

2-10-2009

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Recommended Citation

Cantor, Nancy, "Why diversity still needs a champion" (2009). *Office of the Chancellor*. 11.
<https://surface.syr.edu/chancellor/11>

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Why Diversity Still Needs a Champion

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I know that the reference in the title of our panel was to university presidents, and I promise to get to specifics about how we can be transformative leaders (or at least try to be), but first I want to frame that task in the context of what is happening in D.C. with “*The President*.”

Although *The New York Times* has already observed that President Barack Obama is an “omnipresent icebreaker” in the national conversation about race, now is a good time to recall the President’s warning that we will not “get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy” and that race is something in American history and life “that we’ve never really worked through.”² Diversity—and not only in race (though importantly race)—is an agenda that still needs champions, on campus as well as in Washington, D.C.

From my perspective, the diversity agenda still needs champions in large part because of our national proclivity to focus on *individual* triumph and forget diverse *groups*, their histories and contemporary realities, and also their potential to contribute to remaking America. I have outlined my thinking on this issue in an essay for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*,³ and I want to summarize a few key points here before turning specifically to what we are doing in Syracuse.

The bedrock of this nation’s ideology is individualism, and it is often expressed in a deep-seated reverence for self-made opportunity. In the archetypal rags to riches American success story, a person triumphs against all odds:

- Eileen Collins, a small town girl from Elmira, NY, enters ROTC at Syracuse, earns degrees in physics and engineering, and becomes the first woman space shuttle commander.
- Thurgood Marshall, a slave’s grandson who is denied admission to the University of Maryland’s School of Law, later successfully sues to overturn the school’s segregation policy, and then goes on to become a Supreme Court Justice.

¹ Remarks delivered February 10, 2009 at the annual meeting of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education for the presidents panel discussion titled, “The President as Champion of the Diversity Agenda: Leading by Example.”

² See Sarah Kershaw, “Talk About Race? Relax, It’s OK,” *The New York Times* (January 15, 2009) E1-2.

³ See Nancy Cantor, “Candidates, Hear the Cry: “No Group Left Behind,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Commentary, September 26, 2008.

The power of such stories lies in the triumph of an exceptional individual over adversity—specifically, the disadvantages attached to the groups to which they belong: first generation students, women, African-Americans. In the telling, it is easy to gloss over the nature of these adversities, the odds that were stacked against all members of these groups, win or lose.

Meanwhile, disparities in wealth, health, education, and incarceration among groups still hold most individuals back and hinder our national progress. Yet we, both in higher education and in the public at large, embrace the belief that all will be well if we just ignore the role of group membership altogether. While slightly more tolerant of considerations of socioeconomic class, we are steadfastly paranoid about race, and we prefer to deny that gender matters at all anymore.

Yes, we have elected a Black president and, yes, virtually every leader in higher education says that diversity matters, but this rarely translates into public policy to raise the odds for success for groups at a disadvantage in this society, not just for the exceptional individuals within them.

This is both unjust and unwise because the children and youth who represent our future college-going talent base and competitive edge in the global knowledge economy are increasingly coming from *groups* with histories of exclusion. The stakes are high—for all of us—to even the odds for success, especially for the urban poor, who are largely people of color, and the rural poor, who are increasingly isolated from educational opportunity. The integration of our public schools, colleges, and universities is a compelling national interest. We need a “no group left behind” campaign—and we need it now.

But how do we do that when the economic crisis can and surely will validate a resurgence of zero-sum, group versus group, thinking? Just the kind of thinking that pits groups, scares everyone about scarce resources, and provides some cover for those who don’t really believe that these (disenfranchised) groups can make it, even as these doubters revel in the successes of the exceptional meritorious individuals who do, including as a president?

One thing that I know from the battles of the Michigan cases is that facts and numbers and rational arguments don’t seem to matter when the “you” versus “me,” mentality takes over and the retreat to a mythical “meritocracy” reigns supreme. I will never forget trying to convey the reality of the undergraduate admissions picture in Michigan in the height of the affirmative action debates. It never seemed to matter that we had ten times the number of applications from white students as from students of color.

