

Diversity or Bust: Why Inclusivity Must Become a Top Priority for Higher Education

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At the risk of appearing to go down the contested legal path of affirmative action – which I and many of you have travelled all too often – I want to begin my remarks today with a quote from Justice Sandra Day O’Connor in her decision in *Grutter v. Bollinger*. In outlining the compelling interest of diversity for education, business, the military, she reminds us that the very legitimacy of American institutions is at stake “because universities, and in particular law schools represent the training ground for a large number of the Nation’s leaders, *Sweatt v. Painter*, 339 U.S. 629, 634, the path to leadership must be *visibly open* {italics added} to talented and qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity.”²

I bring us back to this profound statement, not to mire us in the legal contest nor to overplay the role of law schools in training America’s leaders, but instead to remind us of what is at stake in this conversation – the perceived *legitimacy* of American institutions – not just educational, but those that we educate for – the police, the courts, government, the media, cultural institutions, banks, and so on – the very institutions that on one hand undergird our democracy and on the other hand are coming today under so much scrutiny over precisely a

¹ Keynote remarks delivered at the Posse Foundation Presidents Conference on Higher Education, *Thinking About Merit and Who Deserves To Be On Our Campuses*, New York City, Oct 15, 2015. I appreciate the contributions of my colleagues, Shirley Collado, Roland Anglin, and Peter Englot in the preparation of these remarks.

² Sandra Day O’Connor, writing for the majority in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, No. 02-241, Supreme Court, June 23, 2003, 3-4.

failure to evoke trust among the public, especially those groups too often and for too long left out, behind from the start in the ‘land of opportunity.’

For Whom is This a Land of Opportunity?

Arguably, we are not a country of opportunity for most first generation, poor, black, brown, Native American, or immigrant children – such that the label Dreamers could be used more broadly, capturing as it does, both the aspiration and perhaps the unreality of educational opportunity. The prevalence of such disparities in educational attainment have been widely noted in any number of recent reports and headlines, including Sean Reardon’s famously titled NY Times opinion piece: “*No Rich Child Left Behind.*”³ And since income inequality has increased substantially, as Chetty and his colleagues note in a recent NBER working paper, “the consequences of the ‘birth lottery’ – the parents to whom a child is born – are larger today than in the past, even though rank-order mobility has remained stable.”⁴ In fact, the U.S. stands below most other advanced economies in the OECD indices of social mobility (through education) – such that, for example, in Pell Institute data from 2013, 77% of children from families in the top income quartile attained a bachelor’s degree by age 24 and only 9% of those from the lowest income quartile – and the data are strongly skewed by race and ethnicity (2013 data from U.S. Census survey shows 70% of whites with some form of post-secondary education, compared to 57% for African Americans and 36% for Hispanics).⁵ And these disparities carry forward into the job market, as, for example, a survey by McKinsey of 2014 employment data showed an unemployment rate of 12.4% for black bachelor’s degree holders as compared to 5.6% for all degree holders surveyed.

³ Sean Reardon, “No Rich Child Left Behind,” *The New York Times*, April 27, 2013.

⁴ Chetty, Raj., Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, Emmanuel Saez, and Nicholas Turner. “Is the United States Still a Land of Opportunity? Recent Trends in Intergenerational Mobility.” NBER Working Paper Series. National Bureau of Economic Research, Jan. 2014. Web. 7 Sept. 2015. http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/images/mobility_trends.pdf.

⁵ See Anthony Carnevale and Nicole Smith, *The Economic Value of Diversity*, working paper, 2015, p.13; Anthony Carnevale and Jeffrey Strohl, *Separate and Unequal: How Higher Education Reinforced the Intergenerational Reproduction of White Privilege*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2013.



Are We Legitimate Anymore?

