Hello from the Himalayas!

Emerge Global

The MIT IDEAS Competition
There is now a greater need for – and more interest in – international development than ever before.

MIT has embraced international engagement for social good as a key objective, and the number of initiatives and student groups dedicated to this work, now at an all-time high, is reflective of this mandate.

Yet incisive, experience-based, student commentary in the topic is still more the exception than the rule on campus. For the many who have an interest in doing good in a global context but have not traveled down this road yet, where can one find first-hand information about peers’ experiences in international development? Is there a way to tap into what others have done without having to first enroll in a course or head out on an IAP trip?

Yes. And you’re holding it in your hands. Welcome to Komaza, MIT’s only student-run publication on international development, here in its second edition. If you’re thinking that this sort of experience would appeal to you, but haven’t had the time to check it out and don’t necessarily want to commit to something without further information, this is where you need to be.

Komaza does three things that no other MIT publication does. It gives MIT students who have done international development projects – and the number is growing daily – a chance to share their experiences and advice. You can get a genuine perspective before you jump in. It also gives students who are interested in international development the resources and inspiration to actually take the next step: to participate in meaningful development projects abroad, in the process slowly but surely helping to change the world for the better. And perhaps most important, Komaza’s articles and photographs seek to spark a curiosity for international development in MIT students who have yet to take a first step.

So if you have an interest, or even think you may, in the many facets of international development and want to read and see what it’s like through other students’ voices and eyes, Komaza and Komaza alone is where you’ll find it!

The world is waiting for you!

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Across the world, millions of people live in villages equipped with minimal medical facilities and located miles from modern services. In Ethiopia, for example, the population of 77 million is treated by a mere 146 gynecologists, most of whom are concentrated in large cities.

This dire shortage of health care creates many problems but is especially devastating for pregnant women in rural areas. Days of walking away from the closest hospital, these women have no access to regular pre- or post-natal care, and only 5-10% of women have an assisted birth. In these regions, maternity care is not the norm but instead a luxury.

Inadequate resources have led to a growing problem among women that two MIT students are now trying to tackle. Julia Day ’10 and Star Simpson ’10 are currently working on an IDEAS Competition project addressing fistula, a medical condition suffered by at least 2 million women worldwide who are forced to give birth under substandard circumstances.

A fistula is an internal hole abnormally connecting two different organs of the body. This can be caused by muscle wear from contractions of an extended labor (due to a far proximity to proper health care) or from an underdeveloped pelvis (often due to marriage at an early age). The most common form is bladder fistula, in which the patient loses control of her urinary tract and becomes incontinent (see image). Constantly smelly and unclean, these women become social outcasts and are often pegged as cursed, which prevents them from being active in the community.

Constantly smelly and unclean because of their lack of control, these women become social outcasts and are often pegged as cursed, both mentally and physically preventing them from being active in the community.

So what can be done to help these women and curb the stigma of this condition? Through their project, Julia and Star hope to approach this question in two different ways. Firstly, they are developing an anatomically correct model of the lower female abdomen as a training aid for hospitals. “Fistula can be cured through a simple surgery, which is the most frustrating part,” says Julia. The surgery features a 90% recovery rate and enables women to function properly again.

However, few doctors are trained in this surgical procedure. Much of the team’s discussions have been concentrated on Ethiopia because of the progress made by the fistula care hospital established there in 1974. The hospital treats about 1,000 women every year and has recently expanded to 5 satellite clinics. However, even these efforts are not enough to care for the 100,000 known cases the country experiences each year.

Other African countries have made even less advancement in terms of fistula care. Though Nigeria has 8 fistula repair centers, they must be accessible to a population of about 70 million women, making fistula surgery extremely hard to come by. Meanwhile, Niger has only 6 trained surgeons who consis-
tently operate on fistula and Mozambique has a mere 3 for its 17 million inhabitants.

Time investment for training surgeons is high in developing countries, and they often leave for better-paying opportunities abroad. By creating a straightforward model for fistula surgery, Julia and Star hope to streamline the training process and reduce the time and resources required for surgical practice.

In developing their model, the duo has considered all aspects of design. They want to make their product user-friendly as well as eco-friendly and sustainable. It must be a product that can be universally understood but also designed with different kinds of fistula and potential patient body types in mind. Additionally, they’ve discovered that the training system must fit the culture to which it is targeted based on acceptable views of women in that culture. For example, midwifery is a growing practice in Afghanistan, so Star and Julia must adjust their model to include proper delivery practices.

