Changing the World with Data: Our Data for Societal Good Event

Attendees listen as the panelists discuss data driven solutions.

Written by
Kallyn Hobmann

Published on
May 16, 2024

Changing the World with Data: Our Data for Societal Good Event
By Kallyn Hobmann

In today's rapidly changing world of data science and technology, companies and organizations leverage data in various ways. Data can enhance efficiency, operations, product development, communication, and more. However, one of the most impactful uses of data is to drive positive change on a global scale.

In collaboration with the University of San Diego's Knauss School of Business, DSA hosted the Data for Societal Good event on May 2. This event brought together students and working professionals who were eager to explore data-driven approaches to addressing societal issues.
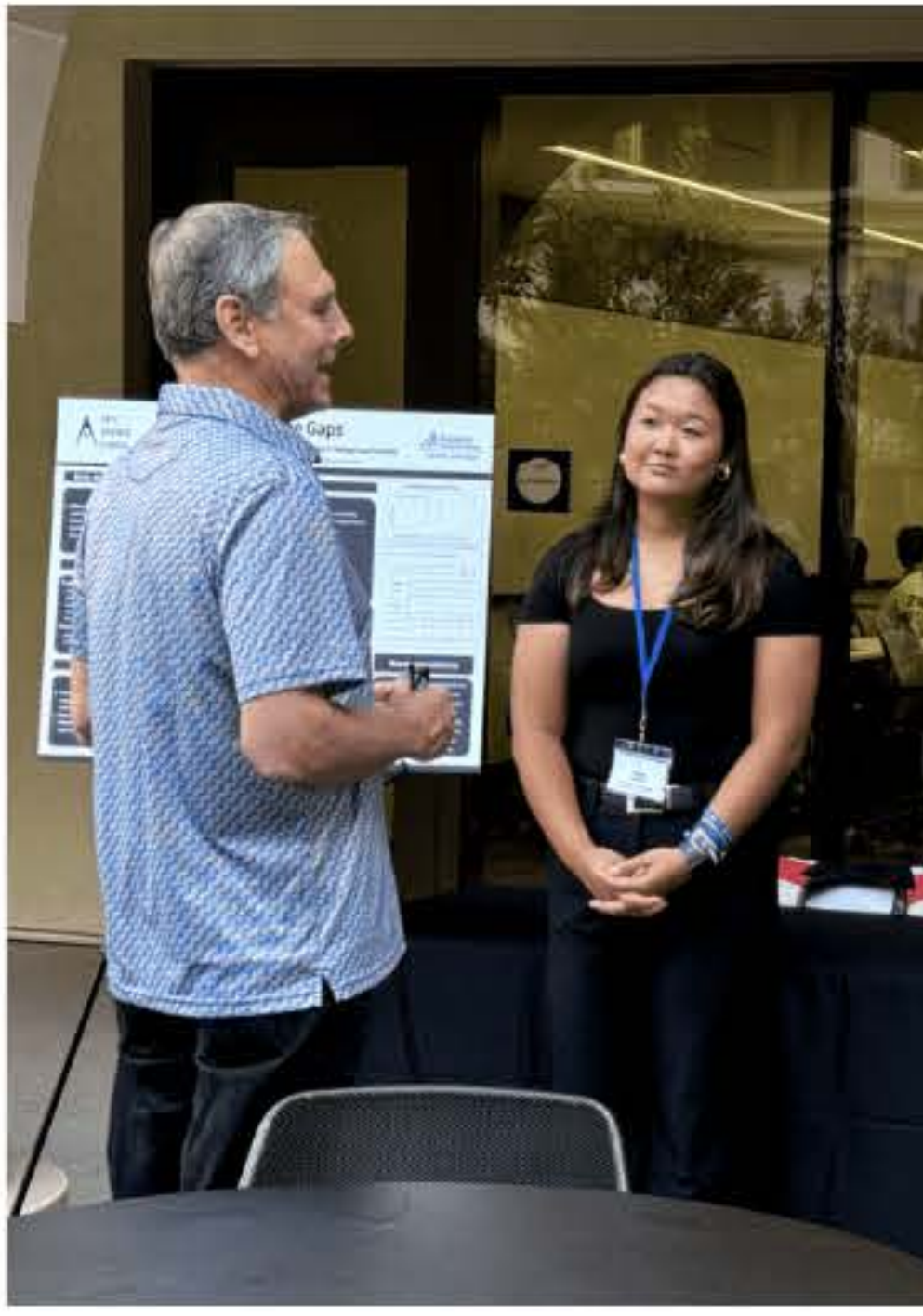
USD MSBA students present their capstone projects to attendees.

