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Clinton Global Initiative University 2008 Meeting
Working Session: Poverty
A More Employable Future: Educating Our Global Youth
Clinton Global Initiative University
March 15, 2008

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FEMALE SPEAKER 1: —Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas [applause]; Emeka Okafor, entrepreneur [applause]; Joanna Ramos-Romero, Latin American Regional Manager, entra 21 International Youth Foundation [applause]; Ethan Veneklasen, Regional Director, West Coast, American Indian Foundation [applause]; and the moderator for this panel is Ruth Simmons, President, Brown University [applause].

RUTH SIMMONS, PH.D.: Good, are we ready? How many of you went to the last session? Well, how many of you were frightened by what you heard a few. Well, this is an opportunity for us to turn to a question of great importance and to see if we can, together, find some solutions, so thank you all for being here today.

I think you know what the format is for this session. We will start on the panel here with some discussion and responses to some questions that I'm going to pose to the members of the panel. We'll then have an opportunity to invite you to have some discussion at your table, and then we'll return to a general session to finish up.

Of course, you've seen the description of the problem that we're facing here today. You've read the factoids about the number of unemployed worldwide, 40 percent of whom are young people. We want to discuss today how to create and

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expand opportunities for these young people to enter the workforce.

I want to remind you to be sure to type your questions in your sessions into the computer at your table. We'll be going over them at the very end of the session. Now, I want to begin by saying that the fallout from the really trenchant unemployment around the world is widespread social ills, from family fragmentation and premature dropout from schools to social decay and violence. What are the ways in which we can connect the training and education to immediate treatment and alleviation of these ills?

I think some of us worry about the long pipeline. You go to college, you start a K through 12, you go to college and then after that you begin to work on these problems. The pipeline is long. The problem is urgent. How do we address that? So, I have a wonderful group of people with us today who will help us answer some of those questions. First of all, I'm going to introduce each of them in sequence, though I've been told not to do it that way, and then I'm going to ask them some questions.

First, Joanna Ramos-Romero is the Latin American Regional Manager for the International Youth Foundation, one of the world's premiere youth development organizations. She oversees projects within entra 21, a youth employability program that works to improve the lives of 50,000 youth across

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Latin America. Joanna worked previously for Catholic Relief Service in the Dominican Republic where she supported refugee and health projects, and Aceh, Indonesia, where she worked to improve the quality of CRS reconstruction projects. Joanna received her Master of Arts degree in International Development Studies from George Washington University's Elliot School of International Affairs.

Joanna, I'm going to ask you to get us started here; entra 21 has done some truly remarkable work in addressing the challenges of youth unemployment in Latin America, so paint a picture for us of the challenges that entra 21 faces in that region. How are you getting young people to sign up for the program?

JOANNA RAMOS-ROMERO: Well I think what you mentioned about there being a long pipeline and [interposing]— Dr. Simmons just mentioned that there's a long pipeline before we can even— in order to prepare you for employment, it seems like there's this long wait, and entra 21 has responded to that and through the previous four years of our program, we've proved that low-income youth especially, disadvantaged youth that don't have access to a university can really benefit from short-term training, so we're talking about seven to eight months of training and it needs to be market-relevant training, so roughly about— our program offers technical training and each participant will spend about half of their time, about 300

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hours or more, on that technical training that's relevant to what the employers are really demanding, the skills, the competencies that they require.

And in addition to that, about a quarter of our program is spent on life skills, as we call them in the youth development field; life skills that are not only relevant to the workplace but also to youth personal development, because we want to equip youth not just with the technical skills, but also equip them with these social skills, these personal skills that allow them to be empowered to make decisions, so that when they do get that job and oh no! It's gone! They are still employable. They know how to see. They know how to look at their options and make informed decisions.

