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The Transformative Power of Education

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THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF EDUCATION
NUCEA CONFERENCE
ATLANTA, GEORGIA

DR. JOHNETTA B. COLE
APRIL 16, 1994

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Brother Program Chair Mel Hall, Sister President Miriam Williford,
Sister & Brothers all:

It's a joy to be here today as your partner in learning and your partner in change. Continuing education has been, and will always be, a vital element in the life of our citizens, communities, and society. The National University Continuing Education Association has demonstrated once again its foresight and leadership in choosing the theme of powerful partnerships for change. Education is the key to seeing, understanding, and confronting the major challenges we face today, and we need to enlist each and every one of us, from all sectors of society, in the essential work strengthening our communities.

Our nation has some mighty serious problems. There's no way around it.

- In 1992, nearly one-quarter of all children up to 9 years old in the US lived in poverty.¹
- Since 1969, real average weekly earnings have fallen by more than 12%, as the incomes of 70% of our workers fell.² The chasm between wealthy and poor has widened.
- Our health care system has left millions out in the cold, with only the emergency room as their "family doctor."
- Our schools are failing our young people at an alarming rate - failing to care for them, reach them, or teach them.
- At a time when we absolutely need to join with each other to solve our major social challenges, we remain fixed on skin color, class, gender, sexual orientation and other differences among us. Somehow we must come to understand that our individual well-being is ultimately and inextricably tied to our collective welfare.

Perhaps worst of all, too many of us have lost our sense of possibility. Too many of us have come to believe we do not have the power to make a positive change in our communities, our society

¹US Bureau of the Census.

²National Center on Education and the Economy, *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages*, (June 1990), p. 1.

and our world. Many of our fellow citizens regard government as irrelevant. And polarized politics has fractured our ability to talk to each other across what common ground we do have.

As a nation, we need to believe again that "we can." We need to know how to build and nourish healthy communities that embrace each one of us and renew our spirits.

Among many of us there is a deep and enduring reservoir of hope and possibility that education, especially continuing education, can be a consistent and powerful instrument for positive social change.

Education really can transform an individual into an agent of change, empowered to believe in herself as a thoughtful, contributing, positive member of a society that needs her. Education really can transform a community into an inclusive, affirming place of growing and working and relating. Education really can transform the institutions of society so that they better serve our democracy, preparing flexible, talented workers who also happen to be thoughtful, responsible citizens committed to a larger good.

Dr. William Haffner, a senior clinician at the American Indian Health Service, has said in relation to a project on infant mortality, "The connection is absolutely clear. Education fosters the conditions that favor life."³ Yes, I believe education fosters the conditions that favor life for each of us; for our children, born and not-yet born; for our fractured communities; and for our fragile planet. I don't know anything other than education that can create human empathy. I don't know how else we can come to say, "My God, what is it like to be in that condition?" And that's where this all must begin.

But these transformations do not happen by the mere good intentions of our institutions of higher education. Our students do not become informed, active citizens just because that goal was written into our charters 15, 50, or 250 years ago. These transformations will not happen if we do not take a good, hard look at what our education is really about. Each of us must take this high and noble talk and make it our walk.

Can we make our neighborhoods into healthy places to live, study, and work? Can we teach our students-concretely with knowledge and wordlessly through the actions we model-the courage and conviction to take on public issues. Can we teach our students to roll up and develop solutions to everyday problems an informed, constructive, collaborative way?

Some have argued that these goals lie outside the "academic" mission of higher education. Don't count me among them. Indeed I argue that the academic mission of education is to teach, by word and deed, the skills and values of responsible, educated citizenship. Furthermore, on a very practical level, respect for

³Quoted in "Welcoming Life," by Robert Crum. *America's Agenda*, Winter 1994, p. 18.

diversity and the capacity for public work are essential tools for success in our rapidly advancing, global economy.

Continuing education units, with their considerable reach into all parts of a community, can be the arms of change. All of you have dedicated yourselves to working in the heart of our communities. You teach those who need stronger job skills and those who can create opportunities to learn them. You reach those for whom new technology will bring unprecedented access to vast stores of resources and information; and you educate those who will determine whether that technology will bring us together or separate us further. Your very theme of lifelong learning lies at the center of every effort to rebuild communities and generate a high skill, high wage economy.

The potential is challengingly great. But how exactly can we - you and I together - tap the transformative power of education?

Organizing our institutions around community service and service-learning is one tremendously powerful way to address the challenges facing our institutions and our communities.

What a joy it is to see that the organizers of this conference put rhetoric into practice by organizing a community service project into which many of you contributed your time and muscle.

Cleaning up an abandoned, litter-filled lot and turning it into a green playground with the joyful sounds of children's laughter can bring together African American, Hispanic American and Asian American people around shared challenges and shared joys. Working in a school as a mentor to a child of a background very different from one's own can help us see, challenge, and change our assumptions about others and about ourselves.

