Grooming students to excel

Leadership with honors

Leadership is also a central theme within San Diego State’s University Honors Program, which emphasizes citizenship and global responsibility, as well as intellectual achievement.

An increasingly popular option among students, the program enrolls 600 students and last year attracted more than 1,300 applicants. Among those accepted, the average GPA was 4.016.

Students say the leadership development opportunities are a big part of its appeal.

“The honors program stirred my interest in student leadership,” said Corinne Pogemiller, a kinesiology major who has been accepted for graduate study at Yale University.

“From day one, you are part of something. You have friends in different majors who challenge you and whose interests are different from yours. All the way through the program, you are exposed to leadership opportunities.”

Community service and cultural events included in the curriculum provide engagement in a small college environment within a large research university, while also nurturing a commitment to civic responsibility, diversity and equity.

Immersed in an interdisciplinary curriculum, the students tackle real world problems. The study abroad requirement teaches students to be global citizens, to serve and to instigate change.

“When students graduate our program,” said director Stacey Sinclair said, “they are transformed.”

Finance major Kaycee Gerhart, for example, says her Honors Program experience inspired her successful application to Teach for America, a nonprofit that hires “outstanding recent college graduates” for two-year posts in under-resourced schools. Gerhart will teach high school math.

Appreciation for diversity

San Diego State’s remarkable ethnic and cultural diversity, evident among students, faculty and staff alike, sends graduates and young leaders like Kaycee Gerhart into the workforce with strong appreciation for the benefits of diversity and the necessity of social justice—two more key qualifications necessary for successful leadership in the 21st century.

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SDSU is committed to helping students develop these essential cultural competencies both inside and outside of the classroom. In fact, with the mandates of 21st leadership firmly in mind, momentum is growing campus-wide to officially integrate diversity awareness across the curriculum.

“We are grooming our students to be competitive professionals, prepared to excel as leaders in a highly diverse and globalized workforce,” said Aaron Bruce, SDSU’s director of diversity. “Increasing the level of student cross-cultural dialogue, civic engagement and leadership development are goals supported by our entire institution.”
Tell us about a few of your favorite feature stories.

One story I did for “About San Diego” involved a home on East Talmadge Drive. A gentleman bought the house knowing that the previous owner had tunneled a cavernous maze underneath. Next to the refrigerator was a plant that slid aside, leading to nine enormous, cathedral-like rooms. More than 100,000 tons of dirt was removed to form the caves. People who had lived in the area told me about Haven’s Caves, and that’s how I tracked down the house. I like any story that leaves people saying, “I didn’t know that.” For example, Mt. Helix was named for the helix aspera, a snail that was discovered up there. The name has nothing to do with the roads spiraling to the top. We did a story about an old San Diego neighborhood known as the Harlem of the West, where some of the greats performed. I like to talk about San Diego’s history, but I consider myself a storyteller, not a historian.

THE MARINE

Nick Popaditch, author of “Once a Marine,” is a decorated Iraqi war veteran. In 2004, while commanding a tank in Fallujah, he suffered head wounds that left him legally blind and partially deaf. He received a Silver Star for his valor and combat innovation. Currently retired from the Marine Corps and living in San Diego, Popaditch is working toward a social science teaching credential at San Diego State.

Did the war change you? It that why you wrote “Once a Marine”?

War is not the transformative experience most people think. I came back the same person I was when I left. But war does change your perception of things. In Iraq, I saw people who had never known democracy experience it for the first time. To see freedom at the grass-roots level and to see people fighting for it is very inspiring. I wrote “Once a Marine” because it tells a story that might make a difference. To readers, the guy in the book is Mr. Every Marine; it just happens to be me. I’m not that special. Most people have the strength to overcome adversity. They just never have to use it.

THE EXECUTIVE

Henry A. Alvarez III became executive director of the San Francisco Housing Authority in 2008. With more than 20 years of leadership experience in Texas, Oregon and San Diego, he is considered among the top 10 public housing experts. He graduated from SDSU with distinction in 1983.

What is your vision of public housing in the U.S.?

I grew up in public housing. We moved from a house with no hot running water to a place where my siblings and I had our own room. Life in that environment was wonderful. There were lots of trees and kids always playing outside. It was the cornerstone of New Orleans’ African-American community. Today, so much of public housing is reaching economic obsolescence. We face challenges of disrepair and antiquated systems. Finding the resources to restore it to a safe and sanitary condition will be difficult. My vision of public housing is rooted in that New Orleans neighborhood where I grew up.

