MASTER OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

Spring-Summer Newsletter 2026



UF UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

https://mdp.africa.ufl.edu/ +352.392.3293 470 Grinter Hall

MASTER OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

Table of Contents

1. **Director's Message** 3
2. **Graduates Spring 2026** 6
3. **Spring 2026 Fieldwork Festival Poster Session** 9
4. **Summer Field Practicums** 10
5. **Spring 2026 Awards** 16
6. **Student Research Awards** 17
7. **Faculty and Alumni Publications** 18
8. **Faculty Spotlight Dr. Jazmín Gonzales Tovar** 22
9. **Student Activities Outside the Classroom** 28
10. **MDP Social Events** 29

UF UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

1.Director's Message



Welcome to our Spring-Summer 2026 newsletter in which we share a collection of noteworthy developments of the University of Florida Master of Sustainable Development (MDP) Program. We are proud of our new graduates (see page 6) and also pleased to provide an overview of the field practicums that our second-year students conducted over the summer in Botswana, Brazil, Florida (3), Indonesia (Papua), Morocco, Mozambique, Pakistan, and Zambia.

MDP students accomplish two important objectives through the realization of their field practicums. In addition to fulfilling a major requirement of the MDP program, students are tasked with contributing to the ongoing work of a host organization. As such, MDP students must identify their host organization (HO); deliberate with their HO to identify a topic or topics of interest; develop a proposal to prepare for the work to be conducted; execute the planned activities, generally involving a combination of methods; analyze the information generated and develop a final report; and finally, present and defend their final report. During this process, MDP students benefit from the generous support of the chair and member/s of their supervisory committees, also recognized in this newsletter.

Here, I want to draw attention to a special attribute of the field practicums for MDP students--namely the opportunities to interact and build relationships with people who often live on the front lines of what we would term challenges of sustainable development. As examples, during the past summer our students worked with communities and individuals experiencing, among others, the following challenges:

- Efforts to sustain or enhance local livelihoods while contributing to the conservation of wildlife in Botswana
- Approaches to strengthen resilience and sustain local livelihoods while under the threat of catastrophic flooding events precipitated by rapidly melting glaciers in northern Pakistan (the same processes that led to the recent tragedy in Nepal)
- Recognition of indigenous land rights, on which cultural and biological conservation depends, in highly diverse tropical forests of Papua, Indonesia under the threat of forest conversion for mining and expansion of oil palm plantations
- Provision of reproductive healthcare to vulnerable women in northern Florida

Other students focused on solidarity finance with an NGO in Brazil; increased adoption of agroforestry systems by smallholders in Zambia; exploration of people's perceptions of "right to clean water' in Florida; analysis of smallholders' perceptions of recently initiated coffee production in Mozambique; preservation of traditional ecological knowledge by enhancing indigenous research capacity in Morocco; and evaluation of education for behavior change to reduce pollution brought on by stormwater runoff in Florida.

This collection of fascinating field practicums shared an important attribute. The local people with whom the students engaged treated them with kindness and respect, as has occurred with past cohorts of students. This is remarkable when one considers that many of the challenges unfolding in communities around the world originate from external drivers and processes, for example, global demand for commodities and natural resources and climate change driven by worldwide patterns of production and consumption. We are grateful to all the people who generously spent time with our students and participated in their research activities. We also want to recognize the dedication and professionalism of our students who took on these important projects.

In this edition of our newsletter, you will find a list of recent publications authored or co-authored by MDP alumni, and faculty, reflecting the diversity and interdisciplinarity that characterizes the MDP program. Many thanks and congratulations to all of you who shared updates on your scholarly work.

In the Faculty Spotlight, Susana Quevedo interviewed Dr. Jazmin Gonzales Tovar, Post-doctoral Associate of the MDP Program. Since joining the MDP program in Fall 2025, Jazmin has taught the foundational course of the MDP program, Development Theory & Practice, in addition to the course Gender & Development. She also co-teaches two courses with me that serve as the bookends for our students' field practicums, Design & Methods of Sustainable Development Practice and Conservation & Development Practice. In all her courses and in her personal engagement with students, she conveys genuine passion for her work and a deep commitment and concern for the success of our students. Not surprisingly, many students have asked Jazmin to chair or serve as member of their supervisory committees. In the Faculty Spotlight, we gain glimpses into her personal and professional background that has led to her focus on topics such as environmental justice, political ecology, ecofeminism, solidarity economies, and empowerment, among others, drawing on her knowledge and experience in different parts of the world. She also elaborates on her well-founded views regarding artificial intelligence (AI), characterizing the term "AI" as a fuzzy umbrella, since it has so many facets and connotations. She points out why anyone

involved in education and/or sustainability should be keenly aware of risks and impacts associated with AI. Here, I want to express my appreciation to Jazmin for her thoughtful, invaluable contributions to the MDP program.

