Stanford Association for International Development

SAID Mentoring Program Up & Running!
We are pleased to announce that the Stanford Association for International Development (SAID) Mentoring Program is now up and running!

Current Stanford juniors and seniors have been paired with past alumni who promoting international development in a variety of fields and manners. This bi-weekly newsletter is designed to help initiate productive conversation between each mentor-mentee pair. By providing past alum’s stories and discussion questions, we hope not only to foster dialogue, but also to hopefully illuminate the future for current students, particularly their educational and/or career prospects. We would like to invite you all, especially Stanford alumni, to participate in the continuation of the newsletter. If you are willing to share your personal experience or have any advice in how the newsletter should be run, we would sincerely appreciate your input.

About Our Organization

Our Goal:
The Stanford Association for International Development (SAID) promotes international development awareness on campus, trains and educates the next generation of leaders in global development issues, and brings together diverse campus resources. In doing so, SAID acts as a connector between students interested in international development and the other students, NGOs, and faculty available to them.
A Message from SAID Co-Founders

After having spent the summer between our Junior and Senior year abroad doing research on various development-related topics, we returned to school very excited about “development” in general but also pretty clueless about what it really was, how to learn more about it, how to best contribute to it (i.e. how to make a career out of poverty eradication), and how to connect with others who were already “out there” changing the world. We started snooping around on campus, talking to faculty and other students and began to realize there was a huge unmet need out there—the need to be connected to other students who were also passionate about the topic, the need to connect these students with academics and practitioners with decades of experience, contacts, and resources behind them, and the need to bring greater awareness of the subject to the rest of students on campus who conceive of “development” as simply foreign aid, Peace Corps, and Oxfam and may, based on this limited understanding, decide to avoid the topic altogether (only to return to it 5 years later, disillusioned with the vanity and emptiness of investment banking, and ready to commit their financial analyst skills to a good cause like Kiva.org. Through this program, we hope to share our experiences with current undergraduates, helping them to jump right in to development work.

About Our Organization (Continued)

What We Do:

Dinner Series - The SAID dinner series gives students a unique opportunity to discuss matters of international development with both Stanford faculty and Bay Area professionals over a free meal!

Conference - Each year, SAID and the GSB-ID collaborate to bring together relevant experts, academics, and practitioners from NGOs, government agencies and international institutions across the country to speak on critical issues in development.

Networking - SAID hosts a number of networking events, including Summer Opportunities Fairs, to connect students to information and opportunities in the field of international development.

Mentorship - The goal of the Mentorship Program is to guide interested students through the process of working/researching/studying international development.

SAID Co-Founders

Yeling Tan (2002)
Jesse Torrence (2002)
Caitlin Gerdts (2002)
Shad Ahmed (2002)

Just the Two of Us: Discussion Questions

Each month, one newsletter will be devoted to the job sector and discuss the benefits and disadvantages of different careers and fields. The other newsletter will focus on international development and policies.

This month’s discussion questions pertain to basic questions about the paths alumni have taken after leaving Stanford. We offer several questions merely as a starting place for productive and beneficial dialogue to begin. Best of luck!

What sparked your interest in international development, and what areas are you especially passionate about?

In retrospect, which choices (regarding graduate school, career, volunteering abroad, etc.) would you repeat again?

What was the most memorable class you took at Stanford relating to International Development?

How have you been able to apply your specific international development interests to your career? Are you doing what you originally planned?

How have possible career opportunities evolved, especially with changes in specific interests?

What does your current job or coursework entail as far as responsibilities and future opportunities?
What They Don’t Teach You In School:
How to Approach Thinking about a Career in Development
(Or Life in General)

My “foray” into development has been a bit sporadic and unpredictable but rewarding and insightful nonetheless. Right after undergraduate, I had planned to teach English in China for 6 months and then join the Peace Corps (like all good aspiring development gurus). I went through all the application processes and was killing time back home in Toledo, Ohio waiting for my final medical approval to come through so I could be shipped off to somewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa and begin to fight global poverty (like the Ghost Busters or something).

Then, I got a cavity—my first one ever—which delayed my medical approval for the Peace Corps for one month. In perhaps a twist of fate, during that month I got a job offer with a fantastic NGO in Toledo, fell in love with a girl from Peru, and decided to forego all my previous plans and stay in Toledo for the next three years! So much for eradicating world poverty. Well, as it turned out, there were more than enough problems to keep me occupied in Toledo. I worked in HIV/AIDS prevention with injected drug users, sex workers, migrant workers, and youth and was shocked, appalled, ashamed, stupefied by the level of poverty and discontent in my own “placid” Mid-Western hometown.

