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Acting on the Commitment The Continuing Case for Diversity in Higher Education and Current Challenges

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Leadership Summit on the Role of Leadership in Fostering and Sustaining
Diversity in Institutions of Higher Education
National Council for Research on Women
Keynote Address
June 22, 2006

“Acting on the Commitment:
The Continuing Case for Diversity in Higher Education
and Current Challenges”

Nancy Cantor, Chancellor and President
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I'm delighted to speak with you today and to say how much I admire the work of the National Council for Research on Women for making clear the many ways that the talents of the nation's majority population---more than 149 million girls and women---are still largely untapped in the nation's corporate boardrooms, the professions, and in the halls of influence and power.

This inequality is, unfortunately, still evident on college campuses. Even though women make up more than half of all instructors and lecturers and nearly half of all assistant professors, we are still only one-third of all associate professors and one-fifth of full professors.¹

Today I want to make the continuing case for diversity of all kinds in higher education, but especially in some of the areas that have been particularly difficult: race, ethnicity, and gender. I will outline some of the challenges and suggest possibilities for action in a nation that is already diverse and becoming more diverse every day. The latest Census Bureau estimate of the number of non-white people living in the United States is 98 million people---one third of all of us.²

The principal challenge we now face is how to tap the energy and talent of our entire, diverse population for the good of our communities and our institutions---from the kindergarten class to the chemistry lab, from the doctor's

¹ National Council for Research on Women, *Gains and Gaps: A Look at the World's Women*, p.11.

² U. S. Census Bureau, May 10, 2006. <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/006808.html>.

office to the halls of Congress. This will be vital, indeed critical, for the good of our children, our fellow citizens, our democracy, our economy, our society, and our future.

The Michigan Cases

As you know, it is now three years since the U. S. Supreme Court upheld a racially conscious admissions plan at the University of Michigan Law School. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who wrote the court's 5-4 decision, held that affirmative action serves a compelling national interest to ensure the health of our nation and the legitimacy of our institutions in the eyes of all of our citizens. Moreover, although the court ruled in the twin case of *Gratz v. Bollinger* that the specific procedure used at the time in undergraduate admissions by Michigan was not narrowly enough tailored, it nevertheless again upheld in that case the appropriateness of race-conscious admissions to serve this overriding compelling interest – a fact that seems to have been widely overlooked in the rush to declare procedures as more important than purposes.

Opponents of affirmative action also tried another venue, the nation's public schools, and earlier this month the newly constituted Court agreed to rule, in cases in Louisville, Ky., and Seattle, on what measures, if any, such schools may use to maintain racial balance.

The promise of *Brown v Board of Education* has not been realized. In fact, the desegregation of public schools, which increased continuously from the mid 1950s to the late 1980s, has now declined to levels not seen in three decades³. At the same time, many school districts have come to realize that racial and ethnic diversity are valuable and have voluntarily adopted student assignment methods to promote racial integration.

However, as advocates for diversity have observed, these school districts have been working largely under a cloud of legal uncertainty. Rulings in the new cases could affect the nation's 50 million public school children and set the tone for government policies on race for years to come.⁴

³ NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, the Center for the Study of Race and Law at The University of Virginia School of Law: *Looking to the Future: Voluntary K-12 School Integration*, 2005; 10, www.naacpldf.org,

⁴ *Ibid.*

Although these cases are not likely to affect the Michigan decisions directly, I'd like to take another look at what the Michigan cases meant for the cause of diversity. As an active participant in the preparation of the Michigan defenses, I believe that their key achievement was the creation of a coalition (industry-academe-labor-political-military) that focused attention on the compelling national interest of diversity.

This was a broad focus, not a procedural focus. It suggested that affirmative action as a *procedure* was necessary to achieve critical mass; but that the focus should be on reaping the full benefits of learning and working in a diverse environment – benefits that would accrue to everyone as *shared private benefits* (preparation for all students for life and work in a diverse, globally interconnected world), and as *collective societal benefits* (productivity, security, legitimacy of institutions) upon which the future of our democracy rests.

