

**Remarks for the Potomac and Chesapeake Association for College Admissions Counseling  
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I see some of the most important people in the world in this room today. I see you all looking around going, ‘who? Who?’ Did Barack Obama just arrive? Oprah? Bill Gates?

No, I’m talking about YOU, the college counselors and admissions officers of the Potomac and Chesapeake region. YOU are the people who make the future possible for succeeding generations of students to achieve their dreams in obtaining a college education. YOU are responsible for setting the forces in motion that create new citizen leaders for our future society.

College admissions counselors and collegiate admissions officers are at the center of one of the most important national conversations today: the urgent need to transform American higher education to be of even greater value for our nation’s future. President Obama’s clarion call for a dramatic expansion in college opportunities by the Year 2020 calls all of us to a serious rethinking of our conventional notions of a college education: who has a right to access higher education; the vast array of institutional and programmatic options for students to obtain such an education; and the means by which new populations of previously-marginalized citizens will be able to afford and succeed in the collegiate landscape of the future.

Today, I want to share with you some thoughts on the agenda ahead as we work together to broaden access for new populations to enter college. The theme of your conference is “The Hands of the Mentors Who Guide Us.” Mentors share their stories with us, and we eagerly lap up these life lessons in the hope that we might make some progress using the ideas from those stories. It is in that spirit that I will be sharing some of Trinity’s story with you.

Let me start with a piece of my educational philosophy. In the mid-1990’s, as Trinity’s student body was changing dramatically, welcoming more students from D.C. and Prince Georges County public schools, the faculty were restive. “If only Admissions would bring us better students,” they opined, our problems would be solved. This “if only” chant about admissions was a chronic condition, and actually, quite debilitating for the students as well as for the faculty. So, I spoke to the faculty and laid down this challenge: if we find some of our students unprepared for college, I told them, perhaps the problem resides in the fact that we are the ones who are unprepared --- we are unprepared for these students.

My challenge went on: it’s not the fault of the students who are sometimes ill-prepared for collegiate expectations because of inadequate lower education. Rather, we, the teachers, we must be better prepared for students who will learn differently; who come differently prepared, if at all; who have learning needs beyond anything we previously encountered; who have cultural frameworks that are not our own. These are students who have life stories we cannot imagine, but who want all of the same things we had the privilege to acquire: knowledge, a philosophical habit, skills for the information age, values to navigate the culture successfully, the economic security that is the most visible practical outcome of a higher education.

I continued: why should we deny some students these tools that will promote lifelong satisfaction and personal economic advantage for these students and their children simply because, when they come to us, they struggle with learning that prior generations from other communities already possessed? If we don't teach them, who will? A college's value should not be measured by how many students it keeps out, but rather, how well it succeeds in educating even the most challenging students admitted.

I was not very popular in the faculty lounge on that day, or for many days thereafter, but my message got through. Today, 15 years later at Trinity, our faculty enthusiastically welcome and embrace our students from the District of Columbia, Prince Georges County and communities throughout the region and nation. Trinity's faculty have transformed our curricula and pedagogies to focus on student success, particularly for students who did not have many advantages in earlier educational endeavors. We have learned that such students often work harder, have more focused ambition, and, indeed, travel more intentionally along the pathways of learning because for these students a college degree is not a birthright but a hard won civil right.

With that preface, I want to focus on three key points about college access and success today:

1. Matchmaking: Aligning collegiate choice with the student profile
2. Purchasing: Deconstructing the college cost enigma
3. Succeeding: What makes it possible for students to succeed in college today?

### **Matchmaking: Aligning Colleges and Students**

We could spend all afternoon discussing the weird science of how students decide which college they really want to attend, whether it makes sense or not. Too often, students choose college because of superficial features of the institution, not because they will do well there. Sports fame, media prestige, celebrity graduates, pretty campuses are all superficial reasons why students choose colleges.

At the same time, some students are discouraged from choosing colleges where they will be successful because of misperceptions about the institutions --- perhaps cost or distance or private versus public or a perception that the student will never be a suitable candidate for admission. Perhaps because the institution has a special mission, like a women's college or historically Black college, students and counselors may not know much about such unique places so they stick with more conventional choices. Maybe the counselor only gets rewarded based on how many of her students get into the Ivy League or flagship state universities; maybe she gets no credit for those students who thrive in less well known colleges.

To create better pathways for collegiate access for more students, we have to break through all of the stereotyping and mismatching based on features. We should spend a lot more time figuring out the correct alignment of student needs and talents with the broad range of collegiate opportunities.

Just yesterday I had lunch with someone who runs one of the many college access programs in the Washington region. She told me the story of a young man from a very low income family who wanted to go to MIT. The student's family and others, including the counselor in his particular high school, told him that was impossible --- he'd never get in, couldn't afford it, wouldn't do well there --- so they said he should consider going to a local community college. However with the help and intervention of this particular college access program, the young man applied to MIT anyway, secured a full scholarship and other support for his living needs, and proceeded to enroll and graduate from MIT, a great success story.

We can probably tell many other similar stories. What we don't know are the stories of those students who never had the chance to prove the naysayers wrong.

Trinity's story of institutional change and transformation is appropriate here.

Trinity was founded 113 years ago by a courageous group of religious women, the Sisters of Notre Dame, who believed that women had every bit as much right to a higher education as men in that day. But women in the nation's capital had no opportunity to attend college, so the SNDs set about establishing Trinity, and for the first 70 years Trinity thrived, educating women such as Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius. We've long been known as a powerhouse for educating women in public leadership.

