

Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities
Diversity Summit
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Embracing Diversity on Campus and in our Communities

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Thank you. I'm very pleased to be here and want to note what a pleasure it is to be introduced by a Michigan graduate. As many of you know, Dr. Flores received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, in our higher education program, and we take considerable pride in the role he now plays nationally in this field. I also want to recognize Dr. Gumecindo Salas, another Michigan graduate, whose also makes important contributions to HACU's success. Our president, Mary Sue Coleman, has asked me to convey her greetings to everyone gathered here today. She regrets that her schedule doesn't permit her to join us. But I'll confess that I'm not too sorry because it gives me the chance to be here instead and I welcome the opportunity to talk with all of you.

The topic for discussion today – embracing diversity on campus and in our communities – is important, large, and complicated. I'll focus my remarks on the campus, because it's the piece I know most about. But I want to stress the strong connection between what we do on campus and what happens in the larger community. We do sometimes speak of the distinction between the academic world and the “real world”. This is fundamentally a false distinction although it is sometimes useful. It is the real world that we study and which we mean to serve. We are inextricably part of it. Were we ever to become wholly separate, we would have failed in our mission. Indeed, the difficulty of communicating our value is a special challenge even though the value is palpable.

Let me start by going back to almost exactly one year ago. On April 1, 2003, the University of Michigan was arguing its case in the admissions lawsuits that were before the Supreme Court. I was in the courtroom and it was a fascinating experience. One of the things that struck me then and remains with me 364 - or maybe 365 since this is a leap year - days later is how hard it was for Maureen Mahoney, one of the University's attorneys, to finish a sentence. The justices kept interrupting, asking questions, challenging her. I was getting a bit concerned. Would we be able to make our case? Then another one of the attorneys nudged me and said it was a good thing – it meant the justices were engaged and taking the ideas seriously. I'll come back to this – so keep it in mind.

As you know, the justices found our arguments persuasive and held that there is a compelling educational interest in diversity in higher education. They ruled that race and ethnicity are two factors, among many, that can be considered in the admissions process. At Michigan we were – and are – pleased with the Supreme Court’s decision. The mood on campus last June, when the decision came down, was decidedly celebratory. But the euphoria passed as we realized that now the really hard work was beginning. Now we need to build the diverse community we argued for in the lawsuits. I think the question before all colleges and universities today is how are we going to do that. Or as Paul Simon, the singer, not the senator, said, “What are you going to do about it? That’s what I’d like to know.”

What we seek to do, the way we ought to answer the challenge of difference and diversity, is with the educational advantages of diversity that we articulated in the lawsuits. We want and need to exploit this diversity as an opportunity as well as a challenge.

The Supreme Court got things right here. They recognized that to create an effective citizenry in a globalized world it is essential that we have students who are trained and experienced in crossing the ethnic, racial, and cultural divides that separate us. The next generation needs to have a cross-cultural agility that does not come naturally to many of us. My generation needs it too and I’ll get to that. And we need to remember too that diversity is a property of a group, not an individual. To say something is diverse is to describe a large group, not a single person. We need to resist the impulse of some to use the word as a euphemism for some group or another.

With that as background, let’s talk about admissions. Those of us in the higher education business have always articulated that when we admit a class we are bringing in people with an array of attributes and that we are interested in the characteristics of the class, not just of individuals taken one at a time. We’re interested in all kinds of things in our students. We’re interested in having people who can solve equations, people who play football, people who play the clarinet, people who come from different parts of our country, different parts of the world. We have always said it. Indeed, at Michigan this was stated clearly in 1879 when the university president at the time, James B. Angell said, “*Good learning is always catholic and generous. It welcomes the humblest votary of science and bids him kindle his lamp freely at the common shrine. It frowns on caste and bigotry. It spurns the artificial distinctions of conventional society. It greets all comers whose intellectual gifts entitle them to admission to the goodly fellowship of cultivated minds. It is essentially democratic in the best sense of that term. In justice, then, to the true spirit of learning, to the best interest of society, to the historic life of this State, let us now hold wide open the gates of this University to all our sons and daughters, rich or poor, to who God,*

by gifts of intellect and kindly providence, has called to seek for a liberal education.”

We’re interested in this diversity President Angell describes so eloquently for his time because we know it has tremendous educational benefit to our students. Social science research included in our arguments to the Supreme Court makes it clear that students learn a good deal more when they are in a classroom with others who are quite different from themselves. As teachers, we all know that there is nothing duller than a group of students who all come from the same place and know the same thing. They are not very interesting to each other or to us as we are teaching them. And we know the real action is when they teach each other.