In each newsletter, I take the opportunity to acknowledge and thank core and affiliate faculty members who support the MDP program in many ways, most importantly by creating diverse learning opportunities in their classes and through their guidance as members of students' supervisory committees. I also want to extend our appreciation to the Center for Latin American Studies, the Center for African Studies, the International Center, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the Provost Office, and the Tropical Conservation and Development Program for their continuous, vital support to the MDP program. I am grateful to Michael Friel who supports students' international travel through The Jacqueline Friel and Jonathan Friel International Travel Fund.

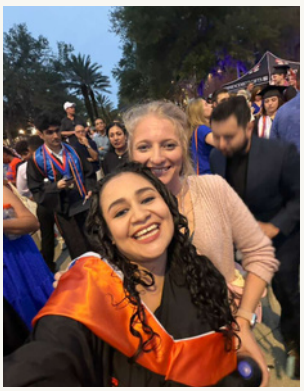
Before closing, I would like to inform our readers that our request to create the 4+1 Combination Any Undergraduate Degree/MDP Program has been approved. This new program will provide UF undergraduates with the opportunity to initiate the MDP program after they have earned the core credits of their undergraduate majors. We have been meeting with many undergraduate coordinators and students who have expressed positive opinions about this new opportunity. We will provide updates on how this 4+1 program unfolds in future MDP newsletters.

Finally, many thanks to Susana Quevedo who serves as Graduate Assistant of the MDP program. She takes leadership in the preparation of our weekly bulletins and newsletters, including this one. Thanks Susana, for all your efforts!

Graduates Spring 2026

Our graduating students celebrated in person at the Ben Hill Griffin Stadium and the O'Connell Center with family and friends. We are very proud of our new graduates and we wish each one great success in their next steps.
Here we provide information about each of our Spring 2026 graduates, members of their supervisory committees, and the topic of their capstone field practicums.







Top photo: from the right, MDP graduates Tayler (right) and Graham (left) celebrate alongside fellow graduates from the MALAS program. Bottom photos: MDP graduate Guiecniza enjoys the occasion with friends and family



Guiecniza Dehesa Blas

Advisors: Dr. July Dayane Nelson and Dr. Andrew Noss

Capstone Field Practicum: “Community Energy Solutions: Advancing Environmental and Economic Justice through the Home Energy Tune-up Program”.

Host Organization: Community Weatherization Coalition. Gainesville, FL USA.

Specialization: Latin American Studies, Tropical Conservation and Development.



Tayler King

Advisors: Dr. July Dayane Nelson and Dr. Ruth Steiner.

Capstone Field Practicum: “Lasting Lincoln: Community Priorities, Barriers, and the Future of the T.B. McPherson Recreation Center”.

Host Organization: City of Gainesville, Wild Spaces and Public Places Department.

Specialization: Urban Planning, Tropical Conservation and Development.



Graham Lineham

Advisors: Dr. Renata Serra and Dr. Sarah McKune

Capstone Field Practicum: “Climate resilience in Churute, Ecuador: Multi-scalar and multidimensional”.

Host Organization: Conservation International. Ecuador. Churute, Ecuador.

Specialization: Latin American Studies, Tropical Conservation and Development.



Simon Suuk

Sustainable Development Practice Certificate

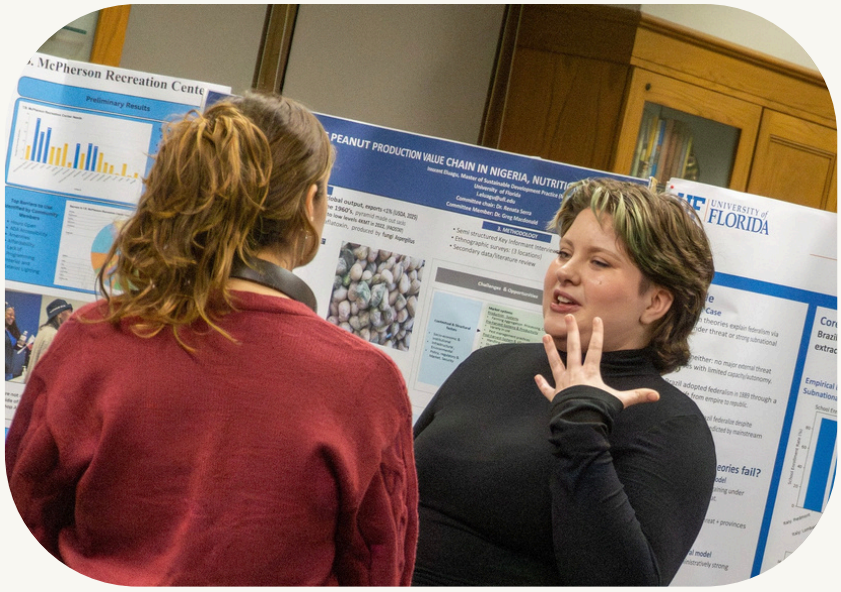
PhD Family, Youth and Community Sciences

Spring 2026 Fieldwork Festival Poster Session

The Center for Latin American Studies' annual Fieldwork Festival gave students the chance to present their research and practicum experiences in a public poster exhibit. Congratulations to all of our MDP participants and award recipients.



