



Photo: David Wentworth

Better Training for Development Professionals



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“At their best, foundations can play a key role in fostering innovation and change. ... We look forward to the advancement of understanding across fields that will help aspiring practitioners tackle some of the greatest challenges of our century.”

JONATHAN FANTON,
JOHN D. AND CATHERINE T. MACARTHUR FOUNDATION

An effort to change development training around the world was formally launched at the Earth Institute in October 2008 (above).

When the MacArthur Foundation sent out a request for new ideas from the world’s great thinkers, it was answered with a paradox, says Jonathan Fanton, the foundation’s president: “A major category of development professionals ... make decisions that affect the lives of millions of people. Yet their training is typically quite narrow or of short duration—certainly not aligned with the breadth of their responsibilities.”

Around the world, development professionals are directing the flow of aid and designing programs to address problems such as extreme poverty and hunger. However, they typically do not have the background in the natural and health sciences they need to properly understand the forces affecting the issues they are trying to address: the interplay of changing climate conditions and water availability on food production and human nutrition, for instance.

Earth Institute research associate John McArthur (CEO and executive director of Millennium Promise), who pointed out the paradox, and Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Earth Institute, recognized that a revolution was needed in development education, similar to what *The Flexner Report* did for improving medical training in 1910. With the support of the MacArthur Foundation, they brought together experts and practitioners from around the world to lay the groundwork for a new set of Master’s in Development Practice degrees.

“While no individual can master all or even most of the skills required—in science, policy design, politics, management, and cross-cultural understanding—for the success of broad-based progress in sustainable development,” wrote McArthur and Sachs, “we certainly need a new generation of development practitioners who can understand the ‘languages’ and practices of many specialties, and who can work fluidly and flexibly across intellectual and professional disciplines and geographic regions.”

One of the early initiatives of the new International Commission on Education for Sustainable Development Practice was the innovative Global Classroom, which joined together 300 students from 12 time zones in real-time discussions with professors and each other. “The Global Classroom formed a small international community in which students gathered to study about world problems,” says Li Zhao, who applied what she learned to an energy efficiency project in her native city of Taiyuan, China, where heavy industry is the main source of income.

“I am helping fight poverty from within my native Sierra Leone,” says Global Classroom graduate Mathew Sandy. “My goal is to deliver the most-needed ideas that affect real life.”

The Global Classroom will be an important part of the Master’s in Development Practice program, a network of graduate degrees to be started around the world. The first degree was established at Columbia—the Master of Public Administration in Development Practice—as a joint effort between the Earth Institute and the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA). The program welcomed its first class of students in the fall of 2009 under the leadership of SIPA professor Glenn Denning, formerly of the Millennium Villages project where he was a founding director of the Millennium Development Goals Centre East.

“We had a very global and diverse application pool, from candidates who were coming from a computer engineering background to public health professionals,” says Louise Rosen, director of the Office of Academic and Research Programs at the Earth Institute. “What connected them was that they all had very strong quantitative skills and a deep commitment to addressing issues of absolute poverty and inequity in the developing world.” ■



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The MacArthur Foundation, under the leadership of Jonathan Fanton (above), committed \$15 million to support the creation of new Master’s in Development Practice programs at universities around the world.



The new M.P.A. in Development Practice at Columbia will give development professionals the interdisciplinary training they need to address issues like extreme poverty and hunger.