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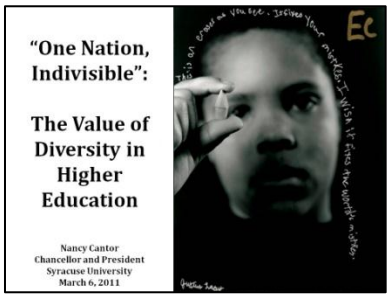
"One Nation, Indivisible": The Value of Diversity in Higher Education

SU Chancellor Nancy Cantor
University of Michigan
Sunday, March 6, 2011



For many of us, certainly for me, it seems particularly appropriate to be reflecting today on the value of diversity in higher education from a podium at the University of Michigan. This is a place where many of us crafted a defense of diversity as a critical element of educational excellence in the Supreme Court cases of *Gratz* and *Grutter*. The State of Michigan is also a place that has now turned its legislative back on affirmative action to achieve diversity in higher education. Indeed, with the passage of Proposal 2, the State of Michigan joined with many other states represented here today, in calling on public higher education – and I would also include private higher education -- to find other ways to ensure this country's founding principles – that we are "One Nation Indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for All."

As you gather here in Michigan, a devoted and extraordinary group of experts working on the ground to ensure our country's values and the affirmative role of higher education, there is a special urgency to your work. For we are in a place and time when our nation – especially in rust belt cities like Detroit and Syracuse – faces the urgent task of rebuilding competitive advantage while failing miserably to educate our fastest growing populations. We cannot forget that we still live, as John Hope Franklin once observed, under "the heavy hand of history."[1] Although we have removed most of the legal barriers that weighed so heavily and so long on the lives of the disenfranchised, we have not come close to evening the odds that are stacked against millions of talented children. It is time to ask, yet

[1] John Hope Franklin, "The Two Worlds of Race: A Historical View," *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 140.1 (Winter 2011): 41. (Reprinted from an original published in *Daedalus* 94.4 (Fall 1965).

again, whether we are ready as a nation to make good on our promises of justice and equality. It is time to ask, yet again, how higher education can best play its rightful, increasingly dispositive role in lifting the heavy hand of historical discrimination.

This is a moment when a tension that was built into the life of our nation from the beginning has come to the forefront in our national conversation. I'm talking about the ongoing stress that Jeffrey Ferguson locates between "basic equality on one side and a battle for individual distinction or stature on the other."[2] It's what many of us label as the competition between the *public good* and the *private gain*, a competition in which exceptional individuals move forward while the group is left behind.[3] Ideally, public good and private gain work in concert, but often they seem to be in conflict, and education has been one of the battlegrounds.

Earlier this year, in his decision concurring with the Fifth Circuit's ruling that upheld undergraduate admissions policies at the University of Texas at Austin, Circuit Judge Emilio M. Garza defined higher education in a way that would be familiar to millions of Americans, highlighting its role as a pathway to individual distinction and success. But then, taking issue with the Supreme Court's decision in *Grutter*, he used this individualistic point of view to dismiss the effects of race and other discrimination on the entire pool of students who aspire to higher education but face obstacles that would be daunting to anyone. Citing *Bakke*, Judge Garza wrote:

> For the most part, college admissions is a zero-sum game. Whenever one student wins, another loses. The entire competition, encouraged from age five on, is premised on *individual* achievement and promise. It is no exaggeration to say that the college application is 18 years in the making and is an unusually personal experience: the application presents a student's best self in the hopes that her sustained hard work and experience to date will be rewarded with admission. Race-based preferences break faith with this expectation by favoring a handful of students based on a trait beyond the control of all.[4]

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[2] Jeffrey B. Ferguson, "Freedom, Equality, Race," *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 140.1 (Winter 2011): 47.
[3] Nancy Cantor, "Candidates, Hear the Cry: 'No Group Left Behind,'" commentary, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 55.5 (26 Sept. 2008): A33.
[4] Fisher v University of Texas at Austin, et.al. 09-50822. US Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit. 1 Feb 2011. 58.

Although one is left to ponder why Garza doesn't also see the heavy hand of history as beyond the control of those it has excluded, he was echoing a popular, even dominant perspective. Recent decisions by the Supreme Court in the school-desegregation cases in Louisville and Seattle, for example, stood the principle of equal rights on its head, supporting individuals who might possibly be hurt if longstanding odds against historically disadvantaged groups were eliminated.