Continuing education units have created many community service programs, including those at Rice University and Weber State. Innovative adult education and workplace literacy programs, like those run by continuing education programs at the University of Mississippi and the University of California-Irvine, help individuals reach their full life potential while increasing their capacity to contribute in the workforce.

After her experience developing and leading a mentorship program, one Loyola College student commented, "Through my service opportunities, I have learned from, and come to understand, people of different backgrounds both here and abroad. Impressed upon me most strongly has been the great dignity apparent in each human spirit, and the need to affirm every person for his or her special gifts and inner dignity."⁴

All of us who believe in the potential of these projects draw our strongest inspiration from the hundreds of students like her whose energy and ideals captivate and challenge us. Many of us have done a good job creating avenues for our students to get involved in our communities. We must now look at how our whole institutions and each one of us within them can respond to the many

⁴Kerry Ann O'Meara, application essay for 1992 Swearer Award.

pressing needs of our world. Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders often points to a school in Francisville, Louisiana, that involves all of Francisville, young and old: small children receive day care, seniors serve as tutors, school children engage in academic studies, and adults earn their GEDs.⁵

Education and service, seniors and youth, in school and out of school: by crossing these boundaries we can confront and begin to truly begin to address poverty, ill health, and the disconnect our young people feel from each other and from society.

As a starting point, we can incorporate service as an integral, invigorating part of the curriculum. I have read students in an environmental studies class who work in the community on issues of lead poisoning. They research the scientific aspects of lead testing, study the biological and social context of lead poisoning, and that actually design and implement lead testing and lead education programs with neighborhood residents. They perform direct service to address an immediate need and they examine the long-term structural causes and solutions to the problem. During this class, the students work diligently, not just for good grades, but to avoid negative consequences for the community. After this experience, the students take with them a lifelong respect for the human impact of policy and science.

The concept of action research is another way to apply our academic missions and resources to create positive change in our communities. One fine example is the East St. Louis Action Research Project, an effort of several departments at the University of Illinois. In this project, which received an award from your association in 1992, the university collaborated with community residents to study the area and develop initiatives to stabilize and strengthen the economic and social foundations of this troubled city. While improving the quality of life in East St. Louis, students have become more committed to these fields of study and gained experience in the hands-on application of their knowledge. Faculty have applied their expertise to difficult community problems. Community leaders have gained talents in planning, community organizing, and community development --- talents they have taken on to other efforts in the city.

These new and academically rigorous ways to teach, learn and research can lay the foundation for a redesign of our institutions.

I applaud our colleague Judith Ramaley at Portland State who has been leading her institution in a redefinition of scholarship. They take the whole geographical region as their campus, and use community indicators - defined by campus and community together - to evaluate their work. Dr. Ramaley has now begun to work with legislators to see how the public financing system for higher education can support rather than discourage such good ideas and outcomes for students, faculty, and communities.

⁵Thomas Toch, "Battle Plans of a General," *America's Agenda*, Winter 1994, p. 14.

Some of my colleagues in the historically Black colleges and universities are taking part in a national effort, funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, to invest in the economic development of low-income neighborhoods. One of the programs, at Southern University of New Orleans, includes leadership training for residents of low-income housing, the development of affordable housing strategies, and the creation of a small business incubator program between the university and a local enterprise zone.

As these and many, many other examples indicate, we are not at a loss for good ideas. We simply need the willpower and staying power to get these efforts going and to persevere for the long haul. Over and over, I hear from community advocates that real good is done only when the investment is for 10, 15, 20 years. Doing good cannot be a fad. And we certainly do not have the right to tie the transformation of communities to our institutions' whims and fancies. To increase the possibility that good will result, we need to weave our ideals throughout our colleges, universities, communities, and businesses.

We can look at all aspects of our institutions--financial aid, tenure and promotion, admissions, priorities for departmental and research funding, recognition programs--and see how they might encourage and reward these efforts. We can forge new partnerships between our workplaces and our learning-places, our houses of worship and our houses of service, investing in lifelong learning to keep ourselves challenged, affirmed, involved, and productive in a rapidly-evolving workplace.

Some skeptics will immediately point to the cost of redesigning our work and our institutions. As we know all too well, our resources are only growing more limited. But perhaps we will be able to apply existing structures and funding sources to these new ideas. Can we combine funding for job training, extension programs, poverty programs, and public health to support community-based educational centers? Can regional and professional accreditation agencies provide incentives for community-based internships and other efforts to assist low-income communities?

And in programs working to develop a high skills workforce, let's find ways to tie continuing education to the needs of the community as well as the workplace: let's teach citizenship and public-problem-solving skills alongside technical skills. If we remember that these efforts help us do better what we're supposed to be about, suddenly they won't seem so expensive.

