MIT-China OpenCourseWare / iLabs / D-lab Initiatives

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Qinghai University

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I. D-LAB

TAUGHT BY YIQUN BAI AND SAL SCATURRO

Sal Scaturro teaching his students about proposal writing.

Yiqun Bai teaches her students how to test water for cholera and e.coli.

Mission
D-Lab China seeks to provide an opportunity for Chinese university students to work with MIT students on sustainable development projects throughout China's rural areas.

Community involvement and activities that allow students to exercise social responsibility are relatively uncommon in Chinese universities. As a result, it is generally difficult for students to begin working on development-related projects. There is, however, a growing interest in such projects among Chinese students since many come from impoverished villages and have witnessed the problems caused by insufficient access to safe water, lack of adequate health and education facilities, poor sanitation mechanisms, etc.

Using an assortment of readings, documentaries, activities, labs, and discussions, MIT students work with their Chinese counterparts during a month-long workshop to develop a deeper understanding of the causes that lead to the most common development problems in China. More importantly, the students work together to create a systematic approach for identifying and/or inventing small-scale solutions that can be applied in a variety of development contexts. The students are also encouraged to take a critical look at nearby villages or their own hometowns and focus on a specific development project based on the needs of that particular community and their own personal interests. The MIT and Chinese students begin work on the individual projects towards the end of the workshop. After completion of the workshop, MIT students who take the D-Lab course assist the Chinese students (particularly with technical areas of design) as they continue to work on their projects. Twice a year the MIT D-Lab students have the opportunity to travel to the Chinese university to collaborate with students in person on project implementation and evaluation. Additional project ideas are generated during these joint sessions, and future D-Lab students continue working on these new projects in the following semesters.

Our vision is to create a scalable and flexible model of D-Lab that students all over China can adopt for use in their own universities.

Background

MIT D-Lab
D-Lab was created in 2002 by Amy Smith as a special Edgerton Center program. Initially called "The Haiti Class," the program focused on developing issues in

this extremely poor country. Students traveled to Haiti in January of 2002 and began working on a project with local people to make a new type of charcoal using the byproducts of sugarcane farms. As this and other projects became successful over the following three years, more students became interested in the class and D-Lab expanded to several other countries including Brazil, India, Honduras, Mexico, Lesotho and Samoa. For more information, please visit the MIT D-Lab website at http://web.mit.edu/d-lab

D-Lab China - This Year's Program

Our D-Lab China pilot project was an intensive workshop held at Qinghai University during August 2005. The first two weeks of the workshop served as an introduction to sustainable development. Classes were intended to give students an introduction to community development projects, understand project implementation methods, and current low-tech solutions to common problems faced in developing communities. In addition, students began working on a small-scale project with nearby villagers to address the poor conditions of their toilet systems. During the last two weeks of the workshop, the 15 students formed a student group with the goal to continue working on projects after the workshop ended. Since the end of the workshop, students have kept in close contact with MIT D-Lab students and plan to work on development projects together throughout the term.

Partner

Qinghai University

Qinghai University is a developing university in the western city of Xining in Qinghai Province. Although unknown to most Chinese citizens and underdeveloped in its facilities, this university has been the site of emphasis by the Chinese government in a Western Development Initiative. Qinghai University has been partnered with the renowned Tsinghua University in Beijing, and since the introduction of a new president from Tsinghua, has begun to make significant changes and developments. The summer of 2004 was the first time the university had hosted foreign teachers, when a team from the MIT-China program taught classes using MIT OpenCourseWare. The university administration is eager to accept western formats of education, and welcomes further collaboration with MIT. Although there is a reasonable amount of development, students of the school informed us last year that they were bored with their classes, did not participate in extracurricular activities, and could not see the applications of their classes. Although many wished to make some differences in the poor rural communities which they are from, most did not think they had the ability to make such a difference and also did not know where

to begin. One accomplishment from this year's project was the creation of a month-long workshop at the university for a group of students interested in sustainable development. Students learned about the D-lab course at MIT, various technologies that apply to many types of development projects, and participated in a simple project at the end of the workshop on a compost toilet. We helped establish a student group at the university with the support of the administration that will continue to search for possible development projects and potentially work with D-lab students on these projects. Students and teachers in the university told us they were very grateful for the opportunity to participate in these activities, and said they learned a great amount from the workshop. Many now plan to look further into how they could contribute to their own communities.