudel, Class of 2011

“Gail was always so supportive of the grad students, and she always laughed at my lame jokes. I’ll never forget that she helped me re-invigorate the Friday Afternoon Departmental Happy Hour after it had been in a lull for a few years following the graduation of legendary Happy Hour organizer Coleman Bazelon. In my youthful zeal, I tried something new. I tried to alternate weekly between beer-based Happy Hours and coffee-based Happy Hours. At my first coffee-based Happy Hour, I selected/supplied the wrong cups, cups meant for cold drinks instead of coffee, and the hot coffee caused the wax cups to melt as all the professors, staff and students were standing around chit-chatting and drinking coffee. I was so embarrassed, but Gail was there with a smile and a laugh and a “Don’t worry, it will be fine.” She’ll always have a special place in my heart.”

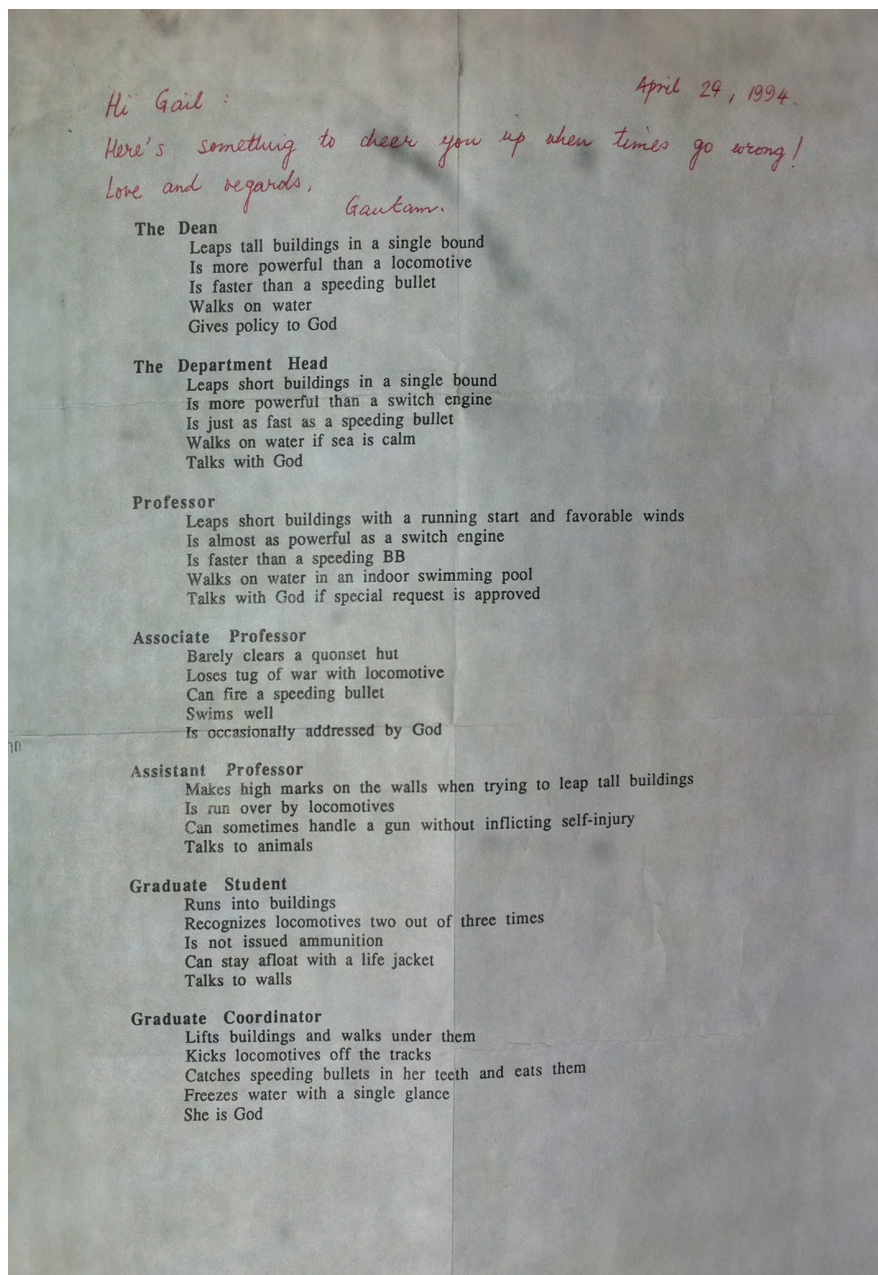
Chris Dumas, Class of 1997

“I’ll be forever grateful for how much Gail helped me in moments of need as a graduate student. She transformed ARE from an academic department to a family. We were so lucky to have her support. Heartfelt condolences to Gail's family and community.”

