

ACE's 100th Annual Meeting

March 12, 2018

“A 50-Year Experiment: The Evolution of Higher Education and American Society”

Keynote Address

By Freeman A. Hrabowski, III

I'm delighted to be addressing you on this special occasion – the 100th anniversary of ACE's first annual meeting. As you all know, ACE formed to address a pressing national need: the training of military personnel during World War I. Since that time, it has been at the forefront of social change, whether supporting unemployed youth during the Great Depression; developing the GED; advocating for the G.I. Bill to make higher education accessible to veterans; and establishing commissions to advance the education of women and underrepresented minorities. ACE was especially visionary in studying the effects of racism on African American children as early as 1938.

I am honored to accept the council's Lifetime Achievement Award on behalf of my students and my colleagues, and some of them are here today. I'd like to ask them to stand. My best friend, my beloved Jackie, is also here today, and I'd like her to stand as well.

I begin with the notion that the way we think about ourselves, the language that we use in interacting with each other, the values that we hold shape who we are not only

today, but in the future – as individuals and as higher education and as a society. As I go around the country talking with all types of educational institutions, I continue to emphasize the importance of stories. Our stories from childhood have shaped us into the people we are. Few of us could have imagined we would be sitting here today – and we would not have been this fortunate if we had not been the beneficiaries of an education. I am positing that the future of our nation is directly tied to the future of education in this country, starting with pre-K through higher education. All of us should be concerned about the challenges across that continuum.

It's been more than 50 years since I sat in the back of my church, Sixth Avenue Baptist in Birmingham, Alabama, doing my math homework. I heard the visiting clergyman say that a march by children – unprecedented in the Civil Rights Movement – could lead to better schools for Birmingham's Negro children. Already a math nerd who loved school and learning, I instantly knew – upon hearing Dr. King – that I had to take a stand. I was 12 years old in May 1963, and despite my parents' concern for my safety – and my own fears – I was determined to take part in the protest. And I did participate in the Children's March, including spending five frightening days in jail.

I could not have known at the time how my decision that day — and my experiences in the days and years that followed — would shape my development as an educator and a human being. Looking back now, I also recognize that my experiences mirrored a period of transformation in our society that was just beginning. The month before I marched and two months before George Wallace would take his infamous stand

in the “schoolhouse door” at the University of Alabama, the Maryland General Assembly chartered my university, UMBC, authorizing it to become the first institution in the state open to people of all races from its start. We were at a critical inflection point in American society.

The Civil Rights Movement and the societal unrest in the '60s led to landmark legislation, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Higher Education Act of 1965, which together increased participation in our democracy and gave many more people access to higher education. Few people understand just how dramatic the changes of the past five decades have been. In the mid-1960s, only about 10% of American adults had earned bachelor's degrees, and among African Americans, only 4% of adults had reached this level of education. During that period, most families of all races did not expect their children to have the opportunity to attend college or complete degrees.

Fifty years later, perceptions about college accessibility have changed dramatically, and a third of adults in this country hold bachelor's degrees and another 10 percent hold associates. The percentage of African Americans with bachelor's degrees, while still lower than that of Asian Americans (55.9%) and non-Hispanic whites (37.3%), has increased almost six-fold over the past 50 years to 23.3%.ⁱ According to a Pew Survey, 94% of parents now expect that their children will attend college.ⁱⁱ

But it's still the case that two-thirds of Americans over age 25 do not have bachelor's degrees. We are starting to think differently about access and success. We

know that two-year degrees play a crucial role in higher education and workforce development, and about half of undergraduates start their educations at two-year colleges. Those institutions remain critical. More of us also are realizing that college may not be right for everyone; we are committed to addressing the pressing need for postsecondary training, and we increasingly realize that it may come in the form certificates and formal recognition of competencies – credentials that have immediate value in the workforce and can be used as building blocks to a degree, if desired.

