The New Three R’s

Manuel Pastor brings his brand of social (con)science to USC College.

By Wayne Lewis
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It’s a little bit hard to pigeonhole Manuel Pastor, who joined the USC College faculty this fall.

The professor of geography and of American studies and ethnicity is an economist by training, but his work ranges across the social sciences. He’s held appointments in UCLA’s architecture and urban planning school, the international relations program at UC San Diego and Occidental College’s economics department.

He’s published on pollution near schools and in minority neighborhoods, globalization’s effect on local markets, race and immigration, and Latin American economies in transition, among a host of other topics.

There’s a common theme, though, that’s quite fitting for the outgoing director of UC Santa Cruz’s Center for Justice, Tolerance, and Community: the quest for equity.

As a researcher, Pastor pinpoints problems of justice and seeks out solutions. And if you ask him, he’ll tell you that the key is the new three R’s.

It’s all about “rigor, relevance and reach. High-quality academic work, directly relevant to some public policy concerns and with extensive reach to publics that really need to use the research.”

And Pastor’s three R’s spell research with impact.

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Occidental and Brown. They recommend changes to permit policies to avoid clusters of polluting facilities in any one neighborhood.

In 2003 Pastor and colleagues showed that California waste sites were located disproportionately greater numbers in minority neighborhoods. In response, the California Integrated Waste Management Board overhauled its efforts to include more community members in the decision-making process about where to locate dumps.

More dramatically, the South Coast Air Quality Management District in 2000 drastically tightened cancer-risk standards for new developments that pollute. This was the result of community pressure — and a timely Los Angeles Times op-ed by Pastor and colleagues. The op-ed presented evidence that, when overlaid upon existing pollution, the laxer regulation represented an inordinate health risk to the region’s minority neighborhoods.

Underlying Pastor’s dedication to justice is a sincere and abiding optimism. When asked about his inspiration, he mentions U.S. civil rights movements both historic and ongoing, from the abolition of slavery to women’s suffrage to the gay rights movement.

“All of those movements represent America moving to its highest promise,” Pastor said. “If you look at vibrant community struggles for justice, they represent such a great promise about who we could be.”

His latest book, co-authored by Chris Benner of Pennsylvania State University and Laura Leete of Willamette University, tackles the changing labor market.

Staircases or Treadmills? Labor Market Intermediaries and Economic Opportunity in a Changing Economy (Russell Sage Press, 2007) explores the use of organizations, such as employment agencies, that help job seekers in Milwaukee and the Silicon Valley.

They found that, compared to those who dwell in higher income areas, people in lower income neighborhoods rely more upon labor market intermediaries. The networks of friends and family in such areas tend to be of limited value for job seeking. This can lead to a vicious cycle.

“One of the biggest punch lines of the book is that the use of temporary agencies tends to help people find employment,” Pastor said, “but it often connects them, even in the long run, to employment that’s not very high quality in terms of benefits or wages.”

The book does offer solutions to this rut.

Pastor described one example, the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership. The Milwaukee metalworking industry had been in decline, and businesses tended to avoid investing in job training for fear of losing more-adept employees to their competitors. This public-private consortium lobbied for training investments across the industry and broke the stalemate.

“They’ve been able to bring up the training level,” Pastor said. “It’s wound up being a useful mechanism for bringing people off welfare and into the
metalworking industry, as well.”

For him, solutions are best when they’re win-win.

For example, there’s his newest grant, the Just Growth project funded by the Ford Foundation. Pastor is looking into what he called “a tantalizingly new possibility.”

“There’s a growing body of evidence, which I hope to contribute to, that regions that are fairer — that is, including more people in the benefits of economic growth — actually tend to have more rapid and more sustainable economic growth.”

This is a strand of research that Pastor has pursued before, and he points to a recent study by the Cleveland Federal Reserve revealing that out of 100 midsize metropolitan areas, regions exhibiting less racial segregation and more income equality tended to have more growth.

The Just Growth project will identify areas where equity and economic growth have gone hand in hand, and try to figure out how it happens. It’s a chance to provide lessons that commingle the interests of community and business groups, which are so often at odds.

In Pastor’s view, interdisciplinarity is essential to providing such solutions.

“None of the social problems that we face can be solved just through getting people to think differently (psychology), creating different relationships between groups (sociology), creating different government systems (politics) or creating different economic opportunities. All of those things need to change at the same time.”

He does offer a caveat.

“It’s important to be interdisciplinary without losing discipline,” Pastor said. Solid methodology is critical — there’s the first “R” again.

For Pastor, who grew up in Southern California, his return to L.A. has both professional and personal dimensions.

Los Angeles is ground zero for a complex intersection of issues around globalization and the impact of the goods movement industry on surrounding communities, including air pollution throughout the L.A. Basin — ideal subjects for Pastor’s research.

More than 40 percent of all cargo containers coming into the U.S. move through the twin ports at Los Angeles and Long Beach, which are growing at more than 10 percent a year and contribute around 25 percent of all air pollution in the basin. Limiting the environmental impacts from the ports’ boom is controversial, but industry, policy-makers, environmentalists and the impacted communities will have to strike a balance to sustain growth over the long-term.

One source of friction is the aging trucking fleet that hauls goods from the ports and adds to pollution and traffic problems. Pastor has already weighed in on the issue with an op-ed for the Los Angeles Business Journal, suggesting a
move away from the current independent contractor system to an employer-based model that would provide a living wage to truckers while requiring the shipping companies maintain a clean fleet. He sees this as an interim step to a robust, green Southern California logistics industry — another win-win.

In L.A., Pastor will be closer to his 92-year-old father in Whittier, as well as to his two children, who attend a certain university in Westwood. (“I have a feeling that they’ll be throwing things at me at football games,” Pastor joked, “but it’s going to be great to be close to them.”) With the move, his wife, Betsy Hamilton, takes the role of principal at a South Pasadena elementary school. With his signature optimism, Pastor described his once-and-again home as a city in flux.

“This is the town where people remake themselves, with Hollywood as the stellar example, but it’s also the town that’s remaking itself right now,” he said. “People are trying to craft new solutions to the problems of social inequity, and they’re trying to craft it in a way that includes business too.”

USC College, similarly, is on the cusp of great things.

“USC has become a very exciting place to be. The university has a big commitment to trying to engage in the city and with the communities around it. And the College has a big commitment to improving the quality of its research profile. That’s really exciting.”

tags: professor, social science