

## **SIS Offers World's First Online Disability Policy Degree**

### **In the Community**

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*The second Comparative and International Disability Policy degree cohort visited the U.N. Economic and Social Commission for the Asia-Pacific in Bangkok in August.*

In April 2011, SIS launched the Comparative and International Disability Policy (CIDP) degree program, the world's first virtual master's degree in disability and public policy and one of American University's first completely virtual degrees. While admission to the program is open to anyone with or without disabilities, the majority of the 15 current students are blind, deaf or mobility-impaired.

“We're giving people access to higher education that in their home countries they may not have access to. It's inclusive education,” said Maya Aguilar, communications coordinator for the SIS-based Institute on Disability and Public Policy (IDPP), which facilitates the CIDP degree.

The IDPP collaborates with its network of university and outreach partners from the countries within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to provide the faculty members, education and research opportunities that support the program. The program specifically targets the ASEAN region because of its high concentration of persons with disabilities. The majority of the CIDP degree students are from this region.

The virtual aspect of the program allows the students, who are scattered around the world, to take classes and attend lectures at their convenience. Faculty – including professors from Switzerland, the United States and Southeast Asia – also participate virtually.

Students may attend class in real time through Blackboard Collaborate Online Collaboration Software or at their convenience by downloading recordings of lectures, which include closed captioning and/or American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation.

“Our accessible cyberinfrastructure – which combines commercial and open source technologies – enables us to bring together faculty, staff and students from all over the world into a geographically distributed learning environment,” said Derrick L. Cogburn, SIS professor and executive director of the Institute on Disability and Public Policy.

New students in the CIDP program meet for a two-week residency at Mahidol University in Bangkok, where they are introduced to professors in physical and virtual faculty chats. They also receive training in the technologies required to participate in the cyberlearning environment and are briefed on the intricacies of U.S. academic culture.

This year, two of the students had an additional opportunity to meet in person. A delegation from the IDPP attended the Fifth Session of the Conference of States Parties to the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities from Sept. 11 - 14 at the U.N. headquarters in New York City. Cogburn and Aguilar partnered with the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University to focus on inclusive education events and a side event organized by the World Bank on the Global Forum on Law, Justice, and Development. CIDP students Felipe Millan and A.J. Nanayakkara also participated in the delegation, serving as official rapporteurs for the U.N. Secretariat during the Convention. Their daily briefings were distributed as part of official Convention correspondence to about 9,000 individuals and organizations worldwide.

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