

Filmmaker behind documentary critically comparing U.S. and foreign education to appear at IU

"Two Million Minutes" suggests lack of motivation, preparedness for U.S. students

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BLOOMINGTON, Ind. -- Robert Compton, executive producer of "Two Million Minutes," a provocative documentary about global education, will show the film and participate in a discussion at Indiana University Bloomington's Willkie Auditorium on Monday, Sept. 15, at 5 p.m. Compton will discuss the film with Yong Zhao, Michigan State University Distinguished Professor and director of the U.S.-China Center for Research on Educational Excellence.

The event is presented by the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP) and the East Asian Studies Center and is the first event of the 2008-09 CEEP Education Policy Chat Series.

"I plan to give the audience a lot to think about," Compton said. "Hopefully, I'll also inspire them to make education a real priority for the entire family."

Compton is a venture capitalist with a Harvard Business School degree. He became interested in making a film comparing educational systems based on his interaction with Chinese and Indian business partners. The film follows six high school seniors, including two from Carmel, Ind., and two each from China and India, as they navigate their final year of high school and make plans for the future. The documentary presents great contrasts in the lifestyles and educational habits of the students from Indiana compared to those from the up-and-coming economies of India and China. The name of the film comes from the number of minutes in four years of high school.

The film has received considerable praise and criticism for its representation of U.S. education compared to the emerging countries. Some education organizations have said the comparison is not valid since the U.S. commits to educating all while India and China promote only the best students.

Compton said that during a screening at the Harvard Graduate School of Education he got an earful of complaints. He said he was shocked at what he called a "lack of open-mindedness and

stubborn insistence on the superiority of American education."

"We received a good deal of negative feedback from the professors and students, who felt that America has nothing to learn from other countries' education systems," he said.

Zhao will offer some counterpoints, although he said the film is generally accurate in how it depicts the differences between how Chinese and U.S. students use their time.

"But the interpretation of that difference as an advantage for the Chinese, hence the Chinese have a better education, is erroneous," Zhao said.

He called the competitive advantage of Chinese students "a myth," and said he will make the point that different countries have different educational practices because of different values.

"What matters in the globalized world may not be what is taught in schools, or worse yet, measure by standardized testing," Zhao said.

One of the Carmel students the film follows, Brittany Brechbuhl, finished in the top 3 percent of her graduating class and is now enrolled at IU Bloomington, planning to major in pre-med and Spanish. The other, Neil Ahrendt, now attends Purdue.

"I think that now, after meeting the Indian and Chinese students also featured in the film, Brittany and Neil really appreciate their dedication to their studies," Compton said. "They probably think they should have challenged themselves a bit more than they did."

Compton is working on two follow-ups to the documentary, each focusing further on the subject of international education: "Two Million Minutes in India -- a Deeper Look at Indian Education," and "Two Million Minutes in China -- a Deeper Look at Chinese Education." The films will again visit with the students from those countries as well as Chinese and Indian school administrators and feature panel discussions among American and foreign students.

This event is the first of the fall series of CEEP Policy Chats, which bring top education leaders, opinion-makers and policy-makers to the IU Bloomington campus for discussions about hot topics in education. The second Policy Chat is scheduled for Sept. 30 at 6 p.m. at the Bloomington South High School auditorium, where the two candidates for Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction will participate in a debate.

CEEP, Indiana's leading non-partisan education policy research center, promotes and supports rigorous program evaluation and education policy research primarily, but not exclusively, for educational, human services and nonprofit organizations. Center projects address state and national education questions. CEEP is part of the IU School of Education. To learn more about CEEP, go to <http://ceep.indiana.edu>.

Willkie Auditorium is located in the Willkie Residence Hall at 150 N. Rose Ave., across from the IU School of Education. The event is free and open to the public.

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About Two Million Minutes Titled Two Million Minutes, this documentary film takes an in-depth look at how students in the United States allocate their high school years (approximately four years or two million minutes) compared with India and China. It examines the implications this may have on the U.S. position in the global economy during the 21st century. Two Million Minutes is currently screening across the country. For more information, please visit www.2mminutes.com.

***“A Nation at Risk”** was presented by the National Commission on Excellence in Education to Secretary of Education, the Honorable T. H. Bell. Its purpose was to “help define the problems afflicting American education and to provide solutions.” The results of the report found the U.S. to be a “nation at risk” as “our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world... Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them.”