While these considerations have proved complicated and the team is still in the design phase, the overwhelming positive feedback they have received from the IDEAS staff and medical professionals here and abroad has definitely been encouraging.

In addition to developing their training model, Julia and Star hope to educate health workers and communities about fistula. “We need to get the word out about this problem,” says Star passionately. “We want it to be not only something acceptable to the community but also something the community wants to prevent.”

By explaining why women have fistula and how it can be treated, they hope to encourage women to seek help and not to feel trapped by circumstances. If fistula becomes less of a stigma, it will be easier for these women to support each other through their medical and psychological issues. Though their training model will help provide a valuable teaching solution, Julia and Star hope for this new education to provide the truly sustainable solution to reducing fistula cases.

As they speak excitedly of their plans, one can see that they are not deterred by any setbacks they’ve encountered. “It’s a process,” says Julia with a slight sigh but a smile as she gives the rundown on how the project has developed.

“It started with obtaining lots of contacts, then asking lots of questions,” she explains. By utilizing MIT’s resources and broad diversity in student expertise, they hope to create a dynamic team and ultimately develop an effective model and education plan. Through collaboration with fistula care experts in Ethiopia and elsewhere, this girl-power duo hopes to develop an effective solution to this tragic problem.

For more information about fistula or for updates on the team’s progress, visit endfistula.org and fistulafighters.mit.edu.

IDEAS Competition

What is the IDEAS Competition?
IDEAS is an annual MIT-sponsored competition that encourages teams to develop and implement projects that create sustainable and positive changes in the world. The competition promotes innovation and feasibility of projects and greatly considers the community impact that the project has.

When is the deadline?
The final deadline for the IDEAS proposals are due April 15, 2010, but applications can be submitted for review on the 15th of each month of the academic year. IDEAS staff reviews these proposals and will meet for a feedback session soon after submission each month. This feedback is a helpful tool for the final proposal and application.

How do I get involved?
Twice a year, the IDEAS staff sponsors “Generator Dinners” to help networking with other interested individuals. However, teams are constantly looking for help and staff is constantly looking to help develop new ideas for projects. For more details, please email ideas-admin@mit.edu.
Sitting Down With Scot Frank

by REBECCA GIANOTTI

Scot Frank (S.B. ’08 in EECS) is President and Chief Executive Officer of One Earth Designs (OED), a non-profit organization working to help Himalayan communities adapt to rapid climate and socioeconomic change. Scot has taught design courses, led project teams and built partnerships in the Himalayan region since 2005. Scot is currently responsible for initiating and maintaining relations with government, other NGOs, and universities, as well as approving program strategies.

Why did you choose to focus on the Himalayan region for your work?
I first visited western China in 2005 to teach design through the MIT China Educational Technology Initiative (CETI). While there, I developed many close friendships with local university students who were from rural areas. By visiting their families, I came to have a deep respect for the local tradition of innovation. Their survival amidst the highest mountains and the driest plateaus on Earth underscores the innovative genius of the Himalayan people. But I could see quite clearly that the tremendous outside forces of climate change and globalization were outstripping even their ability to adapt.

With the support of the Public Service Center (PSC) and the IDEAS Competition, I was able to return several times to the Himalayan region to work with communities. Eventually, this work led to the founding of OED.

In your experience, are the problems faced by the Himalayan people related more to lack of resources or lack of appropriate skill sets?
I believe that it is only because of the tremendous transformations brought about by climate change and globalization that the people of the Himalayas need help at all. Cash has recently become the currency of trade, grasslands are turning into sand and the pristine glaciers are quickly disappearing. Therefore both new resources and new skill sets are required to adapt and prevent further environmental degradation. More importantly, though, OED tries to inspire communities to innovate confidently despite the influx of advertisements and foreign technologies.