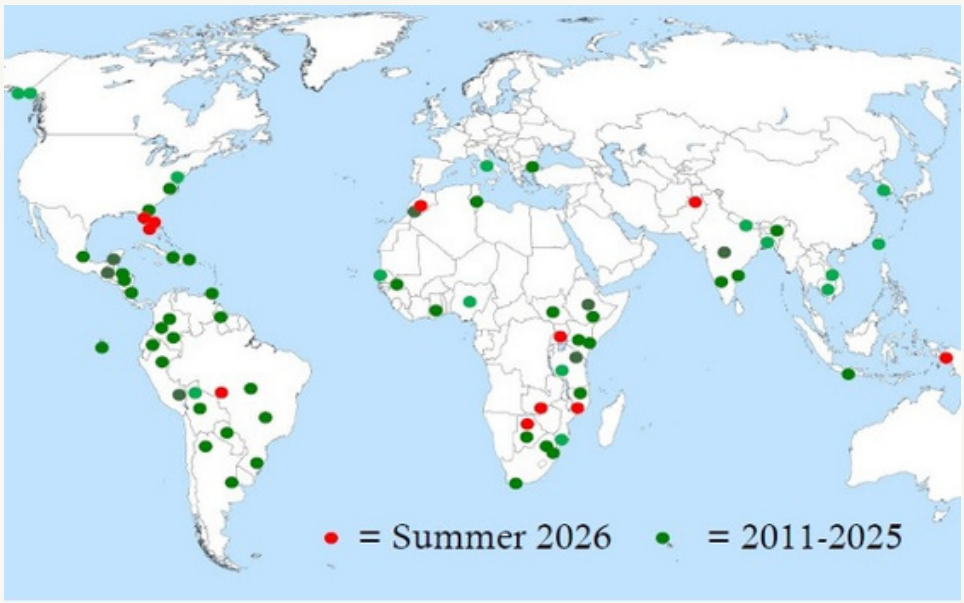
Master's in conservation, development, and sustainability
Runners-up:
Graham Linehan, "Climate resilience in Churute, Ecuador: Multi-scalar and multidimensional.
Heather Burky-Lechwar, "Regenerative Tourism Potential in Rural Coastal Communities: Exploring Community Perception of regenerative tourism in Cordova, Alaska"



Tayler King explaining her research to Julia Taylor

Summer Field Practicums

During the summer 2026, our students completed their field practicums with a diverse range of host organizations, both international and domestic.
For their international travel, our students received generous support from the Jacqueline Friel & Jonathan Friel International Travel Fund, the Center for African Studies, the Center for Latin American Studies, the Tropical Conservation and Development Program, the International Center, and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.



Summer Field Practicums



Tierra Bartolotti

Theme: Assessing Belonging and Governance of Solidarity Finance in Agroecological Networks: A Case Study of Instituto Ouro Verde in the Brazilian Amazon.

Region/ Country: Alta Floresta, Mato Grosso, Brazil

Host Organization: Instituto Ouro Verde

Chair: Catherine Tucker

Committee members: Bob Buschbacher, John Kraft



Charlie Hochfelder

Theme: Growing Trees, Supporting Smallholders: Evaluating Incentives and Agroforestry Adoption in Zambia.

Region/ Country: Zambia

Host Organization: OneAcreFund

Chair: Renata Serra

Committee members: Greg Macdonald

Summer Field Practicums

Julia Taylor



Theme: Right to clean water.

Region/ Country: Florida, USA

Host Organization: Rights of Nature

Chair: Jazmín Gonzales Tovar

Committee members: Jon Dain, Glenn Galloway

Brandon Isenman



Theme: Making Mozambican Coffee: Perceptions of Agroforestry from Nascent Coffee Smallholders in Gorongosa National Park, Mozambique.

Region/ Country: Gorongosa National Park, Mozambique

Host Organization: Gorongosa National Park Coffee Project

Chair: Renata Serra

Committee members: Catherine Tucker

Summer Field Practicums



Jordan Gannon

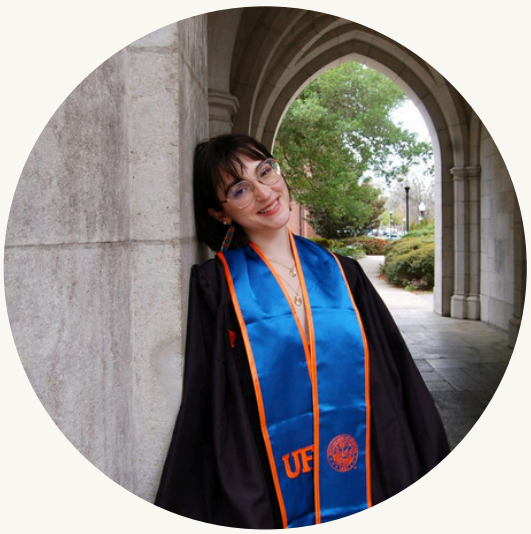
Theme: Ecological monitoring and decision-support system in NG3, Ngamiland-Khaudum Wildlife Dispersal Area (WDA).

