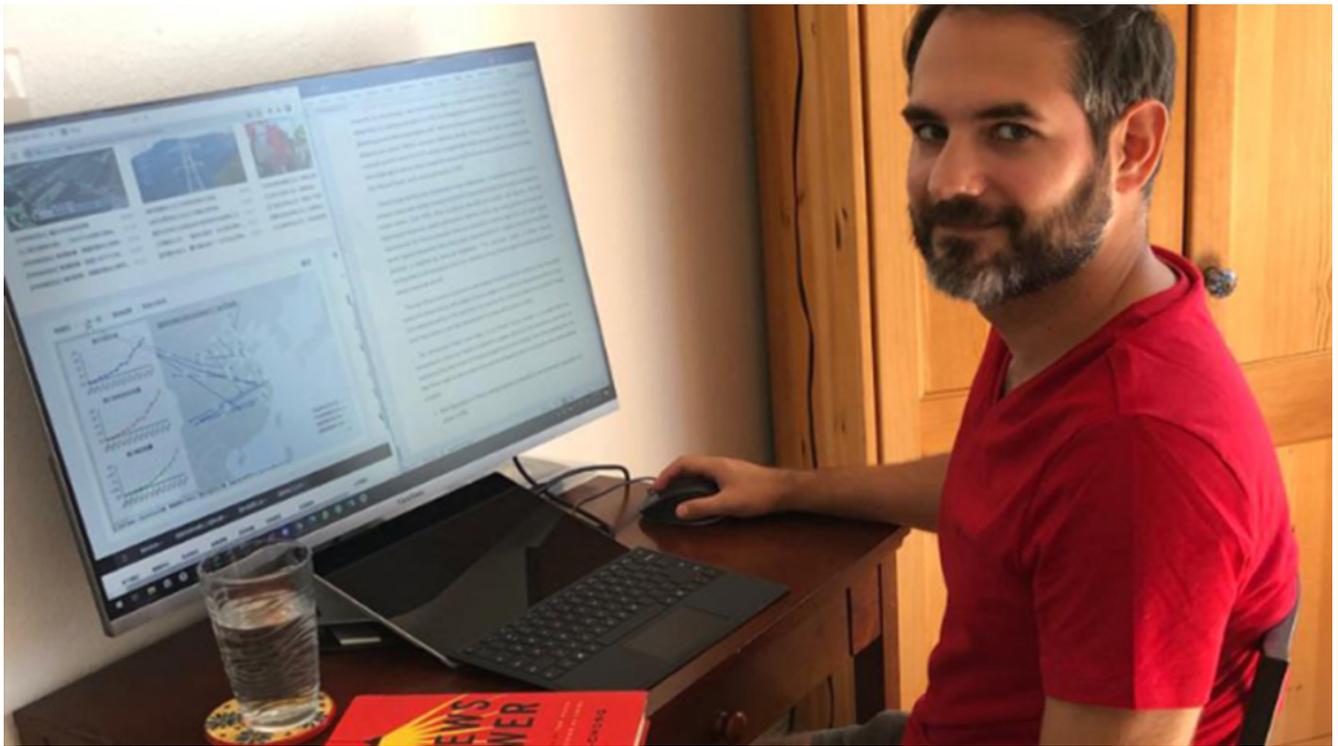


# A day in the life of a Dean's Fellow



**Rolando Almada explains how the GPS MCEPA program has afforded him the opportunity to study the intricacies of the relationship among China, Mexico and the U.S.**

By Virginia Watson | GPS News

After working for a decade in Mexico City and abroad at institutions like the International Renewable Energy Agency, Mexico's Ministry of Energy and Mexico's state-owned electric power company CFE, Rolando Almada's interest grew in the international relationship with China, Mexico and the U.S. He began to look for a professional program that would propel him to new heights in his career, and in his research, he discovered the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS).

Once he was accepted to GPS' [Master of Chinese Economics and Political Affairs \(MCEPA\)](#) program, Almada took advantage of every opportunity, including serving in leadership roles in student groups such as the [Journal of International Policy Solutions \(JIPS\)](#) and the newly created [Sinosphere Journal](#) from [China Focus](#).

His dedication has paid off - Almada was named a GPS [Dean's Fellow](#) for the

2020-21 academic year. This special distinction serves to signal the professional qualities of excellence that the school cultivates and honors, rewarding students' outstanding performance in academics, leadership, civic engagement and regional involvement.

In this Q&A, Almada, a native of Sonora, Mexico, explains how he ended up at GPS, how his favorite professors shaped him long before he ever set foot on the UC San Diego campus and how the novel coronavirus pandemic has made it essential to find a work/life balance.

### **What drew you to GPS and the MCEPA program?**

After working in Mexico and abroad, I was ready to go into a program that offered valuable tools to understand China's complex economic and political system. I want to track and analyze China's energy development and policies as they come out of the oven. I carefully researched many high-quality programs in China, the U.S., Mexico and other countries. Still, the MCEPA curriculum and faculty were the most appealing because it is a professional degree and not a strictly Ph.D.-track degree. The professors at GPS are doing cutting-edge China research through the [21st China Century Center](#). I also thought carefully about the opportunities to live and study in the San Diego-Tijuana area, one of the world's most interesting transnational regions. I believe it is here where Mexico, China and the U.S. are likely to make synergy if we manage to build a constructive relationship.

