Positive impact through social policies

Alumni and students focus on inequality through work aiding migrant families, homeless people and other disenfranchised groups

Inequality is a complex, multifaceted global issue. And at the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS), our goal is to tackle global challenges with meticulous analysis – and then use that analysis to put real-world solutions into place.

Many students at GPS are drawn to the school because they also have a passion for solving difficult and intricate problems facing our communities and nations. A lot go on to work in careers that address inequality. GPS caught up with several alumni, and one current student, who have pursued paths focused on addressing the disparities in society.
Valeria Andrea Buelna Sainz, MPP ’19, works with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) – UN Migration as the program assistant for the Transitional and Support Program, where she is involved in the design and implementation of the IOM projects in Tijuana.

“We focus on projects that aim to increase self-reliance within the migrant population in northern Mexico,” Buelna Sainz said. “Most times migrants do not start off with the same opportunities and advantages, so we seek to provide the tools to successfully integrate within their communities.”
As part of her work, Buelna Sainz also is involved with cash transfer programs, housing aid for asylum seekers who have established themselves in Tijuana, legal assistance for migrants who are living in shelters, and providing temporary shelter for migrants that have been displaced during the coronavirus pandemic and need a coronavirus-free transitional space before they can move to other sheltering spaces in the city.

Buelna Sainz said her favorite part of the job is working with her team to come up with effective solutions for design issues facing their projects, as many of the issues that migrants face in Tijuana are unique to the region.

“I’ve also come to love liaising and building relationships with our partners in the region. I had not thought about this kind of role until the amazing team at Career Services brought it up once during a mock interview I had while I was job hunting,” she said. “Now it is an aspect of my job that I really enjoy: engaging with other organizations, talking about the programs we have and working together toward the same goal, which is to help our migrant communities.”

This work is important, Buelna Sainz said, because of the ongoing discrimination and xenophobia migrants face.

“These are attitudes we have encountered in multiple situations and have come from different places – even those you wouldn’t expect,” she said. “When these attitudes come from the very institutions and communities that are supposed to receive and help migrant people, they are denying them their rights. The space between unequal opportunities is the gap we seek to close however we can.”

Buelna Sainz said one course at GPS that gave her a lot of perspective was program design and evaluation.

“You get to study all about these diverse projects, from their initial design
through their implementation and the final impact,” Buelna Sainz said. “I remember thinking that the numbers and stars in the papers we read meant that people’s lives were better off because of the careful planning that went into it, and that maybe I could take a social issue and do the same, too.”

Ama Debrah

Ama Debrah is in her second year at GPS, where she is pursuing a Master of Public Policy (MPP) degree in the dual tracks of Program Design and Evaluation and Inequality and Social Policy.
Policy track, which launched in fall 2019.

“I was interested in the intersection between evaluating and creating policy that directly works with populations that have been underserved by our governmental system and learning more about policies that are currently in place that are making a positive difference,” Debrah said.

Prior to coming to GPS, she was an early childhood educator in Title I schools, where she said she interacted primarily with populations of Latinx and Vietnamese descent. Her work with these students reinforced her belief that the U.S. needs comprehensive immigration and education reform.

Debrah said two courses she took last quarter, Comparative Social Welfare Policies and the Politics of Diversity, worked well in conjunction with each other to inform her about the history of social policy internationally and what issues are currently facing our country. She also deeply valued GPS professor Gordon McCord’s GIS and Spatial Data Analysis course, which she said gave her tools to be able to analyze trends in populations of need.

“GPS is giving me a very well-rounded understanding of how policy works and a wide variety of tools to analyze and evaluate what works and what doesn’t,” Debrah said. “The core classes for Inequality and Social Policy are a really good mix of qualitative and quantitative courses, in that I feel prepared to write policy briefs but at the same time follow and contribute to a conversation about regression models or other types of quantitative analyses.”

After graduation, Debrah said she is interested in working in local government on issues of education or immigration policy, though she is open to other paths.

