McDonnell International Scholars Academy

Highlights from the 2020 International Symposium
Introduction

Every two years, the McDonnell International Scholars Academy convenes an International Symposium to explore and connect with its global partners on pressing issues of common concern. The Academy is also committed to fostering dialogue and sharing ideas across disciplines. Founded in 2005, the McDonnell Academy organized its first International Symposium at Washington University in St. Louis in 2007. Since then, it has convened meetings in Hong Kong (2008), St. Louis (2010, 2014), Mumbai (2012), Brisbane (2016) and Beijing (2018).

The 8th International Symposium on the theme of “Forces Reshaping the Academy” was to be held in St. Louis in October 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Symposium could not proceed in person. Nevertheless, the McDonnell Academy continued to advance dialogue and engagement among partner institutions through a series of virtual events held throughout fall 2020 and also plans to hold an in-person meeting in St. Louis in 2021.

Global Town Hall: Hope in a Time of Uncertainty

The virtual Symposium kicked off with a Global Town Hall on October 8, which focused on the reasons to be hopeful and optimistic about the future in these challenging and uncertain times. More than 300 students, faculty and university leaders from partner institutions participated. Experts from St. Louis, Hong Kong, India, Israel, Mexico and Uganda shared stories of unmistakable vision and success about what these partnerships mean for the future.

Kurt Dirks, vice chancellor for international affairs and McDonnell Academy director, moderated the discussion. In his opening remarks, he underscored the importance of bringing partners across countries and disciplines together to address pressing global problems, many of which have gotten worse during the pandemic. “We also felt that it is important to shift from problems to solutions and from the fear and anxiety that many of us are experiencing to hope and optimism,” Dirks said.

Chancellor Andrew D. Martin gave opening remarks. “At the McDonnell Academy, we believe it is absolutely paramount to engage in dialogue and work across disciplines and across nations to address the problems facing our world as well as our respective locations and regions. What we do together benefits all of us both globally and locally,” Martin said.

Macroeconomics expert Nadine Baudot-Trajtenberg spoke live from IDC Herzliya in Israel. She reminded the audience what the last decade of economic development has delivered as well as its limits and underlying structural problems. What gives her hope, she said, is the “sense of urgency” arising from this pandemic not only to cope with the immediate economic fallout but also to confront the underlying reasons it is so painful to address these challenges from an economic perspective. She believes “the silver lining is that it is forcing us to think again about what is important to us individually, at the society level and at the global level, and to design the appropriate policies.” What also gives her hope is the renewed focus in her field on better data and measurement because “better measurement will also bring better policies.”

Shalini Bharat, director of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, joined live from Mumbai, India, to address the social impact of the pandemic, particularly among the most vulnerable and marginalized who have been further pushed into a cycle of precarity and misery. Bharat discussed how faculty and students at the Tata Institute are working directly to address a multitude of social issues with a wide-range of the most vulnerable groups, including women facing domestic violence and mental health issues, incarcerated populations, and homeless people. Among the silver linings of the pandemic, she highlighted “the resolve of political leadership almost everywhere to invest in fighting the pandemic and mitigating the hardships caused, especially for the vulnerable sections; a recognition of and widespread use of technology, and above all the resilient communities—the ability of communities to resist collapse and to bounce back.”

Barnabas Nawangwe, vice chancellor of Makerere University in Uganda—the McDonnell Academy’s newest institutional partner—provided remarks on the impact of the pandemic on the African continent. He stressed the responsibility of universities to look for solutions to problems brought by COVID-19 and to other challenges such as climate change. What gives him hope is that “through our research, through partnerships with friends around the world, and through working with communities,” universities can help “change the trajectory from misery to prosperity.”

Alejandro Poiré, dean of the School of Social Sciences and Government at Tecnológico de Monterrey, joined live from Mexico. He addressed concerns about the quality and resilience of democracy around the world, noting that some of the underlying problems of democratic governance that existed before the pandemic have only been made worse by the health and economic crisis. According to Poiré, some of these challenges have to do with the ineffective response of democratic governments and institutions to problems brought about by other trends such as the impact of technological change and growing inequality. Poiré sees hope for the future in the collective strength of universities and networks like the McDonnell Academy to help address these problems.

