With over 50 degree programs to choose from for PhD and Master’s degree candidates, Emory University’s Laney Graduate School stands out with its diverse opportunities for students looking for a higher education degree. Most unique among the offered programs is the Master’s in Development Practice program (MDP).

In 2009, The MacArthur Foundation compiled a team of 20 development experts and asked them to assess the current state of development practice and to identify areas for improvement. The panel included Emory Global Health Institute (EGHI) founder, Dr. Jeff Koplan, and together, the panel reviewed and assessed current practices of development programs. After a year of deliberation, it was recommended that The MacArthur Foundation sponsor the creation of programs that could improve practices of development.

As one of nine universities, Emory’s MDP degree program came to be through grant funding by The MacArthur Foundation. The goal of this program was to begin a new innovative approach to training development practitioners.

Under the direction of Dr. David Nugent, director of the MDP program, and Dr. Carla Roncoli, associate director of the program, Emory’s MDP program uniquely focuses on what happens when theory meets practice in the field. The idea behind this focus is that a great deal of development is based on models and assumptions about what should happen. Although these models and assumptions are the framework for development initiatives, Dr. Nugent believes “things get messy when theory meets practice – a great deal of development has ignored that.”

Acceptance to this program is competitive, with about 75 applications received every year. The application process is extremely competitive as Dr. Nugent described the ideal candidate as someone that doesn’t “have to necessarily be the strongest academically—they also have to have a passion and a vocation for learning and for the messiness of doing.” This “messiness of doing” is a sentiment that is frequently mentioned by Dr. Nugent and bodes well with the focus of the MDP program on the interaction of theory and practice in the field. Generally, MDP
candidates have incurred work experience after their undergraduate degrees or have had global experiences in developing nations, as well.

According to Dr. Nugent, it is fortunate that the MDP program is offered at Emory given that “Emory has an unusually strong international orientation.” Because of Emory’s strong international community, both in the states and abroad, it was not difficult to find the courses and professors that were the best fit for the program.

The MDP program is two full years of education, with 15-20 students per cohort. Required courses fall into four broad areas: natural sciences, social sciences, health sciences, and management principles. Dr. Nugent explained that the reason for this small, highly selective cohort is simply because the program doesn’t have “an assembly line approach. Instead, we focus on creating a more personalized experience for students.” The smaller class size allows faculty to work one-on-one with students in order to facilitate a learning environment where new ideas are welcomed and discussed comprehensively.

Currently, candidates are additionally offered a dual degree program with the Candler School of Theology due to the natural overlap of conflict resolution and peace in the two programs. Dual degree opportunities with the Rollins School of Public Health and the Law School are also options for candidates. Dr. Roncoli further emphasized that the Emory program “thrives on and is based on strong partnerships with every school on campus.” This is a great advantage to the MDP program and one that Drs. Nugent and Roncoli try to encourage of all candidates.

Additionally, students participate in two summer field experiences as a requirement for completing their degree. Students are encouraged to return to the place they worked during the first summer in order to build upon their global experience and to bring additional insight and knowledge to their projects.

Fostering the continuing relationship between Emory and Ethiopia, the MDP program has had students working in Ethiopia since the program beginning. To date, there have been seventeen students working on about a dozen projects in Ethiopia addressing topics such as water management, gender-based violence, maternal and child nutrition, and food security. These students worked with several different organizations, including CARE, USAID, and the International Water Management Institute.

Every year, there are applicants to the MDP program from Ethiopia who are interested in gaining more insight into proper development practices. These students in particular are important because the program wants to attract students who offer a wealth of diversity in order to prevent development of blinders to what the problems and potential solutions may be. Ethiopia has its own development experts in combination with a great training program; however, Ethiopian professors and post-doctoral students frequently come to Emory to gain insight and knowledge from the MDP program.

Ethiopia is central to program efforts as it’s a core location for students to gain field experiences on an international level. Through the MDP program, the relationship between Ethiopia and Emory has further strengthened. Dr. Nugent believes that this program has benefited more from its relationship with Ethiopia than any other country. In the future, the Master’s in Development Practice program will continue to be a unique and rewarding experience for the candidates that join this diverse and imaginative cohort.

Students need “to have a passion and a vocation for learning and for the messiness of doing.” – Dr. David Nugent

MDP student Biruh Zegeye (right) working on a CARE/Global Water Initiative project in Ethiopia