This focus laid the groundwork – a beginning step – toward a more collective mindset in which a zero-sum, individual rights battle could be replaced with a collective commitment to access and social justice as necessary ingredients of an effective society.

The coalition was critical because it emphasized *interdependence* amongst constituencies and groups rather than a competitive battle for a piece of the pie of the economic returns from higher education.

Current Challenges

Unfortunately, since the Michigan decisions, there have been many challenges to this collective mindset (on diversity as a compelling interest), and the coalition that supported it is frayed.

Among these challenges is a referendum on the November ballot in Michigan that would prohibit all state and local government entities, including public schools, from using affirmative action programs that give preferential treatment based on race, gender, ethnicity or national origin.

The chief backer of this referendum, Ward Connerly a former regent of the University of California, sponsored the nearly identical constitutional amendment, Proposition 209, approved by California voters in 1996.

In California, the prohibition on considering race or ethnicity in admissions decisions has kept fully qualified minority applicants out of incoming classes at many campuses of the University of California. The latest to report these results was UCLA, which earlier this month said that only 95 of the 4900 students who plan to enroll as first year students next fall are black.

“The low number of African American students who have stated their intentions to enroll at UCLA has reached crisis proportion,” the UCLA Chancellor, Albert Carnesale, said.⁵

Further, Proposition 209 has been cited since its inception in 1996 in a series of law suits --so far unsuccessful--to challenge breast cancer screening, battered women’s shelters, and services to the disabled and the elderly.⁶ Taken together, challenges like these are working to reinstate a zero-sum, pitched battle for individual rights.

Our divisive mindset keeps growing too, as we are made more and more aware of global competition for jobs and technical pre-eminence: only a mouse click away from us, China and India combined graduate 500,000 scientists and engineers each year, while the United States graduates 134,000.⁷ These figures feed into our sense of economic insecurity, already fueled domestically as cities across the country compete furiously with each other as they make their slow transition from a manufacturing to a knowledge economy.

A whole range of Post-9/11 insecurities add to the fire of inter-group hostilities. The domestic immigration battles reflect this, as different groups are pitted against each other in the belief they each want the same piece of the economic pie.

Within communities, networks of inter-group trust and interaction are practically non-existent, as housing and schooling and places of worship or cultural practice follow patterns of racial, ethnic, and religious isolation. And what we do learn about “others” comes largely from some form of electronic or distanced communication---television, videos, movies, iPods---creating a new

⁵ UCLA News, June 2, 2006, <http://www.newsroom.ucla.edu/page.asp?RelNum=7109>

⁶ Susan W. Kaufman and Anne K. Davis, *The Gender Impact of the Proposed Michigan Civil Rights Initiative*, Ann Arbor: The Center for the Education of Women, University of Michigan, April 2006, 3-5.

⁷ The National Academies, *Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future*, http://fermat.nap.edu/execsumm_pdf/11463, 2006.

generation that feels only the slightest, most “virtual” sense of engagement with and responsibility for community.

Campus Context: Obstacles to Community

This national sense of isolation and defensive competitiveness is also reflected in a divisive mood on college campuses. This mood is by no means uniform or universal, but I thought it would be useful today to point to some examples of the fraying of community and the emergence of inter-group competition. This broad strokes portrait is not meant to alarm or castigate, but rather to suggest ways in which we as leadership might intervene to reorient towards a collective mindset that builds for the future together.

Cutting up the Education Pie

First, as the returns to higher education accelerate, admissions decisions increasingly are seen through the lens of according individual benefits to applicants as consumers rather than building a campus community that will be vibrant and diverse and constitute the kind of context in which engaged, community-minded citizens are cultivated.

In turn, this consumer framework encourages attention to narrow or *procedural* questions of justice – does every individual have exactly the same access to the institution at the moment of application? This narrow approach ignores historical and contemporary inequalities that make the playing field un-level *before* the moment of application. But it also narrows the goals of the admissions process to individual transactions between an institution and a consumer, failing to consider the broader goals of the institution – building a diverse community – and of society – tapping an as yet untapped and fast-growing talent pool for the future.

