

1-12-2007

Scholarship in Action: Why Community Commitment Matters

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Recommended Citation

Cantor, Nancy, "Scholarship in Action: Why Community Commitment Matters" (2007). *Office of the Chancellor*. 30.
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50th Anniversary of the Center for the Study
of Higher and Postsecondary Education:
Challenges to Higher Education in the 21st Century
The University of Michigan
January 12, 2007

Scholarship in Action:
Why Community Commitment Matters
Chancellor Nancy Cantor

It is, of course, an absolute pleasure and honor to be here today, celebrating the 50-year history and accomplishments of the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education and thinking together about the challenges that face higher education.

At this moment, we face a troubling paradox: diversity in postsecondary education is more important than ever, but the national will to ensure it is undermined by growing competition for the escalating individual returns of a college education.

Instead of seeing our collective task as one of educating a diverse workforce for the future, incubating a shared sense of responsibility for our democracy, and rebuilding our communities, the mission of higher education is persistently reduced to a zero-sum pitched battle over an individual leg up in the knowledge economy. Instead of focusing on the public benefits of higher education, we fight over access to its private gains.

Few doubt that our national economy depends critically on drawing from a largely untapped, increasingly diverse talent pool in our cities, towns, and communities.¹ In this effort, equity and equal opportunity are critical. Higher education has also traditionally been a key institutional context for inspiring commitments to responsible citizenship and democracy in the next generations. We must pool our diverse intellectual and social capital to create innovation that matters both to our bottom line and to pressing community issues, from environmental sustainability to shrinking cities and failing schools.

Tragic and dangerous global issues impinge on our lives, demanding the best wisdom and ethical sense we can marshal every single day. If higher education is to continue to be a public good in our knowledge society, it must not only create knowledge but also nurture the wisdom to

¹ See Nancy Cantor, "Building Intellectual and Social Capital through Diversity and Innovation," KeyBank Diversity Thought Leadership Series, The City Club of Cleveland, Cleveland, Ohio, 9 June 2006; The National Academies, *Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future* (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2006). The Executive Summary of this report is available online at http://fermat.nap.edu/execsumm_pdf/11463

use that knowledge to advance human dignity, liberty, and well-being, among our own and among those who do not belong to us, are not like us, and—in many cases---do not like us.

Yet at the same time, it is becoming harder and harder to convince the American public that the public benefits of higher education are as important as the private benefits over which battle lines are drawn in state after state.

Indeed, the success of anti-affirmative action campaigns in some of our most populous states---California, Texas, Florida, and now Michigan---has been a painful reminder of the difficulty of finding ways to honor our nation's historic and unfulfilled commitment to equity, equality, and excellence in education *as tools* for building democracy and community.

When Dr. King said he had a dream for *his* sons and daughters, his aspirations for emancipation were not limited to them – his fight was for *all* our futures. The heart and soul of historic movements for civil rights, whether at Seneca Falls – a stone's throw from Syracuse---or across the bloody lines of race in Selma, Alabama or Johannesburg, South Africa, have always resided in their collective focus.

Today, however, we persistently ignore that focus, turning our backs on the re-segregation of our public schools and inadequately integrating new immigrant groups into the largely under-resourced schools in our inner cities and rural communities.

After the retrenchment of the 1990s, only 14 percent of white students attended multiracial schools by the year 2000,² and almost 40 percent of black and Latino students found themselves in schools with 90 to 100 percent minority populations. National studies have documented the negative consequences of this re-segregation in the public schools,³ and recent assessments from California, Florida, and Texas have reported the distortions---all of them predicted---sledge hammered into the classes entering colleges and universities in these states.⁴

The fastest growing segments of our population now live in our most challenged neighborhoods. They constitute a major part of our talent pool for the future. If we fail to educate and support them, how can we expect to be competitive as a nation? And how will we fulfill our commitment to a democratic culture in which every citizen is able to participate?

² E. Frankenberg, C. Lee, and G. Orfield, *A Multiracial Society with Segregated Schools: Are We Losing the Dream?* (Cambridge, Ma: The Civil Rights Project, 2003) 29.

