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Features

School in the Park

From a kid’s perspective, hands-on learning is the way to go, especially when Balboa Park is your classroom.

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The new national imperative becomes a regional mission, with San Diego State at the forefront. And Washington is watching.

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Faith in the Future

After 9/11, students are finding personal relevance and global perspective in religious studies.

By Liese Klein
Fast Forward. To secure San Diego’s future, we must create it.

In 1900, San Diego was becoming a real city, with electricity, telephones, streetcars, a city park, a teachers’ college (the embryonic SDSU) and a population of 17,700. But it had no zoo, no military bases, no professional sports, no freeways, no suburbs. It’s doubtful that today’s 1,224,000 San Diegans, sent back in time 100 years, would even recognize their city. And vice versa.

So what will San Diego be like in 2100? SDSU scholars are leading efforts to ensure best-case scenarios.

John Eger, executive director of SDSU’s International Center for Communications (ICC) has been instrumental in launching “Envision San Diego,” a partnership with KPBS and SignOnSanDiego.com. The initiative aims to foster a community discussion (via television programs, online discussions and town hall meetings) on the kind of city San Diego should become and how to realize that vision. A recent ICC report started the conversation by describing a “creative community,” one that embraces the information economy by promoting not only creativity, but also connectivity, collaboration and civic engagement.

Professors Alan Sweedler, director of SDSU’s Center for Energy Studies, and Paul Ganster, director of SDSU’s Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias, see sustainability as the key to a livable 22nd century San Diego. Their 100-year plan for the San Diego/Tijuana region, developed with a panel of civic leaders and city planners, won kudos in recent international competition.

The proposal urges “fundamental changes in the way American and Mexican cities are designed, developed and managed, and in the way urban residents utilize natural resources.” Its five central goals: sustainable energy resources and practices, ecological urban form and function, community-based resources management, land use optimization, and social and economic parity.

Lasers, Ultrasound & Mikes
FINDING BETTER MEDICAL SOLUTIONS

Try wrapping your mind around this: One femtosecond is to one second as one second is to 32 million years.

The beauty of the laser’s pulse is key to its ability to create ‘snapshots’ of chemical reactions,” Anderson said, “much like the strobe light in a disco that sequentially ‘freeze-frames’ the dancers’ gyrations.” It is the future of ultrashort pulse lasers — a smoother flap and provide more control over the cut’s shape and location. “Using a blade to remove the eye’s outer cornea is suboptimal because it can produce a jagged edge leading to a jagged interface between the cornea and outcomes,” he explained. “The ultrashort pulse laser can cut a smoother flap and provide more control over the cut’s shape and location.”

3-D ultrasound applications help heart patients

Because the software program May-Newman uses to evaluate her data is based on principles of math and physics, it allows her to factor in key physical properties, such as the heart’s response to force or pressure. She assigns colors to data to produce an animated picture of the contracting heart, as well as vascular volume, i.e., the amount of blood moving through nearby veins and arteries.

Combining a patient’s other test data with this computational model helps clinicians pinpoint and address functional problems. “Good treatment relies heavily on the imaging techniques used for diagnosis,” May-Newman explained.

“With 3-D ultrasound, doctors will be able to offer their cardiac patients swift and efficient therapies designed to meet specific individual needs.”

Lasers point to a future measured in femtoseconds

Imagine a device that could zap disease and genetic defects, perform non-invasive heart surgery or drill out a decayed tooth in a matter of moments. It is not science fiction. It is the future of ultrashort pulse lasers — spitting pulses of light lasting no more than 20 quadrillionths of a second with a peak intensity equivalent to focusing all the sunlight hinging the earth onto the head of a pin.

“Those pulses are the shortest events that human beings have been able to create and control,” explained Matt Anderson, assistant professor of physics at SDSU and chief architect and engineer of the University’s new ultrashort pulse laser. “They offer us a window into molecular activity that occurs in femtoseconds, a unit so vastly different from most people’s reality that it is basically incomprehensible.”

Experiencing with a 50-femtosecond laser pulse, they were able to observe the vibrations of a potassium molecule. “We have actually watched electrons moving between atoms,” Anderson said. Such studies are revealing information that could ultimately lead to controlling molecular systems. This new field, called femtochemistry, holds staggering implications for the future of genetic research and pharmaceuticals. If the laser can be used to turn chemical reactions on and off, which is essentially what drugs do, it could become a valuable option in the cure, treatment and prevention of disease.

Already, eye surgeons are using the ultrashort-pulse laser as superfine scalpels for corrective vision surgery and glaucoma treatment. Anderson recently received a grant from the San Diego Foundation to study further applications in eye surgery.

