Center on Civility and Democratic Engagement

By Dan Lindheim PhD/JD, Faculty Director

FOUNDED BY THE CLASS OF ’68, the Goldman School’s Center on Civility and Democratic Engagement (CCDE) has embarked on a series of new initiatives including supporting community-based policy research by placing Goldman students directly with local grassroots organizations. Academics and policy makers typically study local communities and community groups, but rarely are these groups involved in actually making policy which affects them and about which they have enormous expertise. This initiative, supported by the San Francisco Foundation and Larry and Rebekah Hietz, is an effort to change that reality and to increase the engagement and participation of marginalized groups in the policy-making process.

In one project, Goldman student Tim Tsai worked with Oakland homeless residents and homeless advocacy groups to help bring their voice and experience to policy-making. In working with the East Oakland Collective, the Village, and Just Cities/the Dellums Institute for Social Justice, Tim looked at: (i) the causes of homelessness in Oakland; (ii) the status and structure of homelessness funding (including the disparate and siloed approaches); (iii) which efforts at different levels might have prevented or reduced homelessness; and (iv) dimensioned the magnitude of the response that would be required if government were actually committed to seriously addressing the issues.

Another Goldman student, Anthony Rodriguez, worked with organizations of the formerly incarcerated to change the policies that currently deny them access to both public and private housing. Anthony worked with community and advocacy groups in a countywide coalition led by Just Cities/the Dellums Institute for Social Justice, to define the nature and magnitude of the problem that the formerly incarcerated face in getting access to either publicly supported or private housing. To address this particular housing crisis, efforts are currently underway to pass “Fair Chance” policies at the local and potentially state levels to prohibit housing discrimination against the formerly incarcerated. Richmond recently passed such a policy. The coalition has been working with Berkeley, Oakland, Emeryville, and Alameda County political leaders on considering such policies with the goal of extending the ordinance throughout California.

CCDE has also continued its support for Goldman APA (thesis) projects. This past year, CCDE supported three projects. In the first, Emma Fernandez worked with the SF Elections Commission to provide recommendations on addressing San Francisco’s persistent voter turnout gap.

Neighborhoods with a higher proportion of low-income residents and residents of color tend to register and vote at relatively low levels. Based on interviews with community groups, advocacy groups, and election officials, two issues emerged as particularly important. The first are logistical: how and where to register and then knowing how and where to vote. The second barrier is the complexity of elections. Too many voters struggle to understand ballot issues as well as basic voting mechanics. The project resulted in recommendations to the SF Department of Elections to address these gaps including mechanisms to both expand registration and to increase voting options.

In the second project, Andreas Sampson Gerloski worked with the San Francisco Housing Accelerator Fund to determine a methodology for identifying appropriate properties for development by nonprofit developers so that affordable housing can be rehabilitated and maintained as affordable, thereby avoiding the substantial displacement that typically takes place when properties are sold to market rate developers. This housing both includes SROs as well as multi-family units.

In the third project, Evan Larson worked with the town of Pt. Arena to analyze alternatives for maintaining their important, but no longer financially viable, harbor and public pier. Currently, public subsidy consumes an excessive portion of the budget diverting funds from other valuable projects benefitting the diverse, low-income, working-class community. Working with local user groups, town and surrounding County residents and officials, Evan analyzed the various ideas being proposed. He created a broad public process with a wide variety of community stakeholders to discuss his report and presented his findings to a special session of the City Council. The combination of quality analysis and public process seems to have changed how Pt. Arena intends to proceed.

Continuing its work on campus free speech and engagement, the Center sponsored “The Great Debate” between the Campus Berkeley Democrats and the Berkeley Conservative Society. In the words of the Conservative Society, this was “a thoughtful and intellectual debate … and was another victory for free speech and discussion.”

Finally, at the October 2019 Homecoming, the Center is presenting a panel on key issues surrounding the 2020 Presidential election. Topics will include discussions of: (i) the appropriate platforms and candidates for Democrats if they want to successfully challenge President Trump; (ii) the impacts of gerrymandering and voter suppression efforts on the election; and (iii) the status (and merits) of the efforts and campaigns to modify the Electoral College.