Bill Powderly, an infectious disease specialist, professor of medicine and director of the Institute for Public Health at Washington University, shared his perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic. He noted that we are “in the early days of this pandemic” with much of the population still vulnerable to the virus. He expressed concern that science and scientists have become less trusted, which is often driven by misinformation on social media and deliberate manipulation for political reasons. Powderly is confident that “the answer will come from science.” What gives him hope is that “we are making great strides in terms of our understanding of this virus … Most importantly, I am very optimistic that we will have a vaccine—in fact, we will have several vaccines—produced as a result of scientific inquiry by laboratories here and across the world.” The challenge will be to deploy those vaccines, to overcome misinformation about vaccines, and to make them available to everyone around the world on an equitable basis. Powderly remains confident that vaccines will be successfully deployed.

“...In this capacity brought about by Washington University in St. Louis and the McDonnell Academy is a very good example of what academia, universities and the networks we can build together can actually do during these times of crisis … Solutions to how to deal with populist narratives, how to deal with the disruptions brought about by technological change, how to harness technology to improve the well-being and living of a larger number of people, to improve liberties and freedom of the press—... all these topics are going to be better addressed by networks like this.”

— Alejandro Poiré
Leila Sadat, James Carr Professor of International Criminal Law and director of the Whitney R. Harris World Law Institute at Washington University School of Law, addressed challenges facing the international legal order and the United Nations. Some of these challenges, she explained, stem from Security Council members “playing the role of spoilers” and “exhibiting a woeful lack of global leadership.” For example, Sadat noted, that the United States under the Trump administration has withdrawn from 23 important international agreements or institutions and threatened to withdraw from others.

“But if we take a step back, the picture is not this bleak,” she said. “Hope to me is light at the end of the tunnel. If you don’t have a tunnel, you’re never going to see the light. How is this tunnel built? It is based on lessons learned. “ He concluded with four key lessons: the importance of cooperation, relevance, interdisciplinary collaboration and humility.

Rocky Tuan, professor of tissue engineering and regenerative medicine and vice chancellor of The Chinese University in Hong Kong, addressed the current health crisis. “We all live in this house called Planet Earth, and COVID-19 is like a hurricane or a thunderstorm that comes through, and we are seeing leaks everywhere,” he said. Without fixing the health crisis, “everything will continue to leak,” from the world economy to society. Tuan explained the role his field of study—regenerative medicine—can play, particularly in developing therapeutics and accelerating drug discovery. He also explained that the body’s reaction to infection is analogous to “anger management—our organs go into dysfunction.” Finding a way to control this and restore our immune system is also where regenerative medicine comes in.

Tuan remains optimistic that we can address the current health crisis. “Hope to me is light at the end of the tunnel. If you don’t have a tunnel, you’re never going to see the light. How is this tunnel built? It is based always on lessons learned.” He concluded with four key lessons: the importance of cooperation, relevance, interdisciplinary collaboration and humility.

During the town hall, the audience also had the opportunity to hear video messages from the new leaders of National Taiwan University, The University of Queensland, and Utrecht University. “I’ve been uplifted this year by the spirit of international cooperation that’s being directed at understanding and defeating this virus,” said Deborah Terry, vice chancellor and president of The University of Queensland. “The global expertise that’s being poured into solving this public health challenge is unlike anything humanity has ever seen. My optimism about the future is particularly based on seeing the work of the team here at The University of Queensland that is developing a potential vaccine for COVID-19.”

“When National Taiwan University, like other institutions in the world, was confronted by unforeseen challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is the faculty and students’ commitment to teaching and learning, their faith in collaboration and the demonstration of resilience that gave me hope,” said Chung-Ming Kuan, president of National Taiwan University. “Without knowing what the future holds, the resilience I see in societies and the youth is what institutions like ours should invest in.”