“Using a blade to remove the eye’s outer cornea is suboptimal because it can produce a jagged edge leading to a jagged interface between the cornea and outcomes,” he explained. “The ultrashort pulse laser can cut a smoother flap and provide more control over the cut’s shape and location.”

Anderson believes lasers may completely eliminate the need for painful incisions, “The ultimate dream,” he said, “is to do the reshaping of the inner cornea, or any surgery, without any dissection of the tissue at all.”

The ear also speaks

SDSU audiologist Laura Dreisbach was not the first to suspect that a healthy human ear, like a humming engine, generates its own sound when it’s working well. That premise dates back to 1948.

But a new generation of super-sensitive microphones and related analytical software have enabled Dreisbach, an assistant professor in communicative disorders, to document the predicted phenomenon of otoacoustic emissions — inaudible sounds generated by a healthy inner ear — and apply the results of her research in clinical practice.

A traditional hearing test is lengthy and subjective. And it doesn’t work reliably on young children or patients too ill to respond.

But Dreisbach can quickly and objectively assess any patient’s inner ear simply by inserting a tiny microphone into the ear canal. The explanation is simple.

Normal otoacoustic emissions indicate the middle and inner ears are working; absent emissions indicate hearing loss.

Initial research focused on the frequency range necessary for speech recognition. Going a step further, Dreisbach and her colleagues used specialized microphones to confirm the existence of otoacoustic emissions at ultrahigh frequencies also.

This new discovery may benefit patients receiving certain chemotherapy or antibiotic drugs capable of causing hearing loss. Because sounds at ultrahigh frequencies are typically the first lost, declining otoacoustic emissions in this range alert doctors at the onset of hearing loss, creating an opportunity to adjust treatment and avoid debilitating damage.
With Balboa Park’s museums as their classrooms, students from Rosa Parks Elementary in San Diego’s inner city thrive as participants in the innovative School in the Park program. Hands-on lessons challenge them to learn through the lens of experience rather than as passive listeners.

First published Spring 2003

Kids are jumping up and down, hands waving high in response to the teacher’s questions. All around them are clues to the answers — an enormous 3-D map of San Diego; a life-sized figure of the region’s first padre, Father Junipero Serra; a descriptive timeline spanning San Diego’s growth from 1490 to 1990.

This classroom at the San Diego Historical Society in Balboa Park was designed to teach third-graders about local history and geography. But the students here, bused in from Rosa Parks Elementary School in the inner-city community of City Heights, are not rushing through an afternoon field trip. They’re attending School in the Park, an innovative 12-week program jointly taught by museum educators and Rosa Parks teachers.

The idea originated with philanthropist Sol Price, founder of Price Club and Price Charities, and an architect of the recent revival of City Heights. Aware of overcrowding at Rosa Parks, an elementary campus built as part of the City Heights renaissance, he saw in Balboa Park’s world-class museums a chance to relieve that situation, while also exposing City Heights students to new experiences. Prompted by Price, four museums agreed to a pilot program that included half the third-graders at Rosa Parks. Today, three years later, the program benefits all 800 students in the third, fourth and fifth grades.

School in the Park is a perfect fit with the City Heights Educational Collaborative, a master plan to boost student achievement and teacher retention in neighborhood schools. Launched in 1998 as the City Heights Educational Pilot, the Collaborative is a partnership among Price Charities, the San Diego Unified School District, the San Diego Education Association, and San Diego State University, which assumed administrative and operational responsibility for three City Heights schools, including Rosa Parks Elementary.

“The new environment and new set of opportunities [offered by School in the Park] were seen as an opportunity to help kids learn, help them get excited, help them be critical thinkers,” says Tal Pumpian, SDSU professor of educational leadership and chief educational officer for the Collaborative.

School in the Park director Susan Wachowiak was running a similar
program she’d created in Old Town when Sol Price recruited her to replicate the idea in Balboa Park. In both cases, she says, the experiential learning has appealed to all kinds of students because hands-on lessons make learning relevant.

“When education is taken outside the classroom, it becomes a world experience,” Wachowiak says. “The students see how [what they’re learning] fits into the world. They learn the information and then use it right away.”

Opening Minds

Perhaps the strongest evidence of School in the Park’s success is the positive response of students and parents. Ask Sarah Pasapera, a fourth-grader, what her favorite part of the program is, and she blurs out, “Everything!” With a little more thought, she adds that she especially likes the Museum of Photographic Arts, where she gets to make pictures. “My son is still talking about things he learned, and he’s not even in the program anymore,” says Sarah’s mother, Isabel Pasapera. (Fernando Pasapera is now in middle school.) “We would never be able to take [four children] to all of those museums,” she adds. “They are a lot smarter because of the program. It opens their minds and expands their horizons.”