### **What is your area of specialization, and why did you choose it?**

My specialization area is the [Chinese Environment](#), especially the energy sector. I chose this specialization because China is central to solving the world's environmental and energy challenges. I was also drawn to California because it is a world leader in innovation in both fields. UC San Diego has excellent faculty pushing to accelerate a new wave of energy innovations and actively supporting policies and performing pioneering research in climate change and atmospheric sciences.

### **What do you like most about the MCEPA program?**

I like how GPS equips us with critical science, historical background, policy analysis and quantitative tools during the first year. This way, we can spend the

second year doing meaningful research for the Capstone Project. The MCEPA cohort is very small (seven in my cohort), which is great because I get to know my peers very well. We get excited together about our China topics and research agendas.

**I was told you taught yourself Chinese in order to apply to the program - tell us about that.**

I was working full-time in Mexico City as a communications manager, and the job was intense. However, I used all my spare time during the last two years before applying to GPS to learn Chinese. It was tough to find a school or teachers that would fit my schedule. Still, I eventually found a private tutor and later combined it with intensive courses during the weekend to learn and practice the language. I have continued my language studies in the [China Studies department at UC San Diego](#), which has excellent faculty for consolidating my language skills.

**What's been your favorite class so far and why?**

So many, because there are many courses about China and energy technology, policy and politics. But one class that surprised me in its approach was [Victor Shih](#)'s class on the Political Economy of Authoritarian Regimes. That class gave me a lot to think about: the nature of power and how democracy and authoritarianism can be analyzed as part of a continuous political spectrum. I enjoyed the readings from that class and the small discussion group we formed online with the professor during the COVID-19 lockdown.

**Is there a particular professor that has made a big impact on you? If so, who and why?**

GPS professors made an impact on me even before coming here. Professor [Barry Naughton](#) truly impresses me because of his understanding of the Chinese Economic Miracle and the coming of age of China's state capitalism. I got his books and read them diligently back in Mexico. His research was a departure point for me and helped me formulate my own questions about China and Latin America, especially concerning the evolution and dynamics of China's state-owned enterprises. Those enterprises have been very active and expanding in Latin America since the beginning of the 2000s.

Another influential professor whose research I followed before coming to the

program is Professor [David Victor](#). He has written excellent pieces on how politics and regulation interplay in the international sphere of energy and climate change. Professor Victor's research on the political economy of power sector reform and oil and governance had a massive impact on me when I was working at the International Renewable Energy Agency, the General Directorate of International Affairs of the Ministry of Energy of Mexico, and later at Mexico's state-owned electric power company, CFE.

It was an educational dream to take classes with both professors at GPS and see their current research on topics I am passionate about.

### **What's your favorite thing about being a Dean's Fellow?**



I think it's a big honor and responsibility to represent GPS and the MCEPA program. For me, it is a reminder that I came here as an international student to sharpen my critical and analytical skills and to use them to the best of my ability to bring light and understanding to the many challenges that China's rise poses to the stability and development of the Pacific Region and beyond - all of this with ethical and professional rigor.

### **What general advice do you have for admitted GPS students?**

Take advantage of the many possibilities to tailor the GPS programs to your own

specific interests and needs. GPS and UC San Diego offer many excellent graduate courses that will undoubtedly help you achieve your professional and personal goals.

**Amid your rigorous academic schedule, in what ways do you strike a work/life balance?**

San Diego and California are great places to see and experience nature. It has beautiful parks, mountains, beaches, deserts, forests and lakes. Its society is very outdoorsy. The weather is nice most of the year. You quickly find friends to go to the beach, hike or camp around San Diego and California-Mexico's Baja region. Having access to this really made it easy for me to recharge over the weekends and start the weeks fresh and relaxed.

With the pandemic emergency, in the beginning, it felt almost impossible to keep up, mostly when all sense of structure faded from one day to the next. Fortunately, with the support from my family, friends, faculty and the GPS and UC San Diego CAPS staff, I overcame the emotional and academic challenges we had to live through during an unusual first year. I am very grateful for the GPS and broader UC San Diego community. They have made me a more resilient person and professional.

**Full list of 2020-2021 Dean's Fellows:**

- Summer Bales, MPP '21
- Joe Bettles, MPP '21
- Samantha Beu, MIA '21
- Alejandra Chaidez, MPP '21
- Jack Christensen, MPP '21
- Tony (Ming-Ju) Hsieh, MIA '21
- Tanvi Jaluka, MPP '21
- Alana Laanui, MIA '21
- Carmen (Yingying) Lai, BA/MIA '21
- Eli Mogel, MPP '21
- Jesse Nasland, BA/MIA '21
- Caroline Novit, MPP '21
- Dominic Palazzolo, MIA '21
- James Radcliffe, MIA '21

- Mario Rodriguez Heredia, MPP '21
- Ethan Roseman, MIA '21
- Satomi Sato, MIA '21
- Ben Swearingen, MIA '21
- Sonia (Huizhong) Tan, MCEPA '21
- Indira Tirumala, MIA '21
- Laura Vossler, MPP '21