

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the First Lady

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY  
AT FLORIDA CAMPUS COMPACT AWARDS GALA

Freedom Tower  
Miami, Florida

12:52 P.M. EDT

MRS. OBAMA: Thank you everyone. Please, please, have a seat. Thank you so much. Congressman Boyd, I want to thank you for that very kind introduction. And thank you for your outstanding leadership in Washington on behalf of Florida's families, and for your proud support of Florida Campus Compact and the cause of service -- here in this state and across the country. We are very proud of you. And let's give Congressman Boyd a round of applause. (Applause.)

I am thrilled to join all of you here today as we recognize the outstanding work you're all doing as part of Florida Campus Compact.

And I'd like to start by just thanking a few people -- former Senator Bob Graham -- (applause), former Congresswoman Carrie Meek, who is here -- (applause). We are honored by your presence and also for your lifetime leadership and your continued service to this state and our nation. We are grateful to the both of you.

I also want to acknowledge Mayor Bower, who is doing terrific work for the people of Miami Beach.

And I also want to thank Frank Brogan, who's the Chancellor of Florida's State University -- the system here -- for his commitment to service to the students of this state. We are just grateful for his leadership.

And I also want to thank someone who I got to party with on Tuesday -- (laughter) -- and I think you exaggerate by saying we could win any salsa contest. I might be able to, but I don't know about -- (laughter and applause.) Dr.

Eduardo Padron, President of Miami Dade College, thank you for us hosting us here today.

And of course, I want to recognize the superwoman at my table, Dee Dee Rasmussen, your Executive Director -- (applause). I learned a lot about all her good crazy, because in addition to running this organization, she is raising three kids on her own. She serves on the school board. She's nuts -- but it's the good kind of nuts. (Laughter.) I want to thank her for her boundless energy, her passionate commitment to our young people, and her devoted leadership to Florida Campus Compact. Dee Dee, thank you so much. (Applause.)

And finally, I want to thank all of you, everyone here -- to the faculty, to the students, service directors, the administrators, the college and university presidents who have embraced Campus Compact's mission of making service and service-learning an integral part of higher education in America.

And I know that what you're doing isn't easy -- especially now. I know that many of you are struggling with budget cuts and layoffs, and you're all living in that perfect storm of decreasing donations and increasing demand. And many of you have been putting in long hours and late nights to make up that difference -- work that doesn't exactly come with a lot of overtime pay. Yes, I know. And I know that these labors are of love, but they don't always get the recognition and the rewards that they deserve.

So today, I want you all to know just how much that the President and I truly appreciate your work. That is why I came here today. I want you to know how proud we are, how grateful we are for what you are doing every day. With the challenges that we face today, your work to give young people the tools and the inspiration to pursue public service couldn't be more critical -- and you of all people know that.

Whether the issues are climate change, or keeping our communities safe, to providing desperately needed health care in underserved communities and desperately needed teachers in underperforming schools, these issues are critical.

Believe it or not, in the next four years, as many as one third of America's 3.2 million teachers could retire. And by 2014, just five short years from now, the Department of Education projects that our nation's schools will need to hire as many as 1 million new teachers. Shortages in high-need schools will be particularly acute, as you can imagine.

So today, more than ever, we really need skilled, committed, service-minded young people -- young people with the insight into these issues and the experience working with these communities -- we need them to step forward and to help us meet these challenges.

But there's also good news in recent years, and you all have seen this. We have seen more and more young people who are eager to do just that. Applications are way up for AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps, and last year, 25,000 young people applied for just 4,000 slots in Teach for America. So young people are volunteering through their schools, and their churches, their synagogues, and their mosques. They are concerned about the environmental implications and the ethical implications of the products they buy and the lifestyle they're -- lead. These young people are thinking about the world, and there's a growing sense among this next generation that maybe service is a little cool -- and that's okay.