Sherri Landis, the Historical Society’s director of education, says the museums’ resources are motivational for the children. “We have objects that help us understand [our ancestors’] culture and how they lived,” she says. “We have exhibits that help bring history to life. We have the park, which helps show how the native land has changed.”

And it’s clear that while students relish the freedom of a non-traditional classroom, they take their learning in the park very seriously. Student Robert Montijo reflects on a recent lesson about erosion.

“I learned about weathering. Like now it is raining, and the rain water is washing the walls, and some of the finish will come off. Big rocks fall and break into pieces; water breaks them into smaller pieces. That is how we get beach sand.”

When the idea of School in the Park first came to Rosa Parks, educators worried about meeting benchmarks for student achievement. After all, 12 weeks in Balboa Park meant 12 weeks out of the classroom. “We needed to make sure all the state standards would be realized,” explains Emilee Watts, principal of Rosa Parks.

But Wachowiak had designed School in the Park to satisfy curriculum needs and educational standards. “The program really blends standards-based and life-based learning, formal and informal learning,” she says. “It’s all based on the curriculum; we coordinate our lessons with what they’re learning in the classroom.”

Immediate Results

The results of School in the Park were clear from the outset. Watts says, “Teachers saw positive changes in the students’ oral and written language skills, as well as in their approaches to problem-solving. And that led to dramatic changes in classroom expectations, says Steve Spencer, senior research associate for the Collaborative.

“At first the Rosa Parks teachers felt they needed to protect the kids from what they thought would be unreasonable expectations from museum teachers,” he says.

But the children performed so well in the new environment that their teachers were forced to revamp their perspectives and their lesson plans. “So the program is as much about teachers changing their perception of kids as it is the kids themselves changing,” Spencer says.

Along with rising student achievement and teacher expectations, behavior improved, too. “When we went back to school,” says teacher Loretta Saez, “our students were more mature; they settled quicker, they were more willing to follow classroom routines; they came in ready to learn.”

It was more than enough evidence to justify expanding School in the Park from a group of six teachers and 125 students rotating through four museums in the initial 1999-2000 venture to a program involving 800 students, more than 25 teachers and 10 museums. Educators suspect the program has since contributed to a dramatic improvement in test scores.

Building Confidence

Specific evidence points to broader benefits, including increased student confidence. Watts tells the story of one fourth-grader, assigned to report on the differences between certain rocks, who was daunted by the prospect of textbook research. But after seeing and touching different rocks at the park, he dove into the project and finished it. “I’ve never seen such pride,” Watts says. “He realized that he could do something he couldn’t have done a year or two before.”

Spencer hears many such stories. “You start to see trends,” he says, “things that are pretty significant: confidence, the ability to engage in a challenge and persevere to reaching the goal, feeling a sense of success, learning about cooperation. Clearly, this program impacts these kids’ self-concept. They go forward as more confident learners because of the success they’ve experienced.”

A study conducted after the program’s first year highlighted another long-term benefit—the children’s growing ability to imagine their own futures. “If you had asked them before what they’d like to do when they grew up, most would have said they had no idea,” Watts says. “But we started hearing things like, ‘I want to be an archaeologist.’”

Meeting scientists, historians, animal keepers, photographers—people outside the children’s normal circle of existence—may well change the future of students who attend School in the Park. “The program has stretched these kids probably more than we’ll ever know,” Saez says. “They’ll be more successful in whatever they do because they know there is something out there for them.”

More Than Numbers

Lannie Kanovsky, a visiting professor at SDSU, is working to quantify reports that School in the Park students display improvements in self-esteem, goal-setting, motivation, and sophisticated learning and critical thinking skills. But she also realizes numbers may never reveal what’s really happening in the Park.

The researcher in me is trying to do things quantitatively,” Kanovsky says, “but I know I’m going to miss some of the most important things. What the research will never capture is the heart and the spirit of it. For that, you just have to see it.”

Heather Holliday is a freelance journalist. Both her grandparents went to San Diego State.
Outside, space cowboy look-alikes in Hazmat suits paced the perimeter, checking air and water sensors for warning spikes. Part of a San Diego State University-led team, they were staging a sophisticated response to a simulated public health emergency, such as an act of terrorism. Local and federal security experts assigned to the Super Bowl took note. By the time the Buccaneers had felled the Raiders, San Diego State had proven its commitment to implementing a new national imperative.

The work began after the fall of the Twin Towers, and long before the Department of Homeland Security existed, when communities across the country began to assess their own vulnerabilities to terrorist activity at the local level.

Inside jam-packed QUALCOMM Stadium on Super Bowl Sunday 2003, Buccaneers and Raiders battled for a championship.

Homeland Security

By Coleen L. Geraghty

The new national imperative becomes a regional mission, with San Diego State at the forefront. And Washington is watching.

