

Access to Success

Chancellor Bernadette Gray-Little's remarks at Advancing Diversity at Virginia Tech

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Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good morning. Thank you for welcoming me on my first visit to Blacksburg. Your invitation to speak here today caused me to reflect on my 40-plus years of participating in diversity discussions and programs. And I keep returning to the same question: in what ways have we made a difference?

Over these 40-odd years, my activities to increase diversity will, no doubt, sound familiar to you: at the department level as head of a graduate program, and later as chair; as a dean of arts and sciences, and at the university level as provost and now chancellor—I have worked to increase the number of women and minority graduate students and faculty. Beyond the walls of my institution, I participated on NSF and NIH panels that awarded individual fellowships or institutional grants to increase the enrollment of minority graduate students; and programs of professional organizations, such as the American Psychological Association, that focused on gender, race, and LGBT diversity—all of these activities support increased diversity.

Like many of you, my participation stemmed not only from my personal commitment as a “double minority,” but also from my institutions’ commitment to affirmative action. It is here in my thought process that I return to this question of, “In what ways have we made a difference?”

Our activities seek to increase diversity; however, my personal motivation—like that of many of you—and the goals of affirmative action are to empower disadvantaged communities and individuals to achieve economic, social, and educational equality. It is this disconnect—between diversity as an end of itself and the big goals of real empowerment and socio-economic mobility—that aggravate my conscience.

From the very beginning there has been controversy about the practical application of affirmative action. To some, preferentially admitting or hiring white women or minority group members with objective qualifications comparable to white male candidates is affirmative action. To others, considering an objectively mediocre applicant because of gender or minority status is affirmative action. As you know the pendulum has swung back and partially forward again in the courts about whether universities and employers can take affirmative action to create equality.

Over the decades since school desegregation and the enactment of affirmative action laws, the lexicon of affirmative action has shifted from social equality to diversity. We now talk about diversity as an important university goal because we believe that people with different personal experiences bring points of view that are varied, thereby enriching the university experience for everyone. And we also share the belief that different perspectives improve our solutions to a wide range of individual, social, and political challenges.

However, at times it seems that the academy has lost sight of the goals of social equality and success in the broader society and, instead, focused on diversity for diversity's sake. Even the word "diversity" suggests a state of being rather than any improvement in the communities it aims to benefit.

Let me be clear: I believe that diversity (that multiculturalism) is a valuable goal—it has tremendous value in and of itself as well as in support of social equality and socio-economic success. However, having 20% of underrepresented minority students in our freshmen class does not *necessarily* translate into a better life for Hispanic, African American or Native American communities. Our goal is to support student *success* in an effort to create better lives for those individuals and their communities. That is why “diversity” is not enough. That is why “access” to higher education is not enough.

The history of discrimination and exclusion at many of our universities and places of employment is really the history of the United States. It is a painful and confounding history that I have experienced this firsthand. I spent most of my career at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and people frequently ask me if I am an alumna. But I tell them that it was not even a consideration, because UNC did not admit black people when I was coming up.

On paper we have overcome this type of barrier.

But in practice, there are persistent social and economic barriers that hinder the success of minorities and women. These will require continued commitment from all parts of society, not just higher education.

We in higher education still have a crucial role to play in translating the promise and hope in these communities into success in broader society. Access is important, but it is just the first step. Diversity for the sake of a diverse and enriching experience is important, but it is not enough.

We should recommit ourselves to the original goal of affirmative action—the improvement of lives of individuals and communities. Keeping in mind these broader social goals while engaging prospective and current students, and alumni, can and should affect how we do business at our universities.

Student recruitment

At Kansas we have sought to build relationships with schools, youth groups and organizations that serve communities that are underrepresented in higher education. These include groups such as Latinos of Tomorrow, AVID, TRiO programs and local Boys & Girls Clubs.

The goal is to make it clear at an early age to students that college is an option. We want to give them a sense of what college can do for their lives and what they need to do to be successful once on campus. Providing a campus visit for students as early as grade six can provide an important socializing experience that creates the expectation of college participation.

This approach also builds on the notion that it is important to be present in the community, building relationships long before we start recruiting their children to join our universities. For example, the population of Kansas is diversifying, with four of our counties minority-majority. We have a satellite campus in one of those counties and we've hired a recruiter in the southwestern part of the state where the other three counties are located. We have a person there on the ground to build relationships between the community and the university.

Of course, getting students to enroll only fulfills the access portion. We want them to succeed on campus and in life and that requires a new approach and new services.

Student services

At KU, we are undertaking a range of changes to support student success that are no doubt similar to programs you have or are contemplating.

