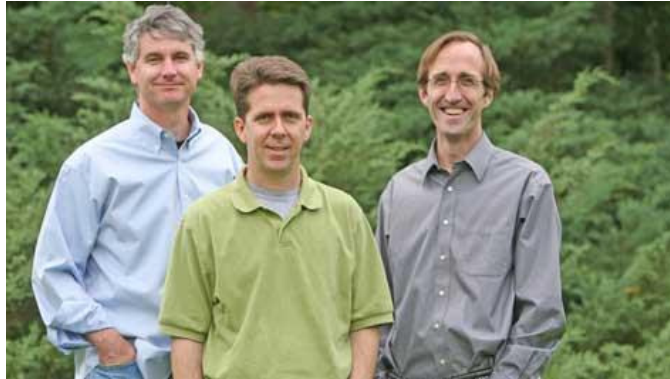

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PLAID guys: Principals in Project-Level AID initiatives at the College of William and Mary are (from left) Michael Tierney, associate professor of government; Rob Hicks, associate professor of economics; and Timmons Roberts, professor of sociology. PLAID operates out of the Institute for the Theory and Practice of International Relations, located in the Corner House.

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PLAID receives nearly \$2 million in funding

by *Joe McClain* | **September 19, 2008**

An interdisciplinary program dedicated to offering detailed, accessible information on the flow of international aid will receive some aid of its own in the form of nearly \$2 million in grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Based at the College of William and Mary, Project-Level Aid—also known as PLAID—has received just over \$1.4 million from the Gates Foundation and \$500,000 from the Hewlett Foundation. The funding will allow PLAID to extend the global scope of its work. PLAID was formed at William and Mary in 2003 as a project to compile and maintain a web-accessible database on international development finance. It tracks foreign aid between sovereign nations, known as bilateral aid, as well as multilateral aid, which refers to financial assistance provided through multinational organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations.

"PLAID is a good example of William & Mary's commitment to both international involvement and civic engagement," said W. Taylor Reveley III, president of the College. "It's grand to see that the project has received such significant support from two great foundations, Gates and Hewlett."

The PLAID team is led by three members of the College of William and Mary faculty, Robert Hicks, J. Timmons Roberts and Michael Tierney. A parallel team of lead investigators are faculty at Brigham Young University, and includes Daniel Nielson, Darren Hawkins and Sven Wilson. The final member of the team is Brad Parks, a research fellow at William and Mary's Institute for the Theory and Practice of International Relations and an associate director at the Millennium Challenge Corporation.

Parks, a 2003 graduate of William and Mary, wrote a senior honors thesis on foreign aid and the environment that sparked the formation of PLAID.

His examination of the changing allocation of aid by Western governments revealed gaps in the data being used by development researchers all over the world. PLAID began filling in the missing information and addressing inconsistencies on records of thousands of individual projects.

Hicks explained that while the quality of existing data is generally good, there is wide variation in the degree of detail among the entries. Data on one project, for instance, might contain a terse, three-word description while another will have a full narrative explanation. PLAID began filling in the blanks, searching for original documents at the level of individual projects.

"Sometimes these things will be online as pdfs, sometimes they'll be in digitized form in some database somewhere," said Hicks, associate professor of economics. "Other times it's going to be stacks of papers in filing cabinets."

To date, researchers have compiled and recoded more than 430,000 individual aid projects.

Roberts, professor of sociology, explained that a free and open PLAID database will be an immense benefit to donor nations and organizations who want to do the most good without duplicating efforts of other aid organizations.

"For instance, you could do a search in PLAID for food relief. You could search for who is giving how much to what countries, what years, what amounts, and who are the recipient agencies and so on, within those countries," he said. "So groups like OXFAM, USAID or CARE could do much better strategic planning on where they should send their aid and who they should talk to in each location and sector."

Carl Strikwerda, dean of Arts and Sciences at William and Mary, said that PLAID will allow donors and recipients to use aid more effectively.

"The PLAID project can help researchers and policymakers worldwide better understand how the billions in international aid are in fact being spent," Strikwerda said. "William and Mary is extremely grateful to the Gates and Hewlett foundations for making an investment in a resource that has the potential to assist everyone from the UN and other international organizations to governments, foundations and scholars."

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