In other words, we could have accepted (but didn’t) every single student of color, and the majority of white applicants rejected from the University of Michigan would still have been beaten out by another white peer! The winners in selective college admissions are overwhelmingly white students from affluent, college-educated families, many of whom have been graduating from those same colleges for generations. They are not likely to be applicants who are African Americans (from any economic stratum) *or* working-class whites. Individually and collectively, we still leave those groups behind in much of higher education.

Collectively Remaking America: A New Morrill Act

So, how do we promote a diversity agenda in this context? Here again, I draw a lesson from the Michigan cases. The “winning” argument for race-conscious admissions—supported in both the undergraduate and Law School cases—was one that addressed the collective needs and purposes of the country (not the rights of individuals per se), national security, economic prosperity, engaged leadership with widespread national support of the broadest swath of our citizenry. It is those collective purposes that we must use today to support our diversity agenda – and this brings me back to President Obama, because he provides us with a rare opportunity as he contemplates “remaking America.”

We must take that opportunity by embedding our commitment to advancing groups, not just individuals, in the agenda for “remaking America.” And here is where colleges and universities, and *their* presidents, can play a very central role, as President Obama suggested in his inaugural address.

Now is the time to create a new and visionary national public policy that will channel the energy of higher-education institutions and their many committed partners into a movement-for change. Just as the Morrill Act of the 19th century acknowledged the family farm as the anchor of American social life and the land-grant universities as their source of innovation, we need a 21st-century equivalent that acknowledges the role that both private and public colleges and universities must play today in our schools, our communities, our democracy, and our global economy.

That is what President Obama suggested when he raised the possibility of a central role for colleges and universities in scientific research, in reversing our nation’s failing schools, in saving our environment, in restoring our once-booming cities and sharing our knowledge and our prosperity on the global stage. The new stimulus package that he and the Congress will shape in the coming months provides the opportunity for a new Morrill Act that can enshrine a vision of higher education—private and public, community colleges and research institutions alike—as public goods once again.

Accordingly, my main point is that higher education, and we as leaders of institutions, can and must assume our rightful role today as public goods, merging the work of our disciplines with the work of our communities. In the process, we will authentically and naturally embed our diversity agenda in its rightful role as central to the future of our institutional and our national viability.

I have always felt that diversity should not be an institutional add-on, just like “service” should not be delivered only at our convenience in one-shot, one-way dispensing of expertise *to* the community or even in well-meaning service-learning projects by our student volunteers. As add-ons, these agendas are all too easily thrown overboard when times get tough—and the doubters come out of the woodwork to claim that these (intertwined agendas) are too expensive, too politically fraught, too distracting from excellence and so on. We-need central—not optional—agendas. Remaking America is serious business. A sustained commitment needs all

hands on deck, and our diversity agenda is not a luxury for good times only. It must be our institutional bread and butter, day in and day out.

Scholarship in Action: Making the Vision Happen

In Syracuse, we are calling our vision for this vital, central agenda "Scholarship in Action." It is built on strategic, disciplined, and reciprocal partnerships around pressing community needs, especially the need for social justice, and substantive areas of opportunity and strength for the university: for example, environmental sustainability and justice, inclusive urban education, art, technology and design, and neighborhood and cultural entrepreneurship. Scholarship in Action grows authentically out of the interests of our scholars and of our community, and our students are always involved.

It draws not only upon our institutional strengths and the promise of our partnerships, but also on our history, which in Syracuse has included vigorous campaigns for social justice and peace, and the precedents of democracy of the indigenous six Haudenosaunee Nations. Our city was a hotbed for abolition, our region the cockpit of the struggle by suffragettes. Even the building of the Erie Canal has given us a template for innovation, suggesting our partnership in new technology that runs the length of the New York State Thruway.

We have powerful incentives to move forward as quickly as possible: as part of the deindustrialization of our region, Syracuse has bled jobs and population for many years. This has led to huge problems and great chasms between the haves and the have-nots. There are critical societal issues, and the stakes are very high.

Scholarship in Action is a two-way street, attuned to the world where it is making a difference and to the disciplines, where it is making an impact. By its very nature, it raises questions about who we are, with whom we partner, who we educate, and what we invest in. It changes how we do our work, as the "work of the university" and "the work of the world" coincide.

