Environmental justice is among the priorities for the new director of the Udall Center

Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy
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Environmental justice, equity and a new era of increased collaboration and engagement with stakeholders – especially those who have historically been underserved or underrepresented – are priorities for Andrea Gerlak, new director of the Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy.

Gerlak, who was made permanent director in November after serving as acting director for several months, has been leading a strategic planning and visioning process for the Udall Center that emphasizes new communication strategies, professional development for staff and wider partnerships across campus.

"We welcome the opportunity to strengthen existing relationships and form new partnerships with faculty and students at the University of Arizona as we tackle timely public policy issues," she said. "And we want to make sure we always do this in ways that are inclusive, respectful of social justice, and environmentally sustainable."

A professor in the School of Geography, Development and the Environment, Gerlak has a doctorate in political science and studies collaborative governance, interdisciplinary research networks and environmental justice.

Her strategic plan for the Udall Center emphasizes diversity and inclusion, staff wellness and professional development, as well as creating an interdisciplinary haven for scholars and practitioners to find solutions to grand challenges.

One effort that is already underway is a program for center employees that offers regularly scheduled activities to get outside, get moving or just focus on general mental and physical wellness.

Gerlak also has created new postdoctoral and internship positions centered on stakeholder engagement. Her goal, she said, is to develop a pathway for early-career professionals to get involved with the center and gain interdisciplinary experience by working with its networks of collaborators around campus and the globe.

The Udall Center is a research center under the Office of Research, Innovation and Impact and is the intellectual home for interdisciplinary, stakeholder-based policy research and outreach. The center aims to advance cross-cutting inquiry and connect diverse policy research efforts and researchers, strengthen support for policy research and deliver measurable public impact.

"The Udall Center has a rich legacy of public service and commitment to Indigenous and sustainability issues," Gerlak said. "I'm excited to develop new partnerships to help harness University expertise to address our most critical environmental and social challenges."

One particularly strong partnership is the center's 26-year relationship with the Morris K. Udall and Stewart L. Udall Foundation, a federal agency that helps fund the center.

This year, the Udall Center and the Udall Foundation are co-hosting events to honor the centennial birthday of Morris K. Udall, who served as a U.S. representative from Arizona for 30 years. Udall led the House Committee on Natural Resources and was responsible for major environmental legislation.

The first event, "Morris K. Udall's Legacy in the Southwest U.S.,” slated for April 28, will feature distinguished Indigenous speakers and panelists, several former Udall interns and associates, and two of Udall's children, educator Anne Udall and former U.S. Sen. Mark Udall of Colorado. It will be held in Environment and Natural Resources 2 and is open to the public. Registration is required.

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