The narrowed access framework undermines the relevance of groups at all – even those previously denied access to educational opportunity. And when it does consider groups, it shies away from any contested categories in favor of the broadest possible cuts, such as the substitution of socioeconomic class for race, ethnicity, or gender. In this kind of proxy approach, the focus remains mostly on individuals and away from the positive value of inclusion of groups likely to bring very distinct experiences to the education table, other than those

captured by socio-economic class. Clearly socioeconomic class is one critical element of diversity. But it is not a substitute for race, ethnicity, and gender.⁸

Pitting Groups and Eschewing Social Responsibility

Moving from competition over admissions to campus life, I believe one can see a similar pattern. Groups are either ignored altogether or pit competitively, rather than seen as positively interweaving to create community. Moreover, there is often a tendency to turn our backs on collective responsibility for the quality of community on our campuses.

We see this in the debates on “intellectual diversity,” which are more about pitting views than exchanging views. We have seen it in debates over what is appropriate to publish in campus media, and what kinds of activities are tolerated in campus organizations. These discussions tend to be more about protecting freedom of expression and association than about forestalling damage to the social fabric of the broader campus community – more about “rights” than “responsibility.”

And when incidents do occur, while there is appropriate concern for avoiding “guilt by association” for those only tangentially involved, there is little said about broader responsibilities. Surely, we all should feel some responsibility when an organization or group to which we belong ends up hurting others, even when no harm was intended.

If we used to bemoan the excesses of a “me” generation, then we should now worry about our “not-me” times, at least when it comes to taking responsibility for community – if I didn’t touch it, I didn’t contribute to it. Empathy and interpersonal responsiveness is in short supply in the individualistic, consumer-oriented, and technologically impersonal world in which we live.

Leadership Retreat

I also see a parallel retreat on the part of academic leadership in the face both of external pressures from legal/legislative challenges and the salience of this individual rights divisiveness on campuses.

⁸ William G. Bowen, Martin A. Kurzweil, and Eugene M. Tobin, *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education*, (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2005).

First, there is an obsession with protecting procedures (and their legality) rather than with promoting the broader diversity and justice goals.

Second, there is the framework of competition (rather than interdependence) within which debates and discussions and policies are being assessed (i.e., who is getting what and how much are they getting and are we balancing everything).

Taken together, the procedural obsession and the competitive balancing in decision-making have largely distracted academic leaders from articulating the theme that diversity is at the core of a well-functioning and healthy academy, and society.

Colleges and universities have key roles to play in preparing a diverse workforce who will produce innovation that matters – to borrow a theme from IBM.⁹ We have always been a major source of innovation and creative capital, and we must engage the fastest growing but largely untapped talent pool for the future. But we have gotten risk-averse and distracted from this mandate.

We need to be reminded that, in a highly competitive global environment, our greatest advantage resides in our untapped talent pool---of women and of racial and ethnic groups (as the fastest growing demographic in the U.S.) and in our ability to join together to produce innovation that matters to our most pressing problems – environmental sustainability, failing schools, shrinking cities – to name a few.

To turn it around, I believe that we will need to recreate the alliance with business and with our communities to energize the focus on national needs that motivated decisive action in the Michigan cases. We need to focus attention on the strength we gain by working together.

We need to collaborate across sectors and with diverse talent to address these challenges. This perspective turns away from “Who has a share?” to “How do we pool our talent to find solutions for the future?”¹⁰

⁹ *Innovation that Matters*, IBM Conference, Rome, Italy, April, 2006.

¹⁰ See Solutionsforourfuture.org, American Council on Education, 2006.

Higher Education: Engaging the World

Higher education can and needs to be at the forefront of this approach, and we should frame our “diversity agenda” as part of a larger mandate to tap talent, build diverse environments of collaboration, and do innovation that matters.