Steve Stohs, Class of 2003

“Indeed, Gail loved ARE, as we all do. For some of us, she is synonymous with ARE, which feels like home. And Gail was its mother hen—always caring for everyone’s needs and looking out for her “kids.” She will indeed be missed! Gail was the departmental mommy—always comforting and helping every student who showed up in her office. I sent Gail a note to express my appreciation many moons ago. I had no idea she'd hold on to it all through her journey at Cal. She showed it to Sofia on the day she was packing up to retire, who sent me this picture (see attachment). We will always hold her in our thoughts and she will continue to live in our hearts forever and ever. RIP Gail!”

Gautam Sethi, Class of 2001



“This is very sad. Gail was an ARE institution and she helped so many cohorts of students navigate ARE and UC Berkeley officialdom, effortlessly. A big loss, no doubt.
Amit Batabyal, Class of 1994

“Although I resented her encroachment on my first name and the confusion it occasionally caused, I LOVED Gail. She made me (and everyone else apparently) feel like one of her best friends. Even years (decades!) after my days in the department, we would light each other up with news updates. And her support extended into the career that succeeded the one where my ARE credentials counted. What a gift to our community!!
Gail Simpson, Class of 1988

“She was the best, indeed! I have very fond memories of Gail in her office, dispensing advice to clueless Italian students trying to make it through grad school!! RIP!”

Gero Carletto, Class of 1996

“Gail was always kind, supportive and crazily competent.”

Matt Warning, Class of 1997

“So sad. Gail was the best. A warm and welcoming presence to everyone. We always said she ran the grad program. Best wishes and condolences to all.”

Mike Roberts, Class of 2000

“I don’t know what I would have done without Gail while I was in grad school. She was our guide and counsel. Every department should be so fortunate as to have a Gail Vawter. She did transform ARE from an academic department to a family. I hope her family knows how much we all loved her and how she calmed and supported so many of us through the years. I’ve missed seeing her these past few years when I stop by the department. My deepest condolences to her family.”

Sandy Hoffmann, Class of 1998

“Oh Dear, I am sad to learn about Gails' passing. She was such a huge support for me during grad school—always there for a quick smile, chat, joke, or life advice. I remember asking her about the dissertation deadline (again), and she said, “Time flies when you're having fun.” Time really did fly too fast. I’ll miss all the little positive things she brought to Gianni Hall—she really made entering Giannini Hall such a special place.”

Hendrik Wolff, Class of 2007

“Gail was vital to ARE, with wisdom, heart and humor. Wonderful volleyball games shared with her and Buzz too!”

Linda Fernandez, Class of 1996

“I remember often going to Gail’s office to pick up candy in between classes on the second floor in Giannini, I think it was Room 201 or 210. She was so good to students and really welcoming of specially new ones. She will be missed.”

Sandeep Sacheti, Class of 1997

“I have fond memories of Gail, from my first visit to the department as a prospective student, to the welcome picnic every year at Codornices Park, to making things happen throughout my graduate career, to the graduation ceremony and beyond. She will be missed by all.”

Peter Kelly, Class of 2011

“Gail had an unusually cheerful disposition and a genuine enthusiasm for the program, both of which managed to convince me that, perhaps, in the end, I would do fine in the program in spite of much early evidence to the contrary. Thanks, Gail, for helping me feel welcome and boost my self-confidence.”

Marcel Fafchamps, Class of 1989

“Gail was wonderful.”

Jonathan Lipow, Class of 1994

“Gail was a delight to work with and learn from. Since joining ARE in 2002, there were at least two constants in Giannini Hall. The first was a milk chocolate Hershey in 203. The second was a smile from this efficient, spectacular blonde force of nature in 203. Gail brought Halloween costumes, volleyball nets, and an overall sense of community to ARE. One dear colleague that we lost, Peter Berck, used to say she was the secret sauce in ARE. Behind the scenes, she made a huge difference in so many graduate students’ lives and, before becoming a full-time graduate student advisor, also in numerous undergraduate students who joined our Environmental Economics and Policy Major in the Rausser College of Natural Resources.