How long, one might ask, can American institutions – educational and beyond – maintain our legitimacy with a public whose diversity is, according to William Frey, “remaking the face of America,”⁶ while so few make it to our door, no less through and up the ladder? I don’t think it is exaggerating to call this a national crisis, and in many ways it is precisely the crisis that underlines the importance of what Posse and all of us gathered here today are trying to tackle. Take, for example, the training of a STEM workforce in which less than 20% of bachelors were awarded to under-represented minorities from 1993-2012,⁷ leading NYT columnist Charles Blow to wonder about “*A Future Segregated by Science*.”⁸ Indeed, examination of the lack of diversity in Silicon Valley not only brings that future to a current reality, but is spurring numerous projects like the Hidden Genius Project – which trains high school men of color in coding, web and app design, and team building skills⁹ -- complementing many similar programs for girls in coding¹⁰ as an effort to change that pattern of de-facto segregation in the technology industry.

And speaking of segregation, the last several decades have seen an alarming re-segregation of the nation’s schools, prisons, and neighborhoods, reminiscent of a pre-civil rights era, and a retrenchment on many of the key rights, voting in particular, and the progressive housing, employment, and educational policies enacted to ensure some leveling of an unequal playing field. Indeed, as I sat to write this speech, the *New York Times* underlined the urgency of this slide-back on core civil rights legislation, pointing in this case to how remarkably little

⁶ William Frey, *A Diversity Explosion: How New Racial Demographics are Remaking the Face of America*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 2015.

⁷ *Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering*, 2015, National Science Foundation Report.

⁸ Charles Blow, “A Future Segregated by Science?”, *The New York Times*, February 2, 2015.

⁹ See <http://www.hiddengeniusproject.org/>.

¹⁰ See the work of the non-profit Black Girls Code, www.blackgirlscode.com.

progress we have made in de-segregating housing nearly fifty years after the Fair Housing Act of 1968. In their editorial entitled: “The Architecture of Segregation,” citing the work of a colleague, Paul Jargowsky at Rutgers University-Camden and others, they point to HUD’s recent commitment to end decades of equivocation on fair housing goals to replace “segregated living patterns with truly integrated and balanced living patterns.”¹¹ Is it surprising then, in this regard, that we see an emergence even on college campuses of what Rupert Nacoste calls our “hibernating bigotry,”¹² for how can we banish those ghosts when we don’t mix in the course of daily life, sharing so few fundamental aspects of democratic living – neither schooling, nor worshiping, nor voting together?

These entrenched patterns of neighborhood homogeneity are one of the reasons that scholars like Nacoste at North Carolina State or Patricia Gurin at Michigan argue for the criticality of inter-group relations dialogues and courses once students (and all of us) arrive on college campuses. It is very hard to build a welcoming inclusive community if there is little basis for empathy, such that we don’t feel particularly connected to one another, having never lived together (in the same neighborhood), near each other (in the same community), or at least shared some similar daily experiences (rush hour on a crowded subway). Speaking more broadly, many have noted, for example, the movement in opinion polls in recent decades toward more support for LGBTQ rights, across the ideological spectrum, and speculated that this may be a function of more families feeling touched by the more open discussions of sexual orientation amongst young adults of late. The closer it gets to “home” the more likely you are to feel empathy, connection, and some sense of interdependence, leading Sheryl Gay Stolberg to speculate, for example, on Justice Kennedy’s recent court opinion on marriage equality as framed by tolerance developed on the ground in his Sacramento roots.¹³ By contrast, decades of white flight, suburbanization and the abandonment of urban centers, regressive housing policies, school choice rather than neighborhood community schools certainly have contributed to a pervasive disconnection across racial, ethnic, and class lines, adding to the corrosive effects of historical prejudice and biases that already divide society and make it harder as Rupert Nacoste noted to move from anxiety to respect.

Are We Visibly Open or Visibly Closed?

Framed in the light of both access and democratic engagement, as O’Connor did, then the compelling interest of diversity in higher education is at the core of the presumed social compact that we have with the public – all of us, whether leading public or private, highly selective or more broadly inclusive institutions – have a responsibility to think about our role in reopening

¹¹ Editorial, “The Architecture of Segregation,” *The New York Times*, September 6, 2015, SR8.

¹² Rupert W. Nacoste, *Taking on Diversity: How We Can Move from Anxiety to Respect*, Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 2015, p.160. See also Nancy Cantor, Mirror, Mirror: Reflections on Race and the Visage of Higher Education in America, *The Conversation*, June 23, 2015.

