

REIF: In some places, when someone like me shows up people applaud.

[LAUGHTER]

[APPLAUSE]

We want to impress our guests, don't we? Good afternoon indeed, and welcome to MIT's Compton Lectures. The presence of so many of you here in spite of the ice and the cold and some snow speaks volumes of the admiration and respect we all have for today's speaker. And to keep ourselves warm, I expect a very lively Q&A session following Ms. Jarrett's lecture.

Let me begin with some context for a few minutes. In 1957, MIT established the Compton Lectures to honor the memory of MIT's tenth President, Karl Taylor Compton, who had died three years before. He led MIT for almost a quarter of a century in two roles. He served MIT as president from 1930 to 1948, 18 years. I barely survived my 20th month.

Guiding the Institute through the Great Depression and World War II, and he served six more years as Chairman of the MIT Corporation-- our board of trustees-- until his death in 1954. His presidency was transformative. He helped MIT grow past its beginnings as an outstanding technical school for training hands-on engineers, to become a great global university.

A distinguished physicist, he brought MIT a renewed sense of energy and direction through a new focus on fundamental scientific research. He brought science to MIT as the equal partner of engineering. And during World War II, he helped invent an unprecedented partnership between the federal government and America's research universities. This partnership has been instrumental in driving the nation's economic growth and quality of life for more than 60 years, and it is a central expression of MIT's commitment to education through research and service.

President Compton himself was noted for the scope of his understanding, his integrity, and his commitment to public service. So it is fitting that we honor his legacy with a speaker who embodies these same qualities, the Honorable Valerie B. Jarrett, Senior Advisor to President Barack Obama.

Officially, Ms. Jarrett oversees the White House Office of Public Engagement, and the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs. She also chairs the White House Council on Women and Girls.

Unofficially, she's often described as President Obama's mentor. She's credited with introducing the young Barack and Michelle Obama to the world of Chicago politics, and she has worked with them closely throughout the development of his political career, including serving as Senior Advisor to his presidential campaign. Prior to joining the Obama administration, she was the CEO of The Habitat Company, a major real estate development group.

Ms. Jarrett has held a number of impressive positions of leadership across the private, not-for-profit, and public sectors, including Chairman of the Board of the Chicago Stock Exchange, Director of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the University of Chicago Medical Center, Chairman of the Chicago Transit Board, Commissioner of Planning and Development for the city of Chicago, and Deputy Chief of Staff for Chicago mayor Richard M. Daley.

She was born in Iran, where her father-- a distinguished Professor of Medicine at the University of Chicago-- was running a hospital. After a year in London, the family returned to Chicago where Ms. Jarrett was raised. She went on to earn her BA in Psychology from Stanford University and her law degree from the University of Michigan.

I note that neither of those degrees came from MIT. However, we can still count Ms. Jarrett as a member of the MIT family for a very special reason. Because she is the great-granddaughter of Robert Robinson Taylor, MIT class of 1892. Robert Taylor studied architecture at MIT and went on to a distinguished career as the lead architect of the campus of the Tuskegee Institute. He was the first African American to earn an architecture degree in the United States, and he was the first African American graduate of MIT.

This afternoon, we're delighted to welcome home to MIT an extraordinarily accomplished member of his remarkable family. She has titled her talk "Built to Last: Opportunity and the Economics of Empowerment." Please join me in giving a warm welcome to the Honorable Valerie B. Jarrett.

JARRETT:

Thank you, thank you. Thank you so much, President Reif, for that lovely introduction and for welcoming me to this amazing campus. I wish the lights were on so I could see you all, but I think you're all there.

It is an honor-- really, a true honor-- for me to be here with you today. Now you can be sure that when I responded to your invitation to give the illustrious Compton Lecture at one of the world's most prestigious universities, without a moment I was a little nervous when I first heard about it. And I thought, oh my gosh, now they're not going to prank me or anything and in the Q&A expect me to solve some complex algorithm or offer an original theorem of quantum physics.

You're not going to do that to me, are you? Because we weren't sure what the questions would be. Don't, don't, it will embarrass us both.

But in all seriousness, let me begin by saying how very special it feels for me to be here with you today. Not only am I delighted at the chance to address a room full of tomorrow's leading young minds, and honored-- just honored-- to participate in a series named after such an accomplished and interesting man-- a scientist, a scholar, an educator with a passion for service. But I'm also personally touched to be able to take this rather cathartic step back in time on the very campus where-- as you heard-- my great-grandfather attended school, and became the first African American to graduate from MIT in 1892.

I understand from your records-- which I have studied-- that he scored high marks in trigonometry, architectural history, differential calculus-- whatever that means-- and applied mechanics. Not a single subject of which I have the least bit of aptitude, I must reluctantly admit to all of you who probably know exactly what all that means.