Did your education at MIT help you get started with OED?
Yes. In the beginning, my background in electrical engineering and computer science allowed me to teach information technology classes, build online environmental monitoring databases, and help other grass-roots non-profits in western China to set up websites. When Catlin Powers and I were starting OED, I was in Development Ventures, a class that helped me think about how to build an organiza-

About One Earth Designs
Founded in 2007 as a result of Catlin Powers’ and Scot Frank’s experiences in the Himalayas, OED incubates local innovation by providing technical training workshops on topics such as water quality testing, solar technologies, sanitation and waste management. OED also encourages entrepreneurship by providing guidance in proposal writing and development of effective and sustainable business strategies. Ongoing OED projects include development of the SolSource 3-in-1, the Citizen Water project, and creation of a science book reader series to improve scientific materials available in local Himalayan languages.

To find out more about One Earth Designs, check out their website at www.OneEarthDesigns.org
Ideas surrounding an issue and working to listen to the complaints and solutions. OED tries to strike this balance by fully leveraging knowledge in developing viable solutions. It can be difficult to find the right balance between drawing upon local and outside knowledge and practices that people already have rather than replacing them with foreign ones. What are some of the biggest challenges you face in trying to help improve people’s lives without overriding their lifestyles?

It can be difficult to find the right balance between drawing upon local and outside knowledge in developing viable solutions. OED tries to strike this balance by fully listening to the complaints and solution ideas surrounding an issue and working to understand the underlying causes of the problem and the daily routines that involve it. We then open dialogue among community members and our local and foreign staff. We aim to develop a solution that pushes the boundaries of local design traditions but that everyone can agree to and that local people can be proud of developing. The importance of education and user feedback within this scheme is paramount.

Why did you choose to found your own group instead of working for change through a larger, already-established organization?

Very few international organizations both work in this region and have a good reputation among communities and local governmental bodies. None of these organizations focus on community-centered design. Local grass-roots organizations are well perceived, but their members do not come from technical backgrounds and the organizations feel uncomfortable with supervising someone with a technical background. One of the objectives of OED is to provide technical services to local grass-roots organizations without creating an uncomfortable dynamic within them.

Based on your experience in the Himalayas, is it really possible to integrate modern day technology with traditional lifestyles? Or does incorporation of new technologies necessitate change in people’s lifestyles?

Change always requires lifestyle evolution. Technological and behavioral adaptations go hand in hand. Thus, I would say that it is absolutely impossible not to change people’s lifestyles by introducing new technology, running education workshops, implementing infrastructure or changing the local environmental landscape; change causes change. The real question to be asking is whether the changes lead to happier people and a healthier environment, or whether they lead to unrest and degradation. OED aims for the former.

What is the most rewarding part of your work?

Learning how to not need to learn everything in depth. Starting an organization, whether a non-profit or a for-profit, requires one to be savvy about nearly everything: your region, your expertise, your market, how to talk to funders, the basics of accounting, legal structures for organizations, and how to govern well, among others.

Coming from a [technical background], I was used to in-depth learning and wanted to do the same with everything else to which I put my mind. It was a bit frustrating to realize that I needed to let go of that and settle with learning just enough to converse with others who knew more in these areas. Thankfully, OED has had a lot of good mentors at MIT, such as the PSC staff, Joost Bonsen and Richard Keiser.

What is the most frustrating part of your work?

It is wonderful to see the community members that we work with become confident innovators and entrepreneurs. The most rewarding part of my work, however, is seeing the people who join our local staff become leaders in their communities. For example, one student who joined us was soon running water quality seminars at her school and working with her home village to protect their springs from grazing animals. Similarly, one barefoot doctor is now able to determine what water sources and sanitation practices cause waterborne diseases in his communities.

What motivates you to keep working on bad days, when things are going wrong and your workload seems overwhelming?

My team. OED is a superb group of people. Whenever I start feeling overwhelmed, all I need to do is look around and see that our core team members are working just as hard as I am. In fact, we are often working so hard that we forget to eat! When we do take some time to eat and talk, doing so reminds us that we wouldn’t want to have it any other way. This is exactly what we want to be doing. Working to democratize engineering and help local communities innovate their own solutions is the most meaningful and satisfying use of our time.
YeSeul Kim, S.B. ’10 and S.M. ’11 in DUSP, crammed herself into the front row of a 12-passenger van that was put into service as a South African *combi* bus. It was mid-March and she had just partaken in the great South African tradition of watching a live rugby game. In the spirit of South Africa, she decided to forgo the tourist taxi for the more traditional form of transportation.

