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3-6-2006

Universities and Their Connected Communities: Creating Capital for the Future

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Recommended Citation

Cantor, Nancy, "Universities and Their Connected Communities: Creating Capital for the Future" (2006). *Office of the Chancellor (2004 - 2013)*. 36.

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SPEECHES

Universities and Their Connected Communities: Creating Capital for the Future

Presidential Lecture Series

Center for Biotechnology and Interdisciplinary Studies

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

Troy, New York

4 p.m. Monday, March 6, 2006

Part I

President Shirley Ann Jackson, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to speak at Rensselaer, a sister institution of Syracuse University in proximity and in history, sharing many alumni and pursuing similar educational philosophies.

Steven van Rensselaer, who founded RPI, was a driving force behind the Erie Canal and, therefore, deeply connected to the city of Syracuse, which until the construction of the Canal was only a trading post for the local salt mines. In 1820, a visitor described our area as "so desolate it would make an owl weep to fly over it."¹ Once Syracuse could export its salt in bulk through the Canal, it grew in just 30 years from 250 people to 22,000.² The salt industry gave rise to a chemical industry and later to a broadly based manufacturing sector, so that 70 years later, Syracuse produced everything from clocks and china to soda ash and steam engines. The story was repeated in city after city.



The Erie Canal was more than a masterpiece of engineering. In linking New York City and the East Coast to the riches and trade of the American West-and creating cities all along the way-it became the cradle of the

Industrial Revolution in the United States.³ The history of the Canal is a powerful reminder that a small group of committed people can make a tremendous difference-can, literally, re-route history. The history of the Canal carries another important lesson. It was created by networks of interest, and it, in turn, created new business, social, and even religious networks⁴ by connecting a series of communities, each nested in its own geographical area.

**Click on thumbnail to see a larger image of the Erie Canal map.*

Although the Industrial Revolution has moved off shore and much of our manufacturing sector has closed down and left, the Technology Revolution of the late 20th century is accelerating, and a new-perhaps as profound-Biological Revolution is well underway. It is a great privilege for me to be speaking today in

one of the hotbeds for the Biological Revolution, this wonderful new Center for Biotechnology and Interdisciplinary Studies at RPI.

Today, I want to suggest to you that we draw on the lessons from the Erie Canal-that a small group of committed people can change history and that networks of interest can create valuable new networks, including many they don't anticipate.

Today, I want to suggest that we collaborate on a blueprint for a new network of creativity across Upstate New York that connects universities, private as well as public, and the cities and communities in which they are nested. We might think of them as an Upstate Pathway of Connected Communities bordering on- or growing out of-the backbone of the old Erie Canal. Such a Pathway, which already exists in some respects, could draw strongly on the arts and the humanities, as well as the sciences, and become a space that is both physically and virtually a "third space," if you will, where we could interact conveniently with our communities, with each other, and with the world.

It's time that private universities expand our definitions of the spaces we can and should occupy. It's time to re-define our terms of engagement with the wider world. Rensselaer President Jackson has observed, "American higher education is an extraordinary enterprise,"⁵ with important challenges at "an extraordinary time in history, with global economic, political, and environmental forces demanding the full attention of scholars, researchers, and innovators."⁶ As private universities, Syracuse, Rensselaer, and many others can bring great resources to that enterprise.

It is well known that private universities make great contributions to the economic growth and competitiveness of New York State. The Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities⁷ reports that these colleges and universities enroll nearly 450,000 students, award 80 percent of the state's Ph.D.'s, and employ a staff of 131,000 on an annual payroll of \$6 billion.

I want to add to the notion of economic capital a sense of the social, intellectual, and cultural capital we can also create. Chief Justice John Marshall observed 200 years ago, that "private colleges and universities benefit our Nation by charting their academic missions free of political pressures and exigencies" and that their role is not to "fill the place which would otherwise be occupied by the government, but that which would otherwise remain vacant."⁸

That space, as Steve Schomberg and I have written,⁹ has traditionally been located somewhere between the monastery and the marketplace. We have enjoyed, to a greater or lesser degree, the privilege of being somewhat insulated, like the

monastery, from the emergencies and instant demands of the day, but we have also had an obligation to prepare future citizens and to search for solutions to critical societal needs. Historically, work in the marketplace for the public good has been most identified with American public universities, starting with their creation through the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862. By contrast, and consistent with John Marshall's characterization, private universities have perhaps been closer to the monastery, identified as ivory towers of thought and experimentation, somewhat detached from any explicit mandate to work directly in the public interest.

Today, however, the boundaries of public and private research universities are blurring, as many large public institutions depend more and more on tuition and endowments and transition from being state-supported to state-assisted to state-located,¹⁰ and many private institutions join their public colleagues in garnering support for research and innovation from their state, and take a greater interest in their home communities, regional economic development, and global competitiveness.

In the Syracuse area, for example, many private institutions, ours included, are involved in The Essential New York Initiative that is working to transform the 12-county region at the center of Upstate New York to a knowledge-based economy.¹¹ Around the nation, some of our finest private institutions--from the University of Pennsylvania in West Philadelphia to Yale University in New Haven and Howard University in Washington, D.C.¹² - are serving to anchor economic and social revitalization of their cities and regions.