We have always, on purely pedagogical grounds, wanted to admit classes that incorporated diversity. In the last forty years we have developed a much richer notion of what that diversity is and ought to be than we might have had in earlier years. We now recognize as well that a diverse student population plays a valuable instrumental role in commerce, in the military, and in citizenship. The practical values of diversity were articulated by private industry and the military in the *amicus curiae* briefs submitted to the Supreme Court in support of the University of Michigan admissions processes promoting diversity. I understand that Roderick Gillum will be among the speakers you will hear later today. He played an important role in pulling these statements together and he can speak more authoritatively than I can about them so I will leave it to him to expound that argument.

Let me, instead, pose the \$64,000 question. We know that a diverse world would be a good one for the academic community and for the larger world. What would we want it to look like?

I’d like it to bear a certain resemblance to the Supreme Court. I’d like it to be a place where people are deeply engaged and eager to debate ideas on their merits. I’d like this world to be one in which we are able to have open conversations in which opinions and ideas are expressed, and interactions take place even if they are not always comfortable and even if there risks that come from the existence of differences. This is not to say that we should embrace all ideas as equally valid. They’re not. But we should embrace the notion that all ideas are worth arguing and puzzling through, without feeling personally threatened. I’d like us to recognize that active disagreement is a token of respect – much better than passive acquiescence, often feigned, to issues of difference. This is extremely difficult. It requires us saying, at least to ourselves, “I’m going to trust that you aren’t going to punish me for being candidly myself in a world where there are huge visible differences between you and me, differences that may matter but it’s not clear how they may matter or how much.” This is a risky place to be but it’s a place we need to get to if

we're going to become good at learning about and learning from our differences – and using them to full advantage.

Let me now turn to the second \$64,000 question – perhaps the \$128,000 question. How do we get there? Let me say a couple of general things and then talk about specific programs.

One thing that I think is crucial is leadership in the university – and throughout higher education – that says, “This matters, it matters a lot, it is absolutely essential to what we do.” One of the great things about the lawsuits at Michigan is that they gave us a platform to say this loud and clear. The lawsuits created the perception, on campus and more broadly, that we were fully committed to creating a diverse educational environment.

Another interesting benefit from the lawsuits is that the process taught us something about how to make progress on hard problems. In the lawsuits, we were working on a common problem, one that stretched across the entire university and involved faculty, students, staff, and alumni. I think that the most promising way to get people to be unafraid of each other and able to connect around issues that are very difficult, issues of race and culture, is to give them group homework problems that they can really get into. I'm told by our students that at the demonstration at the Supreme Court last April 1st, the Michigan students were an integrated group. They came from all races and cultures in our community. Most of the other students, from other universities, were African-American. Our group had been working together on the cases for quite some time. They had crossed some barriers, some great divide, and were a cohesive yet diverse group. Hard work together on things that matter goes a long way to helping us create world in which differences are comfortably explored.

I think therein lies the clue about how we can proceed. We need to pose tough problems – problems that can't be solved alone - and get people working together on them. Michigan happens to be a good place to do this. We have a long tradition of interdisciplinarity and collaboration. So we can find problems that will pull together people who are diverse in many ways. I think this model works for most of education. Two other places that demonstrate it quite clearly are the military and athletics. Both of these are areas that have dealt with difficulties around difference fairly effectively. In each case there is a common problem to be solved and to solve it you have to work as part of the team. The negative consequences of not playing with the team are serious. And in being part of the team, you come to appreciate the skills, insights, and ideas that complement rather than conform to your own and help the team achieve its goal. In universities, which stress learning and understanding, collaborative work is an entirely natural way for us to create that team building.

It's important to note here that the problem-solving groups do together has to be about real things. You can't just take the same old homework exercises and give them to a group. The problems have to be real and the people involved must be truly interested in solving them. Some disciplines and some fields more easily lend themselves to the kinds of problems that involve collaborative work than do others. We need to find more of the right kinds of problems, especially in the social sciences and humanities. Math and science are fields where collaborative work is quite natural. It is the way in which the sciences work. You need people who are good at different things and a well-run lab will have people with varied skills. When the time comes to set-up an experiment, you're going to depend on those people to bring their expertise to bear so you get it right. We need to find more ways to make this happen in the social sciences and the humanities – fields that have more often rewarded the solitary scholar and where teamwork is less common.

I have a colleague, Scott Page, who has written some very interesting papers showing again the advantage of collaborative work, of diversity in doing work. If you're going to have one person solve a problem, OK, get the brightest, or biggest, or fastest person you can. But if you're going to have two people work on a problem, get two very different people and you will do better. People with different backgrounds will give you much more action than if you have two people who are similar to one another. A basketball team of five really fast, sharp point guards will lose to a basketball team in which the point guards aren't as good but where there are also forwards and a center. We should be exploiting the natural advantage of collaboration and diversity in all areas.