I benefited from her many laundry mistakes: when she washed dresses in too hot a washing cycle, they shrunk and the amazing hand-me-downs came to me. I proudly wore one such blue dress during her retirement party that gathered faculty, staff, students, and UC Berkeley community members from all over campus who wanted to thank Gail for her service to Cal! I also inherited Gail’s many, many somewhat peculiar counter toys, which are kept inside my glass shelves, as well as the upside-down chocolate ice cream cone she got from Michael Hanemann and the “Ashes of Troubled Students.” I will treasure them always and will make sure they stay in Giannini Hall and pass them on to a worthy descendant...

During her last May graduation commencement at the Greek, she received a standing ovation from a full Greek theater attending student and faculty body. She wore her signature blue jacket, with a blue and gold lay, and her kind smile. May you receive a deserved standing ovation welcome in Heaven now, Dear Gail.”

Sofia Villas-Boas, ARE Distinguished Professor

“Gail’s life story is truly inspiring. She was a wonderful friend and a fun ski buddy, and she made the world (and ARE) a better, kinder place. Heaven is lucky to have her, but we miss her. I asked her to look out for my young family should Marguerite and I be hit by a bus, and she readily agreed. What more can I say?

Brian Wright, ARE Distinguished Professor

“Thank you for letting us know about Gail's passing. Both as an ARE faculty member and as the dean, I worked closely with her for many years. Her intelligence, hard work, and deep concern for the welfare of students made her a model for how student advising should be done. She helped thousands of students through the maze of being a Berkeley undergraduate, something that all too often seems like a sink-or-swim experience. I know from working with alumni that many students struggle after a few years to remember the names of their professors, but her students will never forget her name. Her close relationship with all the PENR/EEP students was one of the reasons I changed the college graduation ceremony's practice of having faculty advisors read the undergraduate names to having them read by their staff advisors. It wasn't just because they were more likely to pronounce the names correctly; I wanted to celebrate the critical role of advisors like Gail in student success. Best regards.”

Keith Gillies, ARE Professor Emeritus and Former Dean of RCNR

“Oh, dear Gail. I’m so sorry to hear this—I have such fond memories of her, and she was so very helpful and kind.”

Jessica Rider, Class of 2013

“Thank you Gail for making every one of us graduate students - many from far away places - feel like we belonged, we mattered, and we deserved to be part of the amazing institution that is ARE Berkeley. We are so glad we have photos of you holding our little Klara at Graduation.”

Emma & Ralf, Class of 2007

“Gail was the first person I was in touch with from ARE about a year before I arrived. And I spoke with her several times weekly during my five years at Berkeley. She looked after so many of us and was the go-to for so many things, academic and otherwise. She made life better for so many people and will be missed. My heart goes out to her family and to our whole ARE family.” - Sean Cash, Class of 2003

“I’m so sad to hear about Gail’s passing. She knew *everything*—from policies to how to get things done despite the policy, and she didn’t take you know what from anyone. LOVED her for that! As she got to know me over the years, she welcomed me with a big heart, humor, and honesty. She was always helpful and cared deeply about ARE students. She was also so incredibly capable, talented, and hard-working. She was a cherished staff member, and for good reason. I know she was deeply loved by her family and her dear Buzz. RIP Gail.” Kathryn Moriarty Baldwin, RCNR Assistant Dean of Development and Public Information

“Gail was the first person I was in contact with from ARE, even before I came. The last time I saw her was at Peter’s memorial, and it was emotional. It is all these people that make ARE a forever cherished place in my heart. Rest in peace, Gail.”

Yang Xie, Class of 2016

“I am deeply saddened by Gail’s passing. She was the heart of our ARE family, always warm, kind, and ready to help. I feel incredibly fortunate to have had her support during my time as a grad student, and her presence made a lasting impact on so many of us. Rest in peace, Gail—you will be deeply missed but never forgotten. With sympathy,”

Maoyong Fan, Class of 2009

“YES VERY SAD NEWS. Wonderful person and friend to us.”

George Judge, ARE Professor Emeritus

“We interviewed several candidates when we hired Gail. Within the first minute of her interview, we looked at each other and knew that we should do whatever we could to induce her to join the department. She immediately told us that she viewed taking care of students as her fundamental responsibility—faculty and administrators had to play second fiddle.

Everyone who knew her quickly learned that, while she acted tough, she was an incredibly caring person. The other things that mattered most to her were Buzz and her family and volleyball. To Gail, volleyball was the sport most worth playing, which she did enthusiastically in her younger days. We’re grateful to Buzz and her family for sharing her with us.”