Region/ Country: Qangwa community, Botswana

Host Organization: Lifethroughwildlife

Chair: Brian Child

Committee members: Bob McCleery



Kaylee McDonald

Theme: The Preservation of T.E.K in the High Atlas: Building Indigenous Research Capacity in Morocco Through Community Archives and Cultural Resilience.

Region/ Country: Morocco

Host Organization: Dar Si Hmad

Chair: Renata Serra

Committee members: Jazmín Gonzales Tovar

Summer Field Practicums



Susana Quevedo

Theme: Community outreach for women's health.

Region/ Country: Florida, USA

Host Organization: Rural Women's Health Project

Chair: Rafael Ramírez Solórzano

Committee members: Ariadna Tenorio, Adriana Menendez



Lordia Blay

Theme: Evaluating Stormwater Education for Behaviour Change and Nutrient Reduction in Indian River County: Social Norms and Practical Constraints.

Region/ Country: Indian River County, Florida, USA

Host Organization: Indian River Natural Resources Department Stormwater Division

Chair: Eban Bean

Committee members: Klizentyte Kotryna, Alexis Peralta

Summer Field Practicums



Maryam Aman

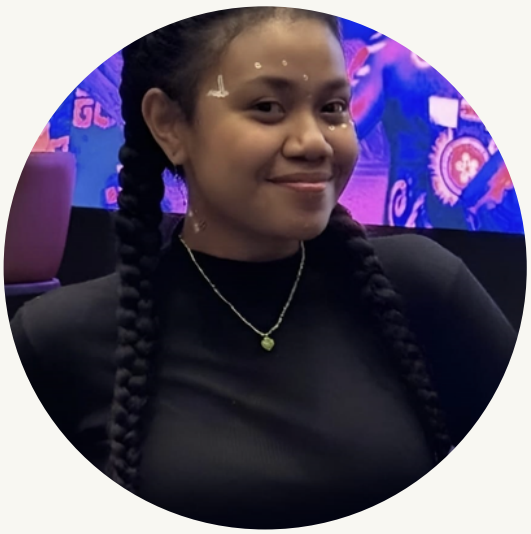
Theme: Glaciers, governance, and resilience: Community adaptation and climate justice in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan.

Region/ Country: Bagrote Valley, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan

Host Organization: Environmental Protection Agency, Gilgit-Baltistan

Chair: Jazmín Gonzales Tovar

Committee members: Renata Serra



Donna Sipata

Theme: Supporting Policy Advocacy on Indigenous Land Rights Through Institutional and Governance Analysis, Working with an Indonesian Environmental NGO, Pusaka Bentala Rakyat Foundation.

Region/ Country: Papua, Indonesia

Host Organization: Pusaka Bentala Rakyat Foundation

Chair: Jazmín Gonzales Tovar

Committee members: Steve Perz

Spring 2026 Awards

UF International Center: Certificate of Outstanding Merit: Veronica Manguinho de Souza, Guieniza Dehesa Blas and Innocent Eluagu.







Student Research Awards

We are grateful to our donors for making our students' work possible.

Jacqueline Friel & Jonathan Friel International Travel Fund Grants: Tierra Bartolotti, Charlie Hochfelder, Brandon Isenman, Jordan Gannon, Kaylee McDonald, Maryam Aman, Donna Sipata.

Center for African Studies Field Research Grant: Kaylee McDonald, Charlie Hochfelder, Brandon Isenman.

Tropical Conservation and Development Program Field Research Grant: Jordan Gannon, Tierra Bartolotti, Brandon Isenman, Maryam Aman

Tropical Conservation and Development Program Practitioner Grant: Donna Sipata, Julia Taylor, Lordia Blay, Charlie Hochfelder

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Travel Grant: Lordia Blay, Tierra Bartolotti, Maryam Aman, Donna Sipata

UF Center for Latin American Studies Student Travel Funds Grant: Susana Quevedo

Faculty and Alumni Publications

For this edition of the newsletter, we reached out to MDP faculty, and alumni to share recent publications they have authored or co-authored. The list below are the contributions we received. We congratulate all contributors on their achievements

Marliz Arteaga - Cohort 2
Arteaga, M., Chavez, A., Sanjinez, L. C., & Inchausty, V. H. (Eds.). (2025). Diálogos desde el Territorio: Investigación-Acción en la Amazonía Boliviana. Universidad de Florida; Universidad Amazónica de Pando.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/400555172_Dialogos_desde_el_Territorio_Investigacion-Accion_en_la_Amazonia_Boliviana

Antonieta Eguren Ibacache - Cohort 4
Gualinga, P., Molina, H., Reyes Ocasio, N., Bunce, K., Carmody, M., Eguren, A., Greene, N., and Marambio, C. (2026). Casa de herramientas para una gobernanza ecológica diversa, equitativa e inclusiva del Río (Charo) Lanao.

