

The Equity Imperative
Commission on Higher Education and Employability Conference
Elsa Núñez
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I want to thank Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo and President Michael Thomas of the New England Board of Higher Education for hosting today's conference. I am confident that their leadership in creating the Commission on Higher Education and Employability to promote economic sustainability in New England will pay huge dividends for our region.

I am pleased to join the other members of the Commission today to discuss how we can ensure a robust economy for New England in the coming decades. One of our goals is to leverage the higher education community's strengths to meet the workforce development needs of our region's economic base and the career aspirations of our residents.

If all New England college students were entering this equation with relatively the same skills and backgrounds, I would not be talking to you about equity this afternoon. But the fact is, low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color — three cohorts that have a disproportionate overlap — are at risk of being shut out of the economic revitalization we seek for New England. As a result, the quality of life for a sizable portion of our community is likely to be diminished, and unless the issue is addressed, we will not achieve the economic prosperity that New England deserves.

The title of this hour on our agenda is "The Equity Imperative." I am going to spend my own portion of the hour setting the stage for the rest of the afternoon's activities. My objective is to describe the issue of equity so that we can use it as a filter for discussions in our three work groups.

At the end of my comments, I am going to show a short video on a work-integrated learning program on my campus that responds to the issues of equity and employability. And then we will spend the rest of the hour considering questions related to equity that can inform the conversations we continue to have in our work groups.

So, what is the Equity Imperative? There are actually three dimensions to the Equity Imperative that I want to introduce today to you — equity's moral imperative, its economic imperative, and the societal imperative of equity.

The moral imperative is based on the shared values of civilized peoples. In our country, we need look no farther than the Declaration of Independence, which states that "... all men are created equal," with "certain inalienable rights" that include "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

It is interesting that almost 250 years later, scientific data reaffirms the values articulated by our Founding Fathers. National Assessment of Educational Progress data shows that **all children in this nation have the same mental acuity and gross motor skills at the age of nine months, regardless of ethnicity, family income, marital status of the mother, or other socioeconomic factors. Born equals!**

By age two, socio-economic status begins to impact a child's progress — nutrition, literacy, family income, and other measures begin to separate the affluent from the poor. At age 4, and in grades 4, 8 and 12, the standardized tests we are all familiar with show a growing

gap in academic performance, chiefly based on family income, with high correlations for children of color and children living in our cities.

Students of color and students from low-income families enter college less prepared to succeed, they are retained at lower rates, and they graduate at lower rates. Apart from all other considerations, I believe we have a moral obligation to reduce the education gap — and therefore the employability gap — for these students. Educational opportunity, tied to employment potential, has the greatest potential of being “the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery,” as the noted educator Horace Mann described.

How significant would it be for us to balance the scales? In Connecticut alone, if we were to graduate African Americans and Latinos from college at the same rate as Caucasians, those individuals would realize an additional \$8 billion a year in earnings.

Dealing with the issue of inequity is not only a moral imperative. For those who might argue that education is a private right and not a concern of the public, let me speak to the economic implications of the equity imperative. Georgetown University’s Center for Education and the Workforce projects that 69% of the jobs of the 21st century in Connecticut will require at least a two-year degree. In Southern New England, it is predicted that half the workers will be minorities by 2020. Yet while 69% of the jobs will require some form of higher education, only 47% of the population currently has the required level of schooling. For African Americans, that figure is only 37%, and for Latinos, that figure is only 33%.

If we don’t educate more minority students and more students from low-income families, we simply will not have a large enough trained workforce to meet New England’s economic challenges. And that impacts all of us.

Finally, let me speak to the social imperative surrounding the issue of equity. Perhaps the notion that we have a moral obligation to educate underrepresented sectors of our population feels intrusive for some. Perhaps a discussion about economics feels a bit removed from those whose good fortune has produced . . . wealth and fortune. But the one thing none of us can deny is that we are social animals — we live together in social groups. And, as history has long recorded, when economic and income inequity within a society reaches a tipping point, the social order is compromised and political revolutions occur.

Three years ago, Federal Reserve Board Chair Janet Yellen spoke to the issue of the growing income inequality in our country and the concentration of wealth, suggesting that not only did these conditions run counter to American values, but are having an alarming impact on our society.

I am not suggesting that we are headed toward the type of violent revolution seen in the past in France or Russia, or the more recent social and political upheaval occurring throughout the globe—in Europe, in Asia, in South America, in Africa. But clearly, income inequality not only negatively impacts individuals and depresses economic growth, it erodes the stability and order of our social fabric. Our neighborhoods, our communities, our states, region, and nation — all will be stronger, more stable, and more sustainable if we can impact the equity imperative.

At this point, I would like to share a video of a work-integrated learning program on my campus. It has implications for the broad issue of employability as well as the issue of equity.

Conclusion

The word “imperative” means vital, urgent. Nothing can be more vital — a matter of our nation’s long-term survival — than talking about raising academic performance, skill sets and employability of underrepresented populations. Their economic mobility, our regional and national economies, and our very social order lie in the balance. Urgent? Absolutely we must be urgent about our business, because we have a lot of ground to make up!

As we break up into our groups to discuss our table questions, let me share an additional question for each of our three work groups:

1. To the group working on labor market data and career centers—as you look at data and related strategies, how can we balance short-term workforce needs with the long-term need for planning sustainable communities and robust local economies?
2. To the group dealing with technical skill bundles and emerging credentials, how can we develop attainable career pathways for underrepresented populations that can give them a livable wage in the communities in which they live?
3. Finally, to the group looking at education/business partnerships, how can we promote work-integrated learning programs on our campuses—like Eastern’s Work Hub—so that underrepresented populations can have opportunities for high wage jobs, not just the low- and middle-wage positions we typically slot them into?

I hope this brief review of issues related to equity has prompted thoughts you can use to further our mutual interest in expanding employment opportunity and ensuring sustainable communities in New England. It is a vital, urgent task and I am delighted to be part of this commission as we confront these challenges head on. Thank you!