



Photo: Alan Orling

Opening the Door for Undergrads



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Jeffrey Sachs (above) teaches one of the core courses in the popular undergraduate special concentration in sustainable development.

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Until recently, training in sustainable development at Columbia University was available only at the graduate and doctoral level. This changed with the creation of a new undergraduate special concentration in the fall of 2007. The program has proven extremely popular among students, and the University is in the process of developing a full major, with plans for it to be in place in 2010.

“Sustainable development is a big challenge for this century. Students are asking for programs that prepare them to meet this challenge,” says Ruth DeFries, Denning Family Professor of Sustainable Development, who helps support the program with Associate Professor Kevin Griffin, interim director of the special concentration. “We need to prepare them, whether they are going into law, finance or science. They need holistic systems thinking.”

Victoria Diaz-Bonilla '11CC, an environmental science major who began the concentration as a sophomore, believes it is just what she needs to make more practical use of her major once she graduates. While the major in environmental science will give her technical skills in the sciences, the special concentration in sustainable development will give her the understanding of economics and social science she needs to go beyond the practice of scientific research and apply her knowledge in the real world.

“I see myself as bridging a gap, something that [Jim] Hansen has pointed out, that [President] Obama has pointed out, this gap between scientists and policymakers,” says Diaz-Bonilla. “I’ve channeled my energy into learning about environmental policymaking and becoming part of this new generation that recognizes the importance of having policies



Students in the Sustainable Development Workshop worked with the Nature Conservancy to assess the impacts of sea level rise on Long Island salt marshes.

based on sound science. . . I’ve come to learn that Columbia is one of the best, if not the best, places to be as an undergraduate for sustainable development and environmental studies,” says Diaz-Bonilla.

Yasmine Koukaz '09CC, who began the undergraduate special concentration as a junior, found it helped her gain direction and focus. “Some people come in and they know they want to be a doctor or a lawyer and they take their classes. For others, it’s hard to know what they want to do when they come here,” says Koukaz. She found the exposure to the many interconnected disciplines covered in the concentration—from natural science to policy—helped her realize her interest in focusing on medicine and public health and in applying her knowledge with a global perspective, something that was especially significant to her, having grown up speaking several languages in a family originally from Lebanon.

Michael Stennis '09CC says he and others who found out about the special concentration at the same time were all generally interested in the field of study, “but there wasn’t an outlet for it” before the concentration was developed. He believes its program of study better prepared him “to verbalize global needs in terms of sustainable development”—in terms of achieving our current generation’s needs without compromising the needs of future generations. This is an important ability to have as we face an era of global challenges like climate change and global poverty. ■