By Peter Shi T'16

Mr. Gergen is CEO of Forward Impact, an organization that unleashes the impact potential of next generation entrepreneurial leaders. This work includes launching community-based strategies to develop and scale high-impact entrepreneurs throughout North Carolina. Read his full biography here: https://entrepreneurship.duke.edu/associate/christopher-gergen/

Our Conversation with Christopher Gergen

Duke I&E: You began your studies at Duke as an Art and English Major. Did your major in Art impact the way that you approach social entrepreneurship?

CG: It certainly contributed to my path. First, with English, you need to be able to articulate what you are doing both in written and in verbal form to communicate your vision and how you plan to reach that vision. Clear verbal and written communication is incredibly important for what I do. It has given me a broader appreciation for the broader canon of literature. For example, I use my writing skills every day for my column “Doing Better at Doing Good” for the Charlotte Observer.

In terms of art, there is a clear corollary between entrepreneurial thinking and creative thinking, and being able to express yourself and exercise the left part of your brain is incredibly important. So, while my painting continues to be just an amateur hobby, it has always been a nice contributor to being able to flex and exercise my creativity.

In addition to my double-major in college, I was also doing a lot of work in public policy, and I was deeply interested in systemic change and social justice work. One of my most formative experiences was a study abroad experience when I was in South Africa in 1992 studying politics and getting actively involved in the post-Apartheid era. Mandela had been released from prison in 1989, so it was a very interesting time to be there.

I had a broad tapestry of experiences, but English and Fine Arts have definitely contributed to my path.

Duke I&E: After a year working with the teleprompter script and writing the headline news for CNN, you decided to travel to Santiago, Chile, where you founded a music lounge and bar with a group of local artists. Could you tell us more about what led you up to, through, and beyond your decision to leave CNN?
**CG:** In South Africa, I was actively engaged with what was going on in the community. I was actively involved in the squatters and townships and with the conversations. After two years, I became a writer for headline news. I was at a news studio in Atlanta, and Nelson Mandela gets elected president. I was writing about it, which was incredibly exciting. Yet, I felt very removed from that experience. I felt like writing these things in the context of these 30 second news clips wasn’t allowing me to be actively engaged in the world around me. I didn’t feel like it was leading to the sort of social impact that I was interested in having. I wanted to immerse myself in an environment where I could learn more about myself and my interests, get exposed to a new culture and language, and get back in the field. I wanted to get involved in something more dynamic and interesting.

I had no idea what that was going to look like. Because I was letting the spirit carry me, I eventually ended up in Santiago, Chile. I seized the opportunity to work in a vibrant city with 30 universities, thousands of young people, and in the middle of a cultural awakening after Pinochet had been deposed in 1989. As a result, it was a great moment to contribute to this community and to create a fun cultural hotspot. I saw putting together this bar as a 3-D art project with the added perk of throwing a good party every night. It had live music, and it flexed my music and fine arts skills. During this time, I became friends with a group of Chilean artists and actors. As a fellow artist, I gravitated towards them. It was a ton of fun, and it got me on the entrepreneurial path. I sketched out what this bar would look like on a napkin, and within four months we had a manifestation of that sketch.

**Duke I&E:** In Santiago, Chile, you met a mentor who identified himself as a “cultural entrepreneur” and started his own university. This man later inspired you to follow the path towards becoming a social entrepreneur. How have mentors prepared you for the challenges that you’ve faced in the field of social entrepreneurship?

**CG:** I think mentors play several roles. They challenge you to think bigger, train you to become a more disciplined, focused thinker, and serve as good accountability partners. With this mentor in Santiago, he allowed me to see a new reality by combining two things that were important for me: social justice and entrepreneurship.

I was deeply focused on social justice from my experiences in South Africa, and I loved being an entrepreneur from my experiences in Santiago. I got turned on by how those two things could be combined by becoming a social entrepreneur in the education space. Since then, I’ve continued to seek out mentors who can continue to help me see the bigger picture and new opportunities around the corner. Because they were people who were often generations older than I am, they have a lot more experience and a better sense of the broader picture and context.

