Overcoming the Barriers of Marginalization: Programs in Sustainable International Development at Brandeis University

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Shared Values

The partnership between the Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program (IFP) and Brandeis University’s Graduate Programs in Sustainable International Development (GPSID) was founded on the shared belief that the end of poverty and preventable disease required a leadership for social justice at all levels of society. IFP promotes a goal of building a global community of social justice leaders through advanced study opportunities. The Heller School for Social Policy and Management, GPSID’s home institution, has a motto “Knowledge Advancing Social Justice.” Through our admissions policies, financial aid, research, teaching, and advocacy, GPSID has since 1994 led the way for graduate training through a holistic and innovative professional curriculum. That curriculum integrates development with the study of political and economic institutions, the allocation of scarce resources, the connection of policy and practice with ecology, demography, and human rights and capabilities, and it draws upon intellectual and cultural histories of justice and social change. IFP and GPSID shared a common goal of access to education aimed clearly at overcoming the marginalization of the world’s poor. This
chapter identifies the underlying values of this partnership, discusses some of the challenges of incorporating IFP Fellows, and concludes with the lessons GPSID draws from the teaching of IFP Fellows.

The partnership between GPSID and IFP went beyond an institutional relationship of a donor to a university. It became a bond between people in both institutions with a shared vision for the role of higher education and training for equitable development. The greatest contribution IFP made to GPSID, and, as will be discussed, to world development, was through the uniqueness and success of its recruitment strategy. Reaching deeply into marginal and poor regions of 22 countries, the IFP networks were able to find young professionals with the discipline and conviction to become drivers of social change toward more inclusive and fair societies. The costs of establishing and maintaining this network, not insignificant, were among the wisest of investments private philanthropy ever made.

IFP saw social justice as the ultimate objective of its decade-long investment in young people throughout the world. GPSID saw itself as a community of concerned scholars and activists for whom a world without preventable disease, poverty, and environmental degradation is achievable.

IFP’s belief that development is a process that begins with building capacity from the ground up reflects the Ford Foundation’s core commitment to international causes, and also emerged from IFP Director Joan Dassin’s own decades-long experience in developing nations. GPSID was founded after I and other colleagues completed years of work in developing societies and knew that ultimately all we could really do as expatriate institutions is to build local problem-solving capacity and to advocate internationally for informed policy that would support and learn from local solutions.

IFP, like GPSID, believed that institutions high and low required informed and courageous leadership. This was a lesson I learned many years ago as a young development worker for Oxfam America under the tutelage of a great field representative, Reggie Norton, of Oxfam Great Britain. While I would spend nights in Guatemala burning the midnight oil, he would hardly seem to read project proposals. One day, I mustered up the courage to ask him how he made his decisions on which community programs to fund. Reggie replied that it was on the basis of community leadership. All the rest, he said, was detail.

The people who worked on IFP knew this too. They created networks throughout the world that knew how to reach deep into society and identify high-potential people with that spark of leadership—a leadership not for personal gain but for the well-being of their communities and