Diversity becomes much less of an “at the margins” enterprise when it is integrated into a strategy of engagement with the world. Diversity is less about “who gets access to us?” than about how we connect to the world in the fullest and richest of ways. Diversity is necessary to building an effective campus environment in which to “prepare the people who find solutions and teach the people who change the world” – as the American Council on Education’s Solutions for our Future campaign suggests.¹¹

In other words, our concerns should be less about the individualistic transactions between universities and consumers, and more about the collective relationship between universities and their connected communities, at home and abroad. The task is to focus on a joint future.

What might some of the elements of this collective approach be and how do we tap enthusiasm for pursuing it?

In its simplest form, I believe that the task for academic leadership is to turn the attention of the academy outward. We should change our transactions with the world from going in one direction – from the world to campus – to form new reciprocal collaborations across many sectors – government, non-profits, industry, community – that engage the campus with the pressing issues of the day. Here is where enthusiasm will be found, and here is where the most natural alliances with diverse communities will flourish.

And there are two trends upon which this engaged attitude can capitalize. One is the robust presence of service-learning curriculum and volunteerism on campuses. For oddly, interest in service-learning and volunteerism is very high, despite the individualism and detachment, even social “irresponsibility,” that I described earlier. This engagement of students and faculty in community-based work, and work around the world, can provide a launching pad for sustained attention to collaboration and diversity. There is a growing cadre of faculty –

¹¹ *Ibid*

including many women and faculty of color – extending well beyond the social sciences into the arts, humanities, sciences and professions – who are increasingly doing scholarly work that matters to communities.

The other impetus for collective action that engages a diverse community of students, faculty, and citizens, is the widely acknowledged need to improve the k-12 pipeline, especially in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM fields), if we are to remain competitive as a nation. Again, at the same time as campus administrators fret over the legality of race- or gender-conscious admissions, there is also widespread agreement that we need desperately to recruit to campuses, as students and faculty, the untapped talent of our increasingly diverse population.

Taken together, the enthusiasm for engaging with our communities on innovation that matters, and the realization that we must fix the leaking pipeline to remain competitive as a nation, is a strong rationale for academic leaders to support diversity as a compelling interest for colleges and universities. It is virtually impossible these days to conceive of contributing innovation that matters without engaging with diversity in the cities and towns across our nation. It is equally unlikely that we can compete globally without the talent – as students and faculty – of our diverse populations. However fearful we may be of legal and legislative challenges; however reluctant we may be to take on questions of inter-group competition and/or social responsibility, we will not solve the bigger issues that confront our nation – and therefore our colleges and universities – without forming coalitions and embracing diversity. That is what we said in Michigan, and it is even truer today.

The Leadership Challenge

The critical work of this summit is to consider how to institutionalize this core commitment to diversity and innovation in higher education. I believe that key ingredients to institutionalization are as follows:

We must conceptualize colleges and universities as responsible to the broader world in significant ways – preparing citizens; producing innovation that matters.

In turn, this requires an openness to and connectedness with community, such that we both recognize the stresses of the broader world as they are

“brought to” the campus, and feel some fundamental responsibility to address them as part of building a productive campus community.

To achieve this, we need to be out in the community, understanding where our students come from and linking our intellectual capital to the pressing issues of the day in those communities.

This means that, whether public or private, two-year or four-year, colleges and universities – and their leaders – need to be acutely attuned to the world, and show a willingness to tackle even the most seemingly intractable problems. When we do this, we will recognize the insights and talent of our diverse population of students and faculty, upon whom we will increasingly depend for answers. Then diversity and excellence in innovation will re-emerge as intertwined and as mission critical to our core institutional purposes, as they are to our national agenda.

Tapping the Talent Pool

Where do we start?

First, we must tap the entire pool of talent, including the talent we now ignore, and open up the pipeline programs to connect K-12 students in public schools with institutions of higher education. That is why the American Council on Education is joining with the Ad Council of America—the people who brought us “A mind is a terrible thing to waste”—to launch a public information campaign later this year aimed at students in the 8th, 9th, and 10th grades and their parents, educating them about the need to prepare for college.

There is a striking lack of knowledge—not surprisingly, most evident in the high-poverty, racially isolated schools of our inner cities—about the course preparation required to attend college, and about the resources, both financial and educational, available to plan for college.

