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Students, Simmons talk global change in NOLA event

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Posted: 3/17/08

College students and presidents from across the country - including Brown students and President Ruth Simmons - convened in New Orleans this weekend along with former President Bill Clinton, Brad Pitt and James Carville to discuss pressing global issues at the Clinton Global Initiative University Conference.

The conference, part of the Clinton Global Initiative, asked each attending student or college president to make a "commitment to action," and focused on energy and climate change, global health, human rights, and poverty alleviation, according to attendees. The conference was intended to empower participants with the tools and contacts necessary to follow through on their projects.

Commitments should be "new, specific and measurable," according to the CGI U Web site. In one example, Michael Glassman '09, Undergraduate Council of Students president, made the commitment to help install compact florescent light bulbs in low income housing in Providence. Glassman said he met students who are working on similar projects at CGI U and plans to keep in touch with them.

A number of Brown students at the conference committed to help organize the Brown Is Green conference on climate change and sustainability. The conference, which will take place from April 24 to 26, will bring speakers and activists to campus, according to Dan MacCombie '08.

MacCombie, who is helping to coordinate Brown Is Green, said the CGI U event was "a really good, professional conference on a lot of the issues we're working on."

The conference began on Friday night with a reception and continued on Saturday with panel discussions. During the two sessions, experts in each of the four CGI U issue-areas addressed the attendees and fielded questions.

On Sunday, attendees were encouraged to participate in service projects in New Orleans' Ninth Ward, a neighborhood that was particularly affected by Hurricane Katrina.

The conference featured a special session on rebuilding New Orleans so as to make it environmentally sustainable that Simmons attended, said Marisa Quinn, assistant to the president.

Simmons was "very excited to participate and bring Brown students" to the conference, Quinn said. Brown students were able to attend the conference free of charge thanks to funding from the Office of the President, according to participants.

While Simmons has attended Clinton Global Initiative conferences in the past, she was particularly excited about CGI U, Quinn said, because her alma mater, Dillard University, is located in New Orleans.

Simmons has been involved in helping universities in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and also in bringing Brown students to the city for service work, Quinn added.

Under Simmons, Brown initiated a partnership with Dillard to help make its campus more environmentally sustainable, Quinn said. On Sunday, Simmons and a handful of students went to Dillard's campus to see what its faculty and students were doing and what Brown students could do to accomplish this goal. Glassman said the visit to Dillard was a highlight.

Simmons, who was one of about 50 college presidents in attendance, also moderated a panel discussion on alleviating poverty, according to Quinn.

Several attendees remarked that they were impressed with the organization of the conference and caliber of the students who attended. MacCombie said many students had started their own NGOs.

Nat Manning '08 said he appreciated seeing "how smart and cool people from our generation are." He added that he thought many were "well-rounded and caring."

Jenn Baumstein '08 said the conference was an "empowering experience" because she was "surrounded by people who want to do something important."

Brown was well represented at the conference, according to multiple attendees. Baumstein said she left the weekend with an "appreciation of what Brown has to offer," noting that the University has been a leader in sustainability and climate change.

For many in the Brown group, the culminating moment was when, in front of an audience of 1,500, Clinton recognized Simmons for leading Brown's partnership with Dillard. In what Quinn called a "dramatic moment," the former president's comments earned a standing ovation from the Brown students in attendance.

As Clinton continued his speech, Glassman said, he referred to the Brown students in attendance as positive examples of active and involved students. MacCombie said Simmons "seemed really proud that all the students were there."

He added, "We were really proud that she was there."

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