THE PANAMA INITIATIVE

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

A PARTNERSHIP OF THE
ENVIRONMENTAL THOUGHT AND PRACTICE PROGRAM,
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES,
THE UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR GLOBAL HEALTH,
THE SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING, AND THE DARDEN SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
IN COOPERATION WITH
THE CITY OF KNOWLEDGE, THE SMITHSONIAN TROPICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE, AND
THE GORGAS MEMORIAL INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH STUDIES
PANAMA CITY, PANAMA

31 OCTOBER 2011
The Panama Initiative, which was launched in 2007-08 with support from U. Va.’s President John Casteen, Provost Tim Garson, and Vice Provost Leigh Grossman, is built upon the notion of interdisciplinary problem solving. The Initiative operates on five fronts at U. Va., joining faculty and students from the Environmental Thought and Practice B.A. Program, the Department of Environmental Sciences, the Trans-University Center for Global Health in the School of Medicine, the School of Engineering, and the Darden School of Business.

U. Va.’s partners in Panama are: the City of Knowledge, a portal to Panamanian academic institutions, domestic and international government agencies, and businesses; the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute; and, the Gorgas Memorial Institute for Health Studies. U. Va. and the City of Knowledge signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2007.

Panama Initiative Director Vivian Thomson, Associate Professor, University of Virginia, and Jorge Arosemena, Executive Director, City of Knowledge, signing an MOU in Panama City

A Foundation for Collaborative Research and Teaching

The Initiative’s projects have involved seventeen faculty members and approximately forty students in Panama and at U. Va.

Panama Initiative Scholars Elizabeth Ritch, Elena Jimenez-Gutierrez, and Vanessa Pineda
ACCOMPLISHMENTS

2007-08

• Nine fourth-year ETP students, led by U. Va. Professors Vivian Thomson and Janet Herman, traveled to Panama to understand the possibilities for, and constraints on, sustainable development in a real-world setting. The group traveled in dugout canoes up the Chagres River to the indigenous village of the Emberá Drua, who are among the poorest of the poor in Panama. They came to appreciate firsthand the Panama Canal’s economic, historic, and environmental impacts. They learned to think about environmental sustainability in broader ways and met with representatives of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, the Gorgas Institute, the National Institute for Agriculture, the National Environmental Authority, and with the regional director of the World Bank.

ETP Students and Panama colleagues,
Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute,
Colón, Panama

• Panamanian medical researcher Ricardo Correa worked at the U. Va. Medical School with Dr. Richard Guerrant, Director of the Center for Global Health, and biology professor Michael Timko. Ricardo studied techniques to further his research on the link between intestinal diseases and malnutrition.

Ricardo Correa, INDICASAT and
U. Va. Center for Global Health

Professor Paolo D’Odorico, U. Va. Dept. of Environmental Sciences, who is conducting research on mangroves and carbon sequestration
• Rodrigo Tarté and Guillermo Castro, Director and Associate Director of Academics for the City of Knowledge, journeyed to the University in to lecture on “Sustainable Development in Panama, Gateway to the American Tropics.” Drs. Castro and Tarté also led student-faculty workshops on the possibilities for sustainable development in Panama.

2008-09

• Dr. Stanley Heckadon Moreno, Director of Communications for the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute and Director of the Galeta Marine Education and Research Facility in Colon, was a guest scholar at U. Va. Dr. Heckadon gave a public lecture on sustainability in Panama and he was a guest leader in the Environmental Thought and Practice students’ capstone seminar. Panama Ambassador Federico Humbert made a special visit to U. Va. in honor of Dr. Heckadon.

• Dr. Azael Saldaña and Vanessa Pineda of the Gorgas Institute came to U. Va. to work with Dr. Dick Guerrant. They studied new diagnostic tests for intestinal pathogens so they can launch a new field study of these pathogens as potential causes of malnutrition and of diarrhea in the poor rural community of Santa Fe. Dr. Saldaña obtained matching support from Panamanian institutions.
• Professors Vivian Thomson, Janet Herman, and Matt Reidenbach traveled to Panama to discuss potential collaborative research projects concerning coral reefs and water resources with colleagues at STRI and the City of Knowledge.

