

CALAHE CONFERENCE REMARKS

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Thank you all for coming today. I would like to thank Maribel Sanchez and Walter Diaz for inviting me to speak with you today. Welcome to Eastern! I also want to thank Justis Lopez for joining us to share his experiences as a Latino student and now as an educator.

I am here to talk to you about going to college . . . and I know, you are already thinking . . . “boring!” I want to make this fun for you, so I am going to be asking you a lot of questions that will require you raising your hand. So get your arms loosened up!

I am originally from Puerto Rico, and in a few minutes I will tell you a little bit about myself. But first, I want to get those arms working! So let us find out **where all of you** are from!

Keep in mind, everyone in our country came from somewhere else except Native Americans. So let’s start there—how many of you are Native Americans? Raise your hands.

Okay. The rest of us came from somewhere else. Let’s find out where. How many of your families originally are from my homeland of Puerto Rico? Raise your hands. How many of your families come from other islands in the Caribbean—Cuba, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic? Raise your hands. How many of you have a Mexican heritage? Raise your hands. How about Central America—Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama, El Salvador or Nicaragua? Raise your hands. Now for South America—whose families come from countries there—Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Guyana, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, Chile, and Ecuador? Who are we missing?

Is there anyone here whose families are from a European country? Raise your hands. Is there anyone here from a country in Asia—China, India, Japan, Korea, for example?

So we all come from somewhere. That is what makes the United States so special—people call us the “melting pot” of the world, because people from many different cultures and places around the world come to this country and learn to live together. The nice thing about it is that you can still celebrate and honor your home country and your family’s traditions at the same time you can join other Americans in respecting each other’s backgrounds and embracing the same freedoms and values that make this nation strong. One of those values is to provide equal opportunities to every resident of our country, regardless of their background.

One of the most important opportunities we want all young people to have is the opportunity to get the education they need to be successful.

It’s time to get those arms working again! I want to find out how many of you have family members who are going to college or have gone to college. Here we go. How many of you have brothers or sisters who have either graduated from college or are going to college now? Raise your hands. How many of you have parents—one or both—who went to college? Raise your hands.

Here is the key question—how many of **you** want to go to college? For those of you who have just raised your hands who also have family members who have gone to or are going to college, I hope you talk to them all the time about why they think you should also go to college. I am sure they want you to.

I don’t want to guess what reasons your family might give you for going to college, and I also realize that those of you who don’t have anyone in your family who has gone to college

aren't going to have those conversations. For all of you, let me share some information with you on the value of a college education. Why go to college?

- 1. Earning Potential.** Each of you has dreams of owning your own house, buying a car, having a nice sound system, and raising a family. A college degree makes that wish list easier to accomplish. National data suggests that a bachelor's degree is worth about a million dollars more during one's lifetime than having just a high school diploma. If we raised the college graduation rates of Latinos in Connecticut to that of whites (basically doubling the current rate), it would generate an additional \$8 billion a year in personal income. That's a lot of X-Boxes, a lot of Air Jordans!
- 2. Employability.** Perhaps I should have put this first, before earning power. Because the fact is, without a college degree, it will be increasingly difficult to get a job in our country. Experts tell us that about two-thirds, or 68 percent, of all jobs in Connecticut in the coming decade will require some level of college education—either a two- or four-year degree. The days of semi-skilled, well paid factory workers is a thing of the past in this state and in our country. Everything runs on a computer these days, and the distinction between a company's "workers" and "managers" is blurring. In today's business world, everyone has to be able to solve problems, work with their hands, and be part of a team.
- 3. Funding Public Services.** So far, I have been speaking about the benefits to students who go to college—think of them as personal benefits. There are also benefits to society that occur when more people go to college. One of them is the reduction in the cost of public services. We pay for those services from taxes paid by workers. When you get a job, you will be paying taxes—federal taxes to the U.S. government, state taxes to the state of Connecticut. When more people get a good education, the cost of public services—welfare, unemployment benefits, public health services—goes down, as does the cost to individual taxpayers. It is another financial benefit of going to college.
- 4. A stronger economy.** Fifteen years ago, America was number one in the world in terms of the percentage of adults who had a college education. Today we are only 14th—Korea, Finland, New Zealand and other countries have all passed us. When a nation's people are well educated, their country competes more successfully in the global economy. More taxes to support public services such as road improvements and education, are also generated. Returning our nation to number one in the world on this important measure would mean trillions of dollars to our economy. And again, a stronger economy is good for all of us. Countries with strong economies have higher standards of living and a stable society.

