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Mary McFarland

International Director, Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins; Professor, Gonzaga University, mary.mcfarland@jc-hem.org

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Why Do We Educate at the Margins? JC:HEM Webinar Reflections

Mary McFarland

International Director, Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins

Professor, Gonzaga University

(Mary.McFarland@jc-hem.org)

Background

On February 24, 2016, Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins (JC:HEM) sponsored a one hour webinar entitled, “Why Do We Educate at the Margins: How Jesuit Higher Education Is Empowering Communities at the Edge of Societies.” Mr. Nicholas Griffin, Chief Operating Officer of JC:HEM, introduced the webinar. Three speakers focused on the past, present and future of JC:HEM. Dr. Mary McFarland, International Director, JC:HEM, was the first speaker, and her comments were transcribed and appear below. Additional speakers were Dr. Carey Treado, Chief Academic Officer, JC:HEM, and Ms. Cindy Bonfini-Hotlosz, Chief Information Officer, JC:HEM.

This webinar carries forward important themes of social justice from Melbourne 2015’s “Expanding the Jesuit Higher Education Network: Collaborations for Social Justice.” Further, the webinar gives focus to exploring how core ideals of sustainability, transferability, and scalability build resiliency in host communities. JC:HEM’s vision, academic philosophy, and operational approach are shared, as well as lessons from the first five years of JC:HEM. The entire webinar can be found at www.jc-hem.org. Regis University is the awarding university for the Diploma in Liberal Studies, and along with Gonzaga University and Georgetown University serves as the lead university with JC:HEM.

Transcript

JC:HEM started in 2010, and with thanks to a generous donor who prefers to stay anonymous, we were able to begin JC:HEM. And we had three pilot years, where we were able to learn every day, “What does it take to be a sustainable, scalable, transferable organization?” We had universities join us in partnership, on-site partners — specifically the first three years, Jesuit Refugee Service — and some corporate partners. Through a collective wisdom, we came to understand the vision for JC:HEM. Our byline is: “Jesuit Higher Education: Transform Learning Transform the World,” and what that represents is our commitment that through higher education, those at the edges of society, wherever they are unserved or underserved by higher education, will be empowered to make the difference through being educated, being able to articulate solutions, that they can contribute their knowledge and wisdom to this global community.

In JC:HEM, we do that through a global classroom. Professors around the world join us to facilitate learning. Our students come from

multiple sites and contribute their voice. With over 60 million people currently in forced human migration or internally displaced, it led to the question of “How did we ever think we could solve the problems of the world without the voices of those at the margins?” Through the JC:HEM global classroom, that is one step to do that.



People sometimes say, “Why engage in such a big project, a big idea?” I think for everybody who is taking time to join us today, the answer is clear, that it’s going to take bold solutions, it takes courage, and it takes all of us, so that together, we can foster a more peaceful and humane world. With JC:HEM, we started with a pilot program in

Dzaleka, Kakuma, and Aleppo, Syria, which, when the war escalated, we moved to Amman, Jordan.

People in our pilot program talked so much to us about the fact that what education means for them is hope for a full life. In the Arrupe Learning Center in Dzaleka, hundreds of students each month, each year, go through the center for learning, with a community of learners, to engage in the global classroom. The other way that we represent hope is through our academic offerings. One of our academic offerings among the community courses is a sustainable agriculture and nutrition course. What was an empty field is now a thriving community garden because people, through education, were able to envision a different day. We started very much aware of the Human Development Index data that shows the places of the world with the highest conflict. We observed that the areas of the world with the lowest education and highest poverty experience the highest levels of conflict. We ask ourselves every day, “Through higher education, can’t we shift that domino?” In these places, and in partnership with Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), St. Aloysius Gonzaga, in Taunggyi, APC in the Philippines, we have started JC:HEM programs to see what the effect would be to shift that domino.

The other thing we have learned, in looking at the Human Development Index and in conversation with our students, is how blatantly clear it has become that when there is conflict in an area, there is war on education. Governments cut education budgets or they do not pay the teachers. Poverty escalates, people do not send their children to school because they need them to go to work. There are cultures in the world that feel that girls should not be educated. We also know today that when war or conflict breaks out, that rape is now used as a strategic weapon of war. It demoralizes the family, it destabilizes the community, and people are afraid to send their girls to school. War will actually destroy the actual physical structure of schools, as we saw in Aleppo, and in many other places in the world. We’ve learned a lot about the huge cost of idleness among children and youth. It makes them exceptionally vulnerable to be children for war, war soldiers, and victims of human trafficking, so you can see why those creating the conflict want education destroyed. With our students who are

refugees, they talk often about their struggles to get to education and, again, we hear the hope that higher education brings. In Tchad, during a recent assessment, we heard from parents who were trying to get a better education for their children respond to the questions, “Is it time now in Tchad?” “Is Tchad ready for higher education?” One refugee stood on behalf of the group and said, “If we had had education in Darfur, we wouldn’t be refugees today. We did not have education, and they caught us unaware.” That and other similar stories lead JC:HEM very much to our commitment to highest quality academic programs. 