Even as we talk about skills, however, the value of a broad liberal arts education is greater now than ever. This conversation is not about one or the other. In this case, Jim Collins' idea of the genius of the “and” versus the tyranny of the “or” could not be truer. It is critical that we as a country and as educators invest in both.

I was privileged to serve on two recent commissions that produced excellent reports, *The Future of Undergraduate Education: The Future of America* from the American Academy of Arts & Sciences and *Renewal and Progress: Strengthening Higher Education Leadership in a Time of Rapid Change* from The Aspen Institute. I was encouraged to see the commissioners envisioning a strong future of higher education, one in which Americans of all backgrounds have access to high quality education in environments in which they can succeed. The future includes higher education contributing to solving the big problems of humankind.

But the commission members – faculty, presidents, and foundation leaders – also recognized that our optimism is not shared by everybody. We keep hearing about how

expensive higher education is, about escalating costs, about questions of accessibility, about whether it's worth it, and whether we as institutions are elitist and unable to understand the broader public. What we say in these reports is that we must counter these perceptions by being able to effectively communicate the value of our institutions, and also by leading change on our campuses to respond to the shifting needs of our students and of society.

American higher education needs greater diversity among its leaders, people who can prepare not only for the challenges of today but also those that we don't even anticipate. The report on the presidency calls for a stronger ecosystem in which we identify these leaders and prepare them for critical roles. As we think about leaders, we are perhaps more challenged in enhancing diversity in the professoriate. Among full-time faculty, 77 percent are white, 10 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and only 6 percent black and 4 percent Hispanic (3 percent all other races/ethnicities). Gender representation, particularly in certain disciplines also remains a challenge, and we need to think about diversity broadly, whether sexual orientation or political leanings. To flourish and achieve the truest aims of education, our campuses must be populated with people with different perspectives and life experiences.

We must focus on systemic change by coordinating what we do in our associations, on our boards, on our campuses, and with public officials. Most important, we must bring a kind of optimism to the work – coupled with a sense of urgency about serving those who are coming to us and about preparing the next generation of citizens.

The report on undergraduate education focuses on several major priorities, one of which has to do with how we strengthen the experience of students as we think about not just their graduating but our preparing them for this changing world. That means everything from working to improve college teaching to creating an environment in which people learn how to listen to each other and to appreciate what we mean when we talk about American democracy. On teaching, we must be open to constant experimentation – looking at everything from hybrid approaches to other uses of technology to assessing the effectiveness of different methods. We need to encourage the federal government and the states to invest in R&D focused on teaching and learning.

Increasing completion rates and addressing gaps will involve engaging the entire college community in using analytics, listening to student voices, and building meaningful relationships. We need, for example, to better understand the pathways and outcomes of students who transfer. We also must build partnerships among institutions and across boundaries, public and private, including with employers.

At UMBC, our approach to student success has been shaped by our experiences with the Meyerhoff Scholars Program, a model for producing graduates from underrepresented minority groups who go on to earn PhDs in the sciences and engineering. For example, we are now the leading producer of African American graduates who go on to earn MD/PhDs. In recent years, I've come to understand that the four pillars of success in science that I talk about in my TED talk really transcend disciplines: setting high expectations; focusing on building community; cultivating a

culture of engaged faculty and of student research; and a commitment to ongoing evaluation.

We must be committed to improvement, and be sensitive to questions about value. Federal support for students remains critical – and we do have to find other ways to increase affordability and creative approaches to maintaining costs. Innovation can both move us forward and reduce costs. We need new ways of communicating the value of education, its impact for the public, and the complexity of measuring student learning.

Both commissions acknowledged that, yes, we have major challenges – but in each case we were approaching them with optimism. The optimism is real. Our institutions are having a greater impact across the population than ever. We have more diversity than ever, but we have to ask: Are our campuses truly encouraging inclusion and interaction across different groups? Of course, there are times when people of similar backgrounds will be together, but are there also times when people connect meaningfully across those boundaries? We must be honest about the challenges we face in this area on most of our campuses. Americans still have not learned how to connect comfortably with people different from themselves, and our colleges reflect that discomfort. The same is true about the need to be honest about the ways in which our system of higher education contributes to inequality. Disproportionately large numbers of minority and low-income students beginning college and not graduating. About 60% of people from families in the top income quartile earn a degree, while only about 20% of those from the lowest quartile do. The inequality gap, whether you're listening to Stiglitz or Piketty, continues to grow.