She definitely felt squished, but when she peeked in the rearview mirror, she was shocked to count a total of 29 passengers! The driver popped in his favorite CD at that moment, blasting Akon songs through the streets of Cape Town. As the *combi* lurched and swerved around brave pedestrians and unwitting drivers, YeSeul thought about how crazy and incongruous the situation seemed compared to her “normal” life back at MIT.

Last semester, YeSeul participated in a study-abroad program entitled *Cities in the 21st Century* through International Honors Program (IHP), an organization that focuses on comparative study-based curricula to introduce students to social justice and sustainability issues around the world. The program focused on understanding “up-and-coming” cities that are becoming increasingly important hubs in their region through four different lenses: anthropological perspective, urban planning, political perspective, and personal experience. The 35 students traveled together, spending a total of 15 weeks distributed amongst Sao Paulo and Curitiba, Brazil; Cape Town and Langa, South Africa; and Hanoi, Vietnam.

While program participants formally studied aspects of the culture, government policies, physical structures, and environment in lectures given by IHP staff members who traveled with them, it soon became evident that a powerful part of the program lay in the cultural immersion and exposure to societal intricacies. Students lived with host families in homestays and learned to navigate the local transportation system to get to class. “The whole experience really fortified my understanding that learning shouldn’t be constrained to textbooks and the classroom. From an ethnographic standpoint, just going out into a city and talking to the locals can be considered learning, and the best part was that I was able to make meaningful relationships despite the barriers and differences. I lost my ‘tourist gaze’ and learned how to understand cultural nuances,” says YeSeul.

One of the most important aspects to studying abroad for YeSeul was that the experience gave her a more complete understanding of the complex issues surrounding education systems and policies.
In the future, she plans to enter the field of educational policy and reform and believes that education plays a central role in international development.

“Someone in one of the South African townships explained to me that the quality of education depended on what side of the railroad tracks you lived on. I strongly believe that education can bridge the gap between the privileged and underprivileged, and that education gives children everywhere the opportunity to break out of the cycle of poverty, no matter what side of the railroad tracks they were born on,” she explained. She highlighted her conversations in Brazilian slums about the Bolsa Familia welfare program and her experiences in the marginalized South African township of Manenburg, where schools had impressive security measures and regularly handed out condoms to attempt to mitigate the spread of HIV.

“I saw that there were a lot of obstacles for students to receiving education, [such as] gang recruitment and teachers who are not held accountable. Educational problems are a combination of economic, cultural, and social issues, and being exposed to all of these different spheres first-hand helped to put that into context,” says YeSeul.

“...education gives children everywhere the opportunity to break out of the cycle of poverty, no matter what side of the railroad tracks they were born on”

Before the end of the program, YeSeul wrote a mini-thesis to summarize her experiences, in which she compared how well the current educational systems of the three different countries are following the mandates set by their respective government’s constitutions. When she returned, the South African system, which shifted to an Outcomes Based Education (OBE) system in 1996, continued to hold her interest. In particular, YeSeul was intrigued by how OBE standardized testing created barriers in and of itself. For example, South Africa has 11 official languages, but standardized exams are administered in English only.

Now that she is back on campus, YeSeul is focusing her undergraduate thesis on the South African education system, expanding on the impact and implications of shifting to such a system in the current aftermath of apartheid. This IAP, YeSeul is returning to South Africa to begin field work that she will continue next summer. She hopes to apply the skills she learned during her semester abroad to incorporate different perspectives in her thesis.
Don’t Forget Me
by Ellen Sojka as told to Yuri Hanada

Ellen Sojka, S.B. ’08, became the Sri Lanka Country Director of Emerge Global, in 2008. Emerge is a non-profit organization that empowers women who have survived sexual abuse and rape to heal and discover self-sufficiency through entrepreneurial jewelry design. Emerge Global works with Sarvodaya, a partner organization that runs Ma Sevana, the only home in Sri Lanka for young abuse survivors and mothers who range from the ages of 10 to 18.

Sarvodaya identified a critical issue faced by survivors in the Sri Lankan court system- due to lack of facilities, they are kept in the prison system for their own protection for up to several years as they wait to testify. In addition, these girls are not differentiated from children who have broken the law, and therefore do not have access to appropriate support and protection. Ma Sevana provides this essential service for recovering abuse victims, and Emerge works with the girls residing there.