I know that many of you come from families that don't have anyone who has gone to college. That may make you feel like college would be too big a step for you, or that there are too many obstacles in your path to getting there. You may think the costs are well beyond your means. Do not be discouraged! And never give up on your dreams!

Let me tell you a story about a little girl who no one would have ever thought would have the opportunity to get a college degree. I was that little girl. Today, I am the president of one of the best colleges in Connecticut, with a thousand employees, five thousand students, and a budget of more than \$125 million a year.

How did I get here? Is my family wealthy? Did my parents both go to college? Did their parents? Did I go to a fancy high school to get ready to go to college? No, no, no, and no. Let me tell you how I got here. I want to share my story, because I know that many of you have similar stories to tell. It is not about where you come from . . . it is about where you are going. If you have a dream and a passion to get there, no one can stand in your way. Si Se Puede! Yes you can!

I was born in the mountains of western Puerto Rico, in a town called San Sebastián. We were surrounded by coffee plantations and other farms. My grandmother lived in the slums of San Juan. Neither of my parents had more than an 8th grade education, and when I was eight years old, my father moved us to Newark, New Jersey. Do any of you know anything about Newark? It is a tough town – not unlike Hartford or Bridgeport or New Haven today. My family was one of the first Puerto Rican families to move to Newark, and there were no other families from other Latin American countries there—no Mexicans, no Dominicans, no Cubans. We were it. None of us spoke a word of English, and there were no English-as-a-Second-Language programs then. This was 1956 and we felt very much alone. We didn't have much money, and we didn't have books and other things to stimulate the mind in our apartment.

My parents enrolled me in grade school, and the teacher—bless her heart—didn't know what to do with me. I spoke no English, yet every word spoken by the teacher and other students was in English. There was a boy in my class who was what we call “developmentally disabled” today — someone who would be taking Special Ed classes in your school. His name was Darrell, and he sat in the corner like an outcast, drawing all day long on big sheets of paper. Darrell drew horses—he was very good at it—and the teacher decided that the best place to put me was in the corner with Darrell. I was given pencils and crayons and paper and left to fend for myself.

Every day for an entire school year, I sat in the corner with Darrell. I wasn't really good at drawing horses, so I tried to catch what was going on in class, and attempted to learn English.

At home, my father and I would take the sports pages of the local newspaper and try to pick up the words of English based on the knowledge we had of baseball and other sports. Things were slow, but we picked it up, and as the oldest child, I became the translator for my family in dealing with the outside world.

My parents both worked in the factories—long hours—and tried their best to provide for me and my siblings. Eventually my dad got a good job as a foreman in the local air conditioning factory. All the while, my father would talk about the need for each of us to get the education he had not received, and his belief that an education would be our ticket out of the housing projects. He and my mother made great sacrifices so that they could send me to a Catholic girl's high school---it was the best in New Jersey and my parents paid for the tuition.

I remember working very hard and enjoying subjects like geometry and literature. When I was a senior, I applied to several colleges, despite the fact that no one else in my family had ever been to college. It was then that I encountered the prejudice that Latinos and other minorities in this country continue to face. I received word that I had been admitted to Middlebury College, a prestigious private college in Vermont. The head nun called me into her office the next day and asked me “Who does your family know?” She assumed that the only way I had been accepted at Middlebury was through family connections. It was almost funny,

because no one in my high school had fewer “connections” than me and my family. We had **no connections!**

Back then, there were so few minority students in our high school that the nuns and staff had no experience with a minority student who studied and was successful academically.

Eventually they came around and told me they were proud of me for getting into college. This is an important point that I want to make here—prejudice and bias and stereotyping occurs out of **ignorance**—not knowing any better. There certainly is plenty of hatred and racism in this country, but much of the discrimination disappears when people are exposed to other cultures.