³ The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., The Civil Rights Project of Harvard University, and 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; A Manual for Parents, Educators, and Advocates* (New York: The NAACP Legal Defense Fund, 2005) 10.

⁴ For additional details, see John Rogers, Veronica Terriquez, Siomara Valladares, and Jeannie Oaks, *California Educational Opportunity Report; Roadblocks to College* (Los Angeles: UC/ACCORD and UCLA IDEA, March, 2006); Susanna Loeb, Linda Darling-Hammond, and John Luczak, "How Teaching Conditions Predict Teaching Turnover in California Schools," *Peabody Journal of Education* 80, 3 (2005) 44-70; Kathryn M. Borman, Tamela McNulte Eitle, Deanna Michael, David J. Eitle, Reginald Lee, Larry Johnson, Deirdre Cobb-Roberts, Sherman Dorn, and Barbara Schircliffe, "Accountability in a Postdesegregation Era: The Continuing Significance of Racial Desegregation in Florida's Schools," *American Educational Research Journal* 41, 3 (Fall, 2004) 605-631; and Joseph Berger, "Adjusting a Formula Devised for Diversity," *The New York Times*. 13 Dec. 2006, late ed.: B7.

We are well aware, as we seek to create genuine and sustainable opportunity, that legal and procedural remedies are vital defenses of the gains we have made. But they are also vulnerable to challenge and, in many places, may not be sufficient. We know all too well that the promises of *Brown v Board* have not been fulfilled,⁵ and as the *Campaign for Fiscal Equity*⁶ in New York State has shown us, the critical task of getting the resources to our most under-served inner city and rural schools will likely take years to accomplish.

This morning, I want to recommend that we step up the struggle for justice, for real democracy, and for excellence in education by looking outward to create, nurture, and sustain coalitions with communities beyond our campuses. Higher education has a very critical role to play in our communities, and by stepping outside our campuses and making substantial partnerships, we can best solidify the public's support for diversity, and our own engagement with democracy.

Reasserting the Public Benefits of Higher Education

Reasserting the public benefits of higher education is a critical challenge facing our colleges and universities, both public and private.

Our institutions have always been more than credentialing factories. We have always played an expansive role in society by providing opportunity not just to individuals but also to groups – whether through the GI Bill, federal student aid, the Americans with Disabilities Act, or affirmative action for under-represented women and minorities. We have always focused on educating responsible citizens who will find innovative solutions for society, not only for themselves.

Nonetheless, many in our society worry today that we have become detached and out of touch with their values and needs.⁷ Seen through the lens of private gains, we are perceived as somewhat arrogantly holding on to valuable credentials.

We must find a means to reconnect with the American people in ways that reaffirm the value and timeliness of our historic expansive mission. This is a time not unlike the days of the pioneer expansion that produced the land-grant mission, or the years after World War II when we looked to Action Research⁸ to reunite us in the face of virulent prejudice and discrimination. In

⁵ See James T. Patterson, *Brown v Board of Education; A Civil Rights Milestone and its Troubled Legacy* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001); Sabrina Zirkel, Gretchen E. Lopez, and Lisa M. Brown, “The 50th Anniversary of Brown v Board of Education: Interethnic Contact and Change in Education in the 21st Century,” *Journal of Social Issues*, 60, 1 (2004); Gary Orfield and Edward Miller, eds., *Chilling Admissions; The Affirmative Action Crisis and the Search for Alternatives* (Cambridge: The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University, Harvard Education Publishing Group, 1998); Dorinda J. Carter, Stella M. Flores, and Richard J. Reddick, eds., *Legacies of Brown; Multiracial Equity in American Education* (Cambridge: Harvard Educational Review Reprint Series 40, 2004).

⁶ See <http://www.cfequity.org/>

⁷ See <http://www.solutionsforourfuture.org> American Council on Education, 2006.

⁸ For a description of this philosophy in the founding of The Research Center for Group Dynamics see Anne Frantilla, “Social Science in the Public Interest: A Fiftieth-Year History of the Institute for Social Research,” *Bentley Historical Library Bulletin* 45 (September 1998) 22.

the days of the New Frontier, JFK spawned the service-learning tradition by advising, “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.”

