

# AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

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## **RICHARD GILDER GRADUATE SCHOOL CELEBRATES INAUGURAL CONVOCATION AT THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY HISTORIC CEREMONY ON JANUARY 15 WELCOMED STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND HONORED GUESTS**

On Thursday, **January 15, 2009**, the **Richard Gilder Graduate School at the American Museum of Natural History** held its first convocation ceremony to officially celebrate this historic inaugural academic year. The Gilder Graduate School is part of the American Museum of Natural History, one of the most prestigious natural history museums in the world and **the only museum in the United States granted the authority to award its own Ph.D. degree**. The intensive Ph.D. program in Comparative Biology, carrying on the Museum's century-plus legacy of excellence in field discovery and theoretical advances, is designed to educate the next generation of biologists through a challenging, integrated approach that brings together the history, evolutionary relationships, and interactions among living organisms.

The convocation took place in one of the most quintessential New York locations—under the belly of the iconic blue whale in the Milstein Hall of Ocean Life, the scene of numerous gatherings over the years spanning school groups, U.S. Presidential visits, and Museum galas. During this groundbreaking celebration, two prestigious national figures noted for their commitment to science and education received honorary degrees from the Gilder Graduate School—**Rita R. Colwell**, former director of the National Science Foundation and Distinguished Professor at the University of Maryland and John Hopkins University, received the Doctor of Science degree, and philanthropist and Museum trustee **Richard Gilder**, the namesake of the school, received the Doctor of Humane Letters.

“With the establishment of the Richard Gilder Graduate School, the American Museum of Natural History has broken ground in the trajectory of its own institutional evolution, in science and the growing field of comparative biology, and on behalf of museums and cultural institutions everywhere,” said Ellen V. Futter, President of the American Museum of Natural History. “This moment signifies both a deepening and extension of our own mission in science and education and also a bold new vision not only for this museum but for science museums and cultural institutions more broadly within a changing, volatile, increasingly integrated world.”

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“Profound biological discoveries will come not only from a further look inward, but also in an outward look, to myriad biological species,” said Michael J. Novacek, Senior Vice President, Provost, and Curator in the Division of Paleontology. “A critical step here is to link the emerging information on genes, form, and species diversity in a way that powerfully informs our understanding of the evolution of life.”

“Building on the Museum’s strength in comparative biology, the Gilder Graduate School will train a new cadre of scientists to investigate many of the most interesting and pressing issues confronting society in the 21st century, ranging from understanding the history of Earth and space or helping to resolve the tree of life for living and extinct species, to assessing the interplay between environmental change and organisms or analyzing emerging infectious diseases,” said John J. Flynn, Dean of the Richard Gilder Graduate School. “Our new graduate school is both a natural extension of the Museum’s integrated mission of science and education and the keystone for an ongoing leadership role in addressing the needs of science and society.”

In the citation accompanying her honorary degree, Rita R. Colwell was recognized as “one of the nation’s most accomplished, productive, and influential scientists whose impact is felt not only in the scientific community, but throughout society more broadly.” Richard Gilder, in his citation, was honored as “a devoted trustee, unsurpassed benefactor, and intellectual provocateur par excellence.” Citing his prominent roles in both the reimagining of the Museum’s new planetarium and the formation of the graduate school that bears his name, Gilder was hailed as “a creative and galvanizing force for the Museum’s institutional growth and transformation.”

In addition to the granting of honorary degrees, the convocation ceremony featured the introduction of the five students in the inaugural class of the Richard Gilder Graduate School Comparative Biology Ph.D. Program. The students were chosen by a committee of Museum scientists from a very large and highly qualified pool of applicants from around the world: **Zachary Baldwin** comes from the **University of Washington**, where he double-majored in Aquatic & Fishery Science and Ecology & Evolutionary Biology; **Bryan Falk** graduated from **Portland State University** and transforming his earlier interest in veterinarian science, moved to New York to volunteer as a research assistant and exhibit explainer at the Museum before entering the school; **Antonia Florio** grew up in Astoria, Queens and graduated as the 2008 valedictorian of **City College of New York**; **Sebastian Kvist** joins the inaugural class with bachelor’s and master’s degrees in biology from Sweden’s **Gothenburg University** and a certificate in conservation biology from **Lund University**, also in Sweden; and **Shaena Montanari** finished her undergraduate degree in geological science from the **University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill** in just three years.

The Richard Gilder Graduate School community also encompasses all of the graduate students in longstanding collaborative Ph.D. programs with partner universities, including the City University of New York, Columbia University, Cornell University, New York University, and Stony Brook University. As part of the convocation ceremony, the Museum also celebrated these productive partnerships and recognized the students who study at the Museum through partnership programs with these exceptional universities.

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The Ph.D. program of the Gilder Graduate School is grounded in the Museum's world-class scientific resources, including its internationally recognized staff of curators and scientists who serve as faculty and its **world-renowned collections of more than 30 million specimens and cultural artifacts**, as well as **some of the most advanced, state-of-the-art scientific facilities in the world**, including three molecular laboratories, powerful parallel computing clusters, a frozen tissue collection with a one-million-sample capacity, an imaging and microscopy laboratory, and an unsurpassed digitalized database that catalogs the Museum's extensive anthropology artifacts. Global field work with Museum faculty provides exceptional research opportunities for students. Additionally, students have unparalleled access to a natural history library of more than 400,000 scientific volumes. The students take classes and undertake research in the newly constructed graduate school facility on the fifth floor of the historic 77th Street side of the Museum.

Four donors already have given more than \$50 million total to support the new graduate school in endowment, fellowship support, and capital enhancements required to accommodate the school: the Gilder Foundation, the Hess Foundation, Inc., an anonymous Museum Trustee, and the City of New York—the Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York City Council.

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