As the anthropologist John Hartigan Jr. has observed, the commonly held vision of higher education principally as a means of individual advancement inhibits "our ability to see race as permeating our social landscape and profoundly skewing life chances."[5] And, of course, the heavy hand of history extends far beyond race and ethnicity – to disability, sexuality, gender, class, religion and further – even if the national discourse is often fiercest over race. In every instance, though, the question is the same: Are we ready to change the opportunity structure, to level the playing field of social mobility and access to the nation's resources for those who have been historically kept out and therefore begin behind today? And if we are ready, can we move beyond one exceptional student at a time, extending our reach and our embrace more affirmatively in whole neighborhoods, to whole groups, where precious talent is lost in large numbers, not in single digits?

Private Gain and Public Good – Stature and Equality

If we think of higher education as a way to get ahead, as a *private* good, we have in mind an educational credential that may distinguish one particular student from the "rest of the pack," as the historian of education David Labaree has written. Another vision is to see higher education as a *public* good, providing socially useful learning that can be shared by all. [6]

In recent years, as we have become a technology-driven knowledge economy, we have largely agreed that the path to success runs through our institutions, and the competition for *private* advancement through higher education has become so intense that it risks obscuring our critical *public* mission. As Labaree argues, "the generous public goals that have been so important to defining the larger societal interest in education---to produce politically capable and socially

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[5] John Hartigan Jr., "What Does Race Have to Do With It? " *The Chronicle of Higher Education, The Chronicle Review* (15 Aug. 2010): 4.

[6] David Labaree. *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning*; *The Credentials Race in American Education* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997) 2.

productive citizens—have lost significant ground to the narrow pursuit of private advantage at public expense." [7]

And what an expense it is. Although we've seen progress, we still have hyper-segregated housing and send our youngest citizens to re-segregated, under-resourced urban and rural public schools. As Gerald Early has written, millions of African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans find themselves on the bottom rungs of the ladder, no matter where it leads----to wealth, life expectancy, home ownership, educational attainment, or prospects for employment.[8]

In fact, as Waldo Martin has warned, the economic gaps between whites and the nation's minority populations have been growing, and the Great Recession may well make things worse. A study published in May 2010 by the Institute on Assets and Social Policy at Brandeis University shows that the wealth gap between blacks and whites has more than quadrupled over the course of a generation.[9] At the moment, a black family home is now 76 percent more likely to be foreclosed on than a white family home.[10]

The disparities are only slightly less harsh in higher education. The black-white gap in college graduation rates is 19 percentage points, and many institutions that grant bachelor's degrees fail to graduate even half their African-American and Hispanic students in six years.[11]

Looking further along the pipeline to graduate education, early reports indicate that enrollments by blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans have declined in states that have banned affirmative action. One recent study, by Liliana M. Garces, translated the percentage declines of minority students entering graduate school in public universities in four states with such bans into actual

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[7] Larabee. Online at http://www.stanford.edu/~dlabaree/

[8] Gerald Early, "The Two Worlds of Race Revisited: A Meditation on Race in the Age of Obama, *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 140.1 (Winter 2011):16. There are gains and losses in these equations. Recent statistics from the Census Bureau, reported by William H. Frey of the Brookings Institution in December, 2010, show that 61 of the 100 largest metro areas, many of them in the south, showed declines in black-white segregation since 2000, and 38 showed declines in Hispanic segregation. However 47 cities showed more segregation for Hispanics, and 12 metro areas, led by Milwaukee, Detroit, New York, Chicago, and Cleveland, have very high rates of segregation.

[9] See http://iasp.brandeis.edu/pdfs/Racial-Wealth-Gap-Brief.pdf (accessed 7 Feb. 2011)

[10] Waldo E Martin Jr., "Precious African American Memories, Post-Racial Dreams & the American Nation," *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 140.1 (Winter 2011): 73, citing a report available online at http://www.responsiblelending.org/mortgage-lending/research-analysis/HMDA-issue-brief-final.pdf (accessed 7 Feb. 2011)

[11] Glen Jones, letter, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (21 Nov. 2010). Jones is President of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education and wrote on behalf of himself and the Board of Directors.

enrollment numbers: 210 fewer in the natural sciences, nearly 100 less in engineering, 70 in the social sciences and 120 in education in a single year.[12] The number of minority students in these graduate programs is quite low to begin with, so this is additional talent we cannot afford to waste.