Robert Taylor's father, Henry Taylor, was born a slave in southeast North Carolina in 1823. His experience was far from typical for a black man before the Civil War, as he was given the opportunity to receive carpentry training and he traveled around a bit and he actually earned his own pay. He did relatively well for himself as a contractor, he was building cargo ships and raising buildings around the Atlantic coast of North Carolina. And in the summer of 1868-- still in the shadows of the Civil War-- Mr. Taylor had a son who he named Robert Robinson Taylor.

Robert Taylor began his studies at Williston School in Wilmington, North Carolina, and he continued at the Gregory Institute, a local school for black children. After graduating, he took a job in his father's business, learning the fundamentals of carpentry and contracting. And after a couple of years on the job, Robert Taylor felt that his training needed to be formalized a bit. But needless to say, this wasn't exactly an easy feat for a black man in the south.

But with a little money he had managed to save and the backing of his parents, at the age of 20 Robert packed his bags and headed North to join the very same tradition that all of you are experiencing here. He enrolled at MIT at 1888 to study architecture, just 23 years after this school opened, and still many, many years before it resembled the regional and racially diverse student body that it is growing to be today.

It was during his years on campus when the seeds were sown for what would become his life work. As many of you hopefully know, Booker T. Washington was one of this country's great economic and social pioneers, championing the rights and economic liberty of African Americans in the late 1800s and early 1900s. While traveling the country to raise funds for Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, having heard of Robert Taylor, Washington looked him up during a stop here in Boston. And Washington must have been impressed because not long after he graduated, Robert Taylor was tapped by Washington to help build Tuskegee Institute from the ground up-- literally, from the ground up.

If ever you're in Alabama, stop by Tuskegee-- I recommend it-- and you can see some of the original buildings are still standing that he designed. Well, maybe it's a little bit more likely that you'll just go online and check it out, and you can look at the buildings from there.

Now in those early years at Tuskegee, resources were scarce. They operated out of an old church and couldn't exactly call up a contractor in the Deep South and cut them a check for new dorms or classrooms. But back in those days, buildings at Tuskegee were built by guess who? The students. Yeah, that would have been like all of you.

As a part of their work study, Tuskegee students spent hours-- on top of their studies, in the evenings and in the sweltering Alabama heat-- constructing their campus from scratch. And even more incredibly, was without the resources that they needed to build those early structures, including a science building and a dorm and a very impressive church built to hold 2,400 people, the students of Tuskegee-- under Robert Taylor's direction-- handmade the millions of bricks necessary to build the buildings. Yes, they literally made their own bricks.

Students and instructors worked together to draw blueprints and chop down and work the lumber, and they installed the steam heating and the electrical lighting. So the next time you all are feeling just a little overworked or unappreciative of the facilities that surround you, just try to imagine how hungry you would have to be for an education before you would agree to build the bricks and the mortar for your campus by hand, and literally raise the roof on your own institution.

So I join you today humbled by the far more challenging road that my great-grandfather and so many others before him-- as they strived down life's pathway-- what kind of life they must've lived. And I stand on their shoulders.

So in the spirit of full disclosure, as I address a room full of-- I know, very scientific minds steeped in technology-- I should mention that I began as a pre-med student. Yes I did, way back in the day. Attempting to follow in my father's path, who you also heard was a physician.

But trust me when I say no drawing board has ever been erased and re-drawn more quickly as mine was after my first day in anatomy class, looking at a cadaver. It was over, it was just all over at that very moment. My major, my career plans, my stomach all turned on a dime that day. All of them, but I never looked back.

So as proud as I am of my roots-- and I am-- I listen to my gut. And so far, it's worked out okay. I would not have been a very good physician, I promise you.

And I've had the privilege of spending my life doing the work that I care passionately about. And I strongly, strongly urge you to do the same. Listen to that quiet voice inside of you and find your passion, and pursue it with all of your heart.

I realized in preparing my remarks for today that my great-grandfather's story truly illustrates the message that I want to deliver to all of you today. His story was only possible because for him and for his father before him, the doorway to opportunity was cracked open. Someone put a tool in Henry Taylor's hand and gave him access to the resources and to the knowledge he needed to put his talents to work. His son was inspired by his dad's success in independence, and pursued a life that would have been unthinkable in his family just one generation earlier.

As I walk through my great-grandfather's old stomping grounds here today and I try to imagine what it must have been like for him, I feel truly inspired by all of the seemingly-insurmountable challenges that he overcame, and his tremendous accomplishments after he graduated from here. Yet still, I cannot help but think of the millions of men and women throughout the years-- of equal talent, of equal potential to my great grandfather-- whose dreams were never realized. Who never caught even a glimpse of their rightful destiny, who never had an opportunity to show what they could do.

Women, immigrants, slaves, and descendants. The rural and urban poor. Countless Americans left out and held back throughout the centuries, their dreams deferred and quietly replaced with tragic or seemingly-hollow, hollow realities.

Loss on this scale comes at a cost to us all. As we aren't just denying the individuals their right to live full and vibrant lives that they so rightly deserve, we're forfeiting part of this country's greatest asset, the creativity and ingenuity of all of the American people.