¹³ Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “Justice Anthony Kennedy’s Tolerance Is Seen in His Sacramento Roots,” *The New York Times*, June 21, 2015.

those doors and bolstering the legitimacy of our institutions – educational and beyond – doing what Harry Boyte called democracy’s education.¹⁴ And, in this regard, it could be argued that we are falling far short of that responsibility as a nation, as a sector, and within our own groupings of similar institutions.

O’Connor’s emphasis on the path to leadership being *visibly open* to all talented and qualified individuals serves to connect questions of merit directly to questions of social impact, begging for precisely the analysis that Lani Guinier so compellingly provides.¹⁵ What, indeed, is “merit” if it reproduces the very same disparities that reinforce the view that the pathways to opportunity in this country are *visibly closed* for (rather than designed to embrace) a growing proportion of our public? This is precisely what Posse’s inclusive assessment process reverses by going beyond the test scores, as our colleagues here implored from their perch on the ground as high school counsellors who see the merit and potential that often goes unobserved in our normative selection process. By contrast, leaving that talent out, as we routinely do, begs the question to be asked as to how hope and aspirations can be maintained when we have a persistent winnowing of American opportunity that is targeting both “new Americans” and traditionally excluded groups. As inspiring as it is to see some students make it through the merit gauntlet, it is even more discouraging and undermining of faith in the legitimacy of the system when majority minority communities see at the same time an explosion of youth disconnected from the educational system, or at best sent through the doors of vastly under-funded community colleges, working diligently to raise graduation rates.



But this too can change if we all step to the plate. In communities all around our nation, our colleges and universities sit as neighbors to communities of low income, often first generation, students of color and DREAMers. For these talented youth, the odds are

¹⁴ Harry Boyte (Ed.). *Democracy’s Education: Public Work, Citizenship, & the Future of Colleges and Universities*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015.

¹⁵ Lani Guinier, *The Tyranny of the Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015.

overwhelming that they will have their first taste of post-secondary education (if they are indeed able to navigate the K-12 pathway) in one of these often quite remarkable but beleaguered community colleges. Yet, as the task force which Tony Marx and Eduardo Padron co-chaired for the Century Foundation forcefully argued, there is a crying need and a realistic opportunity to “*bridge the higher education divide*,”¹⁶ by making common cause between our four year and two year institutions, just as we each need to do with K-12 schools. I saw both the opportunities and the challenges of this task, first by participating in that task force, but even more closely by witnessing how critical the 2+2 program between Syracuse University and Onondaga Community College turned out to be to our city-wide collaboration with the Syracuse City School District and the Say Yes to Education Foundation. Our collective impact commitment to close the educational opportunity gap for Syracuse city students – through wrap-around supports (before, during, and after school and in the summer) and increased college counselling and college scholarships with admission to any one of now over 60 private colleges and universities plus the NY State public institutions – depended in very clear ways on smoothing the pathway between K-12 to community college to four institutions. Indeed we could not develop the “farm team” of talented students from the Syracuse City School District to send to all of you in the *Say Yes Higher Education Compact* around the country, and to enroll in SU, without being joined at the hip with OCC and other community colleges in the area. We offered summer academies with engagement of local industry partners after high school graduation and before college, and enrollment in the community college that then bridged to a four year degree with predictive financial support to carry this talent pool forward. These kinds of cross-sector, cross-institutional educational pathway partnerships not only work to increase high school graduation and post-secondary attainment rates, they also build faith from otherwise marginalized and forgotten communities in the legitimacy of our institutions –visibly opening some otherwise apparently closed doors, as the successes that Say Yes is having around the country suggest.¹⁷

Why Can't We Grow Our Farm Teams, MLB Does?

