Leading from the front
In our third annual Public Service Weekend, non-tradition is celebrated as students explore their role in changemaking and paving the path forward

By Rachel Hommel | GPS News

Be the change you want to see in the world. At the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS), we are uniquely positioned to explore how policy, innovation and global trade can improve the lives of U.S. citizens and the global community.

“You are at a school that believes that the mission of public service is one of the most important parts of society we live in and key to a fair and democratic country,” said Dean Peter Cowhey. “I hope you will learn from each other this weekend. It is your colleagues and peers that will give you invaluable insights in charting your own course ahead.”

UC San Diego is driving positive change locally and worldwide. Recently designated as a Changemaker Campus by Ashoka U, making positive change has become part of our DNA. Co-sponsored by the Public Policy and International Affairs Program (PPIA), the inclusive weekend drew underrepresented undergraduate students from across California to GPS to amplify their voices in the social justice realm.

This year’s theme, Leading from the Front – Understanding Your Role in Changemaking, brought together expert panel discussions and skill building exercises designed to set students on a path to becoming adept at boundary breaking, redefining the status quo in their communities to become the next generation of global leaders.
“Your biggest advocate should be yourself,” stressed Hugo Salzar, PPIA alumnus. “Be like a laser – find your mission statement and focus on that particular area.”

Changemaking 101. It’s a Marathon not a Sprint.

As future leaders in social innovation, participants had a chance to self-reflect on the most salient issues to their personal journey, identifying the societal goals most aligned with their passions. Utilizing the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, participants were able to identify their place on the changemaker continuum in a wide range of disciplines.

“Why is change necessary? What do YOU care about?” challenged Emily Loui, Changemaking 101 facilitator. “Changemaking is not a race. These sustainable development goals are all interconnected and affect each other.”

Throughout the weekend, participants were asked to be curious...and courageous. Perhaps even radical. Norma Chavez-Peterson, the weekend’s keynote speaker, addressed not only the policy topics shaping current public discourse but how future changemakers can influence policy at the local, state and national level. As the executive director of ACLU San Diego and Imperial Counties, she offered a guiding light for participants in the room and a sense of hope.

“I am hopeful that more and more people are waking up and thinking about our rights, moving progressive civil rights policy at the local, state and county level,” emphasized Chavez-Peterson.

Emphasizing the need for activism, Chavez-Peterson stressed the importance of
being clear on the values and vision for yourself and your community. Find mentors, advisors and people that will invest in you and your vision.

“I am where I am because of the people that invested in me,” said Chavez-Peterson. “Find those people that can guide you on your path to activism.”

During the Public Service Weekend, our future changemakers got to build those connections and touchpoints, a time to self-reflect, share and build their network of allies. Below we share three stories.

Carlos Guerrero - Social Justice at the Heart of Education
Political Science Major, San Diego State University

There is nothing quite like giving back to your community. For Carlos Guerrero, currently a high school tutor at his alma mater Montgomery High School in Chula Vista, education has always been central to his role in leading from the front. Wanting to give back to a school that gave him opportunities, he is eager to work on becoming a teacher.

“Changemaking is being able to see institutions that are in place and challenging them,” said Guerrero. “I want to better equip students to prepare them for college. A lot of students in my community do not see people that have gone off to college. It’s critical to have a leader and representative for them.”

Hoping to change how local political leaders prioritize funds allocated to schools, Guerrero is passionate about mixing education and public policy, inspired by the conversations and policy topics addressed over the weekend in shaping current public discourse.
“I loved the conversations on inclusivity and intersectionality,” recalls Guerrero. “We were all there for one common goal – to be public servants and leaders for our communities. I felt very inspired by the diverse perspectives and was a huge motivation to continue my work.”

**Jamie Helberg - Fighting for Environmental Policy**
Environmental Analysis and International Studies Major, Pitzer College

The daughter of a Cuban refugee and Colombian immigrant, diversity and inclusion have always been central to Jamie Helberg’s identity. Seeing the trajectory of her community change, her passion for policy and food access became personal as she grew up around farming. Studying food security in college, she hopes to diversify how people of color get to experience the environment.

“I do not see climate or the earth as separate from the human experience,” stressed Helberg. “I want to see a more humanized understanding of how we relate to the environment, including diverse representation of those who work on climate policy.”

To Helberg, changemaking has a domino effect, not just in her life but the community around her. Currently applying for a Fulbright scholarship, she is eager to do research and inform policy in local government. As a first-generation college student, she felt welcomed and embraced by the other participants, all fighting for the change they want to see in the world.

“I can see how the energy in the room changed, the discourse changed and things
flowed more naturally when diversity was clearly at the table,” said Helberg. “It was incredibly reaffirming to meet people so mobilized to develop themselves professionally and claim their place in public policy.”

Zehra Qazi - Taking A Stand for Human Rights
Public Policy Major, UC Riverside

Born into a world of contrasting cultures, ethically Indian but politically Pakistani, Zehra Qazi has seen first-hand border conflicts, struggling to set foot into a country she calls home. Fueling her desire to learn more about cultural and historical narratives, she views public policy as a way to belong to these conflicts, learning how to educate herself on all sides of the story and both sides of the border.

“Leadership starts with myself. It’s important to interact with people of similar and different journeys,” stressed Qazi. “How do I fit into their journeys and how do I fit into mine? Changemaking is defined through educating myself and helping others be educated.”

With an open mind and keen interest in immigration and human rights violations, public policy has given Qazi a way of comprehending, opening her eyes to how the puzzle pieces fit together. During the weekend, she was inspired by the real-world applications of the memo writing exercise, as well as celebrating non-tradition in public discourse.

“We should all be on the same side and that side is humanity,” said Qazi. “We need to appreciate each other’s cultures. It’s the only way we will truly understand each other.”

For an overview of the weekend, visit our photo gallery here.