President Obama began his career-- as I hope you all know-- as a community organizer dedicated to opening doors to open opportunities for those who are so often left behind. Through his career and his presidency, he's advocated for equal opportunity for all, knowing that our competitive strength-- the United States's competitive strength-- comes from unleashing our full potential. And in his last State of the Union, the President made it clear that our economy will only thrive if every person who is prepared to work hard and play by the rules can have that opportunity to succeed.

But of course, these ideals aren't easy ones to reach. And in the last 30 years, there have been tremendous advancements in science and technology-- many invented by graduates of MIT-- that have dramatically changed the way we live. Certainly when I was in school, the Compton Lecture Series would not have been live streamed over the internet, with people tweeting their critique of the remarks in real time.

You guys aren't doing that to me, are you? You're not tweeting, I hope you're not tweeting.

For these advances have also led to great efficiencies, which have eliminated a lot of middle class, good paying jobs. If you walk through a factory floor today-- as I often do-- you'll see far fewer people-- it's really quiet-- and some very sophisticated computers who drive the assembly lines instead of people. And even though corporate profits and stock prices have rarely been higher, wages for those who are not at the top income bracket have flatlined, and inequality has deepened.

As we continue to recover from the worst recession since the Great Depression, there are still too many Americans who are out of work, who are working their fingers to the bone just to get by. They are living paycheck to paycheck, unable to save and invest in their children's education, or their communities, or small businesses they've dreamt of opening.

Quite simply, we can and we must do better than that. We owe it to every American who dreams of a better life, and not just because it's the right thing to do-- which it is the right thing to do-- but because it's also smart for our economy. And that is why we need to continue ramping up our focus in investment in science and technology, and on educating the future generations for the jobs of the future.

Like the President said in this year's State of the Union, the nation that goes all-in on innovation today will own the global economy tomorrow. And this is an edge that America cannot surrender.

The point here is that when we're working to ensure that all Americans have full access to education, resources, role models, encouragement, opportunities that they need to reach their full potential, we are unleashing the full force of our economic capacity. And we're positioning ourselves to lead the global economy for the next generation.

So let's talk a little bit about what we can do together to get that done. I hope you've noticed that the President is doing everything he can to make it cool to be a geek. Tell me you've noticed that. He's making it cool, that's right, he's making it cool.

I'm not sure when we've ever had a president who was so out in front with his support of geeks. And I would think that here on that campus, that would be a very important priority. He's got your back, he's looking out for you all.

We have a new "We the Geeks" series of Google Hangouts that we do at the White House, that highlight the future of science and technology and innovation here in the United States. Each Hangout features administration and private sector leaders covering topics like commercial space exploration, and engineering, and how students and professionals like you are turning science fiction into science fact. So spread the word, hashtag #WeTheGeeks. I'm serious about that, I expect to see you guys on there.

Then there's the fact that the President has invested \$4.35 billion in a Race to the Top competition to encourage states to improve their curriculum and STEM achievement, while broadening the participation of women and girls and people of color. We also have instituted one of the coolest new traditions at the White House, a science fair, where a handful of young scientists and inventors come to the White House and show off their skills for the President.

If you haven't seen the footage, it's really worth checking out online. We are talking about really, really cool strategies for treating or diagnosing cancer and much more. It's actually pretty awesome, I think you guys should check it out.

At our first fair, the President launched an initiative called Educate to Innovate, to mobilize hundreds of CEOs to invest in improving the country's STEM education, infrastructure, and preparing 100,000 new STEM teachers in 10 years and diversifying our STEM talent pool. The federal government Office of Personnel Management is working to encourage and train our collective 200,000 federal employees to serve as mentors. And these are just some of the efforts aimed at moving America's students from the middle of the pack globally, to the head of the pack for science and math achievement in 10 years.

Let's see if we can make that competition, make it even harder to get into MIT. It's already hard enough, I know you would say. Well, you're already here, so you don't mind if it gets harder. But the folks who come after you.

As chair of the White House Council on Women and Girls-- which I am terribly proud to do, it's five years old this month-- I'm charged with leading the administration's efforts to remove barriers for women interested in STEM, while working to change the narrative in this country about who is supposed to grow up dreaming of becoming a scientist, an astronaut, or an engineer. A few years back, the President welcomed three winners from the International Google Science Fair contest-- it was their first one online. All three winners-- I'm proud to say-- were young American women. All three of them.

One having conducted research to improve ovarian cancer and the treatment of people with resistance to common chemotherapy drugs, she was in high school. Another having executed a study on the effects of air quality on the lungs of people with asthma, she was in high school. And another conducting research on how certain marinades can reduce the amount of cancer-causing compounds that are produced by grilling meat-- yeah, something to think about the next time you're barbecuing-- she was in high school.

They all came into the Oval Office and explained their projects to the President, and he pretended to have even the faintest idea how they could possibly have come up with what they did. The truth is little girls like to get their hands dirty, too. They like to solve problems, they like to build things, and they like to roll up their sleeves and shape their own destinies. Something which should be the right of every single American.

