

# USAID Professionals go Back to School

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Dr. Desai headlined the "Careers and Futures" Event.

Exposure to new perspectives and learning from past experiences are key pieces of the development innovation process. The new USAID Fellows program at UC Berkeley allows USAID professionals to gain firsthand experience with cutting-edge development efforts at the University while sharing their intimate field and implementation knowledge with campus innovators. Luis Pasteur, the 19th century microbiologist lauded for his life-saving vaccines and pasteurization innovations, famously declared that chance favors the prepared mind. Great breakthroughs do not appear out of nowhere, but build on observation, planning, and know-how. Similarly, technology breakthroughs to address complex global development challenges require prior exposure to diverse ideas, expertise, and concepts.

The Development Impact Lab at UC Berkeley was created with support from USAID in order to bring new technology capabilities to the federal agency for foreign assistance and to catalyze university innovators to create more effective, affordable and accessible solutions

to global development challenges. In order to make past experiences accessible to University innovators, DIL and USAID's Office of Science and Technology co-designed the USAID Fellows initiative.

The program was created to allow experienced USAID personnel to re-locate to the Blum Center for Developing Economies at UC Berkeley to spend up to three months working alongside researchers, attending and hosting classes and events, and mentoring students.

***"With this program, we can bring that field experience to the campus, to build trust, create real relationships and accelerate impact." - Dr. Sheila Desai***

The inaugural Fellow, Dr. Sheila Desai, arrived at the Blum Center from the USAID India Mission for Fall Semester 2013. Dr. Desai is the Senior Science and Technology Advisor for the mission's Center for Innovation and Partnerships. In this capacity, she both serves as a mentor to USAID Washington DC initiatives and supports cooperation between scientists and development scholars in the U.S. and India. She thus provided the UC Berkeley campus community with many valuable insights on topics as diverse as technology scaling and evaluation, building international partnerships, and working in international aid organizations.

Dr. Desai's insights were appreciated by staff, researchers and students alike. She brainstormed with faculty from across



During her time with DIL Dr. Desai attended USAID's HESN Technon and an IBD conference in Washington DC with other USAID and international development professionals.

departments to discuss specific innovation initiatives, implementation strategies for centers and broader initiatives, and potential partnerships across the globe. Dr. Desai views the USAID Fellows program as an important piece in the organization's innovation strategy. Explained Dr. Desai, "I am here to fuel the powerful relationship between USAID and university initiatives like DIL. It is essential that academic development innovators cultivate good relationships with Foreign Service officers like myself, because we are the ones who will be there during deployment. With this program, we can bring that field experience to the campus, to build trust, create real relationships and accelerate impact."

Dr. Desai was straight-forward, generously sharing her experiences and the realities of international development work also with students. She hosted her own DIL Salon, spoke to the Blum Center's Global Poverty and

Practice students, headlined a Careers and Futures event, met with the Goldman School of Public Policy's Diplomatic Fellows,

and generously accepted many other invitations to speak to a classes and organizations across campus. Her talks, meetings, and class visits were all met with raving reviews, and her scheduled student-mentoring meetings at the Blum Center repeatedly filled throughout the semester. “Dr. Desai gave us practical advice about entering and working in the development field. Her honesty and candidness was refreshing and appreciated,” said MDP student Tara Roach.

Dr. Desai hopes that the USAID Fellows program will continue to help students to not only “identify problems, but also real-world demands and pathways to reach these demands.” She challenges students to explore and expand upon their ideas, and examine



*At the 1st Annual USAID Higher Education Solution's Network (HESN) TechCon, held at the College of William and Mary, Dr. Desai shared her wisdom with 7 development labs.*

how the complexity of reality may influence their implementation plans. Dr. Desai leaves the campus with new relationships and ideas to improve development efforts for USAID and beyond. Impressed with the Berkeley campus, she has challenged students to “examine the system as well as the problem. I encourage students to explore not only their own solutions, but to investigate how we can improve the entire system.”

During their time on campus, Fellows can expand their networks, while also promoting, informing and strengthening USAID mission and bureau initiatives. Exposure to cutting-edge research and the not-yet-graduated next generation of practitioners, gives USAID professionals a head start in identifying emerging trends and possibilities at the intersection of technology and international development. By

sending one of their own, USAID furthers their connection with the Berkeley innovation community, and catalyzes a variety of new relationships with future development professionals.

Indeed, Dr. Desai was inspired and excited by the passion of current and future development workers on campus. She was happily overwhelmed by the “energy and people involved in development on the Berkeley campus.” “You have over 300 students minoring in Global Poverty Practice and over 700 students enrolled in a class about it. The Blum Center and DIL have really created a movement and mainstreamed development issues on campus,” she said. By bringing lessons from the field to campus, USAID Fellows expose academic innovators to new perspectives from the field, and further expand the crucial collaboration that will continue to allow USAID and UC Berkeley to jointly catalyze further acceleration through the pipeline of successful technology solutions that improve the lives of the global poor.



*Dr. Desai's insights were appreciated throughout the UC Campus. Blum Center Staff, students, and the wider development innovation community in the Bay Area and Washington.*