And then the remaining quarter of the time that a youth would spend in the project is in the internship, so we have internships as part of every youth's experience and that's when they really get to apply what they've learned, and after that we have staff. We have partners on the ground that work with each of the youth to counsel them, to give them job counseling and placement services to really connect them with the local employers, because that's one of the things that we've realized in Latin America, and it's true even here in the United States, that youth— it's very hard for a young person to break into the job market, and part of the reason is because you don't have the contacts, right? You don't have the network, and so the

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innovation of entra 21 has really been able to facilitate that connection, that link between young people and the employers.

Our program really speaks to two audiences; not just the youth who are looking for jobs, but also employers who really are looking for skilled, entry-level workers and they're just not finding them. Let me put this a little bit more grounded in a story of a young person that I met; she finished high school— her name is Lindsay— she finished high school, yet really didn't have a sense of a future. Over and over again we've found in Latin America that there were young people who had so much potential and had a lot of promise, but they didn't have the resources to really advance themselves further in any sort of tertiary education.

She married early; always had this dream of going to university, but then married early and she was very frustrated that she couldn't find any decent job in the formal sector, and heard about our program and decided to enroll and her husband actually was kind of skeptical because this was in Venezuela— I forgot to mention— she's in Venezuela, and in Venezuela there are lots and lots of training programs, mostly given by the Chavez government and they're not necessarily— they're usually not really connected to the market, and youth are coming out of these programs realizing they're not really getting the skills.

So it's been difficult to attract youth to our program at first in Venezuela, but we are able to show them that it's

not just that they're getting training. They're getting an opportunity for a job through this internship and then getting placed, and so many of our projects have actually achieved job placement rate of at least 40 percent, some of them up to 60 percent.

RUTH SIMMONS, PH.D.: Thank you. It's extraordinary, the kind of multiplier effect that you can have when you do that kind of work. I applaud what you're doing. Ethan, I'm going to turn to you next and ask you to answer a question. Ethan serves as regional director of the west coast of the American Indian Foundation. He oversees the San Francisco Bay area, Los Angeles, Dallas and Seattle chapters as well as two of AIF's key programs, Service Corps and the Digital Equalizer. I like that name! He has a long record of success in the world of politics and public policy.

Upon graduating from the University of Rochester he moved to Washington where he managed campaigns and advised candidates ranging from the state legislatures to presidential levels. Ethan, frame for us, if you will, the greatest challenge of education and employment in India, what is your foundation doing to address these challenges, what success have you had and how do you measure that success?

ETHAN VENEKLASEN: That's an awful lot. Well, first of all the American Indian Foundation is actually a relatively young foundation. President Clinton serves as our honorary

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chair, of which we are very pleased. We've been around, as I said, for about seven years. We've worked in the areas of catalyzing social and economic change in India. That's sort of the basis.

With that, we work within three pillar areas, which are public health, education and livelihoods, and then also the two programs that we run ourselves. The Digital Equalizer program; we have 1,342 schools that we put information technology into around India and it's not just about providing computer training at all. It's actually about integrating that into their other curriculum and making that a tool of education that improves the quality of the basic education that the children are receiving, so that's fundamental to what we're talking about, and then the other one— I mention this because otherwise my program officer would kill me— our service corps program which is a little bit like the Peace Corps, but it's a 10-month service fellowship that we put people in to work with NGOs in India for a period of about ten months, and then also most of those folks have postgraduate degrees, but certainly I encourage those who are interested to check out our Web site as well.

Now, having said that, the greatest challenge is India has a growth rate of about nine percent. It's got 1.3 billion people, and the question that everybody's asking right now is is that going to be sustainable? What's that going to look

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like over the long haul? And the answer is the biggest single challenge to that is not on the demand side. There's plenty of demand for stuff. The challenge is on the supply side of labor, and there's a couple of things that drive that. One is the fact that most of the folks are living in the villages in rural settings. That's not where the jobs are and the opportunities for jobs are in the urban areas. Caste plays a role in some of this, but that is really the big picture challenge.

As I said, we've got several different interventions. We work with partners in education. One thing that we've heard time and time again, and this is important to recognize, is that participation in education starts at first standard with very high participation. It falls off steadily year to year, especially among young girls as they get engaged in helping raise their younger brothers and sisters, but then you see right around the age of 11 or 12 as they become a useful pair of hands in the field, it drops off precipitously, and so the one thing that we've heard time and time again is parents will say if I feel like the kid is getting something out of it, if it's creating access to some future life that is better than ours, if they're coming home excited, if they're even attending, I will work. I will do whatever it takes to keep my kid in school, so—

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RUTH SIMMONS, PH.D.: Well what does that mean in terms of what you actually do to keep them there?

ETHAN VENEKLASEN: Well, the Digital Equalizer's probably our greatest example of this. This is something that kids don't have access to elsewhere. It's taken their learning to a whole new level.

Actually I have a very funny story. One of our corporate partners sent out a bunch of their folks into the field to volunteer and work with the kids and they said yes, we're going to go and teach them how to use PowerPoint, which we work with them quite a bit on. They came back and they said what did you send us out there for? They know how to use PowerPoint better than we do? So the level of sophistication in the kids is really high, but the kids get excited about that. It also improves their English language skills, which makes them more marketable, but I think that it's important that we recognize that this is primarily about providing basic education. This is not necessarily— it's an ongoing struggle between is this a livelihood program? Is this an education program? And as long as you start with the basis of this is an education program, you can lay around the livelihood pieces elsewhere.

RUTH SIMMONS, PH.D.: Great. I'll talk a little bit, still, about the digital divide. How many of you can use PowerPoint, almost everybody here. I think that it's

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extraordinary in a short period of time how much has been done in other parts of the world with regard to computer literacy, so that’s fantastic.

We’re going to move on to Emeka, and by the way, see if I get this right. It’s Okafor. Is that right?

EMEKA OKAFOR: Yes, that’s good enough.

RUTH SIMMONS, PH.D.: Okay, that’s good enough. Thank you. Emeka is an entrepreneur, a blogger, director of TEDGlobal 2007: Africa, The Next Chapter. He is the founder and author of the publically acclaimed blog Timbuktu Chronicles, which covers the confluence of entrepreneurship, science and technology in Africa, and Africa Unchained, a blog examining issues that include governance, policy, education and an institution building on the continent.

Emeka also sits on the Global Entrepreneurship Exprise [misspelled?] Advisory Board. He’s a principal at the Makaida [misspelled?] Fund and he sits on the Global Advisory Board for Student for the Advancement of Global Entrepreneurship, SAGE.

Emeka, your work has really put you in touch with a lot of stakeholders who want to see sub-Saharan Africa become economically vibrant or more vibrant. Paint a picture for us of what challenges sub-Saharan Africa faces in addressing this question of youth unemployment. What’s working? What would you recommend students here getting involved in to help make it work better?

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EMEKA OKAFOR: Okay, well I would like us to start looking at models that actually are working on the continent, models that are somewhat unsung. They are not headline-grabbing, but we are seeing evidence of their success and these models range right from the primary school level right through to the high school level up to the treasury school level, and they're models that are not theoretical. There are individuals who have, to a large degree, figured out methodologies and ironed the process of building institutions that will speak to many of its educational challenges that the continent faces, and maybe I'll start from the bottom and go downward.

RUTH SIMMONS, PH.D.: Are you going to give us some specific examples?

EMEKA OKAFOR: Yes, that was what I was about to do. There's a university in Ghana called Asheshi University that was founded by a Ghanaian that went to school here in the United States and did quite well in the corporate world but perceived that there was a gap educationally in Ghana, went back and in a period of less than seven years has established a liberal arts college that by many measures could turn out to be one of the best liberal arts colleges in the continent, and he was addressing what he saw as a fundamental gap, which is getting students to think.