In focus groups for this campaign, time and again, the aspirations of low-income students were high, but the understanding of what it would take to make it to college was very weak. While many inner city students, for example, see high school athletes recruited by colleges, they do not have a comparable “college-going vision” for themselves.

And when they do reach out for guidance, low-income students turn almost exclusively to high school counselors late in their high school years, while upper-income students report using a panoply of guides, including parents, friends, college representatives, and web-based material, starting in middle school and early on in high school.¹²

Even if the disparities in the quality and quantity of education between rich and poor, black, brown, and white, don't doom students initially, the absence of strong connections to the world of colleges and universities can surface as a substantial obstacle to future success.

Building and repairing these pipelines is something that colleges and universities can do, and there are efforts underway all across the nation. In Syracuse, for example, we have formed a new "Partnership for Better Education" with the Syracuse City School District. This partnership, announced by myself and the superintendent in 2005, is a disciplined attempt to draw together the resources of Syracuse University and the Syracuse city schools, capitalizing on our existing pipeline relationships and collaborating to build curricula, especially in the smaller learning communities embedded within each of the city's four high schools and their feeder middle schools. Faculty from SU pair up with city schoolteachers to build curriculum for these learning communities, in the arts, literacy, and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines. Each project in the Partnership weaves in an emphasis on inclusion (of students with differing learning styles and needs) and on literacy, even as the medium of expression shifts, for example, from the art studio to the engineering laboratory. The Partnership creates a two-way street of interaction, on campus and in the schools.

It also draws in students who are identified as part of our ongoing pipeline programs, such as the Syracuse Challenge (which mentors students from 8th grade on to prepare them for college) and the Syracuse GEAR-UP program and Science and Technology Entry Program.

As we think about the untapped talent in our region, we also are connecting with the citizens and leaders of the historic Haudenosaunee nations--formerly known to many of us as the League of the Iroquois. To connect with their students, we have created a scholarship program, the Haudenosaunee Promise, providing full funding for any citizen of the six Nations qualifying for

¹² ACE: Access Initiative, www.acenet.edu.

admission to Syracuse. It expresses our gratitude and appreciation for the historical, political, and cultural legacies of the Haudenosaunee and honors the continually growing relationship between us.

Innovation that Matters

As colleges and universities like Syracuse and so many others across the nation forge closer relationships with our connected communities to recruit students, we also should consider the reciprocal benefits of taking our scholarly and educational work out into the community.

In a knowledge economy, it is obvious that the private benefits of higher education are substantial—college graduates are healthier, happier, wealthier, and live longer than those who do not attend higher education.¹³ By contrast, we often forget the societal benefits of American higher education, a system that remains the envy of the world, at a time when we are not particularly envied around the globe.¹⁴

Research and innovation on college campuses benefit us all, as do the “good neighbor benefits,” as economists label the increased likelihood that college graduates will volunteer, participate in the democratic process, and be more tolerant of other groups and cultures different from their own.¹⁵

But as academic leaders we can’t be complacent anymore either about the robustness of the transfer of innovation to society or about the strength of good neighbor benefits exhibited by our graduates. We have to work to make sure that the campus experience – for faculty and for students – integrates and supports engagement with the world. Some of this work needs to happen in interaction with our connected communities, at home and abroad, and some of it requires building new opportunities and reward structures on campus.

The key to success, regardless of the location, will be if we learn to speak to and feel some responsibility to each other—black, brown, and white. University and Business. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim. It doesn’t matter what the divide is, it matters whether we are willing to invest together. How will this happen?

¹³ See Solutionsforourfuture.org, American Council on Education, 2006.

¹⁴ See, for example, “The Brains Business,” *The Economist*, September 8, 2005.

¹⁵ William G. Bowen and Derek Bok, *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

In Syracuse, it is happening in part through alliances with community-based organizations like Women Transcending Boundaries, a group started after 9/11,¹⁶ and the Inter-Religious Council's Community-Wide Dialogues to End Racism,¹⁷ which reaches not only into our schools but also into the business community to establish inter-group dialogues. Colleges and universities in our area are creating inter-group dialogue curricula to prepare students for the most diverse and yet divided world ever to confront them.¹⁸ Such a multicultural curriculum can educate about inequality and speak to issues of justice, while opening eyes to our social responsibility.