Even after you become parents and you're no longer cool. Which brings me-- I know, I can say that because I'm a very uncool mom-- which brings me to something that we are very excited about, that the President just announced yesterday at the White House. He's going to convene the first ever White House Summit on Working Families this June 23rd. Why is that relevant to you? The summit is going to convene business leaders, labor leaders, workers, academics, elected officials, advocates, the media, and students too, to discuss how we can all work together to build a 21st century workplace where everyone can thrive-- move up-- while still fulfilling your responsibilities at home and in your community.

Women are graduating from college at rates equal to men, graduating from graduate school at a higher rate than men. Their careers are starting out on similar tracks, but we still need to get more women interested in STEM fields. But by their 30s, women start to lose ground.

Women only make \$0.77 on the dollar in this 21st century, women of color even less. And women still assume primary responsibility for childcare and elder care. I can remember very clearly when I was a young single mom, the types of stresses and decisions I was faced with in my career. We have to do a better job of ensuring that we're giving parents of both genders the flexibility and the support that they need to fulfill their responsibilities at home without ceding ground professionally.

And then there's college access and success. Earlier this year, we welcomed a couple of hundred presidents of college and universities to the White House, to discuss strategies for improving access to education for all hardworking students, regardless of where they grew up or their economic status. University presidents from all across the country have pledged through this effort, and President Reif is no exception.

He's made a tremendous commitment on behalf of MIT to refine and strengthen outreach to high-achieving, low-income students. Your president and his counterparts around the country are becoming more and more focused on making sure that our campuses reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of our country. To make sure we are tapping into our full potential and not leaving American talent and ability on the table.

And finally, I hope some of you saw the President's announcement about My Brother's Keeper initiative. It's an effort to mobilize private and public sector forces to empower and support our boys and young men of color. To reverse negative trends and to make sure that they are in positions to compete and succeed, and lead in tomorrow's future and change the workforce and be a productive member of that workforce.

Whereas past generations could make a solid career with some carpentry skills and a good work ethic and a tool box, our kids and our grandkids are going to need that plus highly-technical training with computers and coding-- which I still don't know what that means-- and technology. Maybe I'll learn before I leave here today.

The genesis of all of these efforts stem from our understanding that we can't afford to let the potential talent, ideas, and productivity of any segment of America go to waste. The world is just too competitive, and the stakes are just too high.

When I think about my great-grandfather's life, I have to also think about how many millions of sons of former slaves never got their shot, and where their great-granddaughters are today. For every one of us in this room, we have been given the gift of an outstanding education, and we have to make it count. I don't say this to inspire guilt in you, but to urge your action and to urge your commitment to service. No matter the career that you choose, there is always room in your life for service.

It's a false choice that young people often saddle themselves with, to choose between ambition and altruism, between promoting opportunity for all and climbing the rungs of wealth and success. To quote Martin Luther King, it's not either/or, it's both/and. And that's not to say that it's going to be easy to make the kind of progress that we have to make, or simply understand the role that you're going to play.

But I promise you, it's going to be hard, it's going to be challenging, there are going to be setbacks along the way. I only hope that you will always strive to make a real impact and always look for ways to serve others.

History is full of stories of people beating the odds and capitalizing on the smallest of opportunities, in ways that can change the trajectory of their families forever. All Henry Taylor needed was some tools and a little bit of training, and his son then stood on his shoulders and reached even higher. From slavery to the hollows of MIT in one generation. Not even someone with spirit and vision and determination to succeed could possibly have imagined that his great-granddaughter would be serving as a Senior Advisor to the first African American president of the United States, and being right back here on this campus.

The arc of my family's progress fills me with enormous pride and gives me boundless appreciation for the lasting impact that the policies and priorities that we set will have on millions of lives for generations down the road. So I challenge each of you-- our innovators, our modern-day pioneers-- to take some of your great talent and apply it to growing our economy and creating opportunity for all. Whether your career takes you to a research lab, the classroom, a factory floor, or the furthest reaches of space, remember that your legacy will be determined by more than by what you simply accomplish, but also by what you do for society. And whether you have left the doors that you walked through open just a little wider for those who follow.

MIT gave a very young Robert Taylor a shot at a time when many would not have, and for that I am grateful. It wasn't a handout, it was an opportunity, and he did not waste that opportunity. He used what he had and he built a new future for my family. And even where there were no bricks, he made them by hand.

So make the most of this opportunity that you have. I truly can't wait to see what each of you do to build your lives. Thank you very much.

[APPLAUSE]

JARRETT: Now I get to come out from behind that podium and I can actually see you, I can get a little closer to you.

REIF: Let me just say that we have a couple of microphones here. So please if you want to ask question, just join a microphone and we'll be taking a question from those who are standing.

JARRETT: Didn't even know you were there. Don't be shy. But be polite, please be polite.

REIF: At least start polite.

JARRETT: At least start out polite, exactly.

