

Embracing Diversity on Campus and in our Communities for the 21st century
Remarks by
Mary Futrell, Dean
Graduate School of Education and Human Development
The George Washington University
at the
Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities
Summit on Diversity
March 31, 2004
Washington, DC

Good morning! On behalf of the faculty, students, and staff of the Graduate School of Education and Human Development, I would like to welcome you to GW and to the nation's capital. It is indeed an honor to be with you and to be part of the HACU summit on diversity. As members of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, you are providing courageous leadership by making the issue of diversity a priority not only within your universities, but also within our nation.

America is probably one of the, if not the, most diverse nations in the world. We are a powerful democracy because we appreciate and value the diversity that defines us as a nation. However, you and I know that it has not always been this way—nor have we realized our full potential.

Within the next two weeks, on April 14th to be exact, we will celebrate the 57th anniversary of the *Mendez v. Westminster* decision that was handed down by the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, ending segregation of the public schools in California. The *Mendez* decision, like the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, which was decided in 1954 to end segregation of African American students attending public school, had basically the same mission: to ensure equal educational opportunities for all children regardless of race, ethnicity, language or class.

As we prepare to celebrate the anniversaries of the *Mendez* and *Brown* decisions, we must take the time to reflect on the past. Sometimes we do not like to revisit history because it is too painful, but in this instance it will be more painful if we don't reflect on history and, thus, risk repeating the mistakes of the past.

Just as it was “accepted practice” to have the black side of town, so was it accepted in practice, if not in law, to have the Mexican or Hispanic side of town; to specify Hispanic seats in movie theaters, restaurants, and on the buses. Where there was a sizeable Hispanic American population, schools were segregated and where they existed often consisted of inferior facilities, out-of-date instructional material, and overly large classes.

Christopher Arriola in an article he wrote about the *Mendez* case described why Mexican Americans took a stand against segregated schools. It was after the second world war when some of the Mexican American soldiers returned from fighting for democracy in Europe that Gonfalon Mendez along with some veterans asked a critical question: “If we are good enough to fight and die alongside anglos, then why are our children not good enough to attend the same schools as their children?”

Mendez and four other parents—William Guzman, Frank Palomino, Thomas Estrada, and Lorenzo Ramirez—filed suit in 1945 against the Westminster, Garden

Grove and El Modeno school districts and the Santa Ana City schools for class discrimination. Earl Warren, who became the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court that handed down the Brown decision seven years later, wrote the decision handed down on April 14, 1947 by the Court of Appeals. A host of civil rights groups, including the NAACP, the Japanese American Congress, the American Jewish Congress, and the ACLU filed amicus briefs in support of the Mendez case. Some of the arguments used in the NAACP brief for Mendez were also used in the Brown decision. Over the course of the next five decades, over 200 cases would be filed in the struggle for and against equity and equality within our society.

Almost six decades later

Viewed from the perspective of almost six decades later, Mendez and Brown have resulted in growth and change within the nation's educational system, but even more so within our society as a whole. Members of historically underrepresented minority groups have become ambassadors to the UN, Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Secretaries of Education, Labor, and HUD; governors, mayors as well as members of state legislatures and Congress. We are CEO's of some of the nation's largest corporations; presidents of Research Level I universities. And, we are head of some of the largest and most prestigious professional organizations in America, including the National School Boards Association, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and the National Education Association, of which the first minority president was Braulio Alonso.

But, let us look strictly at our schools. Today, school enrollments are more diverse than they have ever been. Of the 54,000,000 students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools, 62% are white, 38% are African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American. As President Trachtenberg stated earlier, at the university level, according to the Educational Testing Service, school populations are and will continue to be more ethnically, racially, linguistically, and economically diverse. It is predicted that 80% of the 2,000,000 new students expected to enroll in higher education programs over the next decade will come from racial and language minority groups. Our school populations reflect the future of America—and, that being the case, America will become increasingly diverse as this millennium unfolds.

However, today and for the foreseeable future, the issue of class, rather than race, may be a more defining factor in determining access to education, the quality of education children in America receive, and how we address the issue of diversity. For instance, twenty-five percent of America's children come from families living in poverty. The vast majority of those children are from African American and Hispanic families who live in the nation's 25 largest cities, cities where the schools are almost as segregated today as they were six decades ago. Residential segregation has succeeded in keeping most of the nation's largest school districts from becoming desegregated, much less integrated.

But, we also need to admit that there are some organizational issues within our schools that foster unequal education, even segregation, within the system. I am speaking specifically about the organization of the curriculum—tracking—which, according to Jeannie Oakes and Anne Wheelock, is used to assign the vast majority of Hispanic children to the general track, African American students to the vocational track, and a disproportionate number of African and Hispanic American boys to the special education

track. I can assure you that if we hope to leave no child behind we can no longer ignore these issues.

