GPS - a dean’s journey

A short prelude

By Peter Cowhey

The creators of the GPS newsletter asked me to write an account of the changes in my years as dean. Looking at where we have been and how far we have traveled is a prelude to the new initiatives that my successor will pursue.

I decided it would be in the GPS tradition to explain how strategy informed the path forward. In doing so, it may sound as if I see myself as the originator of all that I describe. Moreover, tidying up the narrative makes it sound as if the outcomes followed a neat chronological path.

Neither is true. My accomplishments were a result of group effort.

Our terrific faculty and staff drove many of the key innovations. Recruiting and
investing in great people is the key to any successful organization. Our International Advisory Board provided a stream of candid invaluable feedback. New donors fueled the initiatives. Our students and alumni reminded me of our core values and the need for change. Initiatives often emerged in disjointed bits and pieces as opportunities allowed us to nibble successfully at what would later become moments of bigger consolidations of change.

In short, this is a tale of a community’s journey of progress told through my eyes as the dean.

The early years

I arrived a year late to my service as dean. In theory, my term began on July 1, 2001. However, for the prior 12 months I had led all aspects of the plan to create the Rady School of Management at UC San Diego. Much remained on the agenda, including writing the proposal for the MBA degree’s approval and the hiring of the inaugural Rady School dean. As a result, there was an acting dean that year, while I completed the work for Rady.

Some worried that my tardy arrival would harm the school. Instead, mastering the lessons of how successful management schools worked strongly informed my agenda for GPS (then IR/PS) in the first stage of my 19 years as dean. As academics, we like to talk about strategic vision first, but sometimes neglect the other fundamentals. In contrast, I had concluded that GPS initially needed to
embrace building core elements of excellence of all great professional schools.

Shoring up the core elements required tackling two issues.

The first was scale. Unless the school had the benefits of a vast endowment and the capability of charging tuition on the scale of the Ivy League professional schools (something that no public university should do), it was necessary to build a larger scale of enrollments and new forms of revenue that could support a stable faculty and administrative service staff.

We also needed to grow the size of the faculty to undertake the research studies that would allow us to become a center of intellectual gravity for the world’s understanding of the Pacific Century. As examples of our subsequent scaling, our incoming class has roughly tripled in size in the past 20 years, and our faculty size has more than doubled.

The second issue was student services. GPS had a dedicated staff, but the critical student services required for a professional student’s success lacked adequate budget resources and key specialists.

Moreover, they operated in siloes. Admissions, student academic services, career services and the fledgling executive education program required unifying visions and strategies to serve students more powerfully.

Today, for example, GPS has one of the best job placement records among its peer institutions. And, the executive education program has birthed our successful Master of Advanced Studies in International Affairs (MAS-IA) degree that serves mid-career professionals from around the world. This degree program requires deep integration with all other student affairs functions. Its success, in turn, helped to address the challenge of scale.
I could focus on these less visible tasks initially because the school had launched with a distinctive and far-sighted strategic vision, championed by Peter Gourevitch, the founding dean. It gambled that the intersection of Asia and Americas (the “Pacific”) would replace the “Atlantic” as the fulcrum point for global dynamics in the 21st Century.

GPS decided to focus its curriculum on regions only on the politics and economics of the Pacific, and it insisted that elements of management education (such as finance) be part of the “toolkit” of specialists grounded in a region where government involvement in business affairs was far deeper than the norm in the U.S.

Indirectly, this led GPS to become a leader among its peers on requiring extensive training in quantitative data analysis to complement traditional policy skills. This audacity of vision had attracted a stellar faculty from day one. The faculty of economists and political scientists believed that the tools of contemporary social science could open new understandings of how the Pacific worked. Moreover, they believed that we could teach the tools in a sophisticated way in a professional school.

The early excitement of a different vision can only sustain an institution for so long. The question became “where does our opening act lead next?” A great
institution of discovery, the core value of the research university, must continue to evolve if it is to live up to its mission.

The vision and implications of becoming GPS

Our answer to the evolutionary challenge came in answering four questions.

How did we link our mastery of the Pacific more explicitly to our capacity to address global policy challenges? We tackled this by recognizing that the school’s name was its promise to the world. We began as the School of International Relations and Pacific Studies—announcing we shared the mission of schools of international affairs but staked our reputation on mastery of the Pacific.

After much discussion and analysis, with great help from the International Advisory Board, we decided that we needed a new name with a new promise. Becoming the School of Global Policy and Strategy announced that our mastery of the Pacific had equipped us uniquely to bring a special perspective to addressing the premier global issues of the 21st Century.

We did not abandon our Pacific roots but now transformed them into drivers of global thought leadership. And we embraced our history of thinking that governments and their policies were only one part of the collective decisions shaping our futures. The choices of firms and nongovernmental institutions would also matter. Thus, we became a school of policy and strategy.
We had to translate our new name’s promise to the world by supporting research centers with a broader mission and public engagement outside the Pacific. Fortunately, the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation (a UC system institute) had been headquartered at GPS since its creation and anchored our work on global and Pacific region security.

We created the Policy Design and Evaluation Laboratory to bring together the work of GPS faculty and other UC San Diego scholars to monitor and rigorously evaluate programs around the world designed to improve economic well-being and public health in lower income countries. Our global work on socio-economic development was a point of pride.