But the question is, how do we harness all that energy and all that excitement? How do we show these young people that service can be more than just something that you do once in a while, that it can be more than just something that you do for a year or two after you graduate, but service can be a way of life, it can even be a career? How do we contend with the traditional definitions of what success should look like, those beliefs that still hold sway over so many young people -- the idea that success means money, or power, or prestige, and that it comes with a nice house and a fancy car? How do we counter those voices that tell them, "Well, if you don't get paid a lot of money for what you do, then maybe what you do really isn't that valuable." Or voices that say, "Well, that's awfully nice that you want to do service, but when are you going to get a real job?" (Applause.)

And trust me, I've heard those voices before in my own life. As many of you know by now -- if you haven't heard

about my background -- I started my career at a big fancy law firm, and it was a wonderful experience working for big companies and making a whole lot of money. I think in my first year of working, I've made more than both of my parents combined.

And when I decided to leave for a public service job, let me tell you, my family and my friends started to worry about my sanity. (Laughter.) My mother was concerned that I'd taken her advice to follow my heart just a little too far. And my friends thought I was throwing away a promising career and a lucrative paycheck. They thought I was nuts. And while everyone thought that my heart was in the right place, a lot of people wondered whether my head was on straight.

But I knew right away that I had made the right decision when I stepped away from corporate America and into service. As the congressman stated, I helped start this wonderful new AmeriCorps program called Public Allies. I worked with a group of dedicated visionary young people and I helped to found the Chicago chapter, and in that program we spent years preparing 18 to 30 year-olds from all walks of life for careers in public service.

And after that I then left and went to the University of Chicago to start their first campus-wide community service program. And every day, I got to work with extraordinary young people from all different backgrounds. Every day, I saw how each of them had something to contribute, and how each of them had the potential to lead.

It felt really good. It didn't matter how much money I was making, it didn't matter how prestigious my job seemed to others -- I knew I was making an impact in the community that raised me. I knew I was helping to change people's lives in ways that I couldn't, sitting behind a big fancy desk. I felt more successful than ever before in my life.

And that is the chance that all of you in Campus Compact are giving to young people all across this state every day. That is the power of service-learning: to show that higher education isn't just about producing good students, which is important, or just successful professionals, which is important, but it's about producing

good citizens and great leaders and engaged members of our democracy. (Applause.) It's not just about imparting a body of knowledge and then handing them a degree; it's about ensuring that they're going to use that degree to contribute to the communities that they came from. And it's about modeling a way of life.

All of you are helping to redefine the role of universities in our communities, replacing the old image of the remote ivory tower with a caring and engaged partner. It's simple, but maybe revolutionary: that universities have an obligation to be good citizens, and that students' education is about more than just what their -- what their school and community can give to them; it's also about what they can give back to their school and community.

And we know the difference this kind of learning makes. We all know. We've seen it. We know that students become more engaged in what they're learning and more aware of the world around them. We know that their writing and critical thinking skills improve, and so do their GPAs.

And even if your students don't ultimately pursue a career in public service, what's important is that they graduate with a public service orientation -- an understanding of the problems in our communities; an awareness of the skills they have to offer; and a sense of the difference they can make when they commit their time and their effort.

They become, in a sense, volunteers for life. And we need these insights and this experience just as much -- if not more -- in the private sector as we do in the public sector. You all know we need business leaders motivated by both the pursuit of profit and the pursuit of the public good. If we want to fight -- (applause) -- if we want to fight climate change and create green jobs in this economy, we're going to need CEOs who are committed to preserving our environment. If we want to boost student achievement in our schools, we are going to need businesswomen and men, and lawyers, and scientists and others willing to serve as partners and mentors. If we want to pursue and promote better wellness in all of our communities, we're going to need health care professionals, we're going to need hospital executives who understand the needs of underserved populations.