I left this job after a year and a half to run an NGO engaged in international citizen exchange between Toledo and other countries around the world. This was a dream job for me—since I believed deeply (and still do) that much of the challenge of eradicating extreme poverty in other countries has to do with how citizens in my own country understand (or fail to understand) people outside their own borders (or their own community or socio-economic class, for that matter). One exchange project that we carried out in partnership with the US State Dpt. for high school students from the US and the Middle East took me to Lebanon for a few months. I fell in love with the place (not a girl, this time), and after the exchange project ended I decided to return to the region to teach English and work with NGOs in the West Bank, Palestine for the next six months while I contemplated my next “move”.

That move ended up being entrance into a Masters Degree program in Public Administration in International Development at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. This is where I find myself today—being imbued with a very different take on development, one that tries to solve poverty by being more hard headed about our approach—trying to understand how to unlock self-sustaining, poverty-reducing economic growth in poor countries. That means a LOT of economics—more econ than I ever thought I could stomach. Not all of it is useful, but much of it I think is critical and often overlooked in practice out there. As part of my work here at the Kennedy School, I spent this past summer in Liberia working with the President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and her administration (she’s the first female President on the continent). I also spent a few months at the World Economic Forum in New York, Geneva, and Dalian, China. I have to admit, this summer I didn’t use anything I learned in my first year of graduate school, but that is probably why it was so much fun!
What They Don’t Teach You In School (continued)

As I approach the end of my term here, I am, in some sense, in a similar position as many of you undergrads who are approaching the job market for the first time. The only difference is, perhaps, now I have an extra degree (and a lot more debt!), a few years of work experience, and I also realize how much I really don’t know and how many different directions one can go in, even after having completed a graduate degree in a relatively narrow, technical field. I remember what it felt like five years ago coming out of school and wondering what the hell I was going to do with my life—all this newfound knowledge, a degree from Stanford, the “whole world at my fingertips”, employers who should be stumbling over themselves to offer me a job (ha!). Well, it was an exciting feeling but a bit uncomfortable as well, the idea that the single decision of what job I took after graduation might determine my whole future and shape, perhaps, the destiny of the entire human race (are you laughing again?).

Anyway, the points is, at the end of all these questions, the only conclusion I can come to is that the more I learn about the world and how it works and why people live the way they live, and what I can do to improve some small part of that, the harder it is to know what I really want to do be “when I grow up”. And that’s OK. Uncertainty is OK. Not having all the information I need is OK. And when I wonder if the decision I’m taking—whether in my personal or professional life—is the “right” one or not, I simply take a walk somewhere alone, away from all the distractions in my life, all the “background noise”, all the pushing and pulling of deadlines and projects and conflicting messages, and ask myself, “Where am I right now—in this moment, the present moment, the only moment that ever really exists, the only moment in which I can ever change anything in the world?” Am I fully present, fully aware, fully conscious of myself and of others? Or am I trying so hard to keep up with my future, to launch my plans for world peace, to finish that paper, to get that job, to win that person’s affection, to get somewhere—anywhere—besides right here, that I completely forget to stop and embrace life? To look around and acknowledge myself and the people around me, the problems and pain that are right in front of me, not just across the world in some poverty-stricken, war-torn desert.

When I do this, miraculous things start to happen. I relax. I feel a greater sense of direction, of clarity and conviction and all those things that eluded me before. Then, I act—deliberately, purposefully, authentically, and effortlessly. The papers get done, the deadlines get met, the job offers appear, the “project” moves forward, the “right thing” begins to materialize in front of me without having to chase after it.

So, after all this babbling, if I had one very general piece of advice to give to students of SAID, who I am certain have the compassion, talent, and commitment to be THE future change agents of the world, it would be this:

Stop all your worrying, your perfectionism, and your fear of failure. Stop talking and stop thinking for five minutes today. Just five minutes. Drop it at the door. Go into your room when your roommates are gone and just sit on the floor. Or, take 30 minutes and hike up to the Dish at sunset. Be quiet and still. And just listen as hard as you can. To your own breathing, to the wind, to the birds, to anything.

All of you who have “made it” this far are uniquely positioned to transform the world, by virtue of your abilities, your curiosity, your humanity, and (don’t forget!!) your rich network of friends/colleagues/peers who will be doing amazing things in the next few years. The last thing you need is for someone like me to tell you what to do. You know what to do. You probably just haven’t been listening. What the world needs most right now, I really believe, is for people like you to be 100% tuned in to yourselves, to be fully present, fully engaged in this moment. That is what allows you to handle any adverse situation, to adapt and roll with the punches, to be awake when opportunities come your way, to be clear and deliberate in your actions, and to live a day-to-day life that is aligned with those values you want to promote in the world (i.e. walking the talk).

If you can achieve this, then I guarantee you that the right job, the right person, the right whatever will materialize for you. This as universal a law as gravity, and it is how the world’s greatest change agents achieved impact. Unfortunately, it’s one of the many things they never teach you in school.

Bon voyage!

-Jesse Torrence
Class of 2002