But when coeducation became normative in the late 1960's, like many women's colleges, Trinity's fortunes fell as our traditional student populations were suddenly welcome at Georgetown and Boston College and later Princeton and Brown, UVA and Michigan.

We spent the next two decades wandering like a lost tribe, convinced that our educational methodologies were still valid and vitally important for some women to obtain, and yet unable to reclaim the old markets. Our admissions officers came back weary from being on the road, telling horror tales of high school guidance counselors who refused to let women's colleges in the door, or students who averted their eyes as they walked past our tables at college fairs, as if they were somehow afraid that we'd cast a spell on them if we made eye contact. Those were difficult years.

Shortly after I became Trinity's president, we had a board meeting to discuss our strategic future. Some alumnae board members demanded that we get a new admissions director. Some said we should simply go coed, especially since there was the ever-present danger of becoming, too... well, "feminist." Others bemoaned the loss of our traditional populations and suggested that we go on an expensive and uncertain mission with some consultants to see if we could reclaim our lost constituents.

In the middle of this cacophony, a Sister of Notre Dame stood up and looked around the room and said, "Why are we trying to hard to reclaim a population that is lost to us? There are thousands of women at Trinity's doorstep who could benefit from this education. Why are we not welcoming the women of Washington to our campus?"

Why, indeed? I inquired of the Admissions Office about our recruiting in the DC Public Schools and received the worst possible answer: Trinity did not recruit in the DC Public Schools because their low academic standards made their students unlikely candidates for admission. Trinity had not considered whether it should assume some responsibility for addressing this problem.

Like most American colleges and universities, Trinity had an image of itself as a privileged place, meaning that students were privileged to gain admission, and only a select few who could rise to our level of expectation should be allowed to pass through the gates. We didn't think much about aligning ourselves to new markets, we just assumed the market would keep coming to us, and when that faucet turned off, we assumed it was the fault of Admissions.

This idea was not only killing us, at a very profound level it was a complete betrayal of our mission, not only as a women's institution but also as a Catholic college with a belief in social justice. We were founded to provide access to a great higher education for women who had no access at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. What had become of that courageous vision? We could hardly imagine a future that did not look like our past, and that lack of imagination --- or the fear of a future we might imagine that would be totally different --- was pulling Trinity ever more deeply into a downward economic spiral.

So, I told our admissions recruiters to go into the DC Public Schools. And, predictably, the murmurs of complaint soon became a roar. We went through a good deal of controversy in the 1990's about the public perception of "lowering standards" because we were admitting students who were radically different from those we had known before. We argued about diversity versus Catholicism and who owned the very soul of Trinity. Issues of race and social class flowed underneath the surface disputes, and we had to become fearless in not shrinking from issues that many other institutions still avoid.

Out of the fires of that period came the strong and confident urban university of today, not only proud of our status as one of the most important access institutions for DC residents, but also, a university that now has a demonstrable track record of success in educating students well who once had no opportunities to become academically successful in college. We still have our women's college, now more than three times larger than when I started. We have built a diversified urban university with four academic schools, with 800 women in our single-gender College of Arts and Sciences and more than 1200 women and men in our coeducational Schools of Education, Professional Studies, Nursing and Health Professions. Our student body is 67% African American, 20% Latina, and remarkably international in its ethnic roots.

Along the way we discovered something profoundly important about our historic mission as a women's college: populations of women who have been historically marginalized at the table of educational opportunity embrace this mission enthusiastically and find great liberation in an environment focused on their empowerment. Once we started recruiting in urban public schools we found students and counselors flocking to us. The very empowering methodologies that made previous generations of elite middle and upper class women successful are now making new generations of low income women of color successful beyond anything they had ever imagined.

We also discovered this fact about matchmaking in the new age of collegiate admissions: institutional features and characteristics are far less important to students and families than outcomes. To the extent that our characteristics and features can clearly support great outcomes, then they make sense. What turned out to be most important for our new populations was not the fact of Trinity's mission as a women's institution, but the ways in which our distinctive focus on women's growth and development could make women successful and empowered.

The bottom line on matchmaking is this: the only question that matters is whether the student can be successful in the college of his or her choice, and the answer to that question cannot be found in how many football games the varsity won last year, or whether the school made the Final Four, or whether a Nobel Prize winner is on the faculty. The answer also will never be found in all of the pages of U.S. News "Best Colleges" guide since that publication does not consider genuine educational outcomes. The only way to answer this question is to understand what the student truly needs to thrive, and whether the college or university itself has the programs, the faculty, the services and the campus environment that will ensure the student's success.

### **Purchasing: The College Cost Enigma**

No student should fail to pursue a college education because of cost. Nor should a student be discouraged from applying to a particular college because of uncertainty about money. Private colleges often are more affordable than public institutions because of the range of financial supports available. At Trinity, for example, more than half of our DC residents pay no tuition at all.

People often ask me: how do you do it? How can you afford to educate so many students with such high need? Our median family income of last year's entering freshmen was \$30,000. That's the median, meaning half the class was below that number.

How do we do it?

First, we really do work hard to keep our tuition under control, which also means good expense controls. Our salaries are modest comparatively; our "stuff" is not overdone. What margins we generate get returned to the students in our ability to offer grants, which are unfunded discounts, worth an average of 40% