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Office of the First Lady

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY  
AT THE "100K STRONG" STATE VISIT EVENT

Howard University  
Washington, D.C.

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MRS. OBAMA: Well, it is wonderful to be here. Thank you. Thank you so much. I am very excited.

I want to start by thanking President Ribeau for that very kind introduction but more importantly for his leadership here at one of my favorite universities. (Applause.)

And I also want to acknowledge my counterpart here at Howard, your First Lady -- (applause) -- Dr. Paula Whetsel-Ribeau. It is always nice to see her. And she's looking pretty good today, too, I might add. (Laughter and applause.)

I also want to recognize Ambassador Chen and thank her for those wonderful remarks, the history of educational exchange between our countries. It's important to know.

And I'd also like to acknowledge Mary Kaye Huntsman, the wife of our Ambassador to China, Jon Huntsman, for taking the time to join us here today. Let's give them both a wonderful round of applause. (Applause.)

And finally, I want to thank all the folks here from the Ralph J. Bunche International Affairs Center -- (applause) -- for all their work to promote international study and exchange here at Howard. So thank you all for the work you're doing. You're setting a tremendous example.

So we've had a pretty busy morning at the White House. As you know, we welcomed President Hu, the President of China, for an official state visit. We are so very pleased to have this chance to return the hospitality that President Hu showed my husband during his trip to China a little over a year ago.

Visits like these provide an important opportunity to strengthen ties, and to deepen bonds of understanding between our countries and our leaders. But as you all know, that work doesn't just happen at the White House or within the walls of the U.N. It isn't just about relationships between our governments and our presidents. It's also about relationships between our people -- between our business leaders, and our scientists, our educators, and particularly between our young people.

That's why, when we travel abroad, my husband and I just don't visit palaces and parliaments. We always visit schools and universities and we meet with students just like all of you -- (applause) -- because we believe strongly that young people like you can play a vital role in strengthening ties between people and nations all around the world.

So the topic of today's panel -- which is the importance of studying abroad, particularly in China -- you have to understand is a key component of this administration's foreign policy agenda.

Through the wonders of modern technology, our world has grown increasingly interconnected. Ideas can cross oceans with the click of a button. We can speak, and text, and email, and Skype, and all that other

stuff you guys do with people in every corner of the globe. Companies here in America can do business — and compete with — companies all over the world.

And as a consequence, studying abroad isn't just an important part of a well-rounded educational experience. It's also becoming increasingly important for success in the modern global economy. Getting ahead in today's workplaces isn't just about the skills you bring from the classroom. It's also about the experience you have with the world beyond our borders -- with people, and languages, and cultures that are very different from our own.

But let's be clear: studying in countries like China is about so much more than just improving your own prospects in the global market.

The fact is, with every friendship you make, and every bond of trust you establish, you are shaping the image of America projected to the rest of the world. That is so important. So when you study abroad, you're actually helping to make America stronger.

And these experiences also set the stage for young people all over the world to come together and work together to make our world stronger, because make no mistake about it, whether it's climate change or terrorism, economic recovery or the spread of nuclear weapons, for the U.S. and China, the defining challenges of our time are shared challenges. Neither of our countries can confront these alone. The only way forward, the only way to solve these problems, is by working together.

That's why it is so important for more of our young people to live and study in each other's countries. That's how, student by student, we develop that habit of cooperation, by immersing yourself in someone else's culture, by sharing your stories and letting them share theirs, by taking the time to get past the stereotypes and misperceptions that too often divide us.

That's how you build that familiarity that melts away mistrust. That's how you begin to see yourselves in one another and realize how much we all share, no matter where we live.

So the question today is, how do we provide that opportunity for more of our young people?

Now, the good news is that we are headed in the right direction. In recent years, we've seen a 50 percent increase in students studying in China. And today, the highest number of exchange students in the U.S. are in China -- are from China.

But still, there are too many students here in the United States who don't have that chance. And some that do are reluctant to seize it. Maybe they may feel like study abroad is something that only rich kids do, or maybe kids who go to certain colleges; they're the only ones who do that. They may hear those voices of doubt in their heads -- you know, the ones that say that, "Kids like me don't do things like that," or "How will this really be relevant in my life?"

Now, I say this because I understand these feelings. I felt that same way back when I was in college. I grew up in a blue-collar neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, and the idea of spending time abroad just never registered with me. My brother and I were among the first in our families to go to college. So, trust me, we were way more focused on getting in, getting through, and getting out -- (laughter and applause) -- than we were with finding opportunities that would broaden our horizons.

And the truth is, with the high cost of college these days, many young people are struggling just to afford a regular semester of school -- (applause) -- let alone pay for the airline tickets and the living expenses to go halfway around the world.

So we know that it's not enough for us to simply encourage more people to study abroad. We also need

to make sure that they can actually afford it.

And that's why, during this visit -- his visit to China, my husband announced the 100,000 Strong Initiative. This is a new initiative to increase both the number -- and the diversity -- of young people from the U.S. studying in China. And, today, we're pleased to announce a series of new efforts that will bring us even closer to that goal.

To start, Secretary Clinton, who's been a tireless champion for this program, has just launched a "Double the Numbers Challenge." She's asking college and university presidents to double the number of students who study in China. And we're placing a special emphasis on reaching Hispanic Serving Institutions and Historically Black Colleges and Universities like Howard. (Applause.)

To make it easier for students to meet this challenge, we're launching a new Community College Mini-semester program, providing shorter-term, more affordable study abroad opportunities. And the Chinese government is offering -- listen to this -- 10,000 scholarships to cover all in-country costs for American students and teachers who study in China. (Applause.)

To give more high school students the opportunity, right here the DC Center of Global Education and Leadership is creating weekend and after-school Mandarin classes for DC public school students, and they'll be offering new opportunities for these same students to study in China during the summer. That's wonderful. (Applause.)

And, finally, to help oversee all these new programs and all these wonderful outreach efforts, the State Department has created a high-level federal advisory committee composed of prominent China experts and leaders in business, academic, and the non-profit worlds.

So, we're making some very good progress. And I am proud of what we're doing here because I know, I know, because of what I missed, the impact an opportunity like this can have on a young person's life. I know the growth it can spur, the passion it can spark, the sense of direction and purpose it can provide.

When reflecting on his time in China, Jason Williams, a graduate of Seattle Pacific University, said -- and this is a quote -- "I've come to understand the world as more complex, more interconnected, and more beautiful than I ever could have imagined."

Nina Robinson, who attended School without Walls right here in D.C., described the sense of independence she gained from learning a new language and navigating a new city all on her own. As she concluded simply -- and this is her quote -- "Not only was this trip an educational experience, but it was [a] life experience."

And I can guarantee all of you that when you study abroad, you won't just change your own life. You'll change the lives of every single person you come in contact with.

President Kennedy once said about young people who come to study in the U.S. -- he said, "I think they teach more than they learn." And I think that's true as well for young Americans who study abroad.

As my husband once put it, "America has no better ambassadors to offer than our young people." You all are America's true face to the world. You show the world our energy and our optimism. You show the world our decency and our openness and our compassion.

So, we need you. We need you out there taking some risks and doing some really hard things. And that's certainly true for the four ambassadors that we have on today's panel. These impressive young people have each spent time studying in China, and they have generously agreed to share their experiences with us today.

So, with that, I will happily turn things over to Ann Stock, our Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs, who will be leading our discussion.

So I want to thank you all, as always. I love coming to Howard. (Applause.) I love seeing you all. (Applause.) I am proud of every single one of you who have stepped outside of this comfort zone into another country. Keep it up.

I want to thank our panelists for joining us. And I look forward to seeing many of you follow in their footsteps in the years ahead. So, keep working hard. Thank you all so much. (Applause.)

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11:04 A.M. EST