

Remarks at Global Forum on “Higher Education for Diversity, Social Inclusion, and Community: A Democratic Imperative”

June 15, 2017

LUMSA University, Rome, Italy

As delivered.

Vice Rector Corradi, distinguished faculty, colleagues, and friends. It is a privilege to join you today to discuss the future of democracy and inclusivity, and reaffirm the principles of higher education.

In the United States, higher education and democratic ideals have been inextricably linked since the nation’s founding. In an era when advanced learning was not only unusual, but often a private (instead of an institutional) endeavor, nearly two thirds of the framers of the U.S. Constitution had attended college.

And two of the nation’s Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, are themselves closely linked with the establishment of Universities—the Universities of Pennsylvania and Virginia respectively.

One of the great thought leaders in American education, the late Ernest Boyer, wrote, “In the Colonial college, teaching was a central, even sacred function; the goal was to train the clergy and educate civic leaders.” As the fledgling nation formed its government, educational opportunities were broadened to include citizens from varied backgrounds who were vital to the advancement of the republic.

An educated electorate was seen as essential to democracy. As Thomas Jefferson put it, “Educate and inform the whole mass of the people. They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty.”

Of course, Jefferson’s definition of the “whole mass of people” included only white men of a certain class and stature.

As the American nation grew, so, too, did its commitment to education. In the 19th century the American government invested in land-grant colleges—the precursor to many of its public colleges and universities—to extend educational opportunity beyond the elite and use “scientific methods” to foster economic growth. Further expansions in higher education—driven by abolitionists and freed slaves following emancipation, by the GI Bill following WWII, and by the inclusion of women and racial minorities into colleges and Universities later in the twentieth century—were likewise related to the expansion of American democratic ideals that more fully included the people of the nation.

Indeed, President Truman’s 1947 Commission on Higher Education was very clear that “equal opportunity for all persons...without regard to economic status, race, creed, color, sex, national origin, or ancestry is a major goal of American democracy.”

Echoing Jefferson's earlier writings, the Commission noted, "Only an informed, thoughtful, tolerant people can develop and maintain a free society."

And so one response of higher education must be to continue its essential role in educating the future citizenry. And there is still much work to be done to ensure that our educational institutions reach all of those who can benefit from—and contribute to—our intellectual communities.

We know that opportunity is central to the American narrative, and education is an essential component of opportunity. However, all too often in the United States, access to high quality higher education "remains remarkably stratified along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines."¹

In 2030, first-generation and students of color will comprise 50% of those graduating from U.S. high schools. While half of all people from high-income families in the U.S. possess a bachelor's degree by age 25, just 1 in 10 people from low-income families do. We must do a better job providing access and opportunity to these students from diverse backgrounds. Our democracies cannot flourish when education is the privilege of the few.

An educated citizenry has long been prized, or at least a shared aspiration, and educational opportunities in the United States expanded in tandem with changing notions of who fit the definition of a "citizen." But higher education has played another important, and often overlooked, role in fostering self-rule by promoting disagreement—by nurturing the expression and interrogation of unpopular ideas so central to democracy.

This insight, well known by the Founding Fathers, has been reaffirmed by social scientists. I often quote from a 2015 *New York Times* article, entitled "Diversity Makes You Brighter." The article describes the outcomes of an academic study in which participants competed in groups to find accurate answers to problems.

The researchers observed the behaviors of homogenous and diverse groups (meaning that diverse groups included at least one participant of another ethnicity or race). The results were striking.

Diverse groups were 58% more accurate than homogenous groups in solving problems, and these contrasts held true in separate studies conducted in the United States and in Asia.

Further, the article states: "diversity brought *cognitive friction* that enhanced deliberation." In short, the study's authors found that, "diversity improves the way people think. By disrupting conformity, racial and ethnic diversity prompts people to scrutinize facts, think more deeply and develop their own opinions."

¹ From *America's Unmet Promise: The Imperative for Equity in Higher Education*, published by the American Association of Colleges and Universities on January 21, 2015

They summarized their findings in this manner: “Ethnic diversity is like fresh air: It benefits everybody who experiences it.”

So why are we not yet using our diversity—breathing in this so-called fresh air—to lift our nation and the world?

Because in many parts of our increasingly divided world, we are actively resisting the very kind of diversity the authors describe.