AUDIENCE: Hi, thank you so much for coming to speak with us. I just wanted to ask you to speak a little bit more about the Council for Women and Girls.

JARRETT: Sure, sure. So we created-- I shouldn't say we-- President Obama created, by executive order five years ago, the White House Council on Women and Girls. The council is comprised of representatives of every federal agency and department, and we've come together with the simple charge of challenging ourselves-- of every policy, every program, every piece of legislation we support-- to question ourselves as to whether it has the opportunity to improve the quality of life for women and girls.

So it's everything from-- as I talked about-- getting young girls interested in STEM-- figuring out what to do from the early age through changing the college curriculum, what can we do to attract them and keep them in the field-- to ending sexual assault on college campuses. About a month and a half ago, the President came to one of our White House Council on Women and Girl meetings and he challenged us to come back in 90 days with ways of dramatically improving the reduction of sexual assault on campuses.

Right now, the statistics are pretty stunning. One in five women will either be raped or experience attempted rape in their lifetime. 80% of those happen before the age of 25, 50% happen before the age of 18.

And so you look around the room and you see the women who are here, you can just imagine what some of you have been through. We've got to do better than that. And it's not just on college campuses, within our own military we have to do better. And I make the analogy because-- in a sense-- the people who serve in the military are in our charge, and the people who attend colleges and universities are in the charge of those administrators.

And so what can we do to highlight the best practices for bringing down that to zero, share those best practices around the country, and really step up our effort? So those are just two examples of the many things we do.

We are looking right now at what we can do to close the pay gap between men and women, what can we do to improve workplace flexibility? We've had a series of forums at the White House focusing on equal pay and workplace flexibility, and have brought in employers who have great best practices to share what they're doing.

The Council of Economic Advisors-- I won't answer all of my questions this long, I promise. You hit on something I actually really know a lot about. The Council of Economic Advisors did a report about three years ago that demonstrates that companies that have flexible workplaces are more productive and more profitable. So you're not just doing it because it's good for the women, it's good for your business, it enables you to attract and retain talent in record numbers. Because everybody is demanding the flexibility right now.

So every single agency has a work plan, and we change it every year. We submit our budget tailored to how we can fulfill that work plan, and it's really cool.

AUDIENCE: And if I could just ask a follow-up on that, will the Council for Women and Girls continue after President Obama's presidency?

JARRETT: Well, that will be up to the next president. But I have to tell you, it's going to be really hard to get rid of it. And we try to do-- I mean, our law-- it's a very good question because so much of what you do when you're there reflects the values of the president. And one of the challenges is figuring out how do you institutionalize the changes that you make so it makes it harder for somebody else to unravel them?

And believe me, we tried to unravel a lot of the policies of the prior administration. But something like Women and Girls, it's going to be-- I just, I can't imagine. And hopefully, everybody here will hold the administration accountable to continue what I think has created enormous benefits to women and girls all over our country. Thank you, great question.

AUDIENCE: Thank you so much for being here. I think I'm very excited about a lot of the programs that you talked about, but I'm also very curious about the financing for a lot of these programs. Because they're going to have to happen on the street, at the local level, at the organizational level. So any thoughts on that, of how are these things going to be financed in general?

JARRETT: Yes, excellent question. You can't pick the time that you get elected, but my goodness, probably the best time to effect enormous change is not when you inherit the worst economic recession since the Great Depression. Because not only did the country suffer and many, many people lost jobs-- when the President took office, our country was losing 750,000 jobs a month. Now we've had to dig our way out of an enormous recession, and over the last 48 months we've created over 8.5 million jobs.

But there's still too many people who are unemployed, which then reduces the revenues that are available not just at the federal level, but state and local government as well. They're really hurting, and so what we're doing is we're having to be more creative and using our dollars to leverage change at the local level.

So for example, the My Brother's Keeper initiative has no new federal dollars in it. What the President has challenged us to do is to look at all the federal agencies and the programs that we currently fund, and do a real assessment of which ones are working and which ones are not, which ones should be consolidated. And how can we leverage, how can we use our dollars to leverage change? So challenging the private sector, challenging state and local government, that we'll provide a little resource but then you have to come in and demonstrate evidence-based programs that are actually changing the lives of these boys and men.

So it requires much more creativity as we try to get our fiscal house in order, but ultimately-- and it gets back, actually, to the first question of making sure that these initiatives continue-- when you have a partnership with a public sector through the private sector and the foundations, et cetera, and you get buy-in broadly around the community of our country, it's harder to change courses. And people want to support what works. When we met with a group of business leaders and faith leaders and foundations, and we encouraged them to support, and we showed them the evidence that demonstrates programs that are working, everybody wants to be for that. I mean, it's very simple to invest when you see the return that you're getting, and you understand how it's really in your self-interest to make sure that we're not leaving a whole segment of our population behind.

So it's much more challenging now than when revenues are abundant. But ultimately, I think the sustainability of these initiatives comes when they are in partnership.