I believe that, once again, we need to reassert vigorously the value of our outward-looking public scholarship and the commitments to communities that we can make. We must make a visible demonstration that we are part of the solution, not above the fray of economic and social reinvention in our cities, towns, and communities.

No one doubts that the cities and towns next to and near our colleges and universities, from Syracuse to Detroit to South Central Los Angeles, need reinvention, but even our friends may not fully trust or value our role in that process. So we need to build – or rebuild – the kinds of coalitions of interest, with higher education squarely in the middle, that can make a significant difference for our connected communities and revitalize the public trust in our mission as public goods.⁹ When we do this, the benefits to our own institutions will also be clear.

Leaving the Ivory Tower Again

However, it may take leaving the ivory tower to rekindle the collective public will and quiet the noise of individualism. Accomplishing the expansive mission of higher education as a public good in these times requires a commitment to community that goes well beyond the two one-way streets we currently have: of students coming to us as consumers and faculty transferring technology to the world. We need to build genuine and sustained collaborations with businesses, not-for-profits, schools and neighborhoods in our connected communities – in other words, redefine the boundaries of our campuses and our work (discovery and educational work) in much more porous and reciprocal ways than ever before.

I’m talking about public scholarship.¹⁰ That is, about bold, imaginative, reciprocal, and sustained partnerships between colleges and universities and their connected communities. This is the quickest and the best way to demonstrate to the general public that everyone can benefit from higher education, not just the relative few that gain admission to our classrooms. Public scholarship has great power to “challenge and reshape the relationship between our colleges and universities and the society of which they are a part.”¹¹

It is a way to democratize our institutions organically. As we tap diverse pools of talent to create innovation that matters, the tables may well turn on who sets the agenda and whose expertise matters. Addressing the pressing issues of our communities demands a grounding in local realities, even as it strengthens our global competitiveness.¹² And when we put our minds to work with our neighbors to build thriving communities, then we also assert the natural role of colleges and universities in incubating responsible citizenship.

⁹ Adrianna J. Kezar, Tony C. Chambers, and John C. Burkhardt, eds., *Higher Education for the Public Good* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass-John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2005).

¹⁰ Nancy Cantor and Steven D. Lavine, “Taking Public Scholarship Seriously,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9 June 2006, B20.

¹¹ Tony C. Chambers, “The Special Role of Higher Education in Society,” *Higher Education for the Public Good*, op. cit., 3.

¹² *Innovation That Matters*, IBM Conference, Rome, 2006, and <http://www.solutionsforourfuture.org>, American Council on Education, 2006.

Scholarship in Action

Our vision at Syracuse University---a vision we call Scholarship in Action---is one example of a strategic framework for promoting public scholarship.¹³ I'd like to spend a few moments describing it, because it illustrates how public scholarship can embed diversity and all of its benefits in both a community and a university.

The city of Syracuse, as you may know, was a casualty of our nationwide de-industrialization, as manufacturing operations moved offshore and we were hurtled into the knowledge economy with our inner city depopulated, our schools badly deteriorated, our historic buildings boarded up.

Syracuse is still a city of tremendous resources, however, with a powerful and progressive political tradition that historically made our region a cockpit for the struggle for abolition, women's rights, civil rights, and the rights of indigenous people. It was also a birthplace of the industrial revolution in the United States. It still attracts waves of immigrants, particularly from Eastern Europe and Africa, ready to join with our inner city residents to take up the mantle of the post-industrial revolution. We have the history and the faith to believe that our city, our university, and our region can collaborate to make our area rebound in ways that count, in ways that will contribute to knowledge, discovery, education, and many academic areas.

Our local public scholarship has four interlocking areas of principal focus – urban environmental sustainability; arts, design, and technology; neighborhood economic and cultural entrepreneurship; and inclusive urban education. We work with local citizens groups, public officials and agencies, not-for-profits, artists and business people, and we use the resources of the University and the city interchangeably, moving physically up and down the “hill” on which our campus sits. We involve scholars and students from disciplines across the university (well beyond the traditionally-engaged social science, health, and public affairs disciplines), and they learn from and work with “communities of experts” with local knowledge and history to share.