And most of all, we need citizens who believe that volunteering in your community isn't just something that you do once in a while, or on a holiday; that it's something that's part of your life routine -- like going to the gym, or the grocery store, or picking up your kids from school -- service is forever -- because ultimately we know that so many of the best solutions to the most difficult problems in our communities don't come from boardrooms, or courtrooms, or Congress, or the White House for that matter. Some of the best solutions come directly from the communities themselves.

That's what all of you are teaching students every day by partnering with community organizations. And that's precisely the idea at the heart of what my husband's administration is doing to promote service all across America.

It's why he's launched a new community innovation initiative to seek out the best, most effective non-profits in our communities -- organizations that could be the next Teach for America, or Harlem Children's Zone -- who worked together and then we can replicate those efforts across America.

It's why he was proud to sign the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act -- expanding Senior Corps, and AmeriCorps and other initiatives to give people -- (applause) -- to give people of all ages a chance to serve their communities.

It's why we've requested more funding for service learning, and why we're reaching out to partners in the private sector to find ways to use new media to spark a greater interest in service learning.

And it's why I'm proud that this year's national Learn & Serve Challenge, a week-long effort designed to promote service-learning, has generated participation from more than 75,000 people doing nearly 200 different projects.

And it's why way back in June we launched United We Serve, a nationwide effort calling on all Americans to make service part of their daily lives.

We reached out to hundreds of non-profit organizations, and corporations, and foundations,

government agencies, and we asked ordinary Americans to become service leaders -- to develop their own service projects and post them online so that others could join.

And while we provided the inspiration and the resources to get things started, it's taken off in ways that we never could have ever imagined. We partnered with more than 400 organizations, and there were more than 250,000 service opportunities available on [serve.gov](http://serve.gov).

Big companies like Citigroup and Wal-Mart and others, they answered the call by devoting thousands and thousands of volunteer hours and millions of dollars. The sports and entertainment industries participated too. In fact, this week, and we're excited about that, thanks to an unprecedented effort organized by the Entertainment Industry Foundation, more than 90 television shows on a wide range of networks and cable channels will include service themes in their programming. That's next week. (Applause.)

The lesson here is pretty clear -- and that is that each of us has a role to play, and all of us have something to offer. No matter where you come from, or what you do for a living, you can make a difference in someone's life. And in doing so, you can make a difference in your own life as well.

At least that's what Matt Flood, an alum of the University of Central Florida learned, back when he took a class called "Creative Writing in the Community." He put it this way. He said, "This world is a lot larger than my experiences, and a project like this has the potential of teaching me more than what I can learn in a traditional collegiate classroom environment."

That's what Rebekah Reams from Valencia Community College learned when she volunteered at Habitat for Humanity. She wrote, "I highly recommend volunteering for everyone who wants to be a part of something great, even though it means getting up early on a Saturday morning." (Laughter.)

And today, I am thinking about what happens when folks like you inspire a student like Rebekah, and then she decides she wants to spend her life being "part of something great." Maybe she works as a nurse in an

underserved area, helping to heal hundreds of patients. Or becomes an architect and designs affordable housing for thousands of people. Maybe she becomes a teacher in an inner city or rural school, inspiring generations of students to serve their own community.

And then you take that energy and you multiply that by the millions of students across America who have been engaged by Campus Compact, and then you have some idea of the ripple effect of the work that you're doing -- all of the problems solved, all of the communities lifted up, all of the lives transformed by the students whose lives you've transformed.

If that's not the definition of success, then it's hard to figure out what is. And today, President Obama and I, we honor you, we celebrate you, and more than anything, we thank you for everything that you do to serve your communities and your nation.

The only thing I can say is, hang in there. Don't stop. Keep it going. There are young people who are looking to you for who they can be. They're looking to you to figure out how do they place themselves in the world, the life that they can envision. Every single day you are moving and changing lives in ways that are unimaginable.

And if you need any proof, look at me. I am living proof of the work and the impact of the work that you do. So we are grateful to you. And it has been a privilege to be here among you.

Good luck and stay strong. Thank you so much.  
(Applause.)

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1:11 P.M. EDT