By contrast, for those higher education leaders, present company excluded, who are more inclined to sit contentedly within our own sectors accepting the talent that survives and reaches us, rather than actively cultivating “farm teams” and regional compacts that cross sectors and align with community schools, the impact of this country’s “exploding diversity” may become a bit eye-opening soon. This is certainly in clear view to me as I sit in a metro area of Northern NJ that is increasingly defined by both the presence of the “Newest Americans,” many of whom attend my university (including dreamers whose families are undocumented), and by their neighbors whose families came in the Great Migration from the South, also in search of hope and opportunity for their progeny. And what I see in Newark is not unique to here, though it may be

¹⁶ See The Century Foundation Task Force on Preventing Community Colleges from Becoming Separate and Unequal, *Bridging the Higher Education Divide: Strengthening Community Colleges and Restoring the American Dream*. Washington, DC: The Century Foundation, 2013. www.tcf.org/bookstore/detail/bridging-the-higher-education-divide.

¹⁷ See <http://www.sayyestoeducation.org>.

useful to take a closer look at the experiences of the “hidden talent pool” in cities, those like Newark, NJ, and in rural communities as well.

Unlocking the Talent Dividend

Newark Residents Education Attained 2008-12	% Age 25+
Associate's degree	4.5%
Bachelor's degree	8.9%
Graduate or professional degree	3.6%
Associate's degree or higher	17.0%

Data from U.S. Bureau of Census, 5 Year A.C.S.

- Poverty rate: 28%
- 4,000 disconnected youth out of 10,000 high-school age youth
- Homicide rate of 33.4 vs. 4.5 statewide per 100,000
- 24% of residents reported fair or poor health in last 30 days
- Essex County: 42.22% of Black 3rd graders attend schools that perform in the bottom 10% of all NJ schools, while only .04% of white 3rd graders do



NEWARK
CITY OF LEARNING COLLABORATIVE
25% by 2025

- K-16 educational pathways
- Re-engage disconnected youth
- Retain college grads
- Re-engage adult learners



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Consider, for example, the impact on the social fabric of a community when what is most *visibly open* for many if not most high school-age boys (and girls increasingly) is a door to the criminal justice system, rather than a door to post-secondary opportunity. Isn't it possible that these so-called “disconnected youth” (some 4,000 in Newark who are not in their seats, along with another estimated 3,000 who are not thriving, in high school) could just as well be “opportunity youth” if they weren't disproportionately derailed early on in under-performing schools? For example, 42.22% of Essex County Black 3rd graders attend schools that perform in the bottom 10% of schools in NJ compared to .04% of white 3rd graders in the county. And allied disparities in discipline rates and special education designations also start at shockingly young ages. How can any discussion of “merit” be anything but shallow and meaningless in Essex County if we fail to take into account the enormous and cumulative effect of this disparity in where kids start – some never even get to first base, and some begin half way home already! What role, if any, does higher education have to play in changing this educational derailment, even as we all acknowledge its roots in systems beyond our direct control?

In Newark, we – and the “we” is not only my institution, Rutgers University-Newark, and its neighbor institutions – Essex County College, NJ Institute of Technology, Bloomfield College, Pillar College, Berkeley College, and Rutgers Biomedical Health Sciences – but more than 60 community-based college pipeline organizations, and the Newark Public Schools and Newark Fund for Charter Schools, as well as the large corporate anchors of Prudential and Panasonic and Audible.com, the Council of NJ Grantmakers, and the City of Newark – have banded together to reverse this trend and open the doors of post-secondary attainment through the *Newark City of Learning Collaborative*.¹⁸ We know that to reach our goal of 25% by 2025 (of residents of the City of Newark with post-secondary degrees) will and does require a real

¹⁸ See <http://www.nclc2025.org/>.

reach into the K-12 system, including creating cohorts that travel through it (Posses if you will), college success centers throughout the city, and increased scholarship availability. It requires bridging that higher education divide by smoothing our degree pathways – including articulations of curriculum and course requirements that preserve enough financial aid to make graduation a feasible goal. It involves innovating with new bridge programs, like our Northern NJ Bridges to Baccalaureate STEM program connecting students in six Hispanic-serving county colleges to the eight four year institutions in our Garden State LSAMP Alliance.¹⁹ It means looking for talented youth who need to be given a real opportunity to reconnect by re-entering the educational pathway, as for example in the NJ Step Program we run at Rutgers-Newark for currently and recently incarcerated students,²⁰ and in our collaborations with *Youth Build*²¹ and other alternative education and workforce training programs. As we saw abundantly in evidence when we held a *GradNation* Summit in Newark,²² there is plenty of forgotten talent to be cultivated if we all just work to build a trusting bridge to a new pathway back into the land of opportunity.