We cannot afford to waste it on so many grounds, both private and public. From the perspective of individual justice, how can so many children be kept apart from educational opportunity? From the perspective of social justice, how can our nation thrive *as one* if we aren't in a position to share the learning that creates democratic values and common purpose?

Mobility, Educational Excellence, and Justice

And so we have come full circle. When we defended the Michigan cases, we focused expressly on two principles, both of them still absolutely true. First, we argued that higher education is a route to social mobility in this country, one that must be open to all. As Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote on behalf of the majority in *Grutter*, "In order to cultivate a set of leaders with legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry, it is necessary that the path to leadership be visibly open to talented and qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity."[13] Our second argument, a case we can now make more strongly than ever, is that diversity creates better preparation for *all* students for a global, multicultural world.

But we stopped short in *Gratz* and *Grutter* of taking on directly the pivotal role of higher education in reversing the heavy hand of history in order to make this country a better, more just, less divided society. Yet as Tommie Shelby argued recently, the question that Dr. King had raised in 1963 is still on the table: "[O]ur society has been doing something special *against* the Negro for hundreds of years. How then can he be absorbed into the mainstream of American life if we do not do something special *for* him now, in order to balance the equation and equip him to compete on a just and equal basis?"[14] We simply can't be what we as a country have aspired to be if we don't right the wrongs of the past by reversing practices,

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[12] Peter Schmidt, "Graduate Programs Grow Less Diverse Without Racial Preferences, Research Suggests," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (20 Nov. 2010) He cites a paper presented by Liliana M. Garces, a doctoral candidate at the Harvard School of Education, at the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Higher Education in November, 2010.

[13] Grutter v Bollinger et.al. 02-241. Supreme Court of the United States. 3 June 2003.

[14] Tommie Shelby, "Justice & Racial Conciliation: Two Visions," *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 140.1 (Winter 2011): 97. He cites Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet Classic, 2000): 124; emphasis in the original.

well-meaning as they now may be, that build upon these accumulated disparities and make *us more not less* divided by the year.

To be sure, encouraging enrollment in our institutions in the name of access and social mobility and creating the best diverse educational environments in our power are important steps in this direction. But they are unlikely to go far enough to reverse the deep divisions and disparities that confront us, especially without having at our disposal the narrowly tailored vehicles of race-conscious admissions affirmed in *Grutter* but subsequently outlawed in propositions in state after state. We need to take new affirmative action, not pursued in the courts or the legislatures but directly in our many communities, and most importantly *with* our many communities. To do this, we need to reconnect with the public mission of higher education. In the process, we must re-envision the purposes and practices of selective admissions.

We must begin by facing those accumulated disparities head on, remembering their origins in under-funded and under-performing urban schools, abandoned communities left on the outskirts of opportunity, and the unequal struggle of individual students vying for a foot in the door in what is increasingly a high stakes contest of individual will and legacy status.

In this, we would do well to take a lesson from the intergroup dialogue work pioneered on this campus by Pat Gurin and her many colleagues.[15] One of the clear messages in this literature is that we must understand structural inequality and how it historically and continually adheres differentially to certain groups in this country. Without this knowledge, there can be no shared dialogue across difference. Without it, we will not be able to separate the very real person sitting across the table from the stereotypes of their group. To put this in admissions terms, without facing down disparities, we will persist only in finding the exceptional individual who looks exactly as we hoped for, too easily rejecting large numbers of others because we don't make the effort to peel away the structural obstacles that cover their talents.

This is a matter of justice and fair play. It is also a matter of necessity in light of the demographics of our country, for the failure to educate large parts of our population will devastate American competitiveness in the years to come. As William Kirwan, Chancellor of the University System of Maryland remarked not

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[15] Patricia Gurin, Biren A. Nagada, & Gretchen E. Lopez, "The Benefits of Diversity in Education for Democratic Citizenship," *Journal of Social Issues*, 60.1 (2004).

long ago, "The search for talent and knowledge has gone global at a dizzying rate."[16] At the same time, as leaders in business, science, and government have warned, our country's downward drift in competitiveness puts us at urgent risk, a category 5 storm just ahead. In a recent report to the presidents of the National Academies, they warned, "This is a non-trivial development, given that the basic nature of the competitiveness challenge does not lend itself to any sudden "wake-up call"—such as was provided by Pearl Harbor, Sputnik or 9/11."[17]

Two years ago, in his first State of the Union address, President Obama agreed, pointing out that three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma, "and yet just over half of our citizens have that level of education." In addition to having one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation, "half of the students who begin college never finish," he said, and this "is a prescription for economic decline, because we know that countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow."[18]

Out-educating our global competition requires educating all of our young, not just some of them. And we live in a country where the makeup of the "majority" is rapidly changing. In February, the Census Bureau reported for the first time ever that fewer than half of the youngest group they count--- the three-year-olds---are white. As William H. Frey, a senior fellow in the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution observed, these statistics "finally confirm the beginning of an oft-predicted trend---a truly multiethnic minority school age population that will continue to pour into our grade schools, high schools, and beyond in the coming decade." In the pre-k and kindergarten populations of eight states and the District of Columbia the minority are already in the majority.[19]

The Census shows that 83 percent of our population growth in the past decade came from members of racial and ethnic minority groups,[20] which since the

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[16] The 2005 "Rising Above the Gathering Storm" Committee, *Rising Above the Gathering Storm Revisited: Rapidly Approaching Category 5*, prepared for the Presidents of the National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and Institute of Medicine (2010): 71. Online at http://www.nap.edu/catalog/12999.html Accessed 17 Feb. 2011.

[17] *Rising Above the Gathering Storm Revisited*, 64.

[18] President Barack Obama, State of the Union Address, 24 Feb. 2009.

[19] William H. Frey, "A Demographic Tipping Point Among America's Three-Year-Olds," *State of Metropolitan America* 26, The Brookings Institution (7 Feb. 2011) online at: http://brookings.edu/opinions/2011/0207_population_frey.aspx accessed 9 Feb. 2011

[20] Bruce Katz, "The State of Metropolitan America: Metros on the Front Lines of Demographic Transformation," *State of Metropolitan America* 4, The Brookings Institution (11 May 2010) available online at http://brookings.edu/speeches/2010/0511metro_america_katz.aspx accessed 9 Feb. 2011

year 2000 have grown at five times the rate of whites.[21] Members of groups currently in the minority make up more than 30 percent of the residents in half of our congressional districts.[22] This is a huge and growing pool of talent. If we can fully tap its diversity, we can position higher education to be more valuable---effective, competitive, innovative, and just---in our country.

Selective Institutions and Selective Admissions

As we consider this affirmative approach to tapping a diverse talent pool, the framing of our task is critical. Glen Jones, president of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education, recently wrote that: "The historic numbers-trump-all model has been increasingly outdated in its ability to assess an applicant's true potential, especially among low-income, first-generation, and minority students." [23] Claude Steele agrees that, while the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, this may not be true for many talented youth operating under the burdens of stereotype threat that constrain their performance,[24] even when they have pursued a perfectly adequate college-preparatory curriculum.

Our focus on *selectivity* – rejecting more and more of those who don't appear to fit our standards – can work to diminish diversity. Decades of social psychological research demonstrates[25] that adopting a mind-set of exclusion will yield a very different pool of candidates than a mind-set of inclusion. A mind-set of exclusion---setting a very high threshold for candidates who don't immediately fit what we're seeking--- often rules out students from historically under-represented and currently under-resourced groups. A mind-set of inclusion----looking outward and considering more broadly who might belong and thrive in our institutions---gives us a much better chance of perceiving the vast talents within whole groups we might otherwise pass over as unfit or unlikely to prosper.

There are powerful pressures not to adopt a mind-set that is inclusive. One of the strongest is our desire to maintain our reputations as *selective* institutions.

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[21] William H. Frey, "Census Data: Blacks and Hispanics Take Different Segregation Paths," *State of Metropolitan America* 21, The Brookings Institution (16 Dec. 2010) online at http://brookings.edu/opinions/2010/1216_census_frey.aspx accessed 9 Feb. 2011

[22] William H. Frey, "Five Myths About the 2010 Census and the U.S. Population," *The Washington Post* 14 Feb. 2010, online at http://brookings.edu/opinions/2010/0214_census_frey.aspx accessed 9 Feb. 2011

[23] Jones, 2010.