I ended up going to a local college in New Jersey—Montclair State—one of the best public colleges in our state. And even though I had been accepted there, as well as at Middlebury College and at Rutgers University, I still doubt I would have succeeded without having the fortune of being taught by my freshman English professor, Dr. Morris McGee.

One of the things that language instructors will tell you is that people whose native language is not English will pick it up quickly in conversation. They can even learn to read English fairly quickly. The hardest aspect of language to master is **writing**. It involves vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar, and all the other aspects of written communication, and is the hardest part to master. I quickly found that the writing skills I had in high school would not cut it in college.

When I got my first essay back from Dr. McGee, covered in red correction marks, I thought I would die. I was ready to take the bus home immediately. But Dr. McGee had also written, “Come see me in my office,” and when I went to see him, he encouraged me to work on my writing. Each week, I would go to his office, and while he corrected other students’ work or prepared for his next class, I would rewrite my assignments, stopping to get pointers and edits from Dr. McGee.

We did that every week, and at the end of the semester, I had a solid “B” in his class, and I was ready for the rest of my college career. I would not be here today without the guidance and support of Morris McGee. By the way, he was a Korean War veteran who was confined to a wheelchair. He hadn’t let adversity hold him back, and he wasn’t going to let me fail either.

So here we are. I am a college president, and have earned a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, and a PhD in the process of getting here. Whether you want to be a college president, an engineer, or a doctor, what can each of you do to prepare yourself to meet your own goals and dreams? Let me give you five quick tips.

1. **Work hard.** You have heard this your entire life, but it bears repeating. Hard work—call it making that extra effort—is your best friend. All the natural intelligence, connections, money and other benefits that a student may have cannot replace the commitment you put forth in doing what you want to do. You cannot control external forces in your life—but you can control how much energy, time, and commitment you put into the things that matter to you. Study hard, put in the effort, and it will pay off.
2. **Find a mentor.** I mentioned my freshman English teacher in college. I would not be here without him. And I was lucky he came into my life. But each of you has or will find someone on your journey who wants to help you. When that person shows up, lean on them. Listen to them. Do what they tell you to do. And be thankful and grateful for their support.

3. **Be proud and humble at the same time.** Pride is not always a bad thing. False pride or excessive pride can be. But being genuinely proud of your family, of your values, of your heritage simply means that you are comfortable with who you are and where you have come from. At the same time, never get ahead of yourself. Be humble in your dealings with others. Be respectful. Thankfully embrace and accept what you are given, but never assume that you deserve more. When you earn the gifts in life that you will receive, your joy and thanks will be that much more heartfelt.
4. **Take advantage of opportunity.** Each of you knows someone who has been born into privilege, possessing far more advantages and opportunities than any one person might deserve. Ignore them. Focus instead on your own life. Pursue opportunities—summer camps, special assignments, scholarships, jobs—whatever it might be. When those opportunities come by, do not hesitate. Grasp them and maximize them. You never know when the next opportunity may come. Take advantage of every gift when it arrives on your doorstep.
5. **Never give up.** Human beings have enormous capacity to adapt to challenges and changes in their lives. You have heard the stories—about the surfer who lost her arm to a shark attack and still competes in and wins surfing competitions years later. Or the blind person who learned to master a musical instrument. Or the little Puerto Rican girl stuck in the corner with drawing paper and crayons who is now a college president. Never give up on your dreams. You will be amazed at how far you can go, as long as you keep moving forward. People may treat you unfairly. Some doors may be closed to you. You may even find yourself stumbling once in a while. Get up, dust yourself off, and keep going. Never lose faith in your own abilities!

Hopefully these five lessons can help you in your life's journey. But they are more about attitude. How about tools that you can use now as you continue preparing for a college education. Here are five things that you can do now.