We see this interweaving of the work of the campus and the work of the community in all of our major areas of investment, whether it is:

- The reclamation of the sacred Onondaga Lake, now superfund site, by a consortium of scientists, Native activists, the corporations who once polluted it and now must clean it. As this goes forward, humanists and social scientists are joining local residents to give voice and address the racial and gender disparities of environmental injustice.
- The building of a signature cultural connective corridor between the "EDs and MEDs" on our hill and the City below. Syracuse has remarkable cultural institutions that have survived the decay of a post-industrial city and many multicultural neighborhoods with tremendous talent too often ignored. The Connective Corridor, a collaboration with architects, artists, designers, engineers,

entrepreneurs, politicians, and more, will quite literally bring to light, through technology hot-spots, urban reforestation, public art, ski paths, videos on the sides of buildings, these cultural and human assets.

- The Southside Innovation Center, a university-community collaborative for women and minority owned business incubation, including faculty and students from all over campus working on these business start-ups, including micro-credit loans, entrepreneurship workshops, technology training.
- The district-wide urban education reform collaboration between Say Yes to Education, the Syracuse City School District, and SU, to provide “middle class” opportunities to poor, largely students of color in the City schools and reverse the cradle-to-prison pipeline to a cradle-to-college pipeline, including financial support from a consortium of public and private colleges and universities.

Authenticity and Diversity

And as we interweave the work of the campus and the work of the community in sustained projects with benefits for our disciplines and for our City, we see the emergence of *authentic opportunities* to promote diversity as a central institutional agenda.

First of all, in so many of these projects, faculty and students and community groups co-mingle, with education and scholarship and community revitalization co-inhabiting time and space. This means that many of our scholars and students of color experience more collegiality and “presence”—critical mass if you will—through their community collaborations. This experience of *place* covers many dimensions of diversity (disability, sexuality, class, religion, nationality). The multicultural life of an urban center like Syracuse, both in terms of long-standing communities and recent immigrant communities, can quickly multiply the “presence” of diversity on our campus. And this is not a one-sided benefit. The community members who engage in these collaborations feel, by their own testimony, tremendous empowerment in lead roles that, for once, command the attention of the “powers that be.”

A dynamic of reciprocity has developed between the agenda to remake Syracuse and the diversity agenda of Syracuse University. To give one example: as we work on environmental justice issues in Syracuse, including Onondaga Lake, the long-standing expertise of the Onondaga (and all of the six Haudenosaunee Nations in our region) has as much credibility and place as that of our environmental scientists and social scientists. The mutual trust developed in this work has also helped us tremendously in recruiting Native students and in ensuring that they in turn feel a sense of respect and place on campus. At SU, our Native student population has grown from 18 three years ago to 114 this year. We have a particularly close relationship with the Haudenosaunee, and we provide full financial support for any qualified student from the six Nations to attend SU. Today we have 57 Haudenosaunee Promise Scholars, and many are first-generation college students.

The more we embed our scholarship and education in partnerships with communities who bring different histories, standpoints, skills, the better off we are. And I believe that Scholarship in Action is beginning to do that in Syracuse and for SU.

Crossing Boundaries: Campus and Community, Groups and Groups

It is impossible to do sustained, large-scale collaborations without coming upon the need to cross boundaries of all sorts. As such, Scholarship in Action promotes a key facet of a diversity agenda: the ability to talk, empathize, and understand each other, as individuals and as members of groups, and to find ways to expand our capacities to do this.

A recent incident from COLAB, our interdisciplinary design studio that inhabits the Near Westside of Syracuse as part of our Connective Corridor, illustrates this point. It happened in a class where students were asked to create objects that interact with each other and use technology to extend the reach of the human body. Two of the students, Lily Chong and Matt Kalish, were thinking about interactive toys, perhaps ones with eyes that lighted up.

One day, during a critique of student projects, someone in the class brushed aside an idea by saying "That's so gay." There was a brief debate afterwards about whether this was offensive, but Lily and Matt left the class feeling there must be some way to acknowledge distress within a group and immediately take on the elephant in the room.

So they imagined toy elephants that could communicate with wireless chips. The eyes of the elephant would light up if someone squeezed it for three seconds, and then the eyes of all the other elephants in the room would light up, too, without really revealing who started it.

