

Student Perspectives: Empowering communities through public policy in Latin America and beyond



Master of Public Policy student David Castro-Peña shares why he thinks GPS is perfectly positioned as a place to study Latin American policy

By David Castro-Peña

Public policy got into my mind while walking in rural Colombia almost 10 years ago.

My mentor and friend, statistics lecturer Nestor Cordero, invited us - a couple of engineering students - to visit the rural Sumapaz, Colombia, a territory that covers the world's largest *paramo* ecosystem that provides food and pure water for a city of 7 million habitants.

A *paramo* is a special ecosystem where plants are designed to capture water from the mist and deposit it into underground water basins that feed the main rivers from which millions of communities receive potable water. Walking by those territories helped me understand the territory from a perspective where their habitants were connected to the natural ecosystem and the institutions.

In particular, the farmer was not only a food producer or an irrational agent that just does not use rural insurance. The farmers were human: a single mother raising two children attending a school without internet; a couple of 70-year-old elders looking for agricultural credit; a community of producers with informal rules of investment, all very distant from the educational theories, newspapers and perceptions of the outside world.

Those hours of class and theories clicked in my soul through those conversations with farmers and their generosity in the middle of vicissitudes. Since then, I have been obsessed with one particular idea: the potential of empowering communities for shaping better institutions, for getting better democracy.

Today, studying at UC San Diego - and particularly at the [School of Global Policy and Strategy \(GPS\)](#) - has meant more than just the opportunity of receiving a degree from a top U.S. university. It has been a personal commitment to open opportunities for many young people without employment, for many women bearing the heavy weights of inequality and prejudice. Many of those people are young and old friends with whom I have shared common challenges and dreams.

GPS has responded coherently with my aspirations as a Latino. When deciding where to apply, I sought a university with academic standards that were matched by a concrete effort of increasing the participation for those who are still minorities in most of the Ivy Leagues or other top universities.

Being admitted at UC San Diego meant checking both requirements. The university has become a [Hispanic-Serving Institution \(HSI\)](#) and also a research institution committed to improving the difficult situation of a complex territory, as is the case of the [U.S.-Mexico border](#).

In terms of quality of education, GPS is unique. I have gained insight on the current situation in Latin America, in a context where China has become a major player. This powerful perspective has been enriched with tools taught in GPS core classes, including intensive quantitative knowledge and a clear understanding of

the policymaking processes.

Finally, among other wonderful things, GPS has opened for me a wide cultural window to share these valuable moments of life with students coming from different latitudes and teachers with diverse perspectives.

Paraphrasing Alvaro Gomez Hurtado, one of the greatest gains from culture is the possibility of discovering oneself in a specific temporal context. This awareness increases the possibility of being integrated into a society and its debates.

In this sense, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset would describe this with a famous quote: "I am I, plus my circumstances."

Therefore, my role depends on a coherent interpretation of both history and the current situation of millions of humans living through ecosystems and institutions. This personal interpretation matters more than ever given the rising threats to the possibility of having a society based on diversity, science and merit.

In this transcendental effort of self-discovery, I have found in GPS valuable mentors whose example and academic rigor are helping me get closer to my role at delivering solutions to those who initially inspired me to begin this academic journey.

This mentorship has not been defined by the famous *magister dixit* - Latin for "the teacher has said it" - where the teacher simply transfers knowledge to the student. Conversely, while I have found rigor in the academic sessions, most importantly I have experienced a continuous conversation challenging my preconceived ideas. These exchanges have kept my spirit active to discover better questions, to question better and primarily to walk toward public leadership with integrity: *Fiat Lux*.

David Castro-Peña is a San Diego County Board of Supervisors Fellow, an industrial engineer and a finance professional. He is a [Master of Public Policy](#) candidate at the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy.