

Q&A: Professor Elizabeth Lyons



One of GPS's newest faculty members discusses her first year at the School and summer whereabouts

By Sarah Pfladderer | GPS News

A native to Canada and newcomer to San Diego, [Elizabeth Lyons](#) spared some time from her summer fieldwork in Kenya to recount her first year as an assistant professor at the School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS). In addition to discussing what prepared her for the “dream job,” Lyons also detailed her research regarding how mobile training can improve employee performance.



With your first year under your belt, was it all you expected it to be?

EL: It's really my dream job. I couldn't be happier. I love being able to work on what I'm most interested in and having agency over how my time is allocated. Moreover, I get to work with some of the smartest and most interesting people I've ever met. The most memorable moments of the year relate to conversations I've had with my colleagues. So many of these conversations renewed my excitement about projects or forced me to think harder about problems and ideas. My first teaching quarter was also very memorable. The GPS students are really fun to teach. They're engaged and smart, and they have a diverse set of experiences that make class discussions a lot of fun. Preparing two courses that I've never taught before was definitely a challenge, but it was also very rewarding.

You came to UC San Diego right after earning your Ph.D. from the University of Toronto. How has that transition been?

EL: I've lived in Canada my whole life up to now (minus an eight month stint at a prep school in Pennsylvania). The transition to San Diego has been much easier than I expected. It's hard not to enjoy life here, and I particularly like being able to be outside as frequently as I like. I definitely miss being close to my family, but they've managed to find excuses to visit me a number of times already. I haven't fully adjusted to driving in San Diego, but the ocean views I get while driving are so spectacular it hasn't been as difficult.

Your CV shows you were associate director of the Creative Destruction Lab at the University of Toronto.

EL: The Lab is a program for early-stage technology ventures that have the potential to be massively scalable. Ventures accepted into the program are mentored by some of Canada's top entrepreneurs and angel investors. These mentors give ventures milestones to accomplish every six weeks. If the milestones are not accomplished, it is dropped from the program. Among other things, the Lab helps ventures get early-stage funding, set up complete and strong co-founder teams, push their technologies forward, select manufacturing strategies and develop marketing campaigns.

As associate director, I helped develop systems and procedures for the program. This included contributions to the process for venture selection into the program; designing the meetings between ventures and the mentors; and developing formal

procedures for engagement between the ventures and MBA students at the Rotman School of Management, where the program is hosted. For the latter, I designed an MBA course in which students acted as consultants for the ventures and the mentors. Several of the MBA students who participated ended up joining ventures as co-founders.

In what ways did your previous work prepare you for your GPS professorship?

EL: My experience with designing and co-teaching the Lab course for MBAs was very helpful for preparing me for developing my courses at GPS. My major takeaway from my experience with the Lab course was that the majority of students are willing and able to work very hard, but their willingness to work hard is generally much higher when they feel their professors are also working hard for them. Courses seem to be much more productive and enjoyable for teachers and students when both sides are engaged and invested in student outcomes. The Lab also prepared me to speak with more knowledge and experience about firms and strategies. Given that I teach in the management stream, this has been very useful.

So, what are you up to this summer?

EL: I'm working on three projects in Kenya. The project I am most focused on is in cooperation with a research organization in Nairobi, Kenya, and an insurance company based in Kenya on testing whether mobile training, or mLearning, can improve employee performance. The primary goal is to develop a better understanding of whether training provided through mobile phone applications can reduce some of the challenges firms encounter when trying to serve consumers in rural areas of developing countries. Retail and service firms are beginning to recognize the profit potential of more rural areas of developing countries and are increasingly attempting to enter these markets. Despite the recognition that consumer demand in rural markets has the potential to support a more diverse supply of products, challenges associated with transportation and infrastructure development and with labor norms and education may prevent or significantly delay these markets from developing to



meet demand.

By testing whether improving employee knowledge in a manner that overcomes the costs associated with poor infrastructure can improve outcomes for firms operating in these regions, this study has important implications for the development of the private sector in these regions. This project also has implications for the performance effects of employer-sponsored training more broadly.

What are you most enjoying about being on the ground?

EL: What I'm enjoying about fieldwork in particular is being able to observe my research subjects firsthand and develop a deeper understanding about the contexts they are living and working in. This understanding has significantly improved my research design and made me even more invested in the projects because I can see for myself how they might have direct, positive impacts on people. I also really like Kenya. It's absolutely beautiful. Driving to field sites, I've seen all kinds of animals I would probably never otherwise see in the wild. And the sunsets are really breathtaking.