

# International Consortium for Interdisciplinary Education about Health and the Environment – Third Winter Meeting

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## ABSTRACT

*The third winter meeting of the International Consortium for Interdisciplinary Education about Health and the Environment was held under the auspices of the University of Cologne's Institute of Biology and its Didactics and the Gesellschaft für Umwelt, Gesundheit und Kommunikation, December 10, 2009 in Cologne, Germany. Several presentations and follow-up discussions ensued. This paper reiterates the purpose and philosophy of the Consortium, the need for interdisciplinary thinking about the linkages between the environment and health, and the future of interdisciplinary and cross-national initiatives.*

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## Background

The *International Consortium for Interdisciplinary Education about Health and the Environment* came into existence in 2007 in recognition of the gap in interdisciplinary education and research about these vast topics of “health” and “environment” (McDermott, Klein, Ritzel, & Vamos, 2008). In its three-year existence, participants in the Consortium have traveled to Cologne from universities in Europe, Asia, and North America. Their interests and areas of expertise have spanned environmental health, health education and promotion and other areas of public health, other environmental sciences, including ecology, meteorology and climate change, other physical and natural sciences, the development and evaluation of environmental policy, the codification of legal and ethical practices related to the environment, geographical information systems, hazardous waste management, pollution of water, air, and other natural resources, occupational health, risk assessment, management, and communication and socio-psychological aspects of human behavior.

To date, the *Consortium* has held three conferences for examining the potential of collaborations that are both inter-institutional and international. As indicated previously (Klein, McDermott, Ritzel, & Vamos, 2009) the most obvious outgrowth of the inaugural meeting was reestablishing this scholarly journal (a paper version formerly entitled *Umwelt und Gesundheit* that was published in the 1980s and early 1990s).

The 2009 meeting was held December 10<sup>th</sup> at the University of Cologne, in Germany. This conference was sponsored by the Institute of Biology and its Didactics at the University of Cologne and the

Gesellschaft für Umwelt, Gesundheit und Kommunikation. Scholars representing several of the health, environmental, and educational sciences were invited conference presenters and panelists. The theme of the meeting was *Teaching Health and Environment – A Global Responsibility – A Global Challenge*.

## Conference Topics and Presenters

The program for the conference included the following oral presentations:

\*\*\* *Global Health and Environmental Issues: Teaching as if the Future Matters* (Dale O. Ritzel, Department of Health Education and Recreation, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois, USA)

\*\*\* *Perspectives for the Developed, Emerging, and Developing Countries with Reference to Education for Sustainable Development* (Erach Bharucha, Institute of Environmental Education and Research, Bharati Vidyapeeth University, Pune, India)

\*\*\* *A Social Marketing Approach to Increasing Environmentally Friendly Practices* (Robert J. McDermott, Department of Community and Family Health, University of South Florida College of Public Health, Tampa, Florida, USA)

\*\*\* *Teachers' Health* (Alexandra Bergedick, Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education and Center for Orthopedagogic Gerontology, University of Cologne, Cologne, Germany)

\*\*\* *Educating the Young – Challenges in Prevention of Alcohol and Other Drugs* (Dvora Cohen, Davidson Institute of Science Education, Weizmann Institute of Science, Rehovot, Israel)

\*\*\* *Short Films on Screen Media-related Issues as a Strategy in Teaching Health* (Sandra Hombach and Kirsten Schlüter, Department of Biology and its Didactics, University of Siegen, Siegen, Germany)

\*\*\* *Special Education in Turkey: Issues and Challenges* (Nalan, Babir, Department of Primary Education, Bogazici University, Istanbul, Turkey).

### Follow-Up Discussion

As stated at previous conferences, discussions about health and the environment must include methods and strategies for minimizing the counterproductive effects of disciplinary “silos” across fields of science (Klein et al., 2009). To the contrary, the future of planet earth and the health of its inhabitants may be dependent on international understanding and cooperation. One way to motivate cooperation and interdisciplinary dialogue may be to begin these tasks long before professional careers are long underway.

The University of Cologne established the Interdisciplinary Master in Environmental Sciences (IMES) degree program in 2003 to bring together students from numerous countries and multiple fields that address environmental interests. This degree program, an adjunct to the traditional study programs, offers opportunity for a more effective interdisciplinary education geared towards research and the use of applications (University of Cologne, 2007). The program requires proficiency in speaking and reading English as all coursework is conducted in English. In the further spirit of international cooperation and exposure to interdisciplinary views, an outgrowth of the December 2009 conference at the University of Cologne was the agreement to invite the participation of IMES students and students from North America to work together on joint oral presentations in conjunction with the 12<sup>th</sup> *International Health Education and Injury Prevention Partnership Course and Field Conference* held in Cologne during May 2010. Its long-term continuation cannot be guaranteed but it may be unmatched by other current initiatives to invest in international and interdisciplinary work that brings early career individuals together around the subject of the environment.

### The Future of the Consortium and Conference

The 2007 meeting featured five days of face-to-face contact, including 12 oral presentations (McDermott et al., 2008). The 2008 meeting was reduced to three days, but expanded the set of oral presentations to 14 (Klein et al., 2009). The 2009 meeting encompassed a single day and was limited to just the 7 oral presentations identified above. Reflecting on what has been achieved over three

years time, it is unlikely that a few score of people coming together and offering dialogue across institutions and disciplines has changed practice to any significant extent. That likelihood notwithstanding, the three meetings have enabled the following achievements:

- Exploration of mechanisms for participating scholars to increase their cognizance of the diversities and similarities across fields;
- Establishment of at least a temporary infrastructure for promoting linkages between the academic and practice worlds;
- Initiation of a “think-tank” for promoting interdisciplinary teaching at the respective universities;
- Identification of plausible mechanisms for bringing students of different countries and disciplines together, thereby increasing the potential for reducing academic distances and political differences; and
- Preparation of scholarly papers on relevant and timely topics.

What does the future hold? It is somewhat difficult to say with any degree of certainty. Of the principal organizers of the first three conferences, one (KK) will retire at the end of the next winter semester (February 2011); another (DOR) actually has retired, although is still active on several levels; and the third (RJM) has limited resources to carry on without some degree of contact and commitment from personnel of the University of Cologne. To maintain the existence of the *Consortium* and its ideals, leadership needs to emerge. Cologne seems an appropriate place for these efforts to reside – it offers an excellent venue with numerous scholars in the relevant sciences, it has somewhat of a central location for several past conference participants, and it houses the IMES program, itself, a program with interdisciplinary aspirations.

Will there be a fourth winter meeting in December 2010? Preliminary discussion around this question has been initiated, but little has been decided. Financial sponsorship for the meeting, rising travel costs, the technical gaps between “bench scientists” and “social scientists,” limited availability of time, and other factors challenge holding additional conferences. Perhaps the *Consortium*, as an operating entity, can “sunset” itself. However, as a legacy to its brief existence, one important thing could emerge as a joint effort of academic scholars and students – a “white paper” about the importance of interdisciplinary teaching and joint research with respect to key environmental issues. If such a statement could emerge after just four years, then the

entire initiative might be deemed to have been worthwhile as well as visionary.

### References

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