AUDIENCE: Thanks for your lecture and your time. In my limited experience, I've seen that growing up kids are easily excited by these STEM concepts. And I've seen that the largest impediment to children, actually, regardless of race or ethnicity or gender-- a large impediment to pursuing STEM education or the different aspects of STEM is confidence. I can't tell you how many times I've seen oh I can't do math, oh I can't do biology, that's hard.

JARRETT: That would be me, yes. I tried, though. I did give it a good college try.

AUDIENCE: Well, a lot of people don't, you know?

JARRETT: Yes.

AUDIENCE: And a lot of the STEM outreach has been focused on inciting this excitement or showing the highlights of once you go through the process, but there's very little that's focused on overcoming that lack of confidence. And I was wondering what ideas you had about countering this deficiency that's just part of someone that's just hesitant to go through with some of these difficult processes?

JARRETT:

Yes, I have thoughts on that. Mentorship. Mentorship from somebody who the person can relate to. And I'll tell you two stories, two quick stories.

Ursula Burns-- who you all may know as the CEO of Xerox-- she grew up poor in New York, but she had an aptitude for engineering. And she didn't even really know she had an aptitude for engineering, or what that would mean that she was good in math when she was in high school. And somehow, someone said to her there is an internship available at Xerox, why don't you apply for it? And she did, and she walked in the door at Xerox and she looked around and she thought it looked pretty nice. And people there mentored her, and now she's the CEO of Xerox.

And I was just with her yesterday and I tell her I tell this story all the time, and she said it wouldn't have happened if she hadn't had that internship where she could actually see what the talent she had could translate into. And so part of it-- the confidence-- comes from trying something and seeing that you're good at it, and having an experience in an environment where people want you to succeed. And if you're in an internship, they're investing in you and they want you to succeed. So that's one story.

Another story, this came from-- Magic Johnson was at the Our Brother's Keeper initiative. And he told a story about having a partnership with the leadership at Allstate Insurance in Chicago. And the CEO of Allstate offered to come out and talk to some of the young people in a group that Magic was trying to help. And Magic said no, how about if I bring the kids to the Allstate Building and you introduce them to some officers of color who can talk to them.

And so he took the kids out to Allstate and they had a great time. And he said he was listening to the kids on the bus going home, and they were all saying I want to work there, that was cool. And I met somebody who I could relate to.

So I think women and people of color who often shy away from the STEM fields, they need that mentorship, they need that connection, they need to see how that hard work will translate into something that will be a very fulfilling career. But you're right, there is a psychology to it that can be as much of a deterrent as the actual work itself.

AUDIENCE:

A quick follow-up, I'm sorry. I'm just wondering for someone in your position or someone that has the ability to make programs on the national scale, how much you've even attempted to provide this personal touch on such a broad scale of mentorship?

JARRETT:

Well, we do-- at the White House-- we have a mentorship program at the White House with young girls who are in DC. And through many of our offices that touch science and technology and engineering, we have mentors. And as I mentioned in my remarks, we have about 200,000 federal employees who are in the STEM field who all mentor and go to schools and talk to young people and try to get them excited about it and try to build that confidence. Because there's nothing like success to make you feel confident, and sometimes you've just got to get that foot in the door.

And if you have other ideas for ways that we could do it, we're all ears.

AUDIENCE:

I appreciate this.

JARRETT:

You could help, too. Go visit a school, talk to some young people.

AUDIENCE: Thank you for coming out here, and more importantly, thank you and thank you to the administration for all the support that you've given us researchers for the work that we do. We really appreciate it.

I think it's great that the White House is pushing for encouraging people to pursue STEM careers. But at the same time, I'm wondering about the economic incentives for going into STEM careers.

For example, over the past 10, 15 years, wages for people working in engineering have remained mostly stagnant. And I believe one reason for that is because of H1B visas. So I was wondering if you could comment on immigration policies as they affect employment and wage growth?

JARRETT: Absolutely, and I thought about putting it in my remarks but I couldn't imagine anyone would ask that question here. So simply put, the President believes that we should staple a green card onto every college or graduate degree. Why on earth do we have-- a little applause, you like that. It was an easy one. That was pretty easy.

Why would we have the best universities and colleges in the world train people and then force them to go back home where they compete with our companies here? That doesn't make any sense in the world. And for five years, the President has been trying to get comprehensive immigration reform through Congress, and we are still hopeful that it could happen as early as this year.

And it has been unnecessarily tough. Obviously, the Senate passed a bill-- that was imperfect, but it's certainly one that we would support-- that did address this issue of high-tech immigration. And it's languishing, as many things do in the House. But I think-- based on the President's conversations with Speaker Boehner-- Speaker Boehner is committed to trying to get this done this year. And we will work with him to try to do it because you're right.

At the same time, as we have so many Americans who are still out of work, we also have vacancies in the STEM field. And when I was out in Silicon Valley not that long ago, they were telling me about paying a finder's fee if you could find an engineer for them with the specifications that they needed. We need to harness that talent right here and keep it here, and we also have to expand the number of people who are going into the field. We have to do both, and that's another one where it's not either/or, it's both/and.