Jeff Perloff, ARE Distinguished Professor

“I loved working with Gail. She was simply one of us, regardless of age or academic stature. She joined the one-day rafting trips I organized for undergrads and grads on the South Fork of the American River and always had a wonderful time. What a wonderful woman to have known”.
Dick Norgaard, Professor Emeritus ERG -UC Berkeley

“Gail was such a force of nature and so beloved by all of us. Because of Gail, everyone had office hours posted above their door, and we all knew that she would make sure our course ratings were up to the level. Of course, we could always rely on an energy boost from her unlimited store of goodies. I miss her.”

Ann Harrison, Professor and former Dean of the Haas School of Business, UC Berkeley

“Gail was such an important part of my ARE experience, helping me feel welcome, taken care of, and supported in a way that made sure I made the most of my two years as a transfer student. I have no doubt Gail made every student, whether undergrad or doctoral, feel equally worthy of her care and attention. Thank you Gail.”

Alana Lemarchand, EEP 2010, Commencement Speaker nominated by Gail

“Gail was a wonderful person. She was always there for us – the graduate students – to help us and support us. I feel immensely lucky and fortunate to have met her.” Kyriakos Drivas, Class of 2011

“I am so sad to hear of Gail’s passing. She was wonderful - the person who took care of all graduates - and who cannot smile when remembering her front desk with the chocolates, you always felt welcome to go there with any questions or issues! She was professional and so friendly at the same time, a wonderful person!”

Katti Millock, Class of 1998

“I have just learned [read] this about Gail: ‘We interviewed several candidates when we hired Gail. Within the first minute of her interview, we looked at each other and knew that we should do whatever we could to induce her to join the department. She immediately told us that she viewed taking care of students as her fundamental responsibility—faculty and administrators had to play second fiddle.’ As one of those lucky students, I can say Gail truly kept that promise. I miss her dearly!”

Muzhe Yang, Class of 2008

“I can only echo what is already said in so many heartfelt messages here. I am filled with sadness but also gratitude and many wonderful memories of my time at ARE. Gail full-heartedly took care and prioritized students and always had an answer when I or others in my cohort came to her with questions. She even knew what to say when we did not really have a specific question. She was our advocate and support, kind and sometimes tough at the same time, but always there to help. She was such an important part of my ARE experience and a role model for what student-centered education could look like to this day. She will be dearly missed but also always remembered for all she did! Sending my love to her family and friends and thank you for sharing her with us, her ARE family!”

Kristin Kiesel, Class of 2008

“May Gail find rest in the presence of God.”

Eugenio Bobenreith, Class of 1996

“I don’t think I can add much to what has already been said. Gail was amazing, supportive, kind, and generous. She made such a huge difference for all of us in Giannini.”

Jackie Geoghegan, Class of 1995

“Before I had met Gail, I sent her a fax (!) calling her Mr Vawter. I laughed quite a lot when we finally met at the ARE office. Afterwards, Gail always complimented my smile. And my coat. And whatever. No wonder so many people feel personally very grateful to Gail. So do I. My condolences to Gail's family.”

Anni Huhtala, Class of 1994

“I would like to add that Gail was our "mother" in the program, especially for students who came from other countries. It is not easy for foreign students to go through tough 1st-year PhD coursework together with a totally new living environment. Gail was there for these students (including me!) to help emotionally. Forever grateful to her.”

Koichiro Ito, Class of 2011



Koichiro and Gail

Class of 2011

“Gail is unforgettable. I remember the first day I met her. I stopped by the front office and wanted to set an appointment to talk to someone about the department as a prospective student. She said, “Brian’s class will be done in 5 minutes. If you can wait, I will take you to him, and you do not have to come back another day.” I got my coffee with Brian, and the rest was history. That is who she was: kind, super helpful, and caring of the students. Please convey my condolences to her family. She was beloved.”

Andrew Dabalen, Class of 1998

“Faculty, students, and even chancellors come and go. But Gail was always there for everyone. We will all miss you, Gail, but you will forever live in our fondest memories. Thanks for all you did for each and every one of us.”

Christopher Costello, Class of 2000

“Thank you for passing on the sad news about Gail. She was an incredible woman, loved and respected by faculty, staff, and students. I’m thinking of Gail..., and my thoughts and prayers are with her family. May her soul rest in peace and her memory be a blessing. 🙏”

Amor Nolan, former ARE staff

“As many have already said, Gail was a mainstay, supportive, efficient and welcoming. She certainly helped me and most of us negotiate the frustrations of making it through to graduation. My condolences to her friends and family.”

