New Leaders Take Center Stage

First-year directors infuse four Boalt research centers with abundant energy

Jonathan Simon ’87 and Kate Jastram ’87 are former Boalt classmates and longtime faculty members. Dimple Abichandani and Rebecca Golbert only arrived on campus last summer. Their common thread: Each just capped a fruitful first year directing a Boalt research center.

Simon assumed leadership of the Center for the Study of Law & Society (CSLS), often described as the world’s top center for socio-legal studies. An expert on criminal law, he had worked closely with CSLS while chairing Boalt’s Jurisprudence and Social Policy Program.

Propelling the center’s push to challenge conventional legal and policy wisdom, Simon created the weekly Visiting Scholar Summer Speaker Series, expanded CSLS’s research network, and helped the center guide California policy as the state grapples with overcrowded prisons.

“Law has traditionally been an autonomous field, and the idea of having a space for interdisciplinary research and collaboration is still unfamiliar in parts of the world,” says Simon. “But people are now realizing that approach to legal education serves modern legal practice well, which makes this an optimal time to maximize our impact.”

As the Miller Institute for Global Challenges and the Law’s new faculty director, Jastram wants Boalt to become ground zero for U.S. students pursuing international law by “creating more opportunities for them to enter it.”

She helped develop the school’s Certificate of Specialization in International Law in 2009, awarded to 28 students at graduation this year. Boalt’s international law program recently ranked fifth nationwide.

Energy experts at a CLEE-convened symposium discussed how California could retain its role as a global leader in renewable energy.

Elkind is particularly optimistic about California’s enthusiastic reception for electric cars. “It’s still a new technology, but consumers have responded well to it,” he says. “Our state has a chance to emerge as a leader in producing electric cars and batteries, and bringing down their up-front costs.”

To Hein’s eye, Boalt is uniquely positioned to champion these big goals. “We’re recognized as a leader in environmental law and policy, which increases the reach and impact of our work,” she explains.

Led by top scholars in the field, the center also collaborates with leading faculty in engineering, business, economics, and other areas. Says Hein, “We attract the best and brightest students to work with CLEE on research and to engage with our unparalleled Bay Area environmental and energy community.”

—Ben Peterson

The council supports alternative transportation options and aims to revitalize communities by creating close-knit, mixed-use areas that reduce distances between housing, workplaces, and shopping—and establishing more pedestrian and bicycle-friendly environments. “We’re looking at innovative ways to alter how residential areas function,” Elkind says.

CLEE Executive Director Jayni Foley Hein ’08 outlines other areas where the center is delivering results. “We’re analyzing the current California drought, and proposing policy changes that might alleviate its effects. We’re also working with federal agencies to assess how they can reduce emissions.” Hein says CLEE also leads projects focused on electric vehicle financing and deployment, hydraulic fracturing, and global climate-change mitigation.

Last year, renewable-energy developers, finance experts, utility representatives, business leaders, and public officials gathered in Berkeley for a CLEE-convened symposium that looked a generation or two into the future. The group discussed ways California can boost its role as a global leader on renewable energy, such as increasing the statewide renewable-energy benchmark to 51 percent by 2030. The group also suggested policies to help the state reduce greenhouse gas emissions to levels 80 percent below those in 1990.

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Jastram also connects Boalt students and alums with the American Society of International Law, works to increase international law placements within the school’s UCDC Law Program, and recruits alumni as student mentors.

“Much of our international law system is organized around sovereign nation states, but in many areas, borders are becoming less important,” says Jastram, who has worked in high-level positions with several international organizations. “That throws a lot of international law into question, which makes it a fascinating time to prepare students for practicing in a globalized setting.”

Before becoming the Henderson Center for Social Justice’s executive director, Abichandani spent 15 years advancing its goals in positions where law was the primary tool for change.

At the center, Abichandani quickly forged partnerships with academics, legal practitioners, advocacy organizations, policymakers, and community groups. She engages not only Boalt students who plan to pursue social justice careers, but all who care about equity and justice.

The Henderson Center has recently hosted a dynamic conference on low-wage earners and barriers to workplace equality, as well as symposia on forced arbitration in the workplace and affirmative action.

“I was drawn to the center’s mission of inspiring and arming the next generation of lawyers and leaders in the social justice arena,” Abichandani says. “Winning in today’s environment takes integrated strategies and lawyers who know how to work collaboratively.”

Golbert, executive director of the Berkeley Institute for Jewish Law and Israel Studies, calls her new position a “dream job.” She arrived from Pepperdine University, where she was associate director of its Glazer Institute for Jewish Studies.

In 2013-14, her new institute hosted the Robbins Collection Lecture on Jewish Law and Thought by renowned political theorist Michael Walzer, an international conference on Israeli and Palestinian waterways, and many other events.

Launched in 2011, the institute is expanding Jewish and Israel studies offerings at UC Berkeley. With faculty director Kenneth Bamberger, Golbert oversees its two programs—one on Jewish law, thought, and identity, the other on the study of Israel.

“Both programs engage in trailblazing endeavors,” she says. “Our contribution to these fields is very rewarding.” —Andrew Cohen