Photo Contest: Hope and Resilience around the World

In the lead-up to the Symposium, the McDonnell Academy launched several initiatives to engage students, faculty and staff from partner institutions. One of these was a photo contest on the theme of “Hope and Resilience around the World.” We received more than 170 submissions from every corner of the globe. The winning entries, featured to the right, were from St. Louis and Istanbul.

Visit our website to view a collection of photos and video responses from around the world at mcdonnell.wustl.edu/global-engagement/ international-symposia/symposium-snapshots/.

THE WINNER
The Next Generation
Colleen Smyth
Washington University in St. Louis

THE RUNNER UP
Smile in Spite of Everything
Huseyin Seyyid Kaplan
Bogazici University, Istanbul

THE FINALISTS

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Hidden Costs of the Pandemic: Local and Global Perspective

The global pandemic has upended our way of life and dominated headlines in 2020. The McDonnell Academy partnered with the Institute for Public Health (IPH) at Washington University in St. Louis to share knowledge on the “Hidden Costs of the Pandemic.” The panel took place October 29 as part of the IPH Annual Conference on “COVID-19 Pandemic: Response, Lessons Learned and Recovery,” focused on the coronavirus pandemic: what went right, what needs improvement and what we’ve learned. The panel featured presentations and discussions from experts in St. Louis as well as global perspectives. Three of the presenters were recently awarded seed grants by the McDonnell Academy for their collaborative work with international partners to address COVID-19-related issues. Learn more about these projects at mcdonnell.wustl.edu/global-engagement/international-symposia/8th-mcdonnell-international-symposium/.

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Timothy McBride, Bernard Becker Professor at the Brown School and co-director of the Center for Health Economics and Policy at the Institute for Public Health at Washington University, discussed the economic fallout of COVID-19 and the devastating social impact of the COVID recession. He stressed its disproportionate impact on people of color, young people and women. Most notable was McBride’s assertion that it may be four to five years before unemployment returns to pre-COVID-19 rates. To contrast, he also shared data from South Korea—a country that has been able to get the pandemic under control and avoid a similar rise in unemployment.

Karen Joynt-Maddox, assistant professor at the Washington University School of Medicine and co-director for the Institute’s Center for Health Economics and Policy, said we do not know what the long-term consequences of COVID-19 will be, however, predictions currently show that the virus will most affect people with chronic illness (such as asthma and diabetes). COVID-19 has and will affect access to care and could lead to long-term problems.

Jessi Gold, assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the Washington University School of Medicine, discussed the hidden costs of mental health and how rationed care and lack of PPE are causing anxiety, insomnia and isolation among health care workers. These troubling signs are evident in data collected from both the United States and China. Gold also reported that 27% of Washington University residents (students and others living on campus) have experienced depression.

Jason Newland, professor of pediatrics at the Washington University School of Medicine, spoke on the hidden cost of the pandemic on children. He reported that Latino children are hospitalized eight times more often than white populations. Studies show that child abuse and neglect, mental health admissions, and eating disorders are up. The good news is that schools appear to be safe and following mitigation guidelines, Newland said.

Maria Laura Costa do Nascimento, associate professor in the Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics at the State University of Campinas in Brazil, gave an overview of the effects of COVID-19 on pregnant and postpartum women in Brazil. She also emphasized racial disparities, noting that deaths among black women are two times higher than among white women with a 4.8% positive rate of COVID-19 among pregnant women overall.

Hillary Reno, associate professor in the Divisions of Infectious Diseases and Hospitalist Medicine at the Washington University School of Medicine, explained the effect of COVID-19 on HIV care in Ghana. HIV physicians were reassigned to COVID-19 treatment. Additionally, there was a drop in visits to HIV clinics because patients feared COVID-19. HIV clinical studies were also halted. “It is estimated that more people will die in Africa during the pandemic from HIV and related co-morbidities than COVID,” Kyei noted. His team continues to study alternative ways to continue care, including additional telephone calls, an appointment system, and delivery of medication via motor cycle.

