Changemaking in the 21st Century

GPS hosts “Dialogue Over Dessert” to celebrate those dedicated to finding innovative solutions to pressing problems

Rachel Hommel | GPS News

Who is a changemaker? A mentor? An innovator?

In celebration of Changemaker Week on Jan. 22, 2019, the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS) hosted an interdisciplinary panel of faculty researchers. In a casual dialogue over dessert, they spoke about their work, which highlights some of today’s most impactful and forward-thinking research, all while inspiring students to become the next generation of global leaders.

Designated as a Changemaker Campus by Ashoka U, UC San Diego is the first University of California campus to be recognized in this manner for its role in social innovation and changemaking education. Only 44 universities around the world have received this designation. An initiative of Ashoka, the world’s largest network of social entrepreneurs, the organization recognizes colleges and universities globally that have embedded social innovation as a core value.

“At UC San Diego, we consider changemaking part of our DNA,” said Wendy Hunter Barker, GPS assistant dean and member of the campus changemaking
steering committee. “We received the campus designation by Askoka U in no small part because of the research that happens on this campus. The speakers here tonight are a wonderful representation of the depth and breadth UC San Diego has to offer.”

Below eight experts from across a variety of disciplines present their thoughts on what makes them a changemaker, driving positive change near and far.

David Adamowicz, Salk Institute

At the Gage Lab at Salk, Adamowicz researches dementia using postmortem brain tissue kindly donated by patients and their families and converts living patient skin cells into neurons in order to better understand disease mechanisms in a dynamic setting.

“Our brains hold our memories, they define our personalities. It’s really what drew me to the study of the brain. Like my grandfather said, live your life to the fullest and seize every opportunity. While we cannot change the past, we can all hope for a future without dementia.”

Jennifer Burney, Policy Design and Evaluation Lab (PDEL) at GPS

PDEL combines advanced social science methodology with the power of information technology to design policies and programs that alleviate poverty; promote health, welfare, and security; and enhance accountability.
“I was always a science nerd growing up. I study broadly the connections between climate and food security. On the ground, I am trying to understand how farmers adapt to climate variability and climate change.”

Mauricio de Oliveira, Global TIES Cruz Roja

The Cruz Roja Tijuana team seeks to help the Tijuana Red Cross make the best use of its capabilities and resources in order to provide the residents of Tijuana with the best possible medical care by providing technologies through software programming.

“In Tijuana, the provider of emergency services is the Red Cross because the emergency services are so bad that it is considered a war zone. We wanted to create a data-driven solution to figure out where ambulances are needed and track them.”

Leslie Lewis, Bioregional Center for Sustainable Science, Planning and Design (BRC)

The BRC builds “Healthy Places, Healthy People, Healthy Communities.” Research projects pertain to topics on equitable community development and design, equity in education, green infrastructure and climate and healthy living.

“People young and old are hungry for knowledge. I wanted to understand how people adapt and survive in the face of significant challenges. I am hungry to understand, to transform places through placemaking. We have as much to learn from people out in the community in our capacity to adapt.”
Sadoff uses the disciplines of applied microeconomics and behavioral sciences to understand incentives and how they factor into decision making. Recent works focus on social programs and food choice.

“I want to close educational gaps. I grew up seeing a lot of inequality, a big source of that being the difference in schooling. I was always interested in education and making change. In behavioral economics, we offer students and teachers incentives to improve performance.”

Dale Stokes, Innovative Marine Technology Laboratory, Scripps Institution of Oceanography

Ever wonder what life in Antarctica is like? Stokes can tell you. A researcher with extensive oceanographic field experience, his expertise lies in the design, construction and deployment of in situ sensor systems which study marine environments.
“When I was very young, I wanted to be a tiger. After that phase, I decided I wanted to be an oceanographer. I work at the juncture of biology, technology and physics. There’s a big disconnect with the public and what’s going on in the ocean. To teach people to be stewards, you have to connect them.”

Massimo Vergassola, Department of Physics

Looking to nature for inspiration, Vergassola and his team use machine learning techniques to find effective soaring strategies for gliders flying within complex, turbulent flows by studying migrating birds. The results advance the development of autonomous flying vehicles.

“It’s not a bird, it’s not a plane, it’s an AI glider. We use techniques of artificial intelligence. It’s a beautiful project and it’s a good example of why science is so exciting.”

Linda Whiteside, Partners at Learning (PAL) Program

UC San Diego’s largest service-learning program, PAL provides opportunities for undergraduates to work with underserved P-12 students and schools while earning credit.

“By the end of the quarter, the students have transformed not only a classroom, but have served as a role model for students and teachers. We transform education from the inside out.”

To learn more about UC San Diego Changemaker Week, click here.