[24] Claude M. Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us*, (New York: W.W. Norton), 2010).

[25] See Kurt Hugenberg, Melissa McLain, and Galen V. Bodenhausen, "Framing Discrimination: Effects of Inclusion Versus Exclusion Mind-Sets on Stereotypic Judgments," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91.s6 (2006): 1020-30.

Whatever we think about the validity of rankings, we know that they ride on the numbers ---class rank, test scores, and the percentage of applicants we admit. As Malcolm Gladwell observed last month in *The New Yorker*, we show how *selective* we are by quantifying how accomplished our students are "*when they first arrive on campus*."[26] In the process, we may well search among applicants for narrow evidence of *fit* instead of an expansive definition of *excellence*.

We are also affected by the zero-sum battles going on around us (as witnessed by the individual rights referenda in our states and the law suits at our doorsteps) and by harsh budget constraints. Many selective public institutions are under pressure to recruit out-of-state students who pay higher tuitions. Many private colleges and universities have experienced losses to their endowments that are having ripple effects on their budgets for financial aid. If we are to persevere, we must make enhancing diversity an institutional priority. As selective institutions, we have the most to gain and the most to lose. The gains will come as we use a diverse educational environment to prepare students for a global knowledge economy, as AACU's survey of corporate leaders suggests.[27] The losses will come if we do not engage students from what will be the dominant talent pool of tomorrow. And so selective institutions have compelling institutional reasons not to leave educational diversity to others.

We already know that many our best, most interesting, students from all backgrounds have far exceeded the promise of their test scores. In fact, when our graduation rates, taken together, surpass predictions grounded in group-based factors such as socioeconomic status, we are all especially proud. Our pride should help us change our ways.

Looking Outward and Engaging our Communities

Therefore, as we go forward in the post affirmative action era, I believe that we need to turn our gaze aggressively outward, to be less egocentric, less focused on who *we* are, and how *they* can or cannot come inside, and more focused instead on getting out there and understanding the full gamut of talent and what shape it takes in our many communities. This means defining excellence more by whom we reach---and the variety of talent we come to see out there---than by whom (or how many) we reject. This means aggressive, not passive, outreach. It is not

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[26] Malcolm Gladwell, "The Order of Things" *The New Yorker*, 14-21 Feb. 2011): 74.

[27] The National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America's Promise, *College Learning for the New Global Century* (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007), available online at www.aacu.org.

enough to reach out to the top ten percent of high school classes, whoever they may be. We must work assertively with public schools to change who gets educated, who graduates, and how prepared students are to enter selective universities and to thrive in them.

As the eminent educational researcher Linda Darling-Hammond has compellingly shown, most children of color in our inner cities are still stranded in vastly under-resourced schools with no access to the opportunities that place their middle-class suburban peers on the path to college.[28] We need to be out there leveling the playing field by addressing disparate obstacles and disparate impacts that correlate with race and ethnicity, class, and disability.

We need to engage children before they go down different educational and life paths in K-12 and in their under-supported communities. For members of groups who have been historically discriminated against and under-represented, this needs to be more than an individual contest in which only exceptional individuals manage to succeed. We must change the opportunity structure at a group level. Yes, this may ultimately mean some re-distribution of opportunity in this society---perhaps, for example, away from legacy advantages ---but that is what justice means in a good society. But it could also mean more pre-emptive investments, public and private, in under-resourced and under-performing schools and communities, reversing the odds that perpetuate the heavy hand of history. And those investments are ones in which we can, indeed must, join in making, as most of us are doing in re-invigorating the public mission of higher education.

Re-Invigorating the Public Mission of Selective Universities

To invigorate the public mission of higher education, we must aggressively and affirmatively pursue what the legal theorist Susan Sturm calls an agenda for "institutional citizenship"[29] in our communities (at home and abroad). By this, I mean we must use our prodigious intellectual capital, our energetic human capital, and all of the social capital we can muster to address the "sticky issues" of our day – reclaiming public education, our environment, our economy or our ability to make peace. We must turn our gaze outward, with an expansive and inclusive vision of the difference we can make if we partner with communities of experts in neighborhoods, industry, government, and non-profits. In these partnerships, we

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[28] Linda Darling-Hammond, "The Color Line in American Education: Race, Resources, and Student Achievement," *W.E.B. Dubois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 1.2 (2004): 213-246.
[29] Susan Sturm, "The Architecture of Inclusion: Interdisciplinary Insights on Pursuing Institutional Citizenship," *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender* 247 (2006): 248-334.

can enlist all of our disciplines--- from the arts to the sciences to the professions--- and all the members of our communities, for the diversity of our perspectives and backgrounds becomes a tremendous asset in pursuing our public mission.