Amanda Brinton - Cohort 6
Brinton, A., Diehl, D.C., Townsend, T.G., and Deliz Quiñones, K.Y. (2026). Government Ghosting in Puerto Rico: Impacts on Solid Waste Stakeholders From a Territorial Government Reorganization. Administration & Society, 58(4), 500–528. https://doi.org/10.1177/00953997261444733.

Pilar Morales-Giner - Cohort 6
Rebollo Díaz, C., and Morales-Giner, P. (2025). Framing Climate Mobility: A Discourse Analysis of Spanish Newspapers [Los encuadres de la movilidad climática: un análisis del discurso de la prensa española]. Migraciones. Publicación del Instituto Universitario de Estudios sobre Migraciones, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.14422/mig.23558.029.

Jackie Curnick - Cohort 7
McCabe, M.A., Curnick, J., Kuehn, T., Zorn, A., and Janssen, B. (2026). Understanding environmental health issues to inform community engagement in the central Midwest. Discover Public Health, 23, 21. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12982-025-01323-w.

Faculty and Alumni Publications

María Margarita Fontecha Tirado - Cohort 7
Melo-Velasco, J., Fontecha-Tirado, M., Ruiz Macho, C., and Castellano Saco, S. (2026). Cerrando la brecha: estrategias diferenciadas y accionables para crear el puente entre juventudes rurales y digitalización [Closing the gap: practical strategies to bridge Rural Youth and Digital Agriculture] [Policy brief]. Instituto Interamericano de Cooperación para la Agricultura (IICA). https://hdl.handle.net/11324/24293.

Miguel Olivas Pérez - Cohort 7
Anchondo Páez, J.C., Narváez Flores, R., Olivas Pérez, M., and Ochoa Modesto, F. (2026). Primer registro del picudo del agave (Scyphophorus acupunctatus Gyllenhal) en sotol silvestre (Dasylirion spp., Asparagaceae) en Chihuahua [First record of the agave weevil (Scyphophorus acupunctatus Gyllenhal) on wild sotol populations (Dasylirion spp., Asparagaceae) in the state of Chihuahua]. Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Forestales, 17(94), 135–142. https://doi.org/10.29298/rmcf.v17i94.1609.

Daniel Acosta - Cohort 8
Acosta, D., Anderson, B., **Serra, R.**, Heidi, M.T., Cissé, N.S., Seye, M., **Villalon, L.**, and **McKune, S.L.** (2026). A pathway to food and nutritional security in the Sahel in the context of climate change: A One Health framework. CABI One Health. https://doi.org/10.1079/cabionehealth.2026.0012.

Tiwari, C.; Acosta, D.; Matsiko, E.; Kampire, A.; Nsabimana, A.; Stark, H.; Andrade Laborde, J.; Yang, Y.; Nsereko, E.; Reider, K.; Kirby, M.; and S. **McKune.** (2026). Deux Oeufs: Cracking the potential of eggs to improve child growth and development: A randomized controlled trial (RCT) study protocol. Trials. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13063-025-09237-3.

Faculty and Alumni Publications

Susan Paulson

Paulson, Susan, and Alberto Acosta. "Buen Vivir and Buenos Conviveres." In Vocabulary for Sustainable Consumption and Lifestyles, 250-254. Routledge, 2025.

Paulson, Susan, Sourayan Mookerjea, and Anna Saave. "Ecofeminist & Decolonial Feminist Futures." In Routledge Handbook of Degrowth, 389-403. Routledge, 2025.

Robert Buschbacher

Saavedra, F., Buschbacher, R., Nemogá-Soto, G.R., Alvira, D., Athayde, S., Campbell, J.M., Chavez Michaelsen, A.B., et al., and Zandvliet, D.B. (2026). On tap, not on top: An urgent call for academia to support Indigenous science and equitable conservation. Earth Stewardship. https://doi.org/10.1002/eas2.70038.

Sarah McKune

Ahmed, I., Ojeda, A., Slanzi, C., **Tiwari, C.,** Hassen, J.Y., Havelaar, A., and **McKune, S.** (2026). A mixed-methods investigation of infant and young child feeding practices in rural Ethiopia: integrating insights from surveys, direct observation, and qualitative research. Frontiers in Nutrition. https://doi.org/10.3389/fnut.2026.1794352.

Li, X., Ojeda, A., Deblais, L., Mummed, B., Bhrane, M., Rajashekara, G., Liang, S., Yousuf, J., **McKune, S.,** Havelaar, A., and J. Blackburn. (accepted 2026) Spatial and Temporal Patterns of Campylobacter Infection and Projected Habitat Suitability of Dominant Campylobacter Species in Eastern Ethiopia. GeoHealth. https://doi.org/10.1029/2024GH001146.