We must use all the approaches we have – from analytics to compassion for each student – to move that needle substantially.

When we are most challenged, we must remember what is most important. In higher education, our students are looking to see whether we really meant what we said about rational, evidence-based arguments or about seeking the truth or about respect for women and people of different backgrounds. Our students need us to put very difficult national and international events in context. My students often say, “We’ve never been this divided,” and I say, “Go back to the ‘60s – either the 19th or the 20th centuries.” Yes, we’ve been very divided before.

Yes, we are challenged – but we have also made progress. The nation today looks very different to me than the one I saw as a child in Birmingham. For those of us who are blessed to have had a solid education, our challenge is to help the millions of children for whom this opportunity is not a given. Years ago, I would have said it is imperative that young people learn the value of “wanting to be smart,” but my colleagues and I have decided to change the language we use. Instead, we emphasize the importance of grit and resilience. Young people can accomplish amazing things when they recognize that their abilities are not fixed: They will need to grow and to develop new skills if they are to accomplish their long-term goals.ⁱⁱⁱ Providing the support that young people need both to imagine what is possible and to develop their own abilities is the challenge we face as educators. It’s also a great opportunity – and the nation is counting on us.

For many of us, meeting this awesome responsibility means leading institutional culture change. The culture of society and the culture of our campuses are inextricably linked. What responsibility do we bear when we think about where we are as a society?

I often think about what Frederick M. Lawrence, the secretary of Phi Beta Kappa, says about the importance of college as preparation for citizenship. He notes that Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis called America's most important office "that of private citizen." Dr. Lawrence goes on to say that there are three sets of skills needed to perform the duties of the office of private citizen, and each is developed by a liberal arts and sciences education. To paraphrase his writing:

- First, a private citizen must be able to turn raw information into knowledge.
- Second, a private citizen must be able to evaluate arguments.
- Finally, a private citizen must be able to engage in reasoned debate with others. Presenting one's own rational claims, based on provable truths, as well as being prepared to listen thoughtfully to those of others, is the hallmark of a liberal education.

I am working with colleagues on a new book about the culture of institutions, and about our ability to look in the mirror and acknowledge the good, the bad, and the ugly. What should we be protecting? What needs to change?

At UMBC, we've come to recognize that the culture of an institution is evident in the daily activities of a campus. It is evident in the questions we ask and those we choose to ignore; the achievements we record and celebrate, and those that go unnoticed; and the

initiatives we choose to support, and those we do not.^{iv} Perhaps Eric Weiner, writing in the *Geography of Bliss*, put it best:

“‘Where we are is vital to who we are. By ‘where,’ I’m speaking not only of our physical environment but also of our cultural environment. Culture is the sea we swim in—so pervasive, so all-consuming, that we fail to notice its existence until we step out of it.’”^v

We began the book on culture change around the time of the unrest in Baltimore surrounding the death of Freddie Gray. It took on new meaning as we thought more deeply about the entrenched challenges in our society. This is not a time of business as usual. We must refocus on the central value of education and our commitment to the truth and to the betterment of society. Leaders of our country are graduates of our institutions, having received a fine liberal arts education. We have to ask ourselves, “Are we preparing people to listen and to work together, or are we simply teaching them to win?”

It is encouraging that many colleges and universities around the country are focused on civic engagement. In 2015, my campus hosted the Imagining America conference in Baltimore. As many of you know, Imagining America is a national consortium of colleges, universities, and organizations dedicated to advancing the public and civic purposes of arts, humanities, and design.