Photo: Anthony Nelson
San Diego officials saw security hot spots everywhere—at the bustling ports and border with Mexico, at the international airport downtown and at smaller airports in the suburbs, across the arching span of the San Diego-Coronado Bridge and even at the San Onofre Nuclear power plant 50 miles away.

But local leaders realized these potential problems also presented an opportunity: San Diego could become a template for homeland security solutions. It would take organization, communication, and the best minds available. In California, congressional representatives Duncan Hunter and Susan Davis turned to two prominent local universities—UC San Diego and San Diego State.

In the tradition of community collaboration that has always distinguished San Diego State University, the campus immediately offered its resources and personnel to sustain San Diego’s homeland security efforts. Today, SDSU faculty sit side by side with regional officials in public health meetings and on advisory groups that plan responses to potential emergencies. Researchers and students at San Diego State are turning technological wizardry into practical applications for port and border security. In short, SDSU faculty, students and alumni are involved in homeland security ventures all over the region.

Dolores Wozniak, dean of the College of Health and Human Services, co-chairs the Regional Network for Homeland Security, a dynamic consortium of public and private institutions charged with evaluating San Diego’s first-responders’ needs and capabilities, and developing strategies to bridge the gaps between them. The Regional Network’s mission is two-fold: to pursue state and federal funding opportunities, and to strengthen homeland security programs by dispersing information and leveraging local resources.

Peter Andersen, a professor in the School of Communications who is also a leader in the Regional Network, believes the university’s involvement makes good sense. “SDSU contributes significant brainpower to the Regional Network,” he said. “We are a linchpin in helping the Department of Homeland Security. But in the absence thus far of any substantial federal funding, the university has partnered with community groups, elected officials, private companies and county agencies to fashion viable strategies for responding to potential threats.

The most comprehensive expression of their response to date unfolded Jan. 26 behind the scenes of Super Bowl XXXVII as some 70,000 football fans gathered in San Diego’s Qualcomm Stadium. While athletes from Oakland and Tampa Bay fought for the National Football League Championship, about 200 volunteers stationed in and around the stadium staged a drill based on the premise of a natural or man-made disaster. Truly a demonstration of community activism, the SDSU-led exercise called ShadowBowl came together because committed people from academia, technology, medicine, business and county agencies pooled their talents in an effort to "pre-qualify" to a potential mass casualty situation.

ShadowBowl was the brainchild of San Diego State alumnus and adjunct professor David Warner, a medical neuroscientist with kinetic enthusiasm for marrying communications technology and health care applications. Without government funding, using off-the-shelf or borrowed equipment, networking with local law enforcement and medical experts, Warner created an emergency readiness and response system that dazzled federal homeland security officials, including FBI and CIA agents assigned to the Super Bowl.

In the words of Steve Cooper, special assistant to the president and senior director for information integration at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the technology demonstrated at ShadowBowl is "highly relevant to our homeland security mission.”

SDSU’s cavernous Immersive Visualization Laboratory became one of the central sites. Using off-the-shelf computer equipment, SDU’s new, high-speed Internet-based technology connected first-responders with medical experts in distant locations. Working with them to establish the real-time, two-way audio and video system was Bob Younger, business area manager for advanced technology transition at the Navy’s SPARAS Systems Center.

The resulting breakthrough in communications system enabled participating doctors across the nation to view the "disaster scene” through video cameras attached to the emergency workers’ headgear. In an impressive, futuristic twist, first-responders could speak with physicians many miles away, and see, on a PDA screen, a doctor’s guiding hand superimposed over the image of the "disaster victim.”

As Warner directed the emergency response simulation, Eric Frost, professor of geological sciences, and Bob Welty, director of homeland security projects for the SDSU Foundation, supervised operations from the "Vis Lab.” The team monitored vital data on air and water quality collected by strategically placed environmental sensors, and crowd movement detected by the stadium’s security cameras.

This last task was one that shocked for Bowl organizers had not anticipated. But in the final days before the big game, Super Bowl security managers asked Warner to stand by, ready to convert the Vis Lab into a fallback communications hub for law enforcement officers.

Emergency Training

"In an emergency, what’s needed are trained people. We are taking public health students who already understand disease control, and sharpening their skills in surveillance, field investigation and community education.”

Louise Gresham

"They said they didn’t even know this kind of capability existed,” Warner said. "The agencies were overwhelmed; we were filling the holes they couldn’t fill to support public safety.”

As ShadowBowl demonstrated, San Diego State’s unique contributions to homeland security flow from high levels of communication and trust established between university and community. So naturally, when members of the Regional Network divided the tasks set before them, SDSU assumed responsibility for public health and safety/education, training and communications—a ambitious undertaking and one requiring the highest level of community interaction.