Nesbit, T. S., Coker, K., Abraczinskas, M., O'Neal, L. J., Grunwald, S., **McKune, S. L.** & Forthun, L. F. (2026). Maternal healthcare provider perspectives on spiritual care and the challenges and opportunities for provider spiritual well-being in the United States. Journal of Religion and Health. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-025-02515-z.

Faculty and Alumni Publications

Nesbit, T. S., Coker, K., **McKune, S.**, Abraczinskas, M., O'Neal, L., Grunwald, S., and Forthun, L. (2026) Mindfulness in Healthcare Education: Findings from a Qualitative Exploration of Mindfulness and Spirituality in Maternal Healthcare. In Puig, A., Wang, Y., and Grunwald, S. (Eds) Personal and Institutional Transformation in Higher Education through Mindfulness. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Adesogan, O., **Tiwari, C.**, Havelaar, A., Hendrickx, S., Vyas, D., Stark. H., Wereme N'Diaye, A., Yacouba, Z., and **McKune, S.** (2026). Investigating the Effect of Integrated Nutrition and Agricultural Training on Egg Production and Child Egg Consumption: A Secondary Analysis from the Un Oeuf Trial. The Journal of Nutrition. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tjnut.2025.101273.

Faculty Spotlight
Dr. Jazmín Gonzales Tovar



We had a highly constructive and engaging conversation with our dear professor, Jazmín. We discussed spirituality, social racialization in Latin America, connecting with our Indigenous roots, and how to be more inclusive of all our roots.

In the interview **S** is the abbreviation for Susana Quevedo, and **J** for Jazmín Gonzales Tovar.

Background

Susana: Did you always know you wanted to work in this field? Was there a moment or experience that drew you toward this type of work?

Jazmín: Well, my father is from Ayacucho, in the Andes, and from the time we were children we went to the countryside. Nature, plants: my father loves nature, and I was happy in the countryside. I would skip about, and I was very happy! On those outings I witnessed inequalities.

My father organized pachamancas (a dish cooked underground, similar to barbacoa) in the highlands of Lima with our family. During these pachamancas, 'little heads' would begin to appear among the bushes: local children approaching just as we were about to eat. From a very young age, I had both a love of nature and a sense of concern and indignation about the inequalities I saw.

My father is an anthropologist, and my mother is a sociologist, and I was greatly influenced by them. I studied environmental science at the Universidad Nacional Agraria La Molina, where I always wanted to engage with social issues. I volunteered in rural environmental areas of Lima, in contexts of poverty, doing environmental education. I have always known that this work fulfilled me deeply and that I enjoyed it.

S: Has your perspective changed over time since you began?

J: Definitely. Since my first year of university, which was already 24 years ago, one evolves through a fusion of experiences and exchanges. This should happen, because one learns by living, doing, and talking with other people...

Over the past 10 to 15 years, my vision of governance has also solidified in response to concerns I already had about multilevel governance systems, namely the idea that it suffices to bring all the "stakeholders" together at a table, by means of commissions, to solve everything.

Over these past 10 to 15 years, I have reflected deeply on how systemic power inequalities undermine technocratic and apolitical notions of governance. As a result of my more intensive interaction with Indigenous peoples and popular/community-based ("grassroots") organizations, over the past 6 years I have come to think more strongly about sovereignty, decolonizing environmental justice, disobedience as a legitimate governance strategy when a law is unjust, "post-development," and a vision of governance that is less anthropocentric and Western, and more holistic, cultural, and spiritual.

Fieldwork and Community

S: How do you reflect that experience in your classes? How do you convey it?

J: In the content of my courses (development theory and practice, gender, methods, practicum), I try to incorporate my own materials, as well as those of other authors, that open up topics in which I have experience: approaches, methods, theory, knowledge bases, political ecology, environmental justice, spirituality (which I integrated myself), solidarity economies, degrowth, and Global South perspectives on the different paths to follow in order to advance toward sustainability and a fulfilling life.

Some of these topics were already in the development theory and practice course, but only in a couple of modules. I integrated them throughout the course, so that students would understand them better and be able to draw contrasts. Now, each week there are universally recognized classical theories of development alongside newer and less visible theories, integrated week by week. This reflects my own experience in development and makes the course more complete.

In the gender course, I added topics on autonomy and expanded the materials to include critical perspectives on what "empowerment" means, ecofeminism, matriarchies, Latin American feminisms, "mothering," and "body politics." Each week, I included something on real initiatives and movements: how different types of alliances advance different gender and women's agendas in practice. I adapted the course to my own style: experiences from the Amazon, decolonizing methodologies, and participatory methods for addressing gender issues. I invited other professors and outside guests to speak on topics such as LGBTQ issues and to share their experiences working in different parts of the world.