“Although I don’t have a set idea of what specific job I want to pursue after GPS, I feel ready to take on a wide variety of potential professions,” she added.
Alisar El Rayess

Alisar El Rayess, MIA ’18, said she always had an interest in pursuing a career in human rights and chose GPS because of the Master of International Affairs (MIA) track in International Development and NGO Management.

“It had so much to offer, and I definitely gained a wealth of knowledge and skills that I can directly apply at work,” she said.

El Rayess is the program manager for three large-scale projects at Wellspring Family Services in Seattle, a nonprofit organization with a mission to end the cycle of family homelessness and poverty.
“My purpose is to end human trafficking, and I joined Wellspring Family Services to achieve exactly that,” El Rayess said. “One of the leading causes of human trafficking in the U.S. is homelessness.”

El Rayess said she spent about five years working in post-human-trafficking response and child protection before switching gears to focus on human trafficking prevention. She is currently managing one project at Wellspring that works with children from six schools in the Renton, Washington school district that are at risk for homelessness and consequently human trafficking.

She is also managing a project focused on elevating at-risk families into states of independence, autonomy and empowerment.

El Rayess is also managing Seattle’s $2.5 million COVID-19 Hospitality Workers relief fund.

“We have over 10,000 applications and will be able to serve anywhere between 1,200 to 2,000 households,” she said.

El Rayess is also developing a side project about how gentrification in Seattle has affected family homelessness – and the skills she gained at GPS are what helped her get to where she is today.

“GPS pushed me pretty hard,” she said. “I have never been asked to perform at the level GPS demanded, and it made me a lot stronger, more equipped and incredibly qualified for any role I take on. I feel very confident because of GPS – not only because the program is incredibly difficult and demanding, but because I truly gained a wealth of knowledge that I actually use all the time and is incredibly practical for my work and passion.”
Mei Ke

Mei Ke, MIA ‘20, who had long been an advocate for the LGBTQ+ community, came out publicly as a nonbinary transgender person halfway through their master’s degree program. Ke, who uses they/them pronouns, said that upon coming out, they saw a real need for education about appropriate terminology to address the confusion they encountered about gender and sexuality.

“Although I have been doing informal education about LGBTQ+ issues for a majority of my academic career, I found education about gender to be much more complicated than education about sexuality, as it required breaking down more internalized norms for those not used to discussing the fluidity of gender and expression,” Ke said.

Ke’s work focused on breaking down the assumptions about the trans and greater queer community and the importance of LGBTQ+ diversity – particularly “in traditionally white, straight, cis male dominated spaces like political science,” they said.
After graduation, Ke connected with several other advocacy groups such as Students of UX (SOUX), which had seen Ke’s free online material and wanted them to present to SOUX’s network about inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in data collection.

“Because of my pro-bono work that started at GPS, I am going to be leading an international panel and discussion this May on LGBTQ+ inclusion in the data and user experience fields, which I am incredibly excited about,” Ke said.

Ke said they find it rewarding to introduce other people to queer and transgender culture.

“I am privileged to be a part of an incredibly diverse community whose entire network is built on the idea of self-love and acceptance,” Ke said.

One of the most challenging aspects of LGBTQ+ advocacy work, though, is that it ties in with other types of diversity work such as anti-racism, disability inclusion and discussions around fatphobia, Ke said.

“LGBTQ+ advocacy necessitates hard conversations about all the internalized phobias and prejudices we have, which can be hard to see in ourselves,” Ke said. “Although I also believe this is one of the strengths in the LGBTQ+ community as a whole, having these conversations often is fraught with emotions that can be complicated to shift through for those learning these concepts for the first time.”

Ke said many people believe that LGBTQ+ equality has been achieved with the Supreme Court’s 2015 decision relating to gay marriage - but the reality is that inclusion work has a long way to go, both in law and in everyday life. For example, Ke shared that LGBTQ+ individuals gained protections against workplace discrimination only last year, and transgender people can still be murdered without legal repercussions in 39 out of 50 states. In fact, the murder
rates against Black trans women are so high that the life expectancy of Black transgender women is only 35, according to Ke.