In the process, we will often find that the tables may quickly turn, with those who might once have felt under-represented or under-appreciated on our campuses and in our communities finding much to contribute in these partnerships. As George Sanchez argued several years ago in his Dewey Lecture here at Michigan, public scholarship is a recipe for successfully recruiting and retaining faculty and students from under-represented groups who thrive in leading sustained partnerships that make a difference in challenged communities.[30]

When we construct a two-way street of engagement, we not only take responsibility for partnering to reverse the fate of communities but also open ourselves up to transformation. Not only do we change the opportunity structure – the odds – for whole groups, whole neighborhoods, whole communities, but we also change our own chances of building diverse educational environments. In turn, as we break down barriers between the campus and the world, the work we do on campus to enhance democratic learning and practices, and to leverage our diversity, becomes core to our success off campus. Valuing diversity goes hand in hand with valuing the public mission of universities, and both sets of values, working synergistically, are fundamental to realizing this country's promises.

Scholarship in Action at Syracuse

What it means to fulfill our public mission (in tandem with our commitment to diversity) will of course differ across our institutions. Yet there may well be some common cause and shared strategies even across public and private selective institutions, and so I thought it might be useful as I close tonight to sketch some of what we are doing at Syracuse, which we refer to broadly as Scholarship in Action.

First, I should say that Syracuse, as an institution and a region, has a proud history of opportunity-making. We are a private institution that never endorsed religious quotas and tripled our enrollment overnight to embrace GIs after World War II and Japanese American students from internment camps. We are situated in a region that has been home to the sovereign Haudenosaunee Nations – whose history of democratic governance, leadership by clan mothers, and

[30] George Sanchez, "Crossing Figueroa: The Tangled Web of Diversity and Democracy," The John Dewey Lecture, University of Michigan, October 2004.

environmentalism far pre-dates ours. Fervent suffragist and abolitionist movements put down roots and flourished in our region, and our city came into its own through the innovations of the Erie Canal, even as that manufacturing legacy now stands as a challenge to its prosperity today.

Syracuse University is just about as public as a selective private institution can get – for example, our percentage of low income Pell eligible students leads the private AAUs and is close to most AAU publics. We welcome our role today as an anchor institution in a rust belt city and in a historic region that is both facing so many global challenges and welcoming so many newcomers from all over the world in search of opportunities.

This local-global, historical, and contemporary resonance also finds its way into our academic map of excellence, from 35 years of connections through SU's African-American Studies program to partnerships with the new refugee communities in Syracuse, from educational exchanges with Haitian universities to documentary theater empowering local "Voices from the Congo."[31]

Decades ago, Burton Blatt, a scholar-activist produced a photographic expose, *Christmas in Purgatory*,[32]that awakened the conscience of New York State to the outrageous treatment of developmentally disabled youth. His intellectual descendants are building *Schools of Promise* in Syracuse today.[33]

Long ago, scholars of indigenous religions forged trusting connections with our Onondaga neighbors who are now inspiring and informing our engineers, scientists, and advocates for environmental justice as they work together to reclaim a sacred site, now a superfund site.

Even our entrepreneurs, who are partnering with residents of under-resourced neighborhoods to build women- and minority-owned businesses, and our architects and designers who are re-envisioning with local artists our urban infrastructure, hark back to the rag-tag bunch that dreamed about connections to the world and dared to build the Erie Canal.

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[31] Ping Chong, *Cry for Peace: Voices from the Congo*, Syracuse Stage, December, 2010.
[32] Burton Blatt and Fred Kaplan, *Christmas in Purgatory: A Photographic Essay on Mental Retardation*, (New York: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1966).
[33] Information on *Schools of Promise* in Syracuse can be found on the website for the School of Education at www.syr.edu, under the leadership of George Theoharis and Julie Causton-Theoharis.