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Kim Thuy Seelinger, research associate professor at the Brown School and director of the Institute’s Center for Human Rights, Gender and Migration at Washington University, presented her McDonnell Academy-funded study on the relationship between COVID-19 and intimate partner violence in St. Louis, Kampala (Uganda), and Santiago (Chile). She reported a surge in reported domestic violence cases in April in China, Spain and Greece as well as other countries, and studies indicate that job loss, food insecurity, mounting childcare burdens, and increased alcohol consumption have led to an overall increase in domestic violence. During the Q&A session that followed, the expert panel reflected on specific solutions and innovations to address these wide-ranging problems. They urged bold actions, working closely with communities, and giving voice to others.

Visit our website to view additional content and event videos at mcdonnell.wustl.edu/global-engagement/international-symposia/8th-mcdonnell-international-symposium/.
Global Partnerships for Engineering in Public Health

The International Symposium’s workshop series launched on September 16, 2020, with a workshop on ‘Building Global Partnerships for Engineering in Public Health.’ This gathering advanced discussion on bridging fields and international boundaries to ensure a prepared, connected and diverse workforce for global emergencies such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. Moderated by Guy Genin, the Harold and Kathleen Faught Professor of Mechanical Engineering at the McKelvey School of Engineering at Washington University and McDonnell Academy Ambassador to Xian Jiaotong University, the workshop featured leading global scholars from McDonnell Academy partners and from the St. Louis region.

The first plenary lecture was delivered by Yanan Du, vice dean for global issues in the School of Biomedical Engineering at Tsinghua University, who showcased technologies for screening diseases and cures using rapid laboratory systems that replace animal experiments and that can be tuned to a patient’s individual genetic makeup.

Daphne Weihs, professor of biomedical engineering at the Technion, Israel Institute of Technology, and president of the Israel Biomedical Engineering Society, presented in the next plenary a much-celebrated invention from her lab that enables screening for ovarian cancer in a matter of hours, using biological principles. The plenary lecture from Freddie Wills, Jr., assistant vice president for STEM initiatives at Harris-Stowe State University in St. Louis and a leader in the U.S. NSF-sponsored Missouri Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (MOLSA P) program, highlighted successes, challenges and opportunities in developing an effective system for training students of diverse backgrounds in cutting-edge STEM research and enhancing their ability to contribute solutions to local and global challenges through STEM-related career opportunities. Plenary sessions were rounded out by John Gal, professor and vice dean of life sciences and technology programs in Israel and Uganda, and Daphne Weihs, professor of biomedical engineering at the Technion, Israel Institute of Technology, and president of the Israel Biomedical Engineering Society, presented in the next plenary a much-celebrated invention from her lab that enables screening for ovarian cancer in a matter of hours, using biological principles.

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On October 15, 2020, Washington University’s Social Policy Institute (SPI), the International Center for Child Health and Development (ICHD), and the Next Age Institute (NAI) hosted a discussion on saving programs in Israel and Uganda. Participants contributed ideas for how Washington University can continue to benefit the St. Louis region through leadership in the international networks that enable global responses to local challenges — and enable local impact on global issues.

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Looking Ahead to 2021

We anticipate holding the next McDonnell Academy International Symposium in fall 2021 on Washington University's campus in St. Louis. The core of the symposium will be faculty-driven workshops, intended to advance collaborative research. In addition to these focused workshops, plenary sessions will consider the broader topics from a cross-disciplinary perspective. We also look forward to bringing alumni back to campus to engage with Symposium participants and celebrate the McDonnell Academy's 15th anniversary.
About the McDonnell Academy

mcdonnell.wustl.edu

Since its founding in 2005, the McDonnell International Scholars Academy has forged partnerships with more than 30 premier research universities around the world. The Academy has a dual mission. First, we recruit top scholars from partner universities and mentor them as they pursue graduate and professional degrees at Washington University, preparing them to become future global leaders. Second, we leverage the Academy’s international partnership network to incubate new ideas and foster collaborative research across countries and disciplines.