On Students and Academia

S: What advice would you give to students interested in community-based research? For example, to a student going to a foreign country.

J: There is a "white savior complex" in the field of development, and the MDP places great emphasis on students approaching their work with a different perspective, willing to listen and to exchange viewpoints and knowledge. To students going to foreign countries, the first thing I would say is to immerse themselves in the context before going to the field. If they have never been to that place, they should learn as much as they can and speak with the host organization before beginning fieldwork.
Once they arrive, they should not begin immediately "doing things." They should take a few weeks to interact with the host organization and local people, to learn and listen before starting any interviews or other activities. Spending time listening to people builds trust, so that when the student begins to use more structured methods, such as surveys and focus groups, people feel more comfortable. This preliminary period also gives the student room to plan well and to enter the data collection phase with greater confidence. **But above all, it is an ethical responsibility.**

Students who come to the MDP bring a great deal of life experience and have traveled, which gives them an awareness of different cultures and of how each way of life can be valuable in different ways. This is very important, because they can see that there is not one single way of living, but rather a "pluriverse" of options and contexts, with no single one dominating.

The host organization is there to ensure that the work of MDP students is "grounded", so that students feel supported, knowing that their work has the input not only of UF faculty but also of the host organization.

S: Do you believe that universities and researchers are improving in listening to local communities, or is there still a disconnect?

J: In my own "academic bubble," meaning the groups and conferences in which I participate, there is indeed a willingness to make research as participatory and fair as possible, and in recent years the decolonizing approach has been gaining strength. At forums and conferences such as FLARE, IASC, Pollen, and LASA, one can find people with this same approach.

The MDP has also continued to evolve, as any program does, increasingly reinforcing the participatory approach and the need to bring in different perspectives — something I have sought to amplify. In the development theory and practice course, at the beginning I included a class on the global history of the global development “world”, to show students how it began and how it has changed and evolved over the decades according to sociopolitical and economic trends, while different alternatives existed and emerged in different localities and regions.

Faculty Spotlight
Dr. Jazmín Gonzales Tovar

In recent decades, there has been greater recognition of different ways of understanding "development," or rather, wellbeing and sustainability. "Development" is a word that carries stigma, that has been misused, and whose meaning has become ambiguous.

"Development" has traditionally been understood as economic growth in monetary terms and in terms of GDP. The MDP emphasizes that other dimensions must be considered: a pluriverse of initiatives and philosophies. Neoclassical economics, for example, does not usually consider the loss of matter and energy; it looks only at gains and costs in monetary terms.

On Artificial Intelligence

S: In your class, we had the opportunity to have good conversations and debates about artificial intelligence (AI). Could you give me a brief opinion on AI and on how it has increasingly become present in everyday life and in university life?

J: First, I want to be clear about what I'm talking about, because "AI" is a fuzzy umbrella term. Many types of technologies have been, and continue being, very useful for society. Traditional AI, which emerged some decades ago and has been evolving since then, has been extremely useful for cancer research, weather forecasting, forest monitoring, and so on. These are specialized models fed with specific input datasets that are particularly tailored for the purposes for which those models were created. However, over the past five years we have seen the emergence of corporate generative AI products (created and operated by companies such as Open AI, Anthropic, Google, etc.), which are a whole different story. My personal perspective is that when it comes to corporate gen-AI products, we are not talking about algorithms, we are not talking about technology, we are talking about unethical, extractive business models functioning at a "hyperscale" (a term proudly used by the gen-AI companies themselves).

There is a growing body of compelling empirical evidence of how extractive and inefficient chatbots are in their use of resources, due to the very way in which they are designed. Large language models (LLMs) are deep machine learning at a hyperscale. They do not work with information specifically selected for a particular purpose (as other AI models do) but rather take all the information they can find. By the way, AI corporations have stolen peoples' creative work, in what a Microsoft executive called the "largest theft of labor" in history. It is as if, to learn what climate change is, you consulted every person and source in the world instead of simply consulting a book on climate change. Hence the proliferation of enormous data centers which, as an MIT study explains, require exorbitant, unprecedented quantities of water, energy, and minerals, as well as human labor, to process such massive amounts of

information. Amazon just announced a massive gas-powered data center that will become the largest source of climate (CO_2) pollution in the United States, according to The New York Times. The above-mentioned MIT report (2025) projected corporate gen-AI to be the fifth largest electricity consumer in the world in 2026, between Japan and Russia. The lead author concluded: “The demand for new data centers cannot be met in a sustainable way. The pace at which companies are building new data centers means the bulk of the electricity to power them must come from fossil fuel-based power plants.” Furthermore, data centers are built in areas where racialized and marginalized populations live. Globally, we are at a critical point regarding climate change. Therefore, it is a matter of survival itself. We must think, as human beings, about what is important.