Our students are involved in a variety of initiatives focused on children in Baltimore and surrounding areas, including tutoring and mentoring children in our Choice Program for first-time offenders; serving as teaching fellows at Baltimore schools; working with Upward Bound participants in math and science; participating in

the Sherman STEM Teacher Scholars Program for students preparing to teach math and science in challenging schools; and becoming involved in the university's BreakingGround initiative connecting coursework and community service across disciplines.

We want our students to think deeply about their own personal experiences, and also to see beyond themselves. When I think about this past 55-year period, I think about my friends and myself, devastated by Governor Wallace. And I think about my mother saying, "The Governor may not be fair, but I believe most people really are. Get the knowledge and you'll be okay. No time to be a victim."

As we approach the 50th anniversary of Dr. King's assassination, we know he would ask how his beloved nation is doing? We would tell him more people are educated than ever. We'd also tell him we're facing many new challenges – especially when we think about the kinds of leaders we want to produce and how we are viewed in the world. I recently was talking with a group of representatives from colleges in other countries, and I stressed how committed we are to partnerships. It was encouraging to see the looks on their faces; they were pleased to know that what they might be seeing in the media now is not reflective of the general thinking in the academy about the importance of connections beyond our borders. I continue to reflect on the idea that "To whom much is given, much is required."

So many of us from Alabama – of all races – watched my state closely in the recent special election for the Senate. My students were very attuned to the race. And

after election night, a student asked me why I had tears in my eyes. I thought about my grandmother's story. When she went to register to vote in her hometown, she was required to take the Alabama literacy test based on the constitution. She was the wisest human being I've ever known, despite only being allowed to get a sixth-grade education, so of course, she did not pass the test. Neither did many of her friends. She was so wise that she instructed many other women to memorize questions they found on the test, and after failing the second time, they collected the questions, and my mother, the English teacher, worked with my grandmother at our dining room table. I watched my grandmother showing how she had learned the constitution, and I remember thinking my grandmother sounds like a lawyer. And when she came in the house after taking the test for the third time, she looked me in my eyes and said I am a voting citizen. She was 70 years old. And so, we must tell our students – that men and women of all races have given their lives so that we can have the right to vote. How dare we not take that responsibility seriously.

That's why I had tears in my eyes. It's hard to explain just how powerful it was that in December, people of all races came together and moved beyond their comfort zones to do the right thing for women, for people of color, and for the people of America broadly. What was most moving to me was when I saw where people voted for Senator Doug Jones, those pockets of enlightenment – Tuscaloosa, Birmingham, Montgomery, Mobile – there were universities.

We are in a struggle, but education is about being challenged to think differently – and it is a struggle, and it is not always comfortable. People are sometimes surprised to hear that I’m learning French. My students often ask me, “Don’t you think you’re too old?” And I say, “Bring it on.” And through my study of French, I learned this quote by the poet Apollinaire:

La joie venait toujours après la peine. (The joy comes after the pain.)

Does this struggle matter? Does higher education matter? Absolutely.

I leave you with my challenge to my students everyday:

Watch your thoughts; they become your words.

Watch your words; they become your actions.

Watch your actions; they become your habits.

Watch your habits; they become your character.

Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.

-Anonymous

ⁱ “Highest Educational Levels Reached by Adults in the U.S. Since 1940”, U.S. Census Bureau, March 30, 2017 news release. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2017/cb17-51.html>.

ⁱⁱ “Is College Worth It?” Pew Research Center, May 15, 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/05/15/is-college-worth-it/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ I often refer to the work of Stanford Psychologist Carol Dweck and her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (2007). See also *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (2016), by University of Pennsylvania Psychologist Angela Duckworth.

^{iv} Hirschman, Elliot L. and Freeman A. Hrabowski. “Meet Societal Challenges by Changing the Culture on Campus,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 2011.

^v Weiner, Eric. *The Geography of Bliss: One Grump’s Search for the Happiest Places in the World*. Twelve Books, 2008, p.3.