Bill Foster, Class of 1987

“I was really saddened to hear about Gail’s passing. She always greeted me with kindness and is an inseparable part of the ARE family in my mind.”

Tatyana Deryugina, Class of 2006 (EEP)

“Tough and Tender, that was my friend Gail. A generous colleague who shared her experience, information, and wisdom to help the front office operate at an optimal level and in turn, help make ARE as efficient an academic department as there is on the Cal campus.

I’d get a Gail ‘side-eye’ when diving a bit too enthusiastically into the chocolate basket sitting on her office counter, but always with affectionate amusement. I respected Gail’s counsel both on a professional and personal level and sought out her advice because I appreciated what a force of nature she embodied as the formidable woman she very much was.

I miss you Gail and cherish our time together in ARE, and in the dinners you graciously invited me to have in your lovely Berkeley Hills home, with that awesome view of the Golden Gate bridge. All, mean so much to me. Thank you.

‘Hey Girl!’...rest in sweet peace, and give ‘em some of that classy sass up there in the heavens, making sure they know another goddess has just arrived.

Until we meet again...all my love,” Diana Lazo, ARE staff 1999 -

“Gail was a truly wonderful person. Her dedication to and support of the department’s students was always clear.”

James Hilger, Class of 2006

“When I arrived “fresh from a Saskatchewan farm” to begin the ARE PhD program in the fall of 1988, Gail was exactly the person I needed to reassure me and keep a smile on my face. Her devotion to student well-being is truly incredible.”

James Vercammen, Class of 1991.

“Gail was so instrumental in helping build an ARE culture where students are very well supported while challenged. Truly the mother of the department. She had a special way of making everyone feel welcome and valued. She will be deeply missed.”

Jinhua Zhao, Class of 1997

Gail was so special! She did the work of two people, and was unfailingly effective, helpful, and kind to all—undergraduates, grad students, and even faculty.

Ethan Ligon, Professor, ARE

Gail made a huge difference for so many of us grad students at ARE. I am so grateful to have had Gail’s advice and guidance during those wonderful years. We will always remember her.

Chantal Toledo, Class of 2013

Gail was the first member from the department that I met in person when I came to Giannini Hall to register after arriving at Berkeley. To us, she was much more than a graduate student advising officer. With kindness, warmth and compassion, she guided us, and supported us through our graduate life. We will always remember her.

Di Zeng, Class of 2013

“For students like me who were off-campus for long stretches at a time during our dissertation writing, Gail always made ARE a warm, welcoming place to come back to. I will miss her dearly.”

Kensuke Kubo, Class of 2011

“Gail was a brilliant mentor and a warm presence during my time as an undergraduate. Her high standards pushed me to exceed my own expectations, and with her support, I was able to earn the Melis Medal for my honors thesis. Beyond her academic rigor, she was a joy to work with, always encouraging her students to reach their full potential. I will always cherish the lessons I learned from her.”

Molly Doctors Rajashekhar, EEP Class of 2009

"I will always remember Gail, her kindness, and how much she helped me when I was a grad student"

Enrico Moretti, ARE student in 1994-1995

“Gail always knew the answer to things and made navigating a PhD so much easier.. Made you feel welcome from Day 1.”

Sarah Baird, Class of 2007

“I will always remember the bowl of chocolates that Gail had on her desk. We used to stop by after lunch to get one - but really, we often went just to see Gail and hear the supportive and kind words she always had for grad students.”

Shanthi Nataraj, Class of 2010

Sending up much love to Gail on her Birthday today, November 20, and fondly remembering our Gail—a true Cal Bear and Mama Bear to all. ❤️🍫

Angie Erickson, retired ARE staff

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We will share this entire document with Gail's family, her kids, grandkids and husband Buzz, with messages for them about Gail from her ARE family.



Go Bears !

Go Gail !



Su, October 19, 2024, Charcoal



At the Greek, May 19, 2013



86%



Class of 1996



Class of 2000



Class of 2001



Class of 2002



ARE Class of 2003



ARE 2004



Class of 2005



Class of 2006



ARE class of 2007



Class of 2008



Class of 2009



ARE Class of 2010



ARE Class of 2011



ARE Class of 2012



Class of 2013



Gail in action, Cal Day



203 Giannini Hall, Last day in office in 2013



Giannini Hall, next to 203 Giannini, October 2024.