I said earlier that I envision a world in which the debate and discussion on our campuses is somewhat like the Supreme Court – open, engaged, often contentious, and thoughtful. We're not at that point now for a couple of reasons. First, the diversity programs that we have, that all of us have on our campuses, tend to draw those who are already committed to the enterprise. We need to figure out how we can bring in the people who are uninterested or hostile to the issues that are in front of us. And second, part of drawing them in is creating settings where it is, as I said earlier, safe to be candidly oneself. This is hard to do.

We're working on this at Michigan – as I imagine all of you are on your campuses. I think it's useful to all of us to share stories, to talk about what works and what doesn't. Some quick examples:

- 1) We have a program called intergroup relations that brings students together in their first year to talk about racial, ethnic, and cultural differences. The participants are mostly 18 years old and away from home for the first time. They are facing many new and different things – from being fully responsible for their work to roommates who like Britney Spears. So they are doing a lot of

adjusting and this program is designed to help them sort through some of the issues that may be more complex than Ms. Spears' music. There are trained facilitators working with these groups and there are group exercises as well as discussion so that trust is built in a variety of ways. These programs are effective. They are also expensive and they end after a year. We need to figure out ways to continue what is begun in the first year program.

2) We have one program, Digital Dialogues, that provides an Internet forum for discussion of issues of race and ethnicity. And here, too, we have trained facilitators.

3) You'll note that I refer frequently to trained facilitators, people who have had some instruction and actually learned how to help people have deep yet safe conversations about complicated issues. A next step, one we are working on at Michigan, is training of the faculty in this area. We have a program, the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching Players, that is making headway here. It's an acting troupe. They put on small shows, vignettes of faculty meetings, particularly scenes about hiring and promotion, but also about classroom situations. The vignettes are quite short. Then the actors stay in character and interact with the audience. And they allow very difficult conversations about conscious and unconscious prejudice, about the way people read each other and hear each to take place. In that set-up, because they are actors, faculty can really have disputes with them, while believing that the real people behind the actors aren't going to get upset. And because they are actors, they can fight back in character. This allows difficult conversations to happen in a way that is less risky than in real life. But the effects bleed over into real life and begin to make a difference.

You may recall that earlier in my remarks I noted that my generation needs to learn to be as cross-culturally agile as we are training the next generation to be. Programs like the one I've just described are crucial to that. Our academic faculties do not currently receive the kind of training that makes recognition of prejudice and mediation of difficult discussion part of their professional skills. A great deal of the challenge before us is to convince them to acquire that kind of training.

I want to make a brief comment about the community beyond the campus. We are all doing good work on our campuses to help students, faculty, and staff learn how to function in a diverse and globalized world. Part of that work is enlarging our notion of what constitutes the campus. We need to think beyond the traditional model of higher education, with high schools as feeder institutions. One of the programs we have at Michigan, known as M-TIES, works with our local community college to help students there prepare for transferring to the university. One aspect of the success of this program is that it increases the number of people who think about attending Michigan. There is a ripple effect that reaches people we haven't connected with in other ways.

As you all know, the Supreme Court decisions in the Michigan cases did not mark the end of the struggle for affirmative action. There are many efforts around the country aimed at curtailing our work in this area. The Michigan Civil Rights Initiative, a group encouraged by Ward Connerly, is collecting signatures for an amendment to our state constitution to prohibit state universities and other state entities from “discriminating or granting preferential treatment based on race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin.” Although a circuit court judge ruled the ballot language invalid on technical grounds, we can be sure that this group and this effort will continue to work against affirmative action. On a national level, the National Association of Scholars has recently begun a campaign of challenging admissions processes across the country. This effort, which asks colleges and universities for detailed admissions information, claims to want transparency in the process. We have no problem with openness. Indeed, our admissions process is well documented and publicly described on our website and we release aggregate data when the process is complete. This campaign is not about transparency, it is designed to have a chilling effect on admissions. It’s our responsibility to see that it does not.

Earlier in my remarks I talked about the importance of leadership from educational institutions. One piece of that is the need for all of us to be forceful in communicating the value of diversity to the larger world. The mission of higher education is to train leaders – for politics, for business, for community groups, for health care. Higher education is a long-term investment by society in human and social capital. The smart investment, the one that will yield real benefits to the next generation, is the training of people who can work in the multi-cultural and interconnected world of the future. Our development of communities of learning and teaching where people work together on real problems, of places where differences are welcome and diversity is supported, will be a lasting contribution to society. These communities will provide opportunity and the promise of higher education to the larger world we serve.