Rewarding Scholarship in Action

And when we take that responsibility seriously, then new scholarly and educational vistas open too. At Syracuse, for example, our academic vision is based on the notion of Scholarship in Action where interdisciplinary teams of faculty and students engage with communities of experts on issues that matter, such as disabilities, shrinking cities, failing schools, neighborhood entrepreneurship, religious pluralism, or environmental sustainability and the urban ecosystem.

We are investing in these interdisciplinary clusters – both in new degree programs and in new scholarly relationships, and we are “taking them on the road,” including substantial investments in downtown Syracuse. This work is diverse itself, spanning from the Syracuse Center of Excellence in Environmental Systems and Energy – with 12 academic institution partners and 70 firms participating – to our newly renovated 135,000 square foot Warehouse in downtown Syracuse that houses our architects, designers, and arts journalists, and galleries, educational programs, and resource rooms for local artists, school children, and arts organizations.

We have a major collaboration in the South Side of Syracuse, including investment in building a base of women- and minority-owned businesses through our South Side Entrepreneurial Connect Project and our new South Side Innovation Center. Faculty and students from information studies, management, fashion design, and many more disciplines, are teaming up to spur

¹⁶ For further information on Women Transcending Boundaries, see <http://www.wtb.org>.

¹⁷ For further information on the Community-Wide Dialogues, see <http://www.irccny.org>.

¹⁸ For further information on Syracuse University's inter-group dialogue curriculum, see <http://cstl.syr.edu>.

business growth in the South Side. We have on campus now a community geographer, who is teaming up with community groups and governmental agencies and NGOs to use the latest geographic information systems to map the challenges – like hunger – and the assets – like neighborhood networks – in our community. Our faculty is teaming up with citizens groups to sponsor research and community dialogues on pressing issues, such as environmental justice, and we are creating new venues and collaborating with groups that link the university and the community through the arts and public humanities.

These collaborations, like the one described earlier with the Syracuse City Schools, create a shared mission that breaks down barriers, between campus and community, business and university, scientists and artists, students and faculty, and – perhaps most important to our future – between groups, racial, ethnic, religious, on campus and in our connected community. Step by step, this work builds the coalition committed to diversity and community. It embeds the diversity agenda within the academic work of the institution and in turn embeds that work in the public good.

To make the Scholarship in Action agenda work, however, we must change our reward structure for faculty who do this collaborative work. We must, for example, support faculty members who want to do public scholarship, with results that may be published in academic, peer-reviewed journals, but may also result in network news specials, digital modules for public libraries, or museum exhibitions. We must find the right incentives for a diverse faculty to engage with communities of experts on innovation that matters, and to that end, many institutions, including Syracuse, are re-evaluating their tenure and promotion criteria. A tenure-team initiative, organized by Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life, a 70-institution consortium, is gathering best practices on how to promote standards of excellence in public scholarship.¹⁹ Momentum is growing to take public scholarship seriously.²⁰

In my view, investing in excellence in public scholarship – and in our diverse communities – is a pathway toward bringing questions of diversity and diverse students and faculty from the margins of our institution to the center. As we work on innovation that matters – from the science needed to remediate

¹⁹ Julie Ellison, Director's Column, *Imagining America Newsletter*, Summer, 2004. Also, Cantor, N., "Valuing Public Scholarship," *The Presidency: The American Council on Education Magazine for Higher Education Leaders*, Spring, 2005, 35-37.

²⁰ Nancy Cantor and Steven D. Lavine, *Taking Public Scholarship Seriously*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 9, 2006, B20.

environmental pollution in our cities and waterways to the art that gives voice to refugees resettling in America – we learn to value diversity and the insights of diverse others. When we collaborate and value each other, we start taking responsibility again for the quality of our campus community and the health of our cities and regions. We start seeing diversity as a compelling national interest again.