

Remarks to the UT International Board of Advisors

Dr. Kate Weaver, Associate Professor, LBJ School of Public Affairs

Co-Director, Innovations for Peace and Development

ceweaver@austin.utexas.edu

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Thank you to President Fenves, Provost McInnes and to Maria and Justin for inviting me to speak to you all this evening. I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank my Dean, Angela Evans at the LBJ School, and Dean Randy Diehl, at COLA, for their strong support over the past several years.

I am very excited this evening to tell you about a student-focused international research program that I established five years ago with my colleague, Mike Findley, from the UT Department of Government.

This program, which we call Innovations for Peace and Development, started out with one simple objective: to create a space on campus where students from all disciplines and all levels (undergraduate or graduate) could engage in policy-relevant, applied research on global peace and development.

When we began thinking about Innovations for Peace and Development, we had four things in mind:

- (1) First, we envisioned IPD as a place where our students could pursue their common passion to address the problems we see in the world that drive conflict and poverty.
- (2) Second, we envisioned IPD as a place where students could channel their interests into rigorous professional development and analytical training, so that their idealism would be well tempered by pragmatism. At IPD, students could learn tangible skills, ranging from geospatial mapping, to statistical analysis, to how to write a grant proposal or design an impact evaluation, and also how to publish their research. They would think critically about peace and development: no Western White Savior mentality allowed.
- (3) Third, we envisioned IPD as a place where students could take what they learned in the classroom and apply it to real-world problems, for real-world clients such as the World Bank, the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, the Department of Defense, and Eleanor Crook Foundation (just down the road in San Marcos). In doing so, the students would build invaluable networks, develop their resumes, and – very importantly – get jobs.

We saw this as the kind of on-campus experiential learning that President Fenves articulated in his first State of the University address.

- (4) Finally, we initially envisioned that IPD would be a relatively small endeavor. We thought that maybe we might attract 10 students each year. Maybe 15 if we were lucky.

We were off on that last point. Really, really off.

Since 2013, over 400 students have been part of Innovations for Peace and Development. They participate as student researchers, summer interns, and research fellows. They come to IPD because they are hungry for research experience. They are eager to engage in the world. And they really want to attain the skills and experiences needed to move into post-graduate careers.

So what do these students do at IPD? At IPD, students attend weekly professional development sessions, skills-based training workshops, and participate in a research project of their choice.

I'll just give you one example of a research project (and I'll welcome you to read our annual report if you want to learn more):

Open Aid is a project we initiated several years ago to see if it was possible to track and geomap subnational flows of foreign aid. We launched this project with the express purpose of seeing if we could gather the information needed to rigorously evaluate the impact of the billions of dollars we give annually for development assistance. We also wanted to see if we could use that data to keep both aid donors and recipient governments accountable for that spending.

We spent over a year negotiating with developing country governments, knocking on donor doors and digitizing paper files found buried in closets of Ministries of Finance. We finally produced the first ever map of all foreign aid projects from all international donors in one country: Malawi -a country in Sub-Saharan Africa for whom foreign aid counts for 40% of its gross national product. Our work proved that aid transparency was in fact possible.

And it went viral. The success of this work led to a \$25 million grant from USAID to scale up our mapping for aid transparency. It contributed directly to the work of national and international aid transparency initiatives, including our own US Foreign Assistance Dashboard. For the first time, we saw that our research, which we could have never have pulled off without our students, was having a real effect upon the world. And that was an incredible feeling.

Ultimately, however, IPD is more than just a research shop

Each year, IPD provides support to students to participate in professional internships all over the world. In the last five years, we've supported dozens of students who have worked for governments, international organizations, NGOs, foundations, think tanks and even the private sector. Students have traveled and worked in places as far flung and exotic as Uganda, Nepal, East Timor, and Washington, D.C.

For example, this past year, we partnered with the College of Liberal Arts and Ubongo – an education NGO based in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Ubongo was started by the daughter of one of UT's distinguished Plan II alumni, Austin Ligon. For the next four years, we will send several students on paid internships to work on the development, implementation and impact evaluation of Ubongo's media-based early childhood education programming --- programs which are

designed to reach the poorest communities throughout Africa who are often unable to access traditional forms of schooling. They call Ubongo the “Sesame Street of Africa.”

These kinds of professional internships provide students with exceptional experiences that help them attain post-graduate careers and placements in top PhD programs. As a result, IPD alumni are now working at leading institutions, such as the World Bank, The Brookings Institution, the U.S. Department of State, and the Federal Reserve. Some have gone on to top PhD programs at Harvard, Columbia, Stanford and, of course, UT.

And at the end of all of this, I have to confess: getting IPD off the ground over the past five years has been a lot of work and has put more than a few gray hairs on my head. But without question, it’s been the most rewarding thing I have ever done in my 15-year career as a university professor. And I hope that, at the end of the day, IPD provides something valuable back to the University of Texas, our community and our state, and helps to realize our university motto: that what starts here changes the world.

Thank you very much.