"There is such a dynamic collaboration between SDSU and the community,” observed Louise Gresham, an epidemiologist and SDSU Graduate School of Public Health professor who also works with the Regional Network.

Gresham directs two grants for SDSU’s Graduate School of Public Health, both hold homeland security implications. One finances the training of public health students and staff for emergency response, particularly to a bioterrorism threat.
Projects like these extend San Diego State directly into the community and simultaneously connect students with experienced professionals in mentoring situations. In the College of Engineering, for example, professor Ron Kline’s students have conducted a technology assessment of San Diego’s port and border security. After visiting security posts and interviewing key border agency personnel, the students identified assets and vulnerabilities, along with new technologies, such as transborder tunnel detectors and remote vehicle-disabling devices, that could enhance security efforts.

San Diego State has long been a champion of such emergent technology for homeland security applications. As a partner in the Center for Commercialization of Advanced Technology (CCAT), SDSU works with other public and private institutions to identify and help finance start-up companies that develop anti-terrorism technologies.

One such venture is EyeTracking Inc., founded by Sandra Marshall, an SDSU psychology professor. Marshall discovered a way to use pupil dilation as a gauge of cognitive effort and fatigue.

Marshall is now collaborating with other researchers and companies to take augmented cognition technology to the next level for possible military applications. Jeffrey Morrison, a decision support project manager for SPAWAR Systems Center, likes the idea. “(This project) could dramatically improve decisions of military operators by helping them manage the information they receive,” he said. Funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the sensory technology will be tested by defense contractors over the next two years.

Sun Diego State is home to numerous leading-edge research efforts such as Marshall’s, and much of it is relevant to anti-terrorism. Engineering professor Joseph Katz and his students, for instance, contributed invaluable technical assistance to Northrop Grumman during development of the Global Hawk, an unmanned, high-altitude surveillance aircraft. Equipped with radar, infrared and high-resolution photo-imaging capability, the Global Hawk gives ground command-ers an unprecedented ability to pinpoint hostile activity almost instantaneously, at great distances and over vast geographical areas.

In the environmental engineering department, Mirat Gurol and his colleagues are developing a microbe-disabling device, that could bind to and inactivate harmful proteins released by disease-causing organisms. Efforts like Love’s and Gurol’s will proliferate with completion of a planned Bioscience Center at SDSU. Envisioned as a campus home for innovative programs like the San Diego State University Heart Institute, the Center for Microbial Sciences and the Molecular Biology Institute, the facility also will lease facilities to private companies working to develop or test biodefense technology. The result: an interactive research environment for many fields of biology and engineering, including those with homeland security applications.

“With the emerging biological threats, we find ourselves in a new domain, where national security and homeland security are one and the same,” said Dr. Love. “We are already involved in strengthening preparedness for bioterrorism by supporting research with organisms considered most likely to be agents of biological warfare.”

Each of these endeavors attests to San Diego State’s extraordinary outreach efforts in homeland security. Already, the university’s contributions have extended far into the community, improving health services, law enforcement, border security and communications. As a result, the San Diego region is better equipped to face our unique homeland security challenges and develop exportable solutions for other major metropolitan areas.
This is how it began. A group of students intent on becoming teachers. A school dedicated to their success. More than a century later, that fledgling teachers’ institution, the San Diego Normal School, has grown into San Diego State University, a major urban campus serving 34,000 students and offering dozens of disciplines. But throughout its 106 years, SDSU has held true to its first mission: teaching teachers.

Today, San Diego State’s School of Teacher Education offers educators and aspiring educators a progressive and unique curriculum designed to ensure their real-world success and, in the process, to continue fostering the educated citizenry San Diego’s early leaders and Normal School founders judged essential to the region’s prosperity.

“Education has been a major component of the institutional activity at San Diego State for its entire history,” said Lionel R. “Skip” Meno, dean of SDSU’s College of Education. “This is a major national university, yet there’s been a continuing priority to have a quality K-12 public education program. And the reason I think is that quality elementary and secondary education is just as important to the future of the city today as it was 106 years ago.”

A unique approach

The largest department in the College of Education, the School of Teacher Education each year accommodates about 550 new credentials candidates, 180-200 master’s candidates, and, through joint programs with other institutions, several doctoral students. The credentials curriculum takes only two full-time semesters to complete, but candidates must first earn a bachelor’s degree and fulfill certain pre-requisites.

Although other San Diego area universities offer credentials programs, Meno believes SDSU stands apart, not only as the region’s first teachers’ school, but also because of superb faculty, innovative methodology, strong relationships with area school districts, and involvement in all stages of a teacher’s professional life.

