

Taking the reins at CGT



New director for the Center on Global Transformation Joshua Graff Zivin talks multidisciplinary research and plans for the center's future

By Virginia Watson | GPS News



[The Center on Global Transformation \(CGT\)](#) has found itself at the center of its own transformation: new leadership.

The center, designed to bring together the worlds of academic inquiry and political analysis, will be led by UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS) professor and co-director of the UCSD Global Health Institute [Joshua Graff Zivin](#), following the departure of professor Gordon Hanson, who served as director for 13 years and recently began an appointment at Harvard University.

Graff Zivin, an internationally renowned economist whose broad research interests include the environment, health, development and innovation economics, also holds the Pacific Economic Cooperation Chair in International Economic Relations at GPS.

In this Q&A he discusses the future of CGT, how the center has been affected by the novel coronavirus pandemic and the multidisciplinary benefits of problem-focused research.

As the new director, what's your vision for the next phase of CGT?

“My plan is to continue the excellent work that was led by Gordon Hanson and generously supported by [Joan and Irwin Jacobs](#). That will include recruiting the next wave of [Pacific Leadership Fellows](#) to foster dialogue about pressing policy

issues with thought leaders from around the globe. We will also continue to invest in a range of research activities focused on the various ways that technological innovation shapes the economics and politics of the world around us. And, of course, we will continue to nourish our flagship research endeavors at GPS including the [Big Pixel Initiative](#), the [Japan Forum for Innovation and Technology](#) and the new [Center for Commerce and Diplomacy](#).”

Has the current coronavirus pandemic affected the operations of CGT?

“The pandemic has forced us to reschedule our last Pacific Leadership Fellow for the current academic year, but we will add him to the terrific lineup of speakers already scheduled for next year. On a more upbeat note, I have been amazed at how smooth the transition to a virtual workplace has been, thanks to the IT revolution that has delivered a number of impressive tools to us over the past two decades.”

Your research is conspicuously multidisciplinary. What’s your approach for deciding on your subjects of study?

“Policy scholars are generally problem-focused, and this often means leveraging insights from a variety of disciplines to tackle the challenge at hand. This is especially true in my fields of interest – health, environment and innovation – where obstacles and solutions are typically science-based. While my research spans many fields and topic areas, all of my projects begin with a strong sense of passion and curiosity. What do we know about a particular problem, and would knowing more make a difference in the world?”

What current research projects are you most excited about?

“I have a number of projects underway at the moment, but perhaps the one that is most exciting is one that looks at the role that pollution plays in the spread and severity of influenza. The inspiration for this project was the current coronavirus pandemic, and it has all come together rather quickly. Our results suggest that in addition to the usual benefits that we imagine when we talk about environmental protection, it may also serve as an important hedge against the nastiest impacts of the current and any future pandemic. That will become especially important as we begin to restart economies around the world.

I have also been working with a group of local life scientists to help define

COVID-19 virus and antibody testing protocols that allow us to better balance the health and economic tradeoffs as the current situation continues to evolve.”

You teach a number of popular courses at GPS that allow you to share your insights with the next generation. What skills or understanding do you hope your students leave your classes with?

“I hope to teach students to think through the incentives - economic, political, psychological, social or ethical - embedded in all social problems and policy-making contexts. My intention is to reinforce the importance of an ecumenical approach to understand the nature of any particular problem and the incentives that can be levered to tackle it. I also encourage students to recognize both the value and limits of generalizing those insights across countries and policy domains.”

As a faculty member, what does holding an endowed chair mean to you?

“I am very grateful to hold the Pacific Economic Cooperation Chair in International Economic Relations as it allows me to support students in a variety of ways that better prepare them for the job market. This includes hiring them as research assistants, helping to fund their attendance at professional meetings and facilitating their placement into internships. The chair funds also enable me to invite speakers to campus and host small workshops on topics that connect to the broader interests of our faculty.”