1. **Create an inventory—in your mind or on paper—of the things you like to do.** What interests you? What careers seem to be exciting and rewarding in your mind? If you have a chance to observe or experience them, do so. Often we hear about something that seems interesting but once we examine it more closely, it loses its magic. Not all of us can be NBA players! Or doctors! Or university presidents! **Another inventory that is very important is to answer the question—what are you good at?** You might think that the natural thing is for us to like what we are good at. You are right, our interests and aptitudes should align. But they don't always. Sometimes someone is very good at something yet has no interest in it. The worse thing in life is to have a job that you don't enjoy. But it isn't much better to pursue a career in a field that you like but don't have the skills to succeed in. Take the time to analyze what you like to do and what you are good at. At your school, they have career centers, tests, and others tools to help you figure it out. Check out different working situations, talk to people about what they like about their jobs. You might like to be outdoors, you might like to dress casually, you might like the excitement of deadlines. All of these are different working conditions. How you feel about each can tell you a lot about the type of job you will enjoy.

2. **Seek out classes in school that will prepare you to succeed in college.** Each of your schools have lists of the classes and requirements you need to complete to best prepare for college. If you do not know the list already, find it and study it. I am sure it includes English, math, science, and other requirements. Usually you have choices as to the level you take within a subject area—for instance, there are easier versus more challenging math classes to take. Taking harder courses is part of the “making an effort” lesson I spoke of earlier. I don’t want you to take classes that you are not ready to succeed in, but never sell yourself short, and don’t trade your future for the path of least resistance. Put the time in now and it will pay off later.
3. **Develop academic success/support skills.** I am not talking about math or other subject area skills. I am referring to broad skills that you can apply to anything you study. Study habits—setting aside the time and appropriate place to study—is number one on the list. Close behind is learning how to take tests. The first step in improving your test results is to make sure you eat well and get enough sleep before a big test. Sounds simple, but how many times will students fill up on sugar and junk food while staying out late the night before finals? Another important academic skill is learning how to do research—in the library, online, or out in the field. Finally, work on your writing. Expressing your ideas or describing what you have learned is fundamental to being successful in college. I told you about my own experiences at Montclair State College. That was 50 years ago. Time hasn’t changed the importance of good writing skills. You can have a wonderful idea in your head, but if you cannot explain it clearly and persuasively to someone else—your teachers, your classmates and others—you might as well not have the idea to begin with.
4. **Take risks.** We all have our comfort zones—the areas of knowledge that we know the most and are familiar with. Those comfort zones are just that—they make us comfortable. It’s like being under a nice warm blanket at night. But we do not grow much when we are in our comfort zone. In fact, psychologists will tell you that only when we take risks, challenge ourselves, and try new things do we stretch and grow and expand our knowledge and our world view. Traveling is one way to do this. Reading is another. Taking classes in fields we are unfamiliar with is another. I am not asking you to parachute off a tall building, walk on a bed of hot coals, or go on a blind date! Take safe risks! But find those opportunities and pursue them. Each of you can think of such moments that you have already experienced—times when you had the courage to try something new. It wasn’t easy, you were hesitant if not afraid. But you did it. And it made you stronger!
5. **Be willing to make mistakes.** This is the other side of taking risks. Sometimes we try something new . . . and we fail. The great football coach, Vince Lombardi, who was also from New Jersey by the way, said, “It’s not whether you get knocked down, it’s whether you get back up.” And the great human rights leader Nelson Mandela said, “Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got up again.” I suspect all of you have had your own set of knockdowns, fallings, failings. But you are still here, and you are just getting started!

Let’s get those arms going one more time. How many of you know what you want to be when you grow up? How many of you don’t have a clue? How many of you are ready to take

risks? Make mistakes? Discover your interests? Take advantage of opportunities? Work hard to turn your dreams into reality? Take the right courses in school to ready yourself for college?

Look around you. That's a lot of hands! Now do one more thing. Lower your hands and hold hands with the person to your left and your right. This represents community. People working together. You will learn, if you do not know it already, that few of us succeed without the help of others. Collectively, we can do wonderful things.

The world has many challenges today—climate change, income inequality, war, hunger, and much more. Those challenges are not going away, and I expect all of you will have a chance to make a contribution to society when your time comes. Most likely you will be making those contributions as a team. So work hard, go to college, stick together, and let me know how you are doing. Good luck, and God Bless!