Earlier this year, a group of New York's college, medical school, and university presidents, led by Joel Seligman, president of the University of Rochester, gave our legislators a white paper urging that Albany provide funds for stem cell research so New York can maintain its competitive position with other states.¹³ In this spirit, Gov. George Pataki has proposed that SUNY Upstate Medical University become home to an umbilical cord blood bank for research and treatment and has offered \$250,000 to plan for it.¹⁴

Still, as we strive to be on the cutting edge of the high-tech revolution in biology, we are deeply concerned about the abilities of high school students even to consider college-level math, science, and engineering. As detailed in the National Academies' report *Rising Above The Gathering Storm*¹⁵, in this case, our global competitiveness is at risk.

Earlier this year, Abe Lackman, president of the Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities, told state legislators that New York must support programs at private as well as public institutions to recruit a larger and more diverse pool of students

into the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics [STEM] fields. And the Governor's budget proposal for this session included several such proposals.

The time is right, in other words, for private institutions to join vigorously in the public agenda, and they (and we) are responding well to the challenge. There is some concern, of course, over whether this can be done while also protecting the independence of private universities that Marshall so well delineated and that some see as fragile in the face of the commercialization of universities¹⁶ and the blurring of boundaries between campus and community.¹⁷

To the contrary, I join many of my colleagues in believing that we can inhabit the "space that would otherwise remain vacant"¹⁸ --that is, we can protect the experimentation and freewheeling debates so constructive on our campuses--and still become more inter-dependent with our cities and regions. We can create a vibrant two-way street of people and ideas--that fluid but always shared "third space"--that can be an environment for innovation and social well-being and a vital test-bed for new ideas and disciplines emerging from our faculty and students.¹⁹

But first we should create a blueprint or a strategy to connect campuses and communities in productive partnerships for the future, and then stretch those partnerships out from a "modern Canal," our Upstate Pathway for Connected Communities. This could be a pathway for ideas and innovation to flow from Albany to Buffalo, stopping at each of the campus-community hubs along the way.

At each point along the Pathway, the emphasis of the campus-community nexus--the content focus or currency of exchange--may shift, playing to the particular strengths of a campus and needs of the community, from nanotechnology to environmental and energy systems to stem cell research or innovation in the arts and humanities. At the same time, there should be communication and collaboration all along the way.

Take the arts, for example, from the work of Artspace in Buffalo to our new Warehouse in Syracuse to RPI's new Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center, creativity is already crackling in the communities along the Pathway, and there is a commitment to local engagement in each one, as we co-create art and cultural capital for Upstate New York.

Each of our communities has its own signature, with RPI/Troy focusing on art and technology and Syracuse focusing on urban design, but there are also many shared projects, such as the intent to create artist spaces and homesteading in some of the vacant downtown areas of Buffalo and Syracuse.

Working from the old adage that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, we should commit not only to strong campus-community partnerships in each of the Upstate communities along the Pathway, but also agree to share our work and invite each other in as we focus strategically on our local strengths and context.

This would be similar to what we have tried to do in the Syracuse Center of Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems*, which is led by Syracuse University, with some 12 Upstate New York academic and research institutions, including RPI, and more than 60 firms from their communities participating.



*Click on the image at right to view a larger map - *Connected Communities in Center of Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems*.

[view Part II >>](#)

¹Peter

L. Bernstein, *Wedding of the Waters; The Erie Canal and the Making of a Great Nation* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005) 361.

²Bernstein, 361.

³Bernstein, 26-27.

⁴Bernstein, 34-35.

⁵Letter from Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson to Dr. Nancy Cantor, December, 2005.

⁶Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 2005 *President's Report*.

⁷<http://www.cicu.org/publicationReports/economicImpact.php>

⁸The Trustees of Dartmouth College v Woodward, 17 U.S. 518, 634 (1819).

⁹Nancy Cantor and Steven Schomberg, "Poised between two worlds: The University as Monastery and Marketplace," *EDUCAUSE Review* 38, no. 2, 12-21.

¹⁰J. J. Duderstadt, *A university for the 21st century* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000).

¹¹<http://www.essentialny.com>

¹²Lois Romano, "Urban Colleges Learn to be Good Neighbors; Universities Also Reap Benefits from Investing in Their Communities," *The Washington Post*, 9 Jan. 2006, late ed.: A1.

¹³University at Buffalo, Columbia University Medical Center, Cornell University, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, Mt. Sinai Medical Center, New York University, Rensselaer Polytechnic

Institute, University of Rochester, Rockefeller University, Rochester Institute of Technology, Stony Brook University, SUNY Downstate Medical Center, SUNY Upstate Medical University, Syracuse University, Rowell Park Cancer Institute, Albert Einstein College of Medicine at Yeshiva University, *"New York and Stem Cell Research; A Scientific, Policy, and Economic Analysis."*

¹⁴Erik Kriss, "CNY Umbilical Blood Bank Offers Hope vs. Diseases; Pataki Proposes \$250,000 to Study, Find Site for Cord Blood Facility," *The Post Standard* : 8 Feb. 2006.

¹⁵The National Academies, *Rising Above The Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Future*, http://fermat.nap.edu/execsumm_pdf/11463.pdf, 2006: 3.

¹⁶Derek Bok, *Universities in the Marketplace; The Commercialization of Higher Education* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹⁷Stanley Fish, "The Case for Academic Autonomy; A prerequisite for academe's survival is distinctiveness; without it, we haven't got a prayer," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 23 Jul 2004: C1.

¹⁸John Marshall.

¹⁹David J. Maurrasse, *beyond the campus; How Colleges and Universities Form Partnerships with Their Communities* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001).

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