

For Such a Time as This:

An Economist's Perspective

BY SHERI GRIMES

Pacific students, faculty and staff members filled the lecture hall in Wendell Phillips Center on a Friday afternoon in April to hear Economics Professor Benjamin Dennis share his "Reflections on the Economic Crisis." Dennis, on leave from Pacific, spent a year working as a senior economist on international finance and development with the White House Council of Economic Advisers.

In his 40-minute presentation, Dennis used three illustrations to describe factors that have contributed to the current crisis and discussed perspectives on how the country might reprioritize economic choices. The question-and-answer session following the presentation was lively.

Considering the volatility of public opinion at the time, Dennis made the point that his comments reflected his own perspective and were not to be construed as official policy.

Dennis first took leave from Pacific in the summer of 2006 to work with the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). Formed by the Bush administration, MCC delivers foreign aid based on the premise that aid will be used to greater benefit in countries with good governance. Dennis said MCC evaluates countries for good governance

based upon a commitment to policies that promote political and economic freedom, investments in education and health, the sustainable use of natural resources, control of corruption, and respect for civil liberties and the rule of law. Dennis worked with Tanzania, Burkina Faso and Malawi to identify constraints to growth. He also performed the due diligence once specific proposals were submitted.

The son of a Liberian anthropologist, Dennis's interest in development began as a child. During summers in Liberia, he watched his father contend with the Liberian government to get a road built to his village. Understanding how societies work fascinated Dennis.

In graduate school, he served as an advisor to the minister of finance in Indonesia. It was during the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s. As Dennis told the Pacific audience, "This is not my first financial crisis, or your last." Financial crises are a fact of existence in society he said, also citing the stock market crisis and the dot.com crisis in the 1990s.

This clearly is one of the most serious crises to have come along, and to affect the global economies so pervasively, he said. He expects people will be studying and arguing about its



causes for many years to come.

So, why would he want to take a position in the White House Council of Economic Advisers at a time like this?

"How could I not?" he answered. "There will probably never be a more significant time in my lifetime or a greater opportunity to make a difference." He added: "I feel I've trained my whole life for this."

Dennis said that the magnitude of this crisis has caused some Americans to question the economic priorities of the past and to reconsider where resources should be allocated in the future.

"What kind of society do you want to shape?" he asked the students. It's important to help students see the tremendous opportunity to remake society with a deeper sense of purpose, said Dennis.

In the meantime, he admitted, students likely face a difficult job market. Recovery will take time. Dennis encouraged students

to consider career options they might not have considered previously, to create new possibilities. With this encouragement, Dennis put a different spin on economist Paul Romer's famous quip, "A crisis is a terrible thing to waste."

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