“LGBTQ+ people do not have legal or social protections in their everyday lives,” Ke said. “And as an openly transgender, nonbinary and queer person, I have an obligation to fight and advocate not just for myself, but also for my queer and transgender siblings that go through this type of discrimination every day.”

**Gustavo López**

Gustavo López, an MPP graduate in 2020, has focused his entire career on racial inequity and racial justice.
“Prior to joining GPS, I worked for several years conducting research on immigrants and the Latinx population,” López said. “And at GPS, I worked on several research projects focused on policies and programs related to discrimination of immigrants.”

López is now a senior associate at PolicyLink, where he leads the research work for the Alliance for Boys and Men of Color (ABMoC), a network of grassroots organizations advocating for the improved treatment of boys and men of color in California and other states. Prior to joining PolicyLink, he served as the border research manager at Alliance San Diego, working on border and migration issues and voter engagement work with communities of color.

“I just joined PolicyLink, but so far I love that this organization is working to
advance so many progressive policies to help improve the lives and outcomes of communities of color and people living near or at the poverty line,” López said. “Everyone is engaged and centers data and evidence at the core of our work.”

For boys and young men of color, systemic racism and discrimination are some of the largest issues preventing them from achieving their full potential, López said.

“This means that young boys of color are growing up in communities that were shaped by racist policies that lead to violence, economic insecurity and poverty,” he added.

For the ABMoC team, López leads the research agenda, which he said he is able to do thanks to the data and analytical training he received at GPS.

“A big part of my work will involve translating data into policy briefs, fact sheets and other tools to help advance policies and programs,” he said. “Skills from classes like GIS and the QM series reinforced my analytic background, and courses like policy analysis, program evaluation and cost-benefit analysis provide a necessary primer for understanding policy change.”

López said that at GPS, he had a number of opportunities to learn more about the facets of inequality many groups face, both through fieldwork and in the classroom.

“With a team of students, I received the Chancellor’s Interdisciplinary Grant and conducted research on asylum seekers and their treatment along the southern border region,” López said. “This was done in partnership with Professor Rafael Fernández de Castro. And some of my classes with Professor Gaurav Khanna were also very influential in my decision to continue working on issues of racial inequity and racial justice.”
Nic Zinter

Nic Zinter, MIA ’19, an information officer employed through an independent contractor supporting USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, reports on the humanitarian situation in the regions he monitors – currently, western and southern Africa.

“That covers a lot – everything from armed conflict, mass internal displacement, gender-based violence, food insecurity, cyclones and droughts – and my job is to get accurate and precise information on the situation on the ground and develop consistent information products on the latest developments and U.S. government-led humanitarian response,” Zinter said.

Zinter said his career is fulfilling because he feels like part of a larger effort to
deliver life-saving humanitarian assistance to those who are in urgent need of food assistance, shelter, protection and other basic needs.

“I think that staying consistently informed is central to having the capacity to generate positive change in the world, and being in this job has made me feel more confident in my capacity to play a role in the creation of a safer and more equitable world,” he said.

Zinter said he has always had an interest in working in policy in order to address inequality, though he credits two courses led by Professor Emilie Hafner-Burton as what shaped the trajectory of his career.

“For example, I knew before taking these classes that the extrajudicial killings of LGBTQ+ people in Chechnya was abominable, but Professor Hafner-Burton’s courses challenged me to approach complex issues from the perspective of somebody who could do something about it, and then ask: Why does this problem exist and who does it serve? What tools are at my disposal to disincentivize bad behavior? How can power brokers and institutions work to not only address current atrocities but prevent new ones from taking place?” Zinter said.

Zinter previously worked as a community representative for San Diego County Supervisor Nathan Fletcher, where he had the opportunity to help out with some major legislative accomplishments.

“In response to the egregious trend of police brutality disproportionately affecting Black and brown communities, I was able to rally dozens of local community leaders to address the Board of Supervisors and successfully lobby the county to ban the use of the carotid neck restraint (also known as the ‘chokehold’) within the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department,” Zinter said. “We were also able to mobilize support to address health disparities among low-income communities and communities of color that were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic by setting up testing stations in underrepresented areas of the county,
such as South Bay and East County.”