• Reem Alamiri, an MPP candidate at U. Va. and a 2008 Environmental Thought and Practice graduate, was the first Panama Initiative Scholar at STRI’s Galeta field station. She undertook research on waste management in Colón.

2009-10

• U. Va. medical student Elena Jimenez-Gutierrez and ETP graduate Elizabeth Ritch worked with Gorgas Institute researchers on Chagas disease and on the connection between enteric disease and malnutrition.

• A gradual decline in coral growth appears to be linked to runoff and sedimentation from the construction and operation of the Panama Canal. The continual destruction of mangrove systems from encroachment by the city of Colon has enhanced sediment loads in coastal waters. U. Va. Assistant Professor Matt Reidenbach is researching the implications of simultaneous sea level rise and coral reef decline.

• Ten fourth-year Environmental Thought and Practice students worked with Professors Vivian Thomson, Janet Herman, and Dr. Stanley Heckadon of STRI to analyze alternative methods of waste management in Colón, which depends on a decades-old uncontrolled dump (El Dompe) started by the US military. Support was provided by the US Environmental Protection Agency’s Office of Research and Development and U. Va.’s Harper Endowment Fund.

• Six School of Engineering undergraduates worked with Professors Ed Berger and Deborah Johnson to study—and write senior theses about—the Panama Canal expansion.
In 2011 the Panama Initiative team members expanded existing efforts to explore interwoven natural and human systems on and near the Caribbean coast of Panama. This region is especially rich for our endeavors, because here many of Panama’s extremes converge: pristine areas and devastated ecosystems, vast economic wealth and extreme poverty, and sophisticated engineering systems like the Canal near open dumps.

We aim to illuminate the tight connections among environment, economy, and social justice through integrated studies on waste, water, mangroves, coral reefs, and malnutrition. With our Panama colleagues we plan to write an edited volume, to be published in English and Spanish, entitled Authentic Progress on Panama’s Caribbean Frontier.
Strength Through Collaboration

The City of Knowledge operates as a private, non-profit institution to promote collaboration between universities, scientific research centers, businesses, and international organizations. In 1999, the government of Panama deeded the City of Knowledge the former Fort Clayton, turning its 300-plus acres and dozens of buildings now under renovation into first-rate teaching and conference centers. The goal is the establishment of an institution of learning for and about Panama.

The University brings the strengths of myriad departments, disciplines, centers, and schools, among them the Center for Global Health. The Center was founded in 2001 to promote research and interventions in response to the global threats of poverty and disease. The Center has mobilized a network of students and researchers from a variety of disciplines, both on Grounds and at partner institutions worldwide, who are dedicated to reducing health disparities.

The University’s partnership with our Panama colleagues comes at a critical time in Panama’s history. The economy of Panama is booming, and plans are underway for a $5 billion expansion of the Panama Canal. But some plans—such as mining on indigenous land—have proved controversial. While Panama’s poverty rate has dropped by 10 percent in recent years, to 30 percent, income inequity is the second highest in Latin America.

An important goal is to establish a permanent U. Va. presence in Panama and to make the Panama Initiative a hub for interdisciplinary collaborations involving students and researchers from around the globe. The Panama Initiative exemplifies the University of Virginia’s commitment to exchange of knowledge that will help U. Va.’s students and faculty become world citizens.
A Partnership for the Future

The Panama Initiative has built the foundation for what can be a thriving center for research and teaching. To date direct and indirect support have been provided by a variety of programs at the University of Virginia (the President, the Provost, the Vice Provost for International Affairs, the Environmental Thought and Practice BA Program, the College of Arts and Sciences, the School of Engineering, the Department of Environmental Sciences, the Center for Global Health, and the Harper Endowment), the City of Knowledge, private donors in Panama and in the US, the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, the US Environmental Protection Agency, and the Gorgas Memorial Institute for Health Studies.

The Panama Initiative embodies the priorities and values of the University’s Commission on the Future Report: student experience, global initiatives, global health, and environmental sustainability. In touching on all of these values, the Panama Initiative anticipates the University of the 21st Century—a global academical village reaching across cultures for the common good of all people.
Schoolgirls in Colón, Panama

Dr. Rodrigo Tarté, Prof. Vivian Thomson, and Dr. Guillermo Castro, in front of U. Va.’s Rotunda