Lily, a resident adviser, says she will try the elephants during "dialogue circles" in her residence hall. Most importantly, from my perspective, this illustrates the two-way street of scholarship in action, because as Lily brings her experiences from COLAB back up onto the university hill, they will greatly enrich our many "on campus" efforts to pursue the difficult dialogues that must be a central part of any diversity agenda. SU is one of nine members of the Multiversity Project headed by University of Michigan social psychologist Patricia Gurin. This is an effort to leverage diversity by facilitating inter-group dialogues to provide meaningful, sustained interaction among students across such divides as race, gender, and sexuality.

In Syracuse, these dialogues already have a strong community history, as the City has one of the longest standing programs of Community-Wide Dialogues Against Racism in the country, and the campus has a strong student-lead "Team Against Bias." It all comes together to create, we hope, a critical mass of inter-group activity that I firmly believe we'll sustain.

Sustaining a Diversity/Engagement Agenda

Sustainability is the key to advancing a long-term diversity agenda, as we simultaneously strive to remake America and higher education. And critical to this agenda are the people we

recruit to lead our institutions. At Syracuse, we recruited five new deans last year, four of them women and two of them African-American. At the moment, we have such a diverse cohort of deans that the majority of undergraduates at Syracuse have a dean of color. We count on these women and people of color to fill the ranks of “middle management” (a term not favored in the academy) with faculty and staff who care about remaking America and the role that universities like Syracuse can play in that task.

Even so, we can recruit all the leadership we want, and even hopefully admit the groups of students to make a difference, but if we do not reward faculty for taking on this agenda, I do not believe that it is sustainable. So faculty rewards are where we need to be courageous.

Changing Rewards

There is often a gap between the public-oriented vision of the top leadership and the day-to-day individualistic reward structure facing faculty and students. We have tried to approach that gap between the long term vision and the dominant culture and the incentives that cut against that vision.

As part of its Tenure Team Initiative, for which I served as co-chair, Imagining America, a national consortium of more than 80 colleges and universities, issued a report last June that set out the obstacles faced by faculty members involved in public scholarship. As Timothy Eatman, an assistant professor of higher education at Syracuse and a co-author of the report, told *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “excellent scholarship is just that—excellent scholarship.” At tenure time, it’s important to make certain that there are ways for public scholarship to be evaluated, “so we can discern what is excellent and what isn’t.”⁴

At the moment, even such normally sympathetic fields as policy and social sciences tend to discourage junior faculty members from collaborative work that is inter-disciplinary and publicly engaged. How many times have we heard, “You’d better wait until you get tenure before you do that”? A culture like this extracts a high price. It’s costly not only to artists and scholars who find it difficult to make their work count at tenure time, but also to students looking to the curriculum for opportunities for significant public work. And, as George Sanchez, chair of the board of Imagining America and faculty member at USC, has often noted, this reticence to embrace public scholarship as “scholarly,” disparately impacts the career trajectories of faculty of color, many of whom feel a significant commitment to community and to scholarship together.⁵ We can and must do better.

⁴ See Audrey Williams June, “Colleges Should Change Policies to Encourage Scholarship Devoted to the Public Good, Report Says,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 26, 2008. See also Nancy Cantor and Steven D. Lavine, “Taking Public Scholarship Seriously,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (9 June 2006) : B20.

⁵ George Sanchez, “Crossing Figueroa: The Tangled Web of Diversity and Democracy,” The John Dewey Lecture, University of Michigan, October 2004.

Creating a Critical Mass for Change

At the same time, momentum for institutional change can come through our ties to the greater society. The communities of experts with whom we increasingly work can create external validation and help support a critical mass of scholars interested in public scholarship and democratizing knowledge.

We can create change with our external partners and by tapping the deep-seated, organic interests of the faculty, students, staff, and community to make a difference in the world. We can and we must answer the call to remake America. In doing so, we will remake our institutions and our connections near and far, as local issues almost always resonate globally. We must be courageous and push for the advancement of entire groups, not just exceptional individuals. The hard challenges on our campuses and in our communities are worth our intellectual and social capital, and even in these hard times, we have a great deal of that capital to invest!