And higher education can offer a solution.

In their emerging intellectual lives, university students sometimes cling to familiar social structures—engaging only with individuals who look or talk like them, consuming media that reinforces their own beliefs, or avoiding conversations that cause discomfort.

Indeed in these matters, students mimic the behaviors of the larger citizenry. Bill Bishop, author of *The Big Sort*, examined how Americans increasingly self-selected into homogenous groups. Bishop, partner Robert Cushing, a sociologist and statistician from the University of Texas, and a team of collaborators analyzed data, such as voting records, family income data, and poll numbers, to discern the ways in which Americans were sorting themselves.

The result, and I am quoting here: “By the turn of the 21st century, it seemed as though the country was separating in every way conceivable.”

Where once citizens moved about the United States to seek economic opportunity, this new migration was encouraged by what Bishop describes as “lifestyle choices.” As he put it: “We have built a country where everyone can choose the neighbors (and church and news shows) most compatible with his or her lifestyle and beliefs. And we are living with the consequences of this segregation by way of life: pockets of like-minded citizens that have become so ideologically inbred that we don’t know, can’t understand, and can barely conceive of ‘those people’ who live just a few miles away.”

However comfortable, this kind of *sorting* doesn’t foster the kind of respectful—and even empathetic—exchange of ideas that is optimal for democratic societies.

But the college campus can pull in another direction, offering an ideal environment for questioning existing biases and seeking out people of different backgrounds and perspectives.

Since its founding centuries ago, the Academy has relied upon diversity of thought and the questioning of truth to advance its shared mission. Within our institutions, our faculty and students are taught to interrogate arguments and question received wisdom as a means of creating new knowledge or understanding. Within our classrooms and research laboratories, we celebrate ways in which expertise across all lines of difference unite to

offer solutions to the world's most challenging problems — curing disease, growing economies, addressing climate change, furthering democracies, and promoting peace.

Vigorous disagreement and the contest of ideas are central to higher education. And so I retain an optimistic view of the role that higher education can play in extending this embrace of new perspectives, and the centrality of contested ideas, to the proper functioning of our democracies.

Too often in our political dialogue, and even on our campuses, we lack the capacity to disagree using the potent triad of energy, substance, and civility. Our conversations on race, immigration, economics, or politics are often restrained by a fear of offending or a certainty that there are no other valid perspectives to be entertained. Civility must not be code for quieting others' opinions but a call for an energetic exchange of ideas within our richly diverse academic communities.

Students learn best not only when they're challenged to tackle hard questions and engage viewpoints different from their own, but when they're also taught to have these conversations in thoughtful ways. Institutions of higher education are uniquely positioned, and have a unique responsibility, to model substantive and civil disagreement. Through such disagreements we create new knowledge and new capacities for consensus around shared approaches to seemingly intractable problems.

I don't think there is a singular answer to address the challenges we face as democratic societies. But I believe strongly in education that exposes our students to new ideas and perspectives as a means to better understand themselves, their fellow citizens, and the knotty and complicated facets of our democracies.

To conclude, we have been asked to answer a series of simple questions, including most holistically: In this age of political polarization, where distrust of and disregard for knowledge exists, what should the response of higher education be?

I offer—perhaps just as simply—that the role of higher education is what it has always been: to remain a training ground for the kind of rigorous engagement that fosters new understanding. To welcome and value difference, and harness the enduring traditions of academic discourse. To model and celebrate the ideals of democracy, preserve the dignity of humankind, and nurture the free exchange of ideas.

As universities, we contribute to the development of societies when we see the promise in every citizen and invite students from all backgrounds into our classrooms, research laboratories, and discussions.

To those who question the validity of academic teaching and research, I quote U.S. Congressman and Civil Rights leader, John Lewis: “If not us then who? If not now, then when?” Let us lead and hold us accountable. We can reset the agenda by encouraging more debate—not less; and by supporting this debate with knowledge, fact, and reason.

Within higher education, this is our call to action ... to embrace our collective mission. To do what we do best. To educate and lead the next generation of citizens who will harness the cognitive friction to solve the problems of their day. At a time when derision threatens to replace civility as normative in our public discourse, our debates, and our deliberations, no lessons we teach our students—or our world—could be more timely or more important than these.

Thank you.