Before the panel discussion with our guest speakers, the courtyard outside the Nexus Theater was abuzz with a diverse group of about 100 attendees. Some were still in college, while others had over 20 years of career experience. USD MSBA students presented poster displays showcasing their projects from their Data for Social Good course. During this event, students had the opportunity to learn from each other and receive feedback from industry experts, leading to invaluable conversations about the limitless potential of data science to make a positive impact.

As the evening continued, everyone made their way inside for the panel discussion with guest speakers **Casey Castillo** (CEO, Jacobs & Cushman San Diego Food Bank), **Vanessa Ruiz** (Managing Director, Global Communities), **Bob Kamensky** (CEO, Feeding San Diego), **Ion Nemteanu** (Executive Director, UC San Diego Rady School of Management), and **Karina Kangas** (Business Development Manager, Qualcomm). The panelists shared their experiences and insights on various topics, including the challenges and opportunities of using data in their respective fields, the role of data in driving social change, and the future of data-driven solutions.

The conversation—moderated by **Daniel Lin** (Associate Dean and Professor, Knauss School of Business)—began with the food bank CEOs sharing how data helps their nonprofits better serve San Diegans facing food insecurity. They discussed specific examples, such as using data to identify high-demand food items, optimize delivery routes, and predict future needs.

"Data science has helped us feed more people in an ever-changing world," said Castillo.

The panelists share their insight on data driven solutions.

DSA partners with food banks—we created a predictive dashboard that pinpoints hunger hotspots to help them allocate resources more effectively. Our **Food Bank Project Case Study** published on May 9 illustrates how the insights gained from our models have informed strategic decision-making, leading to more targeted and effective food distribution efforts. This is a tangible example of how data can transform lives and communities.

Castillo talked about the impact community partnerships like ours can have when it comes to data projects, saying he saw this underscored during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We went from serving a little over 300,000 people to 600,000 people overnight. We had to be innovative. We had to change some things," said Castillo. "We were able to do that because we used partners."

Nemteanu added on, urging the audience to remember how data visualization, especially through a dashboard, can directly change lives just like it has with the Food Bank Project.

"[At] the end of that story is someone trying to make a huge, impactful decision where you're trying to automate some type of action, and a lot of that is going to be given credibility through a dashboard," he said. "A dashboard is the window into whether or not the decision you're making makes sense."

Casey Castillo, Ion Nemteanu, and Bob Kamensky discuss the power of data visualization.

Staying on the topic of nonprofits, Kamensky talked about how data helps build trust between organizations and donors. He said using data to optimize operations enables nonprofits like Feeding San Diego to hit milestones and reach goals, showing people the direct impact their support makes.

"Our revenue stream [is] mostly coming from philanthropic organizations, donors [who] say, 'I believe in your mission and I am willing to give you some of my personal wealth for you to accomplish your mission,'" said Kamensky. "There is an expectation, or [there] should be, that we are being good stewards with it, and we are maximizing what we are doing."

Ruiz brought a different, broader perspective to the conversation. She talked about Global Communities' projects around the world, like a women's empowerment program in Ethiopia and a food insecurity program in Madagascar. While her organization touches a vast range of social issues, its projects all share something in common: data. Ruiz said without data science, they couldn't change people's lives like they do now.

"All of this works around data, data visualization, [to] address those social economic issues that we're seeing and the inequalities that we're seeing as well," said Ruiz.

Karina Kangas and Vanessa Ruiz discuss data's global impact.

While it was made clear that data plays an immeasurable role in the nonprofit sector, Kangas gave insight on how it is equally critical in the for-profit realm. She emphasized that at Qualcomm, there is a distinct emphasis on using data to create products that effectively serve others. She gave the audience members a compelling reminder about the influential role they can have in the workplace when they know how to use data. This underscores the importance of data fluency and its potential to empower team members and leadership.

"With data visualization, I'm able to help my teammates understand a little bit quicker or really be able to get to the decision that we ultimately want to be able to achieve, so I feel like that's really what my superpower is," said Kangas. "Just remember that if you are data fluent, you have the capability to actually manipulate the data and help your team members."

As the panel discussion came to an end, the guest speakers reflected on the growth they've seen and the optimistic outlook.

"We are now better at using historical data and demographic trends to prepare and plan our future at the micro and macro level," said Kamensky.

Guests from a variety of backgrounds network and mingle after the panel.

The panel was followed by more networking and conversation. Everyone celebrated as raffle prize winners were announced, and there was a lingering sense of hope and community. Whether it's within a local nonprofit organization or a global corporate company, this event made it clear that data can and is being used for good. We encourage you to continue exploring the potential of data-driven solutions and consider how you can contribute to this movement in your own capacity.