“Partnership with the school districts in the preparation of teachers is one of the key things that makes us unique,” Meno said. “Once we did the teacher preparation, and then they did the employment. What we’re learning is there’s an essential linkage between teacher preparation and the preparation of younger students so that they’re even able to come to college; in other words, we have a responsibility to participate in K-12 education.

“Second, we really can’t do teacher preparation if the school districts aren’t participating,” he continued. “Then the third stage is actual induction of new teachers into the work force. Again that needs to be a partnership. Finally, we participate in ongoing professional development. So instead of being involved in only one component of the continuum of a teacher’s life, we now are involved in all of those components.”

On-site education

SDSU’s partnerships with area schools enable credentials students to spend an entire year with a single group or “cohort” of classmates, not on the SDSU campus, but at one of several participating school sites. Student teaching occurs simultaneously.
with coursework. This year-long immersion experience helps future teachers feel they belong to a “community of educators,” said Nancy Farnan, director of the School of Teacher Education.

“Our research shows that the more communication districts, schools and the university have, the better they’re able to prepare teachers,” she said. “We give complementary messages about what’s important. We’re not working at cross purposes, but together.”

The concept works. In fact, the City Heights K-12 Credential Program, a cohort led by Farnan and SDSU colleagues Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey, recently was named one of four nationwide recipients of the 2003 Christa McAuliffe Award for Excellence in Teacher Education, presented by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

San Diego State administers three City Heights Schools as part of the City Heights Collaborative, a bold, educational reform project designed to improve student performance and break the cycle of poverty in the inner city.

Aida Allen, a fifth-grade teacher at one of those schools, Rosa Parks Elementary, has mentored about 25 San Diego State student teachers. “I think they’re wonderful,” she said, “and one of the beauties of the City Heights cohort is that they’re able to become part of the staff. They’re not just student teachers, they really get hands-on experience. They’re dealing with reality, not just book learning, and it makes a big difference.”

Students also applaud the cohort approach. One graduate told Farnan she’d talked to new teachers from other credential programs who felt nervous about their first year on their own. “But our student said she felt like she’d already done her first year of teaching, because our program was so thorough and so well supported,” Farnan said.

Lily Chen, a brand new math and science teacher at Marston Middle School in Clairemont, has already come to appreciate the real-world immersion she experienced as part of the City Heights cohort.

“City Heights really prepared me in many ways,” Chen said. “Many of my classes focused on motivation – how to engage my students – and I think that’s really an important part of teaching. Also, at City Heights I learned a lot about how to teach English language learners. Now, about 50 percent of my students are English language learners.”

Assessing results

Another distinguishing characteristic of San Diego State’s teacher education programs is an emphasis on research. The master’s and doctoral programs focus on assessment as an essential teaching tool. And faculty practice what they preach, evaluating credentials candidates during and after training. “It’s important for us to know how well we’re doing with the people coming through our program,” Farnan explained.

Further evidence of SDSU’s expertise in evaluation: San Diego State is providing leadership to the California State University (CSU) in creating a system-wide survey to assess CSU-educated teachers. San Diego State faculty are also leading a consortium including Stanford and University of California campuses to develop a new teacher performance assessment tool likely to be adopted statewide.

“It’s the first of its kind in the nation,” Farnan said of the CSU survey, now in its third year. “A lot of surveys have been sent out to graduates to ask what they thought of their training. But we also ask employers, what do you think of this particular graduate’s performance? How well prepared was he or she?”

A follow-up question might be: how satisfied is he or she with teaching? Allen, also an SDSU credentials grad, has an answer: “I think it’s a great career.”

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Further evidence of SDSU’s expertise in evaluation: San Diego State is providing leadership to the California State University (CSU) in creating a system-wide survey to assess CSU-educated teachers. San Diego State faculty are also leading a consortium including Stanford and University of California campuses to develop a new teacher performance assessment tool likely to be adopted statewide.

“It’s the first of its kind in the nation,” Farnan said of the CSU survey, now in its third year. “A lot of surveys have been sent out to graduates to ask what they thought of their training. But we also ask employers, what do you think of this particular graduate’s performance? How well prepared was he or she?”

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Not that religion has ever been irrelevant on the San Diego State campus. On a typical day, Hare Krishnas may be chanting on Centennial Walkway, Jewish students handing out literature at the Aztec Center or evangelical Christians holding forth on the Bible from the Free Speech Steps. Eight major religious centers operate on or near campus, and numerous other religious organizations serve student needs. Since Sept. 11, however, SDSU faculty have seen a surge of interest in religious studies.

“We’ve always had a strong enrollment,” said Holler, who chairs the religious studies department, “but Sept. 11 affected that.” SDSU has always had a strong enrollment in religious studies, and that has continued in recent years. These shifts, however, are not unique to SDSU; faculty members have remade their religious studies classes in response to global events.