It is documented that the supposed financial growth of generative AI companies is not real; 95% of generative AI companies have spent far more than they have received, and so far, they have seen no return. Many financial analysts warn of a financial bubble. It could degenerate into a very serious economic crisis. This may explain why these companies spread the idea that this product is so "powerful" that it "cannot be controlled," since this narrative gives the impression of a highly advanced product with great investment potential. However, this is false: as MIT and other experts explain very well, corporate LLMs make many errors, exhibit biases, and operate in questionable ways, because of the way in which they are designed. Some ("agents") operate with very poor security measures and are designed to hack, which points toward surveillance and control and is extremely dangerous for democracy. Others (chatbots) have Reddit as their primary source of input data and are designed to please their users (actually, a paper by Timnit Gebru et al. (2021) described them as “stochastic parrots”). As a result, chatbots have given suggestions on how to commit suicide to people who asked for them — ending in the deaths of those people. And others are designed as autonomous weapons to be used in wars to detect targets and make battlefield decisions. All of this is, or should be, illegal ,and those responsible are the people who created these products in this way.

On another note, there is evidence showing that chatbots often generate more work than they save; it is an "easy" concept only in appearance. Chatbots cannot completely replace the value of people's lived experiences, creativity, critical thinking, and emotions. Moreover, bearing in mind planetary boundaries, we should instead be slowing down, not producing more intensively.

I believe that university departments should discuss all of this in depth and envision paths that are in keeping with, rather than contrary to, their mission as educational institutions. There is compelling empirical evidence that the use of chatbots erodes people's advanced cognitive abilities: critical thinking, creativity, and the capacity to make decisions. What

other MIT studies have called “cognitive debt” (2025) and more recently “cognitive surrender” (2026). In addition, perspectives and knowledge become flattened: everyone begins to write the same way and think the same way, following the globally dominant ontologies and epistemologies reproduced by chatbots. Above all, it must emphasize that the primary responsibility of educational institutions is to form fully developed human beings who think, feel, interact, and contribute to society; students are not machines for producing reports and articles. The goal is the process, not the product; with generative AI there is no process, only product. It is precisely in the process of creating, reflecting, discussing, questioning, editing, and making mistakes that one learns and grows as a human being. It is the duty of educational authorities and professors to give importance to the human development and the process of their students, and to grade the process and not only the final product. This must be thoroughly discussed so that it is clear.

The evidence, from where I see it, is conclusive: these products are inefficient, extractive, unethical, and financially and environmentally unsustainable. The marketing of corporate gen-AI products, however, presents their arrival as inevitable. The product is forced upon you, with threats such as "get on board or you will be left behind," giving the sense that there is no alternative. I firmly think that we must challenge that rhetoric. Let us stop the car, think, and look carefully at what is happening, what the implications are, and what interests lie behind those who are producing and promoting these products. Let us talk, rather than simply letting ourselves be swept along. We have the power to decide our own future.

S: Considering all of your academic and field experiences, what continues to give you hope?

J: My students give me hope. As my husband Andrew says, my students "are great." Also, many of my colleagues in the MDP program, Renata, Glenn, Adrienne and other professors in the Center for Latin American Studies and Master of Arts in Latin American Studies.

S: Thank you, Professor Jazmín. It was a pleasure speaking with you.

Student Activities Outside the Classroom

Cohort 15

Graham Linehan: Center for Latin American Studies, Graduate Assistant

Guiecniza Dehesa Blas: Community Weatherization Coalition, Volunteer

Innocent Eluagu: Center for African Studies, Graduate Assistant

Tayler King: Assistant to Academic & Career Initiatives, UF Machen Florida Opportunity Scholars Program

Wendy Mesa: Community Building and Engagement Program Coordinator, UF College of Veterinary Medicine

Cohort 16

Brandon Isenman: Dept. of Economics, Teaching Assistant

Charlie Hochfelder: UF International Center, Peace Corps Representative; Tropical Conservation and Development Student Group President

Lordia Blay: Center for African Studies, Graduate Assistant (African Studies Quarterly, Book Review Editor); Public Issues Education (PIE) Fellow, 2025 - 2026 Cohort and Agricultural Education and Communication.

Samagya Kharel: Tropical Conservation and Development Program, Graduate Assistant

Susana Quevedo: MDP, Graduate Assistant; Tropical Conservation and Development Student Group Latin America Representative

Tierra Bartolotti: UF Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) Extension, Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program Assistant

MDP Social Events

We had a wonderful time sharing meaningful moments during the Spring semester 2026.



Top, left to right: MDP students having a conversation café; MDP students, alumni, family, and faculty having a wonderful time at a potluck dinner at the director's house (Glenn Galloway); MDP students celebrating a birthday.

Bottom, left to right: MDP students at the director's house potluck dinner; MDP students and family enjoying a friendly game of pickleball; students receiving their UF International Center awards.

MDP UF Foundation Donations

We especially thank all of you who contributed to MDP on Gator Nation Giving Day (Feb. 27, 2026)!

Edited by Susana Quevedo and Andy Noss
July 2026