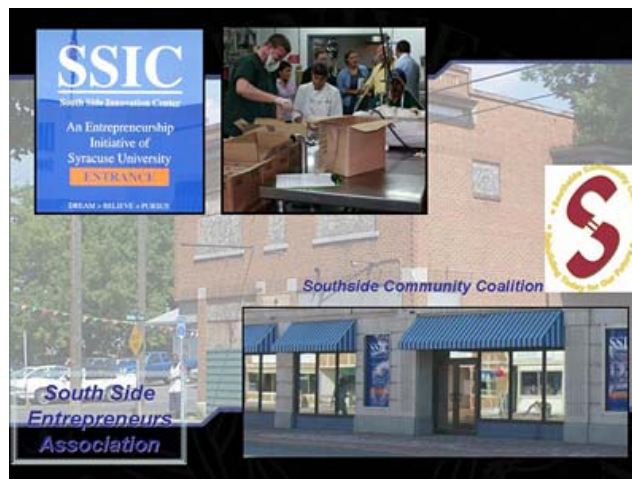
¹³ For more on *Scholarship in Action*, see <http://www.syr.edu>, Vision Statement and Chancellor's Speeches.

Here are some examples:

- At the new headquarters of our Center of Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems, faculty and students from 12 institutions across Upstate NY join with industry and local experts on a brownfield site in downtown Syracuse to work on indoor environmental quality, water resources, and renewable energy. And their work is grounded in very deep ways in local history and knowledge, including the contributions of the Onondaga Nation to the remediation of their sacred lake – Onondaga Lake – a superfund site and casualty of post-Erie Canal industrialization.



- At the newly-opened South Side Innovation Center – a business incubator for residents of one of Syracuse’s most challenged neighborhoods – minority and women entrepreneurs move their businesses from dreams to reality by working with faculty and students from business, information studies, visual and performing arts, journalism, and law. In one ambitious project, they are teaming up with experts from Nelson Farms at Morrisville College to produce a test kitchen in this South Salina Street facility to move products from family recipes to business successes. Again, this work on entrepreneurship is firmly rooted in a strong history of neighborhood coalitions in Syracuse, and in this case in the South Side Entrepreneurs Association and the South Side Community Coalition.



- At the Warehouse, our newly renovated 135,000 square foot facility in the West Side of downtown Syracuse, our architects, artists and designers work, study, and teach every day, and collaborate in the community to redesign and revitalize the urban landscape. The Upstate: A Center for Design, Research, and Real Estate, for example, is joining forces with a neighborhood 501c3, the Chamber of Commerce, and several corporate and city partners to do renovations of abandoned warehouses and turn them into the centerpiece of an Arts, Technology, and Design Quarter. And a new “Connective Corridor,” an urban pathway of redevelopment, transportation, and design will highlight the cultural organizations and venues from the university hill down to this Near West Side quarter – placing our collaborations within the community-based arts infrastructure that has persistently thrived in Syracuse.



- At public schools across the Syracuse City School District, faculty and students from all six colleges and universities in our county, are collaborating in a comprehensive Partnership for Better Education to improve literacy and inclusion. Among a suite of programs, we are: adopting smaller learning communities in each high school, focused on the arts, entrepreneurship, and science and technology; creating early college high school experiences on our campuses; mentoring middle school students in Saturday and Summer Academies; training an urban teacher corp; and perhaps even co-managing newly configured K-8 schools. In each case, these programs are designed with the themes of literacy and inclusion in mind, as Syracuse has been a community with a long history of pioneering activism on literacy and disabilities rights.¹⁴



In all four of these strategic arenas, we intend that our collaborations be sustainable over the long haul and yet be dynamic, evolving in an agile way, in terms of partners and focus, to meet the most pressing needs and take advantage of local history and knowledge, our academic strengths, and new opportunities arising as the City of Syracuse reinvents itself.

Public Scholarship and Public Benefits

Returning to questions of public mission and private gains, it is reasonable to ask whether public scholarship of the sort described in Syracuse offsets some of the individualism we see today? I believe that the answer is yes, largely because these kinds of comprehensive and strategic community collaborations provide a visible demonstration of the wide-ranging value of higher education, and build public trust in the process. By aggressively joining forces with our communities and making a difference in them, we gain much needed credibility and at the same time can actually go far in accomplishing our own purposes.