In actuality, Newark is not unusual both in its challenges and in the opportunity it presents, much as the media likes to portray a set of canonical American cities, from Detroit to Baltimore, as such. As we all know, there is ample evidence that we are not educating enough of the talent pool – and certainly not enough of the fastest growing groups within the pool – to ensure that prosperity reaches enough of American society and that legitimacy is reinstated for our core institutions. That is why, among other initiatives, the Lumina Foundation has started its 75 metro cities collective impact campaign – “Goal 2025” – to increase the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates, and other credentials to 60 percent {from 40% currently} by 2025.²³ There is also evidence that reaching more of that talent pool would make a difference: as the non-profit CEOs for Cities demonstrated in their 2008 analysis of the *Talent Dividend*. One percentage point gains in post-secondary educational attainment in the 51 largest metro regions in the United States, for example, would translate into \$124 billion dollars in aggregate annual income across those regions.²⁴

And to underscore the importance of reaching those goals in metro regions – urban and rural -- across America where that ever-more diverse talent pool too often now languishes and where many of our institutions anchor any possibility of transformation – consider the implications of not stepping to the plate to cultivate these home-grown farm teams. How for example will we gain public support if the fastest growing populations don’t see our institutions as accessible to their progeny? What will it mean for our place in community if the day comes when we are viewed on par with the police – aloof, unresponsive, even unfair? Will the leaders

¹⁹ See <http://gslsamp.rutgers.edu>.

²⁰ See <http://njstep.newark.rutgers.edu>.

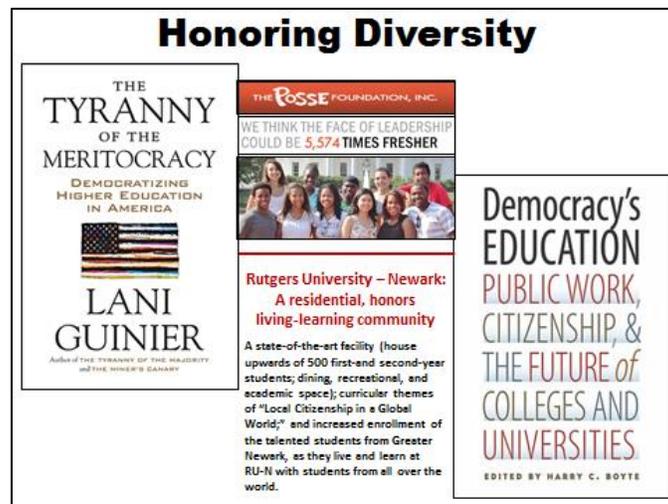
²¹ See www.youthbuildnewarknj.org.

²² See GradNation Summits at <http://www.americaspromise.org>.

²³ See Lumina Foundation Post-Secondary Attainment Report, <http://strongnation.luminafoundation.org/report>.

²⁴ See <http://ceosforcities.org/>.

we produce, as O'Connor predicts, have any legitimacy intact as they guide our courts, classrooms, newsrooms, not to mention the chambers of power in government, business, the military, as they look less and less like the public they are sworn to protect and to whom they market the newest innovations?



Who Are We Educating? How Do We Honor Diversity?

At the risk of dramatic excess, there is a reckoning to be had today for all of higher education, from highly selective liberal arts colleges like many of your own to broadly inclusive research universities like mine. Are we ready to acknowledge some collusion – even if unintentional – with the sorting mechanisms that increasingly winnow out more and more of the fastest growing talent we have access to in this country? Yes, we know that so much of the loss of talent occurs in the early years, even before students enter kindergarten, and that disparities accumulate in under-resourced, even sometimes dysfunctional public schools. That is why many of us view ourselves as anchor institutions in our communities working on publicly-engaged scholarship, tackling with community-based partners, challenges that can derail even the most motivated child, family, and community – from public safety and health to environmental sustainability to school improvement and creative place-making and economic development.