I could, of course, go on---as could all of you---because in universities like ours, there are histories and traditions of excellence that can so appropriately be attuned to drawing those local-global connections today. These are the connections that make it important to work locally and think expansively about the kinds of difference this work can make in forging a path that connects one community with many constituent groups to a broader world of opportunity.

At Syracuse, with an institution-wide vision of Scholarship in Action, we are trying to do just this– change the odds for and with our community and region and for ourselves. We are defining excellence in admissions as much by those we reach as by who and how many we can reject, creating, for example, 2+2 dual admissions programs with guaranteed financial aid up front for students in community colleges in geographies of opportunity from Onondaga Community College in Syracuse to Georgia Perimeter in Atlanta.

We are recognizing our history---some of it less than noble---in the Haudenosaunee Promise Program that provides full tuition, room and board and fees to any citizen of the Six Nations qualifying for admissions.

We are also trying to change the odds directly for children in our city, teaming with the Say Yes to Education Foundation from New York City and the Syracuse City School District to reverse the long-standing disparities in educational opportunities between these mostly low-income and majority minority students and their mostly white middle class suburban peers. Through this very ambitious and comprehensive urban school reform, Syracuse Say Yes is reaching into every single school and encompassing opportunities for all 21,000 students in the district from Kindergarten through High School and on to College.

It includes: before school, after school and summer school programming, individual growth plans for each student, socio-emotional, health, and pro-bono legal supports for all children and families, and guaranteed college tuition at any one of 25 private universities (including, of course, Syracuse) and all of SUNY/CUNY, with financial aid and college counseling starting in middle school, and early college credits in high school. Two years into the program, 920 students are attending college through Say Yes, including 74 at SU.

The aim here is to invest early and often in the college-going future of these children and to provide a national model of what it means for higher education to partner with public schools and communities to answer Dr. King's call to do

something *for* those whom history has, in ways beyond their control, done much *against*, with decades of disinvestment and disenfranchisement.

Like Say Yes, our work in the neighborhoods is quite ambitious and comprehensive, drawing on SU faculty and students from our professional schools and arts and sciences disciplines to work always in partnerships that cross fields and sectors and that align with the interests of residents.

For example, in the Near Westside of Syracuse, the 9th poorest census tract in the U.S., we are partnering in a 501c3 – the Near Westside Initiative – that includes SU academics, neighborhood residents, business people, local government and non-profit experts, and representatives from community-based and social service organizations.

The Initiative is literally rebuilding this once-thriving and still proud multicultural neighborhood into the Syracuse Art, Literacy, and Technology District – SALT – an allusion to its industrial heyday. Abandoned warehouses are being environmentally re-designed by our engineers and architects as new sustainable sites for the arts, education, and neighborhood entrepreneurship. In one, our Latino and Latin American Studies Program is teaming with local residents to house La Casita, a Latino cultural center, next to the offices of Say Yes, and across from the future home of Pro-Literacy International and WCNY, the regional public broadcasting station.

Our artists and educators are teaming up with school children and SU students to recapture a local drug house and turn it into a home for community activities and partnerships, including an education center on Literacy through Photography. Vacant lots are being given new "green life" with sustainable housing and urban gardens. A food co-op and job training in the new green tech and sustainable economy are proceeding apace.

Most importantly, we are seeking to build trust and an expansive vision across disciplines, sectors, generations, cultures and groups in a collective effort to break down divisions, unearth the accumulated disparities, and change the prognosis for the future.

Perhaps this is best captured by what happened to the dark and ugly railroad bridges that for decades divided the Near Westside, figuratively and physically,

from the prosperity downtown, even though thousands of commuters drove under them every day.

Last summer, the Near Westside Initiative commissioned the renowned graffiti artist, Steve Powers to "visually disrupt" this barrier. He came and spent time with residents and listened to their concerns and stories. Then he wrote a "Love Letter to Syracuse" on the bridges, turning barriers into points of connection and conversation. And that exemplifies just one way we can team together to begin to take down the walls, find hope in each other's stories, and reconnect with this country's founding dream – "One Nation, Indivisible."

At this point in our history, colleges and universities must position themselves to change the odds, to see all of the many talents of those who would come through our doors. We must give them a chance to flourish. At the same time, we ourselves must be open to institutional excellence and transformation. If we can do this step by step, person by person, project by project, and group by group, we can make our universities and our nation truly places of "Liberty and Justice for All."