During her time in Sri Lanka, Ellen directed a comprehensive jewelry curriculum program and, with the help of Emerge Global volunteers, both designed and implemented an innovative “banking” program, which teaches the basics of business and fiscal responsibility to help participants develop the skills for economic independence. She originally wrote this piece in July as she prepared for her transition back to the U.S. Ellen is currently based in Boston as Emerge Global’s U.S. Director.

7/13/2009 - Today Rachael, Emerge Global’s incoming Country Director, was introduced to our girls in Sri Lanka, and it turned into one of the most hectic, emotional workshops she could have visited. Hectic because the workshop didn’t operate in the normal fashion: with girls “purchasing” beads from the Emerge Store and turning in checks received for completed products to the Emerge Bank. We are about to change the workshop bead colors from Spring/Summer to Fall/Winter, so instead of handing out new beads we only collected products, and asked the girls to finish up their current supplies before next week. Emotional because we learned about one of our girls who had left, two more that would be leaving within the next week, and the girls found out that I would be leaving Sri Lanka in a little less than two months, returning to the USA as Emerge Global’s US Director.

To add more chaos to an already chaotic workshop, Nirukshi, Emerge’s Bead Program Coordinator, and I organized a birthday party (my birthday was the day before, July 12th) for the girls, complete with balloons, noisemakers, cake, and “buns” (burgers) from McDonald’s that Nirukshi had gotten for free by filling out over 20 comment cards. Rachael was introduced as the new Country Director, with Nirukshi explaining that I would be leaving in the near future. As soon as this was said the mood in the room changed; the most visible sign of the overwhelming feeling of loss was when two of our girls began to cry. It broke my heart to see them unhappy, and also forced me to think about leaving in a way that I had subconsciously been avoiding.

The party was overall a success: the girls loved their buns and party favors, and I even followed the Sri Lankan tradition of feeding everyone, including Nirukshi and...
Rachael, a bite of cake. Things became more serious again towards the end of the workshop when one of the girls told me she would be leaving to go home within the week. Tears were streaming down her face when she looked at me and said “Ellen Miss, don’t forget me.” I pointed to her, and then to my heart. “I won’t.”

When the Emerge team piles into the car to leave Ma Sevana the girls will usually wave us goodbye. Today this particular girl kept waving until we were out of sight, not breaking eye contact with me until the gate closed behind Nirukshi’s car and we were back on the road.

After visiting Ma Sevana we usually stop by the Vocational Training Center (VTC) where many past program participants learn English, computers, how to sew, and other useful vocations. When we arrived, we were told that another one of our girls was going home. In her case, she was being sent to an aunt’s house, and she looked worried and scared when she spoke about her uncertain future. She had been living away from her family, and society, for over four years. And for the second time today I heard the phrase “Don’t forget me” uttered from one of our girls.

Tears were streaming down her face when she looked at me and said “Ellen Miss, don’t forget me.” I pointed to her, and then to my heart. “I won’t.”

I’ve become so intertwined in these girls’ lives that it’s hard to imagine not remembering them. But many times, like this afternoon, I realize they are more realistic and grounded than I am. I came to Sri Lanka with the hope that I could make their lives better, and I’d like to think I have. But at the end of the day, these girls know that while people come to help them, they also leave. And where I am going, none of them will be able to follow. It’s something that hits me hard, to think of these girls as sisters and realize that they will never visit me, and that if I am to see them again it is my responsibility to get myself back to Sri Lanka.

Don’t forget me. They say this because not forgetting is my responsibility. They understand that between the both of us I’m the one who is moving on, who will have the capacity, and ability, to forget.
What do you think is the value of having a non-profit organization like STG carrying out this kind of work instead of a for-profit company or government institution?

A non-profit organization has the flexibility to better consider both short-term and long-term benefits, whereas for-profit companies and government initiatives tend to be more strongly focused on the short-term. For STG, this means stressing the importance of training local partners and fostering small businesses within the local market in addition to (and as the mechanism for) providing renewable energy resources to rural institutions. Though it may take slightly longer for the product to get to market because of the necessary training period, such a local business will be well poised to continue providing jobs and renewable energy infrastructure in the local market well into the future.

How important is it to have creation of small businesses and business models together with technology implementation?

