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NGO Conference Highlights Move To Corporate Responsibility

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Panelists at International NGO conference held on February 11-12 at Stanford highlighted the trend towards corporate responsibility and social impact among top business schools and corporations.

The conference featured an array of panelists in sessions titled "Inspiring Career Paths" and "What to Expect Working in an NGO."

Graham Freeman, one of the first panelists, co-founded Cernio, a socially responsible for-profit technology services company. Freeman said, "I believe that social responsibility should play a prominent role in our professional lives."

Bill McKenna served as an example of a mid-career professional approaching the social sector. Armed with a law degree and a Masters in Management from Northwestern University, as well as a Masters in International Policy Studies, McKenna has paired his extensive business and law experience with his growing interest in international NGOs and development.

McKenna advised, "The for profit sector is very applicable to the social sector."

Anietie Ekanem, a Stanford graduate whose parents emigrated from Nigeria, founded Wireless Africa. He combined his consulting background, experience with corporations and start up companies, and his passion for Africa to provide health, government, and educational services to African countries using wireless technology.

After years working in the technical for profit sector Ekanem wanted more of a social impact. "I wanted to play a role in job and wealth creation in Africa," said Ekanem.

Laura Loker, a Senior Consultant at the Foundation Strategy Group, entered the business world after completing her BA in Business Administration at the University of Michigan. She went on to get an MBA with a certificate in Public Management and a Masters in International Policy Studies from Stanford.

Loker, an international health consultant, utilized her skills on a two-month trip to Tanzania, where she worked with an African social marketing NGO focused on public health initiatives. "My work is fulfilling and exciting, I love knowing that I can help thousands of people," said Loker.

These panelists suggest that business schools and corporations around the country have a growing awareness of corporate responsibility and the social sector.

This shift may be attributed to the changing business climate. In the early 1970s, there were 7000 multinational enterprises where as today there are more than 60,000. In addition, the public, non-profit, and private sectors are increasingly interdependent.

"Companies today must reconcile their role in society and not only respond to shareholder concerns but to the expectations of all key

stakeholders for sustainable business successes and societal well being,” said Bradley K. Googins, Executive Director of Center for Corporate Citizenship.

StartingBloc, a non-profit organization founded in the wake of the Enron, Tyco, and WorldCom scandals seeks to educate future business and civic leaders on responsible and sustainable business practices.

“Private sector leaders and social entrepreneurs must create collaborative working engagements and partnerships to further social and financial return on investment,” said Martin Hanlon-Smith, founder of StartingBloc.

In response to StartingBloc’s creation, Robert L. Nelson, Director of the American Bar Foundation, said, “At a time when public and government leaders are increasingly skeptical about the ethics of business and professional organizations, it is exciting to see StartingBloc taking an initiative in the field of corporate social responsibility.”

Richard Schmalensee, Dean of MIT Sloan School of Management, expressed, “It would be a tragedy if recent scandals made our bright, idealistic youth hostile to business.”

This shift towards corporate responsibility is also evident among top business schools.

Stanford’s Graduate School of Business is one of 11 academic institutions recognized for its pioneering work in developing a curriculum that prepares students to manage complex issues relating to business and society. Stanford’s Public Management Program (PMP) offers students cutting-edge knowledge and hands-on experience to apply business principles to social and environmental issues.

The University of North Carolina (UNC) offers the Sustainable Enterprise Initiative where students mentor urban students while others assist inner city businesses.

The University of Michigan offers dual degrees in environmental management with the School of Natural Resources and Environment, enabling students to intern in Africa.

At graduate business schools around the nation 1,300 MBA students have founded 100 chapters of Net Impact: New Leaders for Better Business, a business student organization devoted to social and environmental responsibility.

According to the World Resources Institute (WRI) and the Initiative for Social Innovation through Business (ISIB), a program of the Aspen, “Social issues are clearly making inroads into business school programs.”

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