THE ENGINEER

An executive vice president for QUALCOMM Inc., Peggy Johnson works with the company’s partners to drive the adoption of 3G wireless broadband in the Americas and India. A 1985 graduate of the electrical engineering department, she is a member of QUALCOMM’s executive committee.

What’s on your mobile phone?

I’m a runner and I really like the “Bones in Motion” program. It’s a running/cycling map that tracks your movement. It can calculate how far you’ve gone and how fast; it even tracks the altitude changes. When you complete your run, you can see both map and satellite views of your path. There’s also a PC component so people can post their runs. Now that we have high-speed wireless networks in place, consumers expect to be able to do more in a mobile environment. They’re going to demand GPS technology in all handsets.

The not-so-secret lives of Aztecs

Ken Kramer won four Emmy Awards for the stories he has told in “About San Diego,” televised each weekend on NBC 7/39. He has also been recognized for news and documentary reporting, but “About San Diego” is his signature work. Kramer graduated in 1974 with a degree in broadcasting and filmmaking.

The STORYTELLER

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**The Artist**

For three decades, the horse has been the single subject of Deborah Butterfield’s art. Her life-sized sculptures, constructed from found objects, are cast in bronze. Butterfield has held more than 100 solo exhibitions; twice, she has received individual artist fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts. She studied art at SDSU from 1966-68.

Why does your art appeal to so many people?

I think the horse is something everyone can relate to, but it does bother me that, as a subject, it is so accessible. I hope people who are attracted to my work will eventually find something deeper in it. My sculptures are like paintings suspended on four legs, and within them, there is an emotionally taut composition. They are abstractions that become personified, X-ray snapshots of an internal dialogue. We come to them to ask about ourselves. I hope my work is perceived in a way that goes beyond the conscious mind. I want people to feel it through their skin.

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**The Cultural Champion**

Eduardo Diaz was appointed last November to lead the Smithsonian Latino Center with a $3 million budget for coordinating cultural programs and exhibits nationwide. Previously, he was executive director of the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque, N.M., the country’s leading venue for the study, presentation and advancement of Hispanic culture. He graduated in 1972 with a degree in Latin American Studies.

What is the most common misperception about the Latino culture?

The diversity of cultures within the Latino community is underestimated and under-appreciated. People assume it’s homogeneous and monolithic, but that’s not the case. We opened a show in Albuquerque about the Asian connection, particularly to Mexico. Another exhibit traced the connection between the Latino and the African cultures. The Smithsonian Latino Center responds to strident calls from inside and outside the Smithsonian Institution to expand the incorporation of the Latino experience into its programs and services. We want to ensure that the American experience includes all of our diverse communities. My task, in a nutshell, is to strengthen the Latino presence institutionally at the Smithsonian.

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**The Athlete**

Former Aztec men’s golfer Scott Piercy was one of 25 players awarded a Professional Golf Association Tour card for the 2009 season. Last season, he ranked ninth among the nationwide tour’s leading earners and finished in the top 25 six times. A three-year letter-winner at San Diego State, he turned pro after graduating in 2001.

How do you stay sharp on tour?

It’s a cliché, but it’s true: a lot of the game is mental. With the tour running from January to mid-October, the hardest part is keeping yourself mentally ready to play. If I get into a slump, I’ll analyze my game to make sure I’m working on the right thing. It’s actually a lot easier to beat yourself than to get beat by other players. I mark my golf ball with a smiley face to maintain a good mental attitude. But when the tour is over and I go on vacation, I leave my clubs at home.

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**The Tribal Chair**

Rhonda Welch-Scalco is one of the few women to be voted tribal leader of the Barona Band of Mission Indians. During her tenure, the tribe has donated millions to education and health care facilities, infrastructure and the environment. She completed a master’s degree in education at SDSU in 1994.

Which is more of a challenge, your age or your gender?

It is difficult to say which one is more of a challenge. I come from a long line of tribal leaders including both my mother and grandmother who served as Tribal Chairwomen. Their leadership inspired me and guided me through the challenges of balancing motherhood, my career in government and currently, the pursuit of my Ph.D. I take my hat off to women who are successful working in politics or business and raising a family. It isn’t easy, but it is achievable.

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**When these alumni speak, people listen.**