Relying on market mechanisms to drive demand for a product is increasingly recognized as a more “sustainable” way of disseminating products/technologies within the developing world. It may seem counter-intuitive to try to sell something within a market where cash flows are minimal, but many cases of doing just that have shown that even people with very little money will pay for a technology that improves their productivity. While methods [such as government subsidies and donor-supported distributions] may do a great job of getting units out in the short term, a lack of consistent funding often prevents these types of projects from continuing in the long term.

Amy Mueller (M.Eng. '03, S.B. '02 in EECS) is co-Director and Treasurer of STG International, a non-profit organization that works to provide energy access to rural areas of developing countries using solar thermal micro-generators. Amy has contributed to the development of STG’s technology since late 2004, working mostly on the electronic control systems, and is currently pursuing her PhD at MIT in Environmental Engineering.
In your view, should donors be supporting small-scale, off-grid technology development or building up large-scale electricity infrastructure?

Both are very important! In fact, the World Bank and GEF have several projects that aim to help developing countries install large-scale infrastructure based on solar power. For example, projects have been investigated in both India and Egypt. There are many areas of the planet, however, that simply will not have access to grid electricity in our lifetimes. Sparsely-populated mountainous regions like Lesotho are filled with small villages of people who could benefit immensely from access to electricity, but the cost of stringing lines to these areas can exceed thousands of US dollars per kilometer. In these cases, small-scale distributed solutions have a huge role to play in improving quality of life.

How adaptable is this kind of small-scale, off-grid electricity generation technology to other developing locations outside of Lesotho?

The solar technology we are working on is something that will work in any area with lots of direct sunlight (Lesotho has over 300 sunny days per year). Rural areas are ideal because land costs are usually lower, [making it easier] to install the system nearby. We have designed the system using mainly off-the-shelf components which are available virtually anywhere around the globe and using basic building techniques (e.g. welding and refrigeration plumbing) to allow local manufacture of the system.

What is the most frustrating part of your work?

[Trying] to divide my time between helping with the project on-the-ground and keeping up with my work here in the US, and [also] forgetting that not all cultures are as work-centric as the US (and especially MIT). Working abroad means that I am always far away from people or work that I care about, and it is difficult not to feel responsible when things fall through the cracks because I was away. Then, in Lesotho, we tend to want to work long days and through the weekends, forgetting that our local partners spend the evening and weekend time with their families. Balancing our desire to get the work completed with the traditional pace of life in Lesotho has definitely challenged us to streamline the work and organize ourselves.

What is the most rewarding part of your work?

Seeing our partners learn new skills and provide suggestions on how to improve the technology. Most people in Lesotho will tell you that someday they hope to own their own business, and making that possible for a few people would be incredibly rewarding.

About STG International

STG International is currently working to complete installation of their first full-scale (3 kW) solar thermal micro-generator system at a health clinic in Lesotho. The technology uses automotive and HVAC OEM parts and supplies that can be found in any plumbing store to make an engine that runs using heat instead of gasoline. The units can be used for co-generation of electricity and hot water in rural areas with no access to an electric grid. The STG team also provides training to local engineers and entrepreneurs, helps adapt the technology to suit local needs and materials, and collaborates with local partners to identify appropriate markets and business plans to manufacture and sell the technology.

To find out more about STG, check out their website at www.stginternational.org

How do you balance the demands of PhD research with the technical and administrative work required for STG?

It’s a challenge every day! I try to set aside one day per week to focus on work for STG and then spend the rest of the week working on my PhD research – but it’s rare that I am able to stick to this plan very effectively. I would never be able to balance the requirements for both projects if I didn’t have a very supportive and understanding thesis advisor, so I would like to extend a huge thank you to Professor Hemond for all of his help on both projects over the past five years.

What motivates you to keep working on bad days, when things are going wrong and your workload seems overwhelming?

The enthusiasm we have received from so many people in so many countries is a great motivation to keep working on the technology until it really is ready to be replicated over and over in new places around the globe. Seeing the state of health care in Lesotho definitely makes me want to see the project succeed [to provide clinics with power], even if we hit bumps along the way.

And, maybe this is just something MIT teaches us, but the fact that the project is challenging is part of what convinces me that we’re on the path to something good – if it were too easy, I probably would have moved on years ago. As it is, every hiccup and bump along the way teaches us something new, and it is immensely rewarding to work on a project where you both get to teach and learn along the way.
Developing self-confidence and having mentor support can turn a shy high school student into a community service leader. Just ask the mentors at the Leadership Training Institute.