I think I mentioned this in my remarks as well, part of what makes the United States so excellent is our innovation and our ability to think big and then follow up those great ideas. And that's why the President-- when he first came in, and every year since-- at a time when we've had to shrink our budget, has invested in basic science and research and technology, including health care technology. Because we appreciate that those are the growth industries of the future, and those are the industries-- if we position ourselves right-- that will keep us globally competitive.

REIF: Let me just say, time is getting tight. So we'll take the four questions that we have on the microphone, and we'll stop there, please.

JARRETT: I'll be faster. I know I've been long on my answers.

AUDIENCE: Thank you. A little bit in relation to that question, I think also just touching on the people that are already here. My family is undocumented, my mom has a daycare center, I'm a student at MIT, and I really want to appreciate DACA, Different Action for Childhood Arrivals, and Brother's Keeper, and other initiatives.

But I really want to ask the question-- and this is really because it's hard to study when our communities and our families are being separated by the Department of Home Security every day. And because it's also hard to study, when I was at UCLA and knowing that a lot of young people of color are being criminalized and taken into jail when they should be in school alongside me. Why is it that the President-- who has been promising comprehensive immigration reform-- continues to have the world record for deportations amongst any US administration in the history of this country? Two million and rising.

And also, why is it that companies like CCA and GEO are allowed to make profit off of people in jail? I don't understand why that continues to happen.

JARRETT:

Well, let's talk about the President's record. Let's talk about the fact that most of the people who are in that statistic are stopped at the border. Those are not families who've come into the country and are leading lives and productive citizens, those are people who were stopped from coming in at the border. And we are a nation of laws and we are a nation of immigrants, and we have to balance those both out.

And what the president believes-- which is why he hasn't just supported legislation that deals with the high-tech. Because for a while there, the tech community was just focused on let's get the high-tech visas in place. And he said, I'm not willing to do just a piece of this without a solution for the dreamers, without a solution for the people who want a path to citizenship, who've been in this country, who are productive, and if they pay back taxes and they get right with the law should have a path to citizenship. That's the position he's been taking.

One of the things that you realize when you're in the executive branch of government-- and that you all learn in theory when you're in school-- is that there are three branches of government. Congress passes a law, we execute them. The president cannot unilaterally determine that he's not going to follow a law, he can't do that.

And so that's why he can't just say, we're not going to deport people. The law requires us-- we're not going to have a back and forth here, I'm just going to answer your question or we'll never get to the other ones. He has to follow the law, he has to do what the law says. And what he has to do is petition Congress to change the law, which is what he has been passionately trying to do.

And so the focus for this really should be questioning why it is that the House of Representatives hasn't passed a piece of legislation that the vast majority of American people support. That's the question that we should ask.

AUDIENCE:

And my second question? I had the second question that I posed already.

JARRETT:

How about this? How about at the end, we'll have that conversation.

AUDIENCE:

Promise?

JARRETT:

I promise, I'm not going anywhere. I promise, but then don't go away. Don't go away, all right.

AUDIENCE:

Good afternoon. On a lighter note, I was just thinking that when you were talking about the We the Geek campaign, it might be really interesting if you have an undergraduate hackathon at the White House.

JARRETT:

What would that mean? Because hack is another word. We were going to be polite, no hacking. What's a hackathon?

AUDIENCE:

Now you're putting me on the spot. Essentially students stay up all night and they come up with something cool.

JARRETT: Oh, OK. I thought you were going to hack into our computers.

AUDIENCE: No, no.

JARRETT: Now you see why I was getting a little nervous here. So they stay up all night and come up with something cool?

AUDIENCE: Correct.

JARRETT: One night?

AUDIENCE: Yes.

JARRETT: Come on down. I'm serious. I'm serious, that would be so cool. Absolutely.

Absolutely, and because it was your idea, pick 10 friends and come on down. And we'll have our chief technology officer stay up all night with you. I will come in the morning and check on you and see how you did.

I think that would be fun. Is it something you're serious about?

AUDIENCE: I wouldn't joke about it.

JARRETT: All right, then give me your contact information. We'll do that.

AUDIENCE: My final question-- it's kind of short-- but what's the toughest issue that President Obama has come to you with? And what was your advice on it?

JARRETT: Oh, my goodness. You know what, I can't answer it. This is what we say to him sometimes in jest, though it's very serious. Questions don't come to him unless they are so complicated that it's often choosing between really, really bad and bad.

Because if it were easy, I would decide it and I would never take it to him. That's really the truth. If you think of all of the layers that something goes through before it gets to his desk, it has got to be very, very complicated and hard.

I will say more generally-- because I absolutely never discuss conversations I have with him because that's just how we roll-- but I will say the issues that have been the hardest are the ones that affect putting men and women in harm's way. And his responsibilities as Commander-in-Chief are the ones that he stays up all night thinking and trying to figure out what's right for America.