Holler is particularly pleased to see students grappling with the links between religion and culture in their attempts to understand their own diverse communities. “We have excellent students coming in,” she said. “They understand that what we’re doing is not just an abstract exercise, but a way to comprehend each other and explore what it means to be human. There is very little solipsism; there are no tightly enclosed bubbles around them; they see that we’re all connected and constructed by our culture.”

In particular, more students are exploring Islam than in years past. Lecturer Sandy S. Swayd has seen his class on Islam triple from an average of 20 students five years ago. Of the 66 students enrolled in fall 2002, many say they were influenced by Sept. 11 to find out more about other cultures. “I think there is more interest and I think the interest will last,” Swayd said.

San Diego’s growing and influential Muslim community helped establish a Center for Islamic and Arabic Studies at SDSU in 2000, and the department is hoping to fill a full-time position in Islam by this summer. As many as 50 percent of Swayd’s students come from Iran or India, and Muslims want to learn more about their traditions.

When Sept. 11 broke out, I felt very uncomfortable,” said Sara McNab, 20, a senior from an Egyptian background. “I took the class so I could learn more about my own religion, because I didn’t feel like I knew enough. I wanted to have a bigger impact and show that Islam is like any other religion. It doesn’t teach hatred or negative things; it teaches good things.”

Faith and experience

Often, the students’ own perceptions and experiences help shape class discussion and make for lively dialogue. As part of a recent discussion on Mexico’s Day of the Dead festival, for instance, students in Rebecca McLean’s “Death, Dying and the Afterlife” section brought much more to the class than their knowledge of the readings—they brought their personal stories. One student spoke of poring over the grave of a dead family member, as a way of sharing the celebration with the departed. Another described elaborate funerary rites in his ancestral state of Michoacán, Mexico.

“I think students do bring their own life experiences to religious studies classes,” said Moore, an assistant professor. “Religion is not an impersonal or academic subject to them. They raise issues and ask questions about things that I hadn’t thought about.”

Classes that incorporate students’ varied personal experiences into the curriculum are common in SDSU’s religious studies department, which in recent years has transformed its study of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, global cultural shifts, as well as San Diego’s changing ethnic mix.

Instead of poring over dusty tomes of theological debate and institutional history, SDSU students today are more likely to visit San Diego’s “UFO church” or interview Somali Muslims at Gray Heights.

“I thought it would be fascinating to juxtapose the kinds of violence religion is capable of—violence against the other, violence to one-self like self-mutilation and sacrifice—to all the non-violence for which religion is also famous, like the non-violence we see in Mahatma Gandhi or the work of Martin Luther King Jr.,” Holler said. “I really developed this class as an extension of previous research. I never realized how timely it would be.”

SDSU’s curriculum to reflect global cultural shifts, as well as San Diego’s changing ethnic mix.

By Liese Klein

First published Spring 2003

In the Wake of 9-11, Students Find New Relevance in Religious Studies

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Marla Runyan
Class of 1991

Marla Runyan’s life is running right on course. Since graduating from San Diego State in 1991, the former Aztec sprinter has matured into one of the world’s top runners. Along the way, she’s also earned a graduate degree and written her autobiography.

Admirable accomplishments for anyone. But all the more remarkable for Marla Runyan, who’s been legally blind since age nine due to Stargardt’s disease, a juvenile form of macular degeneration.

Because of her condition, Marla learned to take a mental approach to her sport, mapping out racecourses in her head in advance. “It’s all about preparing,” she says, “so on race day, all I have to worry about is running, not the course.”

Her preparation has paid off. She made the 2000 Olympics team and finished eighth in her race. Making the Olympic team, she said, was as important to her as winning a medal.

Marla ran her first marathon in New York just last November and placed fourth, the highest an American has finished in more than a decade. More recently, she was fifth in the April 21 Boston Marathon, the best American finish since 1993.

Marla is also competing this summer in the U.S. Nationals in Palo Alto and the World Championship in Paris. Cheering her on will be her husband and coach, Matt Longeran.

Alongside her amazing athletic accomplishments, Marla highly values her academic achievements. She has earned both a B.A. and an M.S. from SDSU in education for deaf-blind children.

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Alongside her amazing athletic accomplishments, Marla highly values her academic achievements. She has earned both a B.A. and an M.S. from SDSU in education for deaf-blind children.

“Next to making the Olympic team, the thing I’m most proud of is getting my master’s,” she says. “Especially as someone who’s visually impaired, it’s very meaningful to me to have my master’s.”

Sometime between races, working with co-author Sally Jenkins, Marla also wrote a book about her life titled, “No Finish Line: My Life As I See It.”