The Leadership Training Institute (LTI) at MIT is a student-run organization that seeks to empower high school students by teaching them the principles of leadership, teamwork and self-reflection. This is achieved through a hands-on program in which MIT mentors lead group activities and partner with high school students in one-on-one mentoring.

During August 2009, LTI partnered with the China Development Initiative (CDI) to bring a tailored version of their program to Shenzhen, China. Situated directly across the water from Hong Kong, Shenzhen is a vibrant and modern city that has grown rapidly since the 1970s due to heavy foreign investment. Sponsored by Vanke, a Chinese real estate firm, LTI and CDI ran a Summer Service Leadership Program for 28 promising high school students chosen through a competitive selection process.

Fun, physical group activities were a major component of the program. Led by 2 or 3 mentors at a time, the activities were designed to teach mentees the value of cooperation, good communication and creative problem solving. The activities, such as Chocolate River and Paper Towers, were highly effective at conveying lessons while still being enjoyable. Although some students were initially reluctant to voice their opinions, a little encouragement from the mentors led to an outpouring of original thought.

Michaela LaVan ’12 admire the way that each team in Paper Towers came up with a unique construction method, including some that had never been seen by the LTI mentors. The most commonly used method among American students is to fold the paper and stack folded sheets on top of each other. But each of the mentee groups in Shenzhen used a different method. One team curled the paper sheets tightly inside one another to form long rods, while another cut slits into the paper to help them balance on top of each other, demonstrating innovation and lateral thinking.

Cultural differences are always to be expected when working in a foreign country and this trip was no exception. While the mentees all spoke very good English and there was little language barrier, surprises occasionally arose for the mentor team over the course of the program. The activity Anatomy of a Leader asked mentees to draw the outline of a person’s body, including characteristics that represent the qualities of a good leader. Attributes like big ears for good listening and a big head for intelligence are common when the activity is run with American students. However, the mentor team was surprised to learn that in China a good drinking mug and ability to hold one’s alcohol are necessities for successful business meetings.

Indeed, the lines often blur between teacher and student during the course of an LTI program. Jia Zhu ’11 joined LTI during her freshman year because, she says, “they were advertising [the program] as a way to develop your own leadership skills and change the lives of young people”.

Students and mentors of the 2009 Summer Service Leadership Program. Shenzhen, China.
Leading group activities and mentoring high school students enables LTI members to learn public speaking, effective leadership, and communication skills. They ‘pay it forward’ by showing younger students that personal success is built on a foundation of belief in one’s own abilities, teamwork, and service to others. It is through community service that the biggest personal gains are sometimes made.

As Jia explains, “the thing that makes LTI unique is that our students must complete a community service project.” Mentors assist with project planning and locating resources but the project is entirely implemented by the mentees. In Shenzhen, the high school students decided to help the young students at a nearby elementary school, which mostly serves the children of migrant workers to the city. The mentees developed a program in which they could teach the elementary school students the lessons they had learned about leadership, teamwork and communication.

At the beginning of the program, the mentee students were very unsure of their ability to carry out such a project by themselves. However, through the program activities and mentoring process, the mentees developed confidence and started their service project with abundant enthusiasm. Michaela notes that “on a personal development level, I could see a big difference [in the students] from the beginning to the end of the program – they became more confident, came out of their shells, and even the quietest kids volunteered ideas. [The program] inspired a lot of confidence in them.”

At the end of every session, mentors and mentees had 20 minutes of unstructured time together. While this time was sometimes spent discussing the more formal lessons of the program, it was also a chance for younger students to get advice from students a little older and wiser. David Zou ’11 formed a strong bond with his mentee Lucas, with whom he is still in frequent email contact. They connected over a shared interest in magic tricks and, says David, “our relationship has really developed into more of a friendship than a mentor/mentee relationship”. The intense LTI curriculum and mentoring process often leads to lasting friendships between mentors and mentees.

Although the mentor team departed at the end of August, the students in Shenzhen continue to work on their service project and regularly report back to the LTI team, providing progress updates and asking for advice. Students who lacked confidence in their abilities are now empowered to create change, not just for themselves, but also for their communities.

For more information, visit the Leadership Training Institute at www.mitti.org and the China Development Initiative at web.mit.edu/cdi