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UC Haiti Initiative Invited to Speak at Prestigious East Coast Conference

Berkeley, CA. September 20, 2011. — On Saturday, September 18, two UC Haiti Initiative (UCHI) student founders spoke about Development Projects at the 3rd Annual Millennium Campus Conference (MCC), hosted at Harvard University, in front of thousands of student leaders from across the United States.

Nicolas Pascal, UCHI's Director of Strategic Development, and Will Smelko, UCHI's Director of Community Development, spoke on an hour-and-a-half-long panel titled, "Challenges and Opportunities of Student-Led Development Projects," and presented about UCHI's endeavors to organize around the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

The MCC is supported by the Millennium Campus Network (MCN), a group of 37 member organizations and over 10,000 supporters dedicated to bringing together student activists from around the world in support of the Millennium Development Goals. At this year's weekend-long conference, Mr. Pascal and Mr. Smelko had the privilege of presenting part of the keynote address as well as speaking about UCHI's development project model.

According to Mr. Pascal, "student-led projects are unique for the same reason that all our projects are unique, and will succeed. Our Haitian colleagues direct us in supporting them. They know their communities. We don't, and never could, tell them what is best. Rather, we tell them how we can help after they tell us what's the score. This is an advantage of a student-grounded ethos. We have no vested interest in any particular outcome."

Mr. Smelko adds, "UCHI is a student-founded organization that formed in the aftermath of the January 2010 Haitian earthquake. We see the UC system, especially when taken together, as having a host of incredible strengths and resources. Our mission is to make those resources readily available to our Haitian partners, to address their most pressing needs in higher education as they see fit. We operate using peer-to-peer partnerships, where students, faculty and staff from UC work in tandem with their respective counterparts in Haiti."

The University of California Haiti Initiative (UCHI)'s non-traditional approach to addressing poverty caught the attention of the MCC hosts and captured the imagination of the audience of 1,000 attendees.

This unique mentality leads to plenty of opportunity to make a difference in Haiti, but presents its own difficulties too, which Mr. Pascal and Mr. Smelko alluded to at the conference. One challenge student-led projects such as those of UCHI face, for example, is the transition of knowledge and leadership in an organization whose membership is constantly graduating and moving on.

As Mr. Pascal says, “the ultimate challenge is to ensure longevity when turnover is systematically high. However, there is something about this cause that compels many of UCHI’s members to stay on, to one degree or another. With roughly a quarter of a million undergraduates in the UC system and UCHI chapters at each campus, we are well placed to tap into the tremendous potential.”

By sharing this unique model at MCC, student activists around the nation were able to learn how UCHI was able to achieve a high level of institutional support within a large university system, broker relationships between communities within two distinct countries, and guide their institutions into close and fruitful partnership with each other. Mr. Pascal was more than happy to share their experiences with such a passionate group of conference participants.

“As a long-term, higher education initiative, UCHI is also committed to eradicating global poverty and supports the MCN in their amazing ability to coordinate, organize, and inspire those best positioned—current university students—in their efforts to critically commit themselves to our global community,” Mr. Pascal said.

Of course, sharing their UCHI experiences also allowed Mr. Pascal and Mr. Smelko to create awareness of their growing and promising organization.

According to Mr. Smelko, “The UC Haiti Initiative has been able to create and sustain a massive network across all ten University of California campuses, and this conference allows us to continue to expand our network across the US and the world. We have only scratched the surface of building relationships with other individuals and coalitions doing work in Haiti who we can both learn from and work with. This conference reminded us of the need for continued efforts to partner with other effective organizations.”

Most of all, both Mr. Pascal and Mr. Smelko felt impassioned by the spirit and great potential for change that the conference brings to young leaders, challenging the major global issues that the Millennium Development Goals describe, and bringing back the spirit of community to the various communities across the US.

Mr. Pascal said, “I was so impressed by the collective passion, creativity, and intelligence the MCN was able to collect in one place. These students are primed to participate in the change that we desperately need.”

For questions, additional information, supplementary quotes, and more, contact:

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About UCHI

The University of California Haiti Initiative (UCHI) is a student-led initiative formed in 2010 following the disastrous Haitian earthquake. UCHI features a unique combination of various academic disciplines working across 10 UC campuses in the UC system, with the support of UC faculty and administration, to work collaboratively with local Haitian organizations to improve higher education and increase sustainable development.

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