The Laboratory on International Law and Regulation became our facility for melding questions about when and how international law proves effective in addressing human rights and environmental issues.

Later, this lab spun off the Deep Decarbonization Initiative, a joint project with the Jacobs School of Engineering at UC San Diego, to meld political economic analysis of feasibility with research on engineering practical paths for global climate policy.

Most recently, we created the Center on Commerce and Diplomacy to examine the deep structural changes in global business and economics that require fresh policies and reexamined business strategies.

The second question was how did we further deepen our policy research and
outreach regarding the Pacific regions? Going global did not mean retreating from our priority on the Pacific. The geographic focus of our curriculum remained exclusively on the Americas and Asia. We worked with UC San Diego leadership to move the Center for U.S.-Mexico Studies to GPS so that we had one of the country’s top centers on Latin America in our portfolio.

Smaller scale programs focused on Korea, Japan and Southeast Asia evolved.

Next came the 21st Century China Center, which has quickly become preeminent in the field.

As I closed my time at GPS, we decided a comparable effort was necessary on India. Watch for its debut next year!

On the horizon, ideas are kindling for a program on the future of democracies and authoritarian regimes that will cut across the individual geographic centers.

The third question was how did we better graft GPS into the DNA of UC San Diego as a world leader in science, engineering and medicine? This was a point of my special enthusiasm for me because my own career as a scholar and practitioner had focused on solving the choices created for society by big shifts in technological capabilities.

Our answer was to commit GPS to become a leader in science and technology policy. To achieve this ambition, we altered the mix of our faculty. We have hired a cluster of young scholars, some jointly appointed with the Jacobs School of Engineering and the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, whose Ph.D.s are in the natural sciences and engineering but whose published research spans both their science discipline and the best journals of applied policy analysis.

We have given them institutional support especially through our Center for Global Transformation – recently renamed in my honor.

This center’s Big Pixel Initiative, for example, propelled our leadership in the use of satellite photo data to provide new ways to measure and evaluate the results of public choices about crop management and urban infrastructure. It has funded new tools for measuring underground water resources to allow better management in coming years of drought.

Designing the right technical instruments requires a deep understanding of the
policy and strategy choices that they must inform, a very GPS question. Combined with the Deep Decarbonization program and Sustainable Development Goals initiative, GPS has developed an enviable capability in environmental, energy and climate policy.

At the same time, the Center’s Pacific Leadership Fellows has evolved from an exclusive focus on bringing prominent leaders from Asia and the Americas to a cadre with a more global scope and a broader range of leadership roles. Their ranks now include prominent leaders from Europe and technology innovators.

The fourth question was how could these new paths translate into new options for our students? One dramatic example is how they have changed the mix of our degree programs.

Joining our International Affairs degree program is our rapidly growing Master of Public Policy (MPP) degree. Our students told us that they embraced the popular slogan “think globally, act locally.”

They wanted to see how our expertise in comparative policy choices of different countries could provide better insights, for example, into managing the choices of Mexico City or Beijing on environmental management. This degree lets them do so.

Meanwhile, our preeminent program on China had built a strong demand for a degree that let students do a deep dive on contemporary China in the context of changing global geo-economics and politics. The Master of Chinese Economic and
Political Affairs (MCEPA) permits that special focus.

And, perhaps most gratifying to me, the growth of a large number of intensive quantitative skills courses opened a new option to address the vexing question of how to reduce the total cost of undergraduate and graduate professional education.

This is particularly important at UC San Diego because it has a large undergraduate population of first generation college students. We have created a five-year program, which combines a UC San Diego undergraduate and GPS graduate degree by allowing talented undergraduates to begin their GPS graduate studies in their senior year.

In the end, these students cut the time to both degrees by a year and avoid one year of the higher tuition for a graduate degree. And, because they typically load up on advanced quantitative courses, they are readily employable even if they lack prior professional experience.

What’s next?

The choices of the future rest with the next dean and the faculty. For all of our past great work on big global and Pacific issues, the contours of the political, strategic, economic and environmental challenges keep evolving in ways that require continual reappraisal of our strategies.

Moreover, we must join with our students and staff on the continuing work that arose from the collective reflections arising from the racial and social upheavals of recent times. At GPS, this discussion also has to embrace a global dimension to reflect the range of our student body.

Where this leads the school may be surprising. For example, should it be more involved in undergraduate education in order to bring its unique perspective more fully into the educational experience of UC San Diego’s diverse student body? How could it create a higher profile and impact for its expanding portfolio of projects on science, technology and public policy that address both domestic and global questions?

GPS has the resources and the skills to tackle big questions, opportunities and
challenges. Our finances are in good order. We have grown our endowment as a financial cushion and enabler of new undertakings. We now have 14 faculty endowed chairs and fellowships. We have a growing cadre of generous donors and advisers from the global community who have already helped us to raise more than double the school’s fundraising target for UC San Diego’s current capital campaign. Our alumni are focusing on the mission of expanding scholarship assistance to future GPS students.

There is a sense of community and collective ambition at GPS that makes new undertakings easier. We have a faculty of established stars and rapidly rising new ones. I am confident that Dean Freund and the GPS faculty, staff, students, alumni and supporters have the tools necessary to achieve far greater goals than those reached in the past 20 years. It will be fun to watch.