In particular, this kind of vision strategically moves diversity and democratic culture to the center of our institutional agendas, empowering a rich set of faculty and student voices with relevant experiences in similar communities both locally, nationally, and globally. As George

¹⁴ See for example Burton Blatt and Fred Kaplan, *Christmas in Purgatory: A Photographic Essay on Mental Retardation* (New York: Allyn and Bacon, Inc, 1966); and the work of Syracuse community activist and SU alumna, Ruth Colvin, who founded Literacy Volunteers of America, for which she recently received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, 2006, from President Bush.

Sanchez noted here in his recent Dewey Lecture, those who often feel relegated to the outside of our campus communities, such as faculty and students of color, emerge with more expertise and authentic voice in this agenda, as they often begin with more “standing” in the surrounding community and on the issues at hand.¹⁵

The same can be said for the engagement in public scholarly collaborations of residents, artists, and entrepreneurs in the many challenged neighborhoods of our communities. As they engage in these collaborations, their place in and centrality to all our futures becomes ever more evident.

Moreover, as these citizen-experts are empowered in our academic as well as community agendas, then their sons and daughters both feel more welcomed in and valued by our institutions and are better prepared to succeed in them. We have seen this exemplified at Syracuse with the success of our Haudenosaunee Promise Scholarship Program,¹⁶ as it is greatly reinforced by the many public scholarly collaborations with the Onondaga Nation. Similarly, the Partnership for Better Education will likely enhance our long-standing Syracuse Challenge Scholarship Program, as city students will start viewing our campuses as part of their schools early on in the middle- and high-school years.

The public scholarship agenda also generalizes, for as we act locally, we connect globally, through the many immigrant voices in our cities and through the network of similar efforts in other towns and cities in transition, at home and abroad. The word begins to spread, in our case, through articles in the *Indian Time* newspaper¹⁷, school districts across Upstate New York, or consortia such as Imagining America,¹⁸ in which scores of colleagues across the nation collaborate with community artists and designers to revitalize their cities and towns. Many issues that might seem parochial, such as the isolation of downtown Syracuse exacerbated by Interstate 81 that slices through the City, turn out to have parallels in other places, from Boston to Los Angeles. Much of what is intensely local, such as the remediation efforts on Onondaga Lake, have scientific, technical, and human resonance with problems faced across the globe, from China to South Africa.

By building up from the local to what David Scobey calls the “new cosmopolitanism,”¹⁹ we are able to make discoveries with wide applicability, and educate our students in a global context, while still keeping faith with the public interest of our communities. By doing so, we accomplish a great deal for and with those “publics” – from neighborhood groups to business leaders to politicians – who we look to for support and for endorsement of the expansive mission of higher education. Even more importantly, we actively demonstrate to our students the full meaning of citizenship and communal responsibility, allowing them to learn about the knowledge economy not from a distance, but up close. Everyone begins then to develop an organic and direct understanding of what it means to pool talents, work together, and keep an eye

¹⁵ George Sanchez, *Crossing Figueroa: The Tangled Web of Diversity and Democracy*, Paper presented at The John Dewey Lecture, University of Michigan, October, 2004.

¹⁶ For a full description, see <http://financialaid.syr.edu/scholar-haudenosaunee/flyer.htm>

¹⁷ Shannon Burns, “Syracuse University Offers Full Scholarships to All Haudenosaunee,” *Indian Time*, 25 Aug. 2005, 1-2.

¹⁸ For details see website at <http://www.ia.umich.edu/>

¹⁹ David Scobey, Director, Harvard Center for Community Partnerships, Bates College, Maine.

on public rather than only private gains. In so doing, we do as much to change our institutions, by bringing the outside in, as we do to change the lives and livelihoods of our communities, at home and abroad.

Hopefully, this outward-looking agenda, with its emphasis on making coalitions in the public good that at the same time change the academy within, is one that higher education can vigorously promote in the years to come.