At Spelman College, a historically Black college for women, we are working on these issues on a number of levels. We were born of service, a seminary for young black women just out of slavery. To this day, we work hard to prepare our students for leadership by educating them in the traditional academic sense and by helping them understand that no one is free from the responsibility to engage in service that leads to both stronger communities and a just nation. If there is one truth you hear over and over again at Spelman, it's this: Doing for others is just the rent you pay for living on this earth. Here are some specific illustrations that we

put this belief into practice.

- Nearly 50% of our students are engaged in an ongoing way in a range of community service activities in Atlanta. It is truly a matter of beautiful consequences that Spelman women are doing service in homeless shelters and rape crisis centers. Spelman students tutor little sisters and brothers in the housing projects that surround our campus.
- This fall, our provost will begin teaching a class on the sociology of poverty in which students will work with Cafe 458, a local multi-service center for the homeless.
- This year, we launch what will be an annual award at our Founders Day convocation: The Fannie Lou Hamer Award. It will be given to a faculty or staff member who is engaged in community service in an exemplary way.
- We are involved in the Atlanta Project, about which you will hear more later today. It is the epitome of collaboration, bringing together, in new and constructive ways, government agencies, social service and health care agencies, religious institutions, educators, and law enforcement officials. The program is built on the brainpower and muscle of thousands of volunteers. As President Carter said when he founded the project, tackling these issues is "fraught with the very real possibility of failure, ... [but] the real failure would be not to try."⁶
- As a natural outgrowth of who we are, we have founded the Women's Entrepreneurial Center to assist women of all ages to exercise their leadership in business, whether by starting a business or by moving up the career ladder. We reach out to women at all points in their careers, to help them transform themselves and, by their enhanced participation in the business world, transform their work places and society.

Spelman is of course not alone among HBCUs in the arena of service. Let me share a wonderful example with you.

I recently read about a Howard University student, Corey Nevels, who has worked with a group of boys in the neighborhood of Ledroit Park in Washington. The boys cleared a field of rocks, tilled the soil, and grew a crop of okra, tomatoes, peppers, cabbage, squash, cucumbers, and lettuce. Though Corey probably got involved because he felt it was a good thing to do with part of his spare time, he has found it impossible to leave. He says of the kids, "They've taught me a whole lot about keeping my word, about following through.. There's so much that's valuable about these

⁶Atlanta Project Targets Crime, Poverty, and Drug Abuse in Urban Areas," *Carter Center News*, Fall 1991, p. 1.

children." The boys depend on him, and he has seen their trust betrayed when others pass in and out of their lives.

At first, the boys wanted to sell the produce they grew. By the end of the summer, the boys wanted to take the vegetables home to their grandmothers. In the fall, Corey and the boys held a harvest feast for their families. As they were about to wrap up the garden, they realized they had to continue meeting through the winter to continue their discussions about their neighborhood, school, and homes. They could not simply let their lives drift apart.⁷ All of them-Corey and the boys-came to see their possibilities and their connections; their lives were irreversibly transformed.

As we have developed these projects, we have learned important lessons about what true partnerships really mean. The community voice must be included throughout the whole process of naming priorities, designing and implementing projects, celebrating our successes, and correcting our failures. As an Australian aborigine woman said, "If you have come to help me, then you are wasting your time, but if your liberation is bound to mine, then let us work together."⁸ We must get over our often-unconscious institutional arrogance and learn the beauty of institutional humility. And we must stick with it when the going gets tough.

In implementing these programs, on our campuses we will find that they build community on campus as well as off. Among our concerns within higher education are the increasing specialization among our faculty and the fragmentation among the various groups that live and work on our campuses-students, faculty, administrators, staff, and the racial, ethnic, gender and class groups within each of those. Community service can bring these groups together around interdisciplinary, concrete, problem-focused themes that explicitly and unavoidably confront diversity and division, values and ideologies. The critical factor here is the context and guidance to create a constructive, meaningful dialogue around issues that more often drive deeper wedges between groups. This is a crucial role for the faculty among you.

Institutions of higher education cannot ignore their duty to work for the good of humankind. Learning to understand the world is only the first step. Learning how and going on to make it better is the second and critical step. Continuing education, by reaching out to individuals of all ages, colors, and life experiences, multiplies the levers we can bring to bear on the critical issues we face on those points where we can make it all better.

We must call our institutions back to the fundamental missions

⁷Michael Shapiro, et al., "Don't Call Me Slacker," *Rolling Stone*, March 24, 1994, pp. 42, 47.

⁸Johnnetta B. Cole, *Conversations*, p. 153.

of serving society and cultivating educated citizens. We must also listen carefully to voices different from our own, and heed their wisdom.

At their best, America's colleges and universities have offered moral leadership for the nation, leveraged practical resources for the real benefit of society, trained our citizens for the hard work that needed to be done in the world, and inspired them to reach for their greatest possibilities. We have a wonderful opportunity to transform ourselves, our institutions, our communities, and our world. Future generations are counting on us. Let us not let them down. Let us lift them up. Let us teach the power of possibility.

Make it clear who "we" is, who will do this work.