As Americans, we must ask ourselves the question: Can we truly become one nation, indivisible with liberty and justice for all if we do not guarantee every single American child—regardless of race, language, or socio-economic status—educational equality? Can we achieve this goal if we do not assure every child his/her right to a quality education? Can we expect these young men and women to have the knowledge and skills required in our increasingly interdependent, intercultural, technological global society if they do not have access to quality educational opportunities? How can we expect each person to fulfill his responsibilities as a citizen if we do not guarantee that each and every one will be taught by highly qualified teachers, have the opportunity to study a rigorous, challenging curricula, attend schools that are equipped with state of the art instructional materials, including technologies, and are safe? The answer to the question is we cannot, but we must insure equality in education. Why the urgency? Because education is fundamental to assuring that we, as a nation, develop the full potential of every citizen as part of our efforts to become more united!

More specifically, what higher education needs to understand and, equally important, what America needs to understand is that our society is not becoming diverse, it is diverse. Higher education leaders needs to understand that the children in our pre-schools and our elementary and secondary schools will one day be their students. These same students will be the future leaders, the workers, and the citizens of this great nation. So, how can institutions of higher education, how can the 350+ members of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities help America build upon its diversity? Allow me to offer a few suggestions. Higher education insitutions can strengthen equality and equity in America by:

- Forming partnerships with local schools and community groups to provide support for elementary and secondary students through mentoring and tutorial programs; (i.e., we have collaborated with the National Council of La Raza and the Latin American Youth Center for four years providing tutoring to 40 Upward Bounds student—linguistically and cultually diverse students from DC; last year 8 graduated from the program and are now attending college);
- Working with school districts to develop programs to encourage and support students from underrepresented groups in gifted and talented and academic programs;
- Providing access to campus programs and facilities to local high school students (help acculturate these students to life on a college campus)—GW allows junior and senior high school students at the Grant High School to enroll in courses taught here, students receive credit for the courses they take;
- Working with school districts to update curricular offerings and provide professional development training for educational personnel;
- Ensuring that the faculty at our colleges and universities reflect the diversity that defines our student populations pre-k through graduate school;

- Encouraging more Hispanic and African Americans to become teachers and ensuring that they meet the standards to become certified to teach;
- Ensuring that all teachers demonstrate their ability to work effectively with diverse student populations;
- Providing technical and research support through centers and clearinghouses, (i.e. National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition uses research, policies, and practices to bring about a greater appreciation for diverse languages and cultures in the U. S.; and
- Providing a place for students and faculty to discuss issues such as diversity, affirmative action, and so forth.

These are but a few examples of how we try to work with school districts in the Washington, DC-Metropolitan Area to ensure that people from diverse groups are full participants in our society.

Reflecting on the past to envision the future.

Chief Justice Warren's comments in announcing the two decisions were very similar, but allow me to quote from *Brown*,

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments . . . It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity to an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right that must be made available to all on equal terms

Education is no less important today than when the Supreme Court made its historic pronouncement. In fact, it is even more important.

The dilemma America faces is not that *Mendez* and *Brown* have not worked. To the contrary, despite every conceivable effort to defeat these two decisions, they have survived and are working although their missions have not been fully realized. We have and must continue to enhance quality educational opportunities for America's children and adults regardless of their race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender or age.

As I close, allow me to once again reflect on the history of our struggle for educational equity and equality. The struggle to achieve educational parity for persons of color, for under-represented groups started in the 1930's with efforts to persuade state legislatures and the courts in Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas to provide equal resources at the higher education level, but by 1945 the focus shifted to elementary and secondary education. The landmark decisions handed down in 1947 and 1954 opened the doors to building upon our nation's diversity. However, even as we have struggled to open those doors wider, there have been persistent efforts to close them. No where is that more evident than in efforts to eliminate affirmative action as a means to give more minorities opportunities to further their education in our institutions of higher education.

None-the-less, over the last six decades people from diverse backgrounds, including Asian and Native Americans, women and people with special needs, have

joined the struggle. As a result, opportunities to participate at all levels of America's political, social, economic, and educational systems are more accessible than ever before. But, we must work together to continue the fight not only to help keep those doors open, but to ensure that neither *Mendez* nor *Brown* becomes simply footnotes in the annals of history. We must work more closely together to realize their promise for all Americans, especially for persons who are still disenfranchised.

As HACU pauses, as all of us pause to reflect on where we have been, where we are today and where we are going in our struggle to build on the diversity that defines us as a nation, let us concentrate our attention and efforts neither on the past nor the present, but on the future. The future belongs not to those who sacrificed and struggled to desegregate America, but to future generations of boys and girls, men and women from every walk of life and their commitment to continue the struggle. We must lead by demonstrating to future generations and to the world what true diversity means and the best way to do that is through education and by educating every American. We must be willing to join with others to build an America that respects and values our diversity, but a nation that is also more united.

Thank you! Have a successful summit and I hope that you will visit with us again!