Ensuring diversity and inclusion

New GPS Diversity Dialogues program aims to engage the community in meaningful conversations

By Wendy Hunter Barker | GPS News

Walking across the Robinson Building Complex courtyard, you pass clusters of students animatedly comparing exam responses in Mandarin, Korean, Spanish and perhaps even Russian. You see the latest in Japanese fashion on display and smell the aroma of Thai food from the school’s favorite vendor brought in to feed hungry students during finals week. As an international affairs and public policy school, the School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS) is one of the most diverse places on UC San Diego’s campus.

This diversity that is celebrated in the classroom, forms the bedrock of the school’s curriculum and results in a proliferation of student groups and organizations. Yet, bringing together people from a wide array of backgrounds can sometimes lead to self-segregation and cliques. Regional geopolitical trends and cultural norms can be analytically discussed in the classroom, yet how well do they blend in the quad?

The fabric of GPS is composed of global curiosity, an appreciation for difference
and a willingness to see the world from a different perspective. Yet even with these core beliefs held by the vast majority of students, faculty and staff, ongoing efforts are still needed to promote a wholly inclusive environment. To this end, the school has implemented a new program – the GPS Diversity Dialogues – designed to get the community talking about issues that can potentially divide.

“I think people are afraid they will say the wrong thing because these are complicated subjects,” said Joe Bettles, a 2021 Master of Public Policy (MPP) candidate. “When we have conversations about gender, for instance, we want to highlight the complexity and wide range of experiences. But at the same time, it is important to not miss the forest for the trees. It is actually very simple. It is about allowing people to be who they want to be. And being willing to make an effort when you are asked to listen.”

The program – in its inaugural year – is simple. GPS Diversity Dialogues bring together faculty, students and staff once each quarter to share a meal and discuss a topic that impacts the school. These topics are far-ranging, spanning gender, race and inclusion of English language learners. Topics are proposed by the GPS community, with those garnering the most interest being selected for discussion.

“Attending these GPS Diversity Dialogues has been a wonderful opportunity to engage with people from all over our community to understand what they think, how they feel and who we are,” said Sonja Steinbrech, GPS director of degree program enrollment. “The chance to have both one-on-one conversation and group dialog about sometimes difficult topics can be uncomfortable but always offers a chance to grow and learn for all those who participate.”
As issues are discussed and ways to improve the community climate are discovered, these ideas are captured and sent to the faculty’s Equity and Diversity Committee, where they are explored in greater detail.

“This faculty committee is charged with advising the dean on diversity issues across the school, and the feedback from these dialogues has been a great help,” said Associate Dean of Student Affairs Gordon McCord. “It provides us with a direct window into the thinking on these topics and helps us in our work to support efforts to make GPS a more equitable, inclusive community where all feel welcome, supported and able to thrive.”

Support From Across the Campus

GPS is not alone in its efforts to create a more inclusive campus. UC San Diego has recently unveiled its Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence, a multi-year project that incorporated feedback from the entire campus community and has institutionalized annual accountability reports for all units.

The plan is designed as a collective framework for campus engagement, strategic action, assessment and accountability that will shape the future of our campus. It identifies core tenets central to achieving UC San Diego’s vision for inclusive excellence including Access and Success, Climate, and Accountability.

UC San Diego’s campuswide efforts have been critical to the success of programs like GPS Diversity Dialogues. The campus provides intensive training on leading equity and diversity initiatives within units (LEAD Fellows), provides resources for a wide array of campus community centers which all aim to make people feel heard and valued and offers strong leadership from the Office for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion.

“The words – equity, diversity, inclusion – are heard so frequently that sometimes we stop digesting their meaning. But these words are fundamental to the work we do as educators and require overt attention as we train the next generation of global leaders,” said GPS Dean Peter Cowhey.

Learn more about the equity and diversity initiatives at GPS here.