The reason I think examples like that are important is we tend to think of the educational challenges on the continent

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as being hierarchical, top down, large announcements as opposed to these distributed methods and means that would actually have impact and are replicable, so we have Asheshi University for example, which as we speak is already attracting attention from recruiters at Wall Street, recruiters just like Goldman Sachs all in the space of seven years.

You go down the ladder. You go to an institution such as the Songai Institute—

RUTH SIMMONS, PH.D.: Can I just stop you and ask you about the liberal arts context, because that's so counterintuitive? A lot of people would have recommended exactly the opposite to address some of the issues employed in Africa. The liberal arts piece, is that a model that you would see expanded widely or is this just a very small, very limited experiment?

EMEKA OKAFOR: Well, it's less the fact that it's a liberal arts institution, but it's more the fact that the students that are going through the process that this college has put together are very different in terms of their abilities to those coming out from liberal arts universities in colleges that exist throughout the continent. Their ability to solve problems, their abilities to constructively engage the societies from where they come as opposed to just being administrators; we have a fairly well known African educationist out of Harvard, Kaolista [misspelled?] Zuma, who

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has characterized many African universities as being civil services universities, so it's less the fact that it's a liberal arts college. It's more the fact that the process in place allows these people, or people who pass through the process, to have these very critical, unique problem solving skills.

So if you then go down to the high school level, we also have a number of initiatives on the ground that are beginning to look at well, if you have a high school or a secondary school that doesn't have the ability to sustain itself because the governmental institutions cannot sustain it, how do you make them self-sustaining, at least to an extent? How do you have the students within these institutions understand that the skills that they acquire are skills that will allow them to be productive as opposed to just consumers?

An example of that is an initiative that is happening in a number of countries, and it's launched by a British organization called Teach a Man to Fish.

Then, if you go even further down to the vocational and primary school level, you have a group out of Benin called the Songai Center, which is vocational, but at the same time it views the individuals that come through it with the same productive skills that are critical, particularly in a part of the world where many of these things are lacking, and so on, right through to the primary school level.

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Something else I wanted to point out, to use your term counterintuitive, is the fact that there's a professor out of England by the name of James Tooley who has identified the fact that private schools for the very poor actually tend to be a greater choice than the existing government run schools.

We're not talking about wealthy children from privileged families. It's people who are making a choice on what will give them value, so I think, to sum up, I think we should begin to look at these alternative existing models that are actually working as opposed to these headline-grabbing initiatives that, to a large extent, haven't gone anywhere.

RUTH SIMMONS, PH.D.: Very provocative; thank you very much. Steven, sorry to keep you waiting, you came to Phillips Community College at the University of Arkansas as an English instructor in 1980 and you served as English instructor, division dean, vice chancellor for instruction, executive vice chancellor, and since 2003, chancellor.

You serve on the Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges' executive committee; chair the Steering Committee of the Delta Bridge Project, Phillips County's community development initiative. You lead the University of Arkansas On-Line Degree Consortium, and are Chairman of the Board of Directors of Mercy Ministries, a nonprofit women's resource center.

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Let me ask you, as chancellor of a community college in on of the 20 poorest counties in the United States, tell us what kind of problems your students are facing and what program Phillips Community College is offering to address these problems. Obviously we have about seven minutes left, so you'll have to be a bit selective.

STEVEN MURRAY: We are located in one of the 20 poorest counties in the nation, so all of the numbers that you want to be high are low, and all of the numbers that you want to be low are high for us, and our students come from generational poverty. It's not simply that mom or dad lost a job and they became poor. They are the products of three or four generations of poverty.

We have tried to address those issues in a number of different ways, but I would point to two specific initiatives, one internal and the other external.

Internally we've created an initiative called Career Pathways and it is a welfare to work program, a welfare to education to work program. IN order to be eligible, the students have to be making less than 150% of the federal poverty wage, which is almost everyone in our county to be quite frank, and that program tries to address all of the issues that our students bring with them that become barriers to a successful education.