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---Jennifer Zwiebel

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When publishing experts and SDSU alumni Marilyn and Tom Ross visited their alma mater recently, they not only felt nostalgic, but also confident in their decision to make two planned gifts to San Diego State. Over the last 5 years, the Rosses have established two charitable remainder trusts (CRTs) with the university, totaling $275,000. Although both Tom and Marilyn studied at SDSU more than 40 years ago, their paths didn’t cross for another two decades. At that time, Marilyn was a freelance writer and owner of a marketing agency, and Tom owned an engineering firm. To ensure a successful marriage and merging of two families, Tom changed careers and began working with Marilyn.

Authors and publishers of 12 books, including the best-selling “Complete Guide to Self-Publishing,” the Rosses operate Self Publishing Resources Inc. (www.SelfPublishingResources.com) and also lecture nationwide, helping thousands of authors produce and sell books.

Given their love of prose, it’s not surprising that the Rosses directed their planned gifts to support SDSU’s Love Library. “Tom and I view libraries as one of society’s greatest resources and often untapped treasures,” Marilyn says. “San Diego State’s has bountiful resources, and the ambiance of warmth and light in the building is beautiful.”

Marilyn and Tom were thrilled to express their passion for the written word by making a significant philanthropic contribution to their alma mater, while also substantially reducing their taxes. By transferring appreciated assets into CRTs, they received an immediate income tax deduction, bypassed capital gains tax and avoided the donations being subject to gift or estate taxes in the future. Further, SDSU will pay the Rosses a lifetime income, which may amount to more than the value of the original donation.

Library Dean Connie Venita Dowell couldn’t be more pleased. “Due to leadership gifts like the Rosses’, we can continue acquiring materials for our students that inspire discovery and enable scholarship.”

The Rosses, who have retreated to the mountains of Colorado, are still in the publishing business. Currently on Marilyn’s plate is a book titled “Metroplitan Moves,” which offers advice on finding a safe and successful place in small town USA. “Some of us need the tranquility that can only be found in nature,” Marilyn says. “But we’ll return to America’s Finest City to visit. Thankfully, the perfect weather and SDSU will still be there.”

Nichk K. Millot

For more information on how a planned gift to SDSU can fulfill your philanthropic intent and also benefit you financially, please visit www.sdsugift.org or contact our planned giving office at (619) 594-7090.

A Gift for Prose

Andy Trakas: Making a Connection with Inner-City Students

Hoover High School vice principal Andy Trakas, ’85, often doesn’t leave his office until after 7 p.m. Those are the days he’s supervising an after-school basketball game or meeting with immigrant parents about their son’s struggles in math.

Trakas knows what it’s like to struggle through school. Good grades never came easily for him. But even as a youngsters, Trakas had a magic foot – he could kick a soccer ball halfway down the field. Eventually, that foot earned him a scholarship to SDSU and a spot as kicker on the Aztec football team.

Turns out grades weren’t Trakas’ only challenge in college; bad press after a close game taught him that college football heroes could be vilified as easily as lionized. “SDSU put things in perspective for me,” Trakas recalled. “I had to deal with some tough situations, and I came out stronger.”

Trakas’ first teaching job was at Scripps Ranch High School. Although content in that upscale environment, he was intrigued by an open position at Hoover High School because nearby North Park had been his playground as a youth. The interview with then-principal Doris Alvarez (1997 National Principal of the Year) catalyzed his career. “I realized those kids in Scripps didn’t need me,” Trakas said. “At Hoover, I could make a connection.”

He has. Whether because of Trakas’ urban childhood or experience as the child of immigrant parents (Greek in his case), Hoover High students connect with him. “Andy’s a student magnet, especially for the borderline students,” said Hoover principal Doug Williams. “He has helped many of them focus on their education and make wise choices.”

Last fall, after 5 years teaching humanities, Trakas became Hoover’s vice principal and dean of students. At a meeting shortly after, Williams recalled, “someone asked how Andy was doing as dean of students. Those of us who worked with him just looked at each other and smiled. We knew we had made the right choice.”

—Coleen L. Gaughey

During the Vietnam war, there were daily protests on the steps of the administration building. As the war progressed, the protesters became more vocal, animated and sometimes aggressive. I remember students attempting to burn an American flag inside a trash can and other students trying to salvage the flag by dragging it out.

I had a U.S. Naval Academy bumper sticker on my VW bug, a remnant from a boy I had dated in high school, and no amount of scraping could get it off. Several times, my car was egged while parked in a campus lot – just for sporting that stick- er, which reflected a one-time love interest and not necessarily my politics.

Pam Mariko Ryan, ’74, B.A., child development (family studies), ’91, M.A., education

When I was at State…
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