They include:

- Comprehensive revision of our core curriculum to emphasize a streamlined set of requirements. There are six learning goals, each with associated learning. We hope to enroll the 2013 class into the new curriculum. Our past curriculum led to numerous problems in navigating complex requirements.
- A summer reading program that began in fall 2012 to give an early introduction to intellectual life of the university and to begin the semester with a common experience
- First year seminars program, piloted with 15 seminars in 2012, to ensure small intimate classroom activities and discussion. With additional experience and funds, this will be expanded.
- Increased GPA/ACT requirements for automatic admission to go into effect in 2016.
- Reinstating learning communities, which were cut in 2009 because of reductions in state funding. I imagine some of your students come from towns as small as many of ours, where a first-year lecture class is bigger than their entire high school. That's a big adjustment, so programs like learning communities make a big campus smaller by providing students with a group of fellow scholars with whom they live and study.
- Reshaped our scholarship offerings to create four-year renewable scholarships (2012)
- Piloted an electronic early warning system for first semester freshman who are having academic difficulty. Systems that provide feedback early in the semester can be especially helpful in large introductory courses. And by spurring a connection between students and faculty, they can start to build the one-on-one relationships that help students feel welcome and aid their success.
- Established an office of undergraduate research and hired a director

- On tap for the future is an effort to coordinate, if not centralize, the various retention efforts offered by different units so that we can guarantee a certain level of response for students who need academic support services.

These are university-wide efforts, intended to address quality of programs and services we offer all students, programs for all students, but some of them, for example undergraduate research, have been shown to be especially helpful in successfully involving minority students in university life.

These changes will benefit all students, but they can benefit underrepresented students most of all since they help ease the shock that some, especially low income and first-generation students, where minority students are disproportionately represented, feel upon arriving at a university.

Besides these programs we are fortunate to have a very successful office of Educational Opportunity that sponsors the full suite of TRiO programs. The McNair program for first generation low income and minority students, in particular, has been very successful with an 86% graduation rate, higher than the University as a whole. Forty-one percent of McNair graduates have earned master's degrees.

Faculty and staff

The faculty and staff of a university should be a model of the community we'd like our students to create when they go out into the world as leaders. Moreover, faculty and staff need to have broad experiences and perspectives to be able to understand and support our students. One way to diversify the faculty is through visiting professorships, and at KU we have one that is dedicated to recruiting ethnic minority scholars.

The Langston Hughes Visiting professorship is a one semester professorship with a stipend, housing allowance and travel budget for a scholar to teach two courses or conduct research, as well as to give a campus-wide lecture. Seven of the past 13 participants are now KU faculty members. And even those who aren't teaching here help us by telling their peers about the community at KU.

We're also in the second year of what we call the Hiring for Excellence model. It requires all faculty searches to have at least 20 qualified applicants, which is narrowed to minimum of nine ranked candidates prior to phone interviews and then campus visits. It also provides a pool of questions that go beyond just academic topics to look at candidates other qualities and interests that are important to the university. Early results indicate that this approach is helping ensure that female and ethnic minority candidates by ensuring that we get a comprehensive view of candidates.

But here, too, this is about more than just access. We want to recruit faculty and staff who have the opportunity to advance and succeed, which is why we also ensure diversity is a consideration when hiring for senior positions. We elevated the diversity and equity position to a vice provost

position, with a focus on the recruitment, retention and development of under-represented faculty, staff and students.

We also engage members of our four Diversity Councils in the hiring of vice provosts, deans and other senior administrators, and they take part in candidate interviews. This emphasizes to all candidates, regardless of background, the importance that we place on inclusion and diversity as a core value.

One area where I'm particularly eager to see additional advances made is on the research side. A University of Kansas economics professor, Donna Ginther, was the lead researcher in a study of National Institutes of Health grants. She and her colleagues determined that—controlling for all other factors—black researchers were 10 percentage points less likely to receive NIH grants than their white colleagues.

Research is a significant factor in professional advancement for faculty, so this sort of disparity has ramifications for scholars throughout the sciences. Fortunately, as a result of Professor Ginther's work, the NIH just last month announced new initiatives to counteract this disparity. These range from research support for undergraduates so that we can build a pipeline of diverse PhD candidates, to matching scholars with more experienced veteran research mentors and even potential changes in the grant application process itself.

If we're serious about diversity meaning more than just access, this is an area where universities and funding agencies must continue to improve.

The truly diverse university

We have made progress as universities and as a society in eliminating the barriers that kept so many talented people from reaching their full potential. Through the work of activists, leaders, and scholars we have created a system of higher education that affords more people more access to more knowledge than ever before in human history. These are ways in which we have made a difference. But our focus needs to shift from access to success.

The "American Dream" is *only* a dream for certain communities because they do not have access to success. We as universities and we as a nation cannot claim a victory for diversity until social, economic, and academic success are characteristics of all communities in America. I would argue that these are the ways that we can make a real and permanent difference in America and the world.

If we keep that focus—diversity is about creating equality amongst people and communities—then we can ensure that this conference and similar conferences elsewhere are aimed at fostering success for all people.

Thank you for your attention and for the work you're doing here at Virginia Tech to create a truly diverse university and to foster equality.