And I will tell you-- it's on a somber note but yet again, amazingly patriotic-- before he made his decision about increasing troops in Afghanistan several years ago, he thought about it long and hard and he put the Defense Department through their paces to give him a recommendation that was evidence-based. And then he delivered his decision at West Point.

And I went with him to West Point, and I sat in the audience and I looked around at the faces of these young men and women. Knowing that he was addressing people who were getting ready to not only put themselves in harm's way, who were younger than my daughter, who may not come back or may not come back as they left. There's nothing harder than that. And that is the loneliest, hardest decision that a Commander-in-Chief ever makes, and it's his decision alone.

And I think one of the things that I hadn't fully appreciated-- and you know what, I supposed intuitively but I hadn't really fully had it sink in until I got there-- is that in the end, I'm just an advisor. He can take my advice, he can leave my advice. Same thing for everybody who works for him.

Ultimately, the decisions-- the big, tough decisions-- are his. And I sleep better knowing that a president such as the one we have, with his values and his discipline and his commitment to the American people, is the one making those decisions.

AUDIENCE: Ms. Jarrett, thanks for coming in. So I just have a question about the minimum wage. President Obama had said they'll raise the wage from [? \$10.10. ?] So I'm just wondering when you raise the wage for the public sector, somewhere else has got to give in.

So I'm just wondering, what's the impact of this minimum wage raise and do you think it'll hurt job creation in the private sector? And also bigger picture, what the Obama administration is going to do going forward to create more jobs for America.

JARRETT: Well, the answer to the second question is I'm counting on you. Because the long-term, sustainable health of our country does not rest with the federal government creating jobs, we should foster an environment in which you can unleash your talents. The real job creation is in the private sector. So we educate people, we try to provide them with the skills they need, we provide infrastructure, we create and foster this environment that makes us so globally competitive, but the job creation comes from you.

Wait, what was the first question? I should never answer the second question first. What was it? Oh, you forgot, too.

AUDIENCE: I forgot, too, actually.

JARRETT: It was a good question. What was it?

AUDIENCE: Yeah, I don't know. Minimum wage.

JARRETT: Oh, minimum wage. Thank you, thank you. All right, so the President has called for raising the minimum wage-- graduated over time-- to \$10.10, and that would be nationally. And our economists-- and we have some of the-- many from here, no doubt-- some of the best economist in the world who think it's good for the economy. You're going to put a little extra money in a lot of pockets.

And if you look at the minimum wage-- getting back to my White House Council on Women and Girls hat-- disproportionately low-wage workers are women, and oftentimes single moms. And so just having a little bit more money in their pocket will help them, they will go spend that money, and that will be good for the economy. And so net, we think it's going to create jobs.

We weren't able to get it passed yet through Congress-- we're still trying-- but in the meantime, the President is going to require all employees of federal contractors-- which he can do using his authority, it's within his right as President of the Executive Branch-- to require them to raise their minimum wages. And what we've seen since the President's announcement is companies like The Gap-- we were in New York a couple days ago and we dropped in on a Gap store.

He hadn't been shopping in New York in a very long time. It was very cool, he said, to be able to just stand on a sidewalk not under a tent.

But we went in and we were lifting up The Gap because they-- on their own-- have decided to raise the minimum wage. You're seeing states like Connecticut, cities like San Antonio, all around the country, deciding to raise their minimum wage. And we would prefer to do it at a national level, but we'll take it any way we can get it.

AUDIENCE: Thank you.

JARRETT: Looks like you get the last question, plus my follow-up on the side.

AUDIENCE: Thank you very much for your wonderful lecture. I have a question. What are the White House initiatives for women from the countries who are fighting for their democratic values, like Ukraine? And where they show their incredible leadership in advocating democratic values, and now they are speaking for the peace in Ukraine.

JARRETT: Excellent question. So two years ago, Secretary Clinton-- when she was Secretary of State-- and I launched a new initiative called Equal Futures. And Equal Futures is a challenge to countries all around the world to make a commitment to focus on the economic security and political advancement of women in those countries. And right now, we have 23 countries and counting who want to work with us, share best practices about what they're doing to get women into the political system.

Because I'm a strong believer that if we had a Congress that had more women in it, we'd get a lot more done than we do. Believe me on that. Even the guys are clapping, you know I'm right.

And so we are hoping to use this initiative to reach out to countries all across the world and share what works and lead by example. So we're doing the same thing in the United States. Economic and political empowerment of women is the way to success in those countries.

And we need to support countries, which is why the President is standing so steadfast with the people of Ukraine to support those democratic values. And we'll do everything within our power around the world to do that and lift it up. And it's a matter of common interests and common values, and ones that we should support. Good question, good question.

REIF: Well, we have been exposed to a tremendous privilege and an amazing treat. Let's show our deep appreciation for the Honorable Valerie Jarrett.

JARRETT: Thank you, thank you very much. That was fun.