



Secondary Education Examined in “Two Million Minutes” Documentary Screening

Rensselaer President Shirley Ann Jackson hosted a screening and panel discussion of a new documentary, *Two Million Minutes*, March 25 in the Center for Biotechnology and Interdisciplinary Studies. The film takes an in-depth look at secondary education in the United States as compared with India and China, and examines the implications this may have on the U.S. position in the global economy during the 21st century. It features President Jackson speaking on what she has identified as the “Quiet Crisis” in the United States, a crisis rooted in the fact that we are not preparing enough people to replace a retiring science and engineering workforce. Following the screening, President Jackson moderated a discussion with the audience and special guests Robert Compton, the executive producer of the documentary, and Jan Morrison, executive director of the Teaching Institute for Excellence in STEM.

Two Million Minutes began when Compton, a venture capitalist and an entrepreneur, took his Bangalore employees out to dinner. He expected the software engineers to know about math and science, he said prior to the on-campus screening, “but they talked to me about Shakespeare, about U.S. history, about Chinese history. They were so well-rounded, I decided to swim upstream and see how they got so smart.”

His curiosity got him into trouble. When he realized his teenaged daughters’ Indian contemporaries had an enormous educational head start, Compton started to make this film, which profiles six high school students in India, China, and America. The students — a boy and a girl from each country — come from comparable backgrounds. Their parents are professional, the schools are good, and the kids are at the top of their classes in math and science.

The film takes its title from the four-year period when students are in high school, and what they do with that time. In the film, students and a number of experts, including President Jackson, addressed the issue of global education. Among these experts are former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, International Education Specialist Vivien Stewart, Economist Richard Freeman, and Vivek Paul, the entrepreneur who helped frame Thomas Friedman’s book, *The World Is Flat*. President Jackson referred to the book in her opening remarks at the presentation and in the film.

“The Quiet Crisis, the flattening world: this is another moment where the world is shifting,” President Jackson says on-screen in *Two Million Minutes*. The first moment she refers to is the challenge unleashed after the Soviet satellite Sputnik was launched in 1957.

“President John F. Kennedy issued a call to action in May 1961, urging that the United States rally its intellectual, industrial, and economic resources to put a man on the moon before the end of the decade. The Congress and the country responded. The wave of activity that followed included an intensive focus on identifying and providing the necessary science-and-math-focused educational supports for elementary, middle, and high school students — students like me — all over the country,” President Jackson wrote in the 2007 Winter/ Spring edition of *The College Board Review*.

Although prior to the screening Compton noted that the film is a descriptive endeavor, not a prescriptive one, a cure for the “Quiet Crisis” was debated during the panel discussion. President Jackson began the conversation by seeking reactions from the audience, which included faculty, students, and administration from the Rensselaer community, and from area high schools, as well as government and business leaders.

A few audience members said that the rigorous educational model followed by the Indian students in the film echoed their own experiences. Rensselaer’s Assistant Vice President for Information Services Jeff Miner commented “our success planted the seeds of our mediocrity,” and reflected a general audience concern that material comforts have stripped Americans, somehow, of our motivation to succeed. Emma Willard’s Head of School Trudy Hall was intrigued by the notion of drive and where it came from in our country.

Next, President Jackson urged the panelists to address the audience’s reactions and the film. “What characterizes a 4-year-old?” Jan Morrison wondered. “There’s no satisfying them because one question leads to another. How do we nurture this? The situation is complex because we are talking about our most treasured commodity, our young people.”

“We have to decide as a culture what is important,” Compton said. “My daughters were spending four to six hours a day swimming. I came back from India and I said ‘we’re changing that. Your future’s not going to be decided in a pool.’ ”

“When I was growing up in Washington, D.C., I used to play marbles and I was pretty good,” President Jackson said in closing remarks to the audience, “but if you did not bring marbles, you could not play marbles. You cannot do calculus and differential equations without knowing how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide. You cannot add, subtract, multiply, and divide if you cannot read and write.”

“To innovate,” she said, “you have to go back to the basics.”



Send comments to:
Inside Rensselaer, Strategic Communications and External Relations
1000 Troy Building, 110 Eighth Street, Troy, N.Y. 12180 or to leibat@rpi.edu.

Inside Rensselaer
Volume 2, Number 7, April 18, 2008
©2008 Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

