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Confronting Poverty

One in five children in California. 40.4 million people in the United States. Hundreds of millions worldwide. As these and related metrics can only begin to suggest, poverty and the inequities that create it are problems both profound and pervasive problems.

The UC Santa Barbara Blum Center for Global Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Development will bring these issues front and center, gathering faculty and students from a host of academic disciplines to teach, learn, conduct research and to explore opportunities for collective action and practical engagement.

With newly appointed director Alice O'Connor at the helm, the center is kicking off the academic year with a talk by Robert Reich, former U.S. secretary of labor and currently the Chancellor's Professor of Public Policy at UC Berkeley. His lecture, "How Did We Get Into This Mess?: Reclaiming Our Economy and Our Democracy" is slated for 4 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 2, in Campbell Hall. It is free and open to the public.

A Common Focus

The Blum Center at UCSB is part of a UC-wide initiative begun a decade ago by UC Regent Richard Blum. Centers exist on every campus, and while they have different names and different areas of specific focus, each deals with issues of poverty. "And when we say globally, we mean both domestically and around the world," said O'Connor, a professor of history.

“We are deeply grateful to UC Regent Richard Blum for his vision and generosity in initiating the UC Blum Centers, which exemplify our university’s mission of research, teaching, and public service,” said Chancellor Henry T. Yang. “We are honored, excited, and inspired to inaugurate the UC Santa Barbara Blum Center for Global Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Development. We look forward to the opportunities this center will provide for collaboration across the disciplines to help us better understand and take action on issues of poverty and inequality, and to make a contribution to our global society.”

Scholarship and Community Engagement

According to O’Connor, a significant emphasis at UCSB and on other UC campuses is to establish a curricular presence for interdisciplinary ways of understanding the issues of poverty and inequality, and also how to deal with them. “A big part of what we’re going to be doing over the year is to create an interdisciplinary minor on poverty and economic development that combines academic coursework with a capstone internship,” she said. “The initiative will also support interdisciplinary, collaborative and community-engaged research as well as other forms of public outreach.”

O’Connor sees a number of opportunities for community engagement in Santa Barbara, involving problems such as affordable housing, hunger, homelessness, and numerous issues around work, wages, and immigrant justice. Part of the work of the center, she noted, will be in identifying where and how we can be of use to the community we live and work in.

The Next Generation of Leaders

“The Blum Centers play the critically important role of training and mobilizing a large, highly diverse cadre of students to become the next generation of leaders who truly grasp the importance and consequences of poverty and widening inequality,” said Reich. “And, they augment the truly impressive University of California, which maximizes upward mobility at an unprecedented scale.

“This combination of training and educating is needed now more than ever to restore the balance of power and enable more active participation in our democracy,” he added.

Global Citizens First

The broader Blum Network attempts to strengthen collaboration and coordination across the UC-system on poverty-related issues. One of its main projects has been the growth of a student leadership network — the Student Action Council on Eradicating Poverty and Inequality (SACEPI), involving student representatives from all the UC Blum centers.

“The Blum centers are a chance to challenge young people to think about themselves in the world, not only as Americans or as members of the millennial generation, but as global citizens who understand the complicated ethics of development work,” Blum said of his vision for the centers and the Blum Network.

“We are educating a generation of poverty actors and entrepreneurs who understand — whether they are engineers or historians or medical students — that helping lift people out of poverty is complicated, difficult and deeply worthwhile,” he continued. “Organizations like the Blum centers are needed in addition to traditional academic departments, and in addition to the many actors working on international development challenges from outside of campus.”

Blum Center Events

In addition to Reich, author of 15 books, including the recent “Saving Capitalism for the Many, Not the Few,” the UCSB center will also host Anirudh Krishna, a professor of public policy and political science at Duke University. Krishna will give a talk at the end of November on his new book, “The Broken Ladder: The Paradox and Potential of India’s One Billion.”

Also, throughout the academic year, SACEPI students at UCSB will continue to raise awareness and plan actions to highlight the importance of poverty alleviation and sustainable development and involve students in these issues.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the

edge of the Pacific Ocean.