Yet, when it comes to higher education, we all also have a more assertive, real-time role to play as well. For example, can we take a step back from the obsession with rankings and re-define merit as Lani Guinier is suggesting? Aren't the lessons of Posse precisely those we need to heed as we identify and honor talent in new, broader ways, create cohorts that can have some critical mass and presence on our campuses, bringing together the local intelligence from one city or town that can mix in ways that change lives for everyone and every place. What would it look like if we all had inter-group dialogue curricula, such as that pioneered by Pat Gurin and her

colleagues,²⁵ starting from the premise that we don't now live together, and that implicit bias or hibernating bigotry – whichever you prefer to call it– is a reality for all of us, and that those ghosts simply can't be banished until we talk about it? Why aren't we precisely the institutions and leaders who don't just say that diversity and excellence are synergistically intertwined, as Scott Page and others so amply academically demonstrate, but put our action behind those words?²⁶ This is the time to try something new.

That is what we at Rutgers-Newark are trying to do, and I point to it as one example among the many that you all can share too. In this case, our efforts to leverage diversity as excellence are lead not coincidentally, by Shirley Collado (whom most of you know as former executive vice president at Posse and vice president for student affairs and dean of the college at Middlebury College), teaming up with Sherri-Ann Butterfield, a superb sociologist and senior associate dean of arts & sciences and a broad group of faculty and professional staff across the university. Together, they are working to honor our identity as one of the nation's most diverse research universities (with no predominant racial or ethnic group represented among our students, and a majority of pell eligible, many first-generation, undergraduate students), deeply committed as an anchor institution not just in Newark, but of Newark. The aim is to create an honors living learning community, dedicated to “local citizenship in a global world,” and inclusive of many of the talented youth who live right near us but never necessarily imagined themselves as honors students at Rutgers-Newark. HLLC, as we call it, will eventually enroll and house 500 students, with a significant proportion we hope from Newark and Greater Newark, admitted by a selection process not based on standardized tests (which we do not weigh heavily anyway) but on a Posse-like inclusive approach. We are looking for that intelligence that is too often missed, honed through direct engagement with precisely the challenges of our world that derail too many future leaders from their potential contributions. We are working with dozens of local community-based organizations to identify those talented students, and we will reinforce their connections back to our community in the curriculum. In turn, the curriculum in HLLC, begun this year with our first “social justice” cohort of 30 students, will be an interdisciplinary one, tuned to honor what they so uniquely and passionately bring to our educational table. For us, this is what an honors program should be about, as we all look to those who deserve to see the mantle of leadership in American society as *visibly open*, trying to make progress on the mandate that Justice O'Connor laid down some time ago.

Diversity or Bust, Are We Ready?

And while each institution will find its own specific way, we all need to embrace diversity, or bust – otherwise we won't make progress on our legitimacy crisis born of the perfect storm of decades, if not centuries, of entrenched bias, escalating inequality, and

²⁵ Patricia Gurin, Biren Nagda, and Ximena Zúñiga, *Dialogue Across Difference: Practice, Theory, and Research on Intergroup Dialogue*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013.

²⁶ Scott Page, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.

demographic revolution that won't stop to check on the current definition of merit. We all need to remove our blinders and see our complicity in perpetuating if not creating disparities in educational opportunity. We need to change our relationship to place and community to cultivate a "national league" of farm team talent for us all. And as we do this work in public, with the public, for public purposes, as Harry Boyte calls it, we will educate for democracy in a way that burnishes at least some of those ghosts that keep hanging around us.

It is time to show that we have some courage, on par with the resilience, grit, leadership, and stunning perseverance that is apparent in the opportunity youth of our time. It is time we retake the progressive mantle of higher education to right the course of educational opportunity, societal prosperity, and democratic inclusion. For as they ask, if not us, who? If not now, when?