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A lot of times we see poverty as simply a financial issue that you're poor because you don't have money, but most of our students come to us lacking not just financial resources but emotional resources, family resources, social, spiritual resources and we try in the Career Pathways program to address all of those issues.

Each of the students is assigned not the typical academic advisor, but a student advocate whose role is to try to eliminate all of those obstacles to success. The students that see a particular advocate form a learning community. They meet together on a weekly basis and we have seen considerable success with that initiative. We've taken students with whom we have historically had the least success and we've had better than average success and what we're trying to at this point is to institutionalize the Career Pathways model so that it becomes the way that we do business as a community college.

The other issue that I would point to is the Delta Bridge Project, because one of the things that we have realized is that we don't exist in a vacuum. We're a good community college in a rapidly declining community, and we can't remain that forever. We have to be a part of community development initiatives.

Delta Bridge is our countywide community development project, and the college has been very involved in that because we know that we can't make progress on the educational front

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unless we also make progress on the economic development front. If we, as a community college, simply become more efficient and we produce more graduates but the jobs don't exist in our community, we're simply educating for export and actually exacerbating the social ills of the community.

So we've been involved in the Delta Bridge Project for the last four years. We have created goal teams addressing jobs and economic development, education, tourism and quality of life, health care—

RUTH SIMMONS, PH.D.: Steven, for those who are interested in creating programs of similar scope, could you just tell us how you came to understand those needs? Did you simply create a program and find your way to all of these solutions immediately, or did you learn by doing?

STEVEN MURRAY: Oh, I think it's a case of learning by doing.

RUTH SIMMONS, PH.D.: So tell us a little bit. What are some of the things that came later as a consequence of the experience that you gained initially?

STEVEN MURRAY: One of the things that came later is an understanding that we don't understand our own students. Most of our faculty and staff are not a product of generational poverty, and so they don't understand why our students behave the way that they do, so one of the things that we have done this year, we bought for every college employee a copy of Ruby

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Payne’s book Bridges Out of Poverty, and we’ve engaged in a year-long discussion with monthly breakfast meetings of the characteristics of generational poverty and how we, as an institution, have to respond to that.

My favorite example and I think we’re beginning to see institutional behavior and attitudes change— my favorite example was a discussion that we had of a student. The faculty was frustrated because she was in an 8:00 class and the student didn’t show up for class. She was going to have to drop her class. In that conversation around Bridges Out of Poverty, we learned that the student was a single mother with two small children. Every morning she would get up, push her kids in the stroller to the day care center, go back home, go several more blocks to the Citylink stop, our fixed route transportation system, if it was on time catch it, if it was not on time or she didn’t get there on time wait another 20 minutes, show up for class, be late more often than not, and be faced with an instructor who had a policy that said if you’re late twice it counts as an absence. If you’re absent four times you’re dropped from the course.

So we realized in that conversation that we were enrolling this student in a class in which she had a zero chance of ever passing the course, but the interesting thing is that we began to see that we were complicit in that, that we had to look at institutional behaviors, and there was a very

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simple response: you don't enroll her in the 8:00 class. You enroll her in a 9:00 class and she's got another hour to get there on time.

RUTH SIMMONS, PH.D.: So in effect we have to train ourselves to do this work, because it isn't something that's necessarily a natural inclination for those of us who have come to it with very different experiences. We have to begin by learning, first of all, and then by training everybody else who's going to be involved in this work.

I think Dave is going to come up here and tell us our time is over. I want you to see that there are 17 seconds left on the clock [laughter], and that we've done our share in the first half, so come on up.

DAVE EGGERS: Well, okay, so the table, I think, has been set really quite nicely. We have fantastic stories from India, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and Arkansas, and so there's a lot of common themes coming through.

So first of all, if you have any questions for the panelists, please tell your table facilitators right away, but the discussion question that we're going to look at is, what are two to three innovative solutions that students and campus communities can implement to ensure access to quality education and improve employment preparation around the world? You have half an hour. Good luck!

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