Now, I’m working actively with a terrific mentor in his late seventies, who has just resigned from Walford College after a very distinguished career. He is amazing
because of his ability to provide perspective. He also works with me on effectively using my time and challenges me to ask the right questions and the hard questions.

**Duke I&E: What are some examples of these hard questions?**

**CG:** Some examples are: Am I the best leader that I can be? Am I having greatest impact that I can while being the best father and husband that I can be too? For me, the biggest challenge is time management. We are fortunate to have many opportunities before us – there is so much interest in the world of social entrepreneurship, and we have the opportunity to take this to a whole new level.

The real question is: how do I channel my limited time and energy to be able to have the maximum impact? How do I be as efficient as I can with my time? The biggest challenge is choosing which challenges I want to focus on – which are the ones that will yield the highest return, both in terms of impact and dividends? What are the things that I should take off the table? Saying no is one of the most difficult decisions to make.

**Duke I&E: From co-founding SMARTTHINKING, an online tutoring platform, to creating innovation ecosystems such as Bull City Forward, HQ Raleigh, and ThinkHouse, many of your projects focus on education. How does your work help unleash the potential of next generation entrepreneurial change-makers?**

**CG:** I think that there are two main aspects. First, how do we unleash the potential through talent development on a large scale? How do we awaken people to their own potential as change-makers? How do we give them both the confidence and competence to take those ideas and put them into action? I do a lot of this work with my teaching at Duke, with a network of 70 colleges and universities on social entrepreneurship through the Sullivan Foundation, and with the Center for Creative Leadership.

However, creating this talent pipeline is only half of the question. The second half is creating the enabling conditions and communities to harness that talent and energy. If we neglect the larger community, that energy will go to more fertile territory. That’s a big part of the question: how do we harness that talent in North Carolina and within this country? How do we retain that talent, and how do we make them thrive by connecting them with the relationships and resources that will allow them to be as successful as possible? Hence, my work concentrates on working with emerging entrepreneurs on their path to reaching their fullest potential.

**Duke I&E: What steps do you think entrepreneurs and innovators take to lead themselves and find their tribe? How can Duke utilize innovation ecosystems to help students to find their own tribe?**

**CG:** First, how can people create the best version of transformed lives for themselves, where they are passionate, enthusiastic, and feel like that they are doing
the right things in the right place with the right people? Second, how do we equip them with the skills and resources for them to be able to have transformative impact on the world around them? It's the concept of bridging the gap them having both personal transformation and transformative impact.

To equip emerging leaders at Duke with the mindsets and skillsets to create extraordinary lives for themselves and extraordinary impact, we must start with thinking about what an extraordinary life looks like for every one of us. We should reflect on our own paths, since every path is different.

We also have to provide the space, tools, and framework for people to intentionally go on that journey themselves. What is it going to take for them to create that entrepreneurial life for themselves? We should provide emerging leaders with the space to dream big, but also the framework to put those ideas into action. This requires gaining access to the networks that will allow you to succeed and finding people with shared interests and passions.

The more you understand yourself, the more you can seek out people with similar strengths and passions. Duke offers a unique environment to allow access to those networks. The only caution I would add is that being an effective leader requires you to be a boundary-spanning leader – somebody who can work across communities and cultures and someone who is willing to break out of their tribe.

Tribes are useful, since they give you a sense of validation, community, and purpose. However, we stand a great risk at Duke and the greater world if we are separated into our separate tribes. One of the things that Duke is great at doing is cross-disciplinary collaboration and connecting with people from diverse backgrounds that can accomplish amazing things through collaboration.

**Duke I&E:** Let’s talk about inclusive innovation. As a father of two children, what ways do you think we can encourage our children to dream big and create a better world?

**CG:** Two defining characteristics of a social entrepreneur are a deep sense of empathy and appreciation for what we have been given and how we can give back. There is a saying that goes “to whom much is given, much is expected,” and I think we should take that seriously in our own lives.

For my children, I create an environment where they are exposed to different ideas and backgrounds. Hopefully, they can establish a greater context for themselves in the world and develop a deeper sense of empathy for others. Then, they can hopefully see where the injustices lie and be empowered to do something about it.

**Duke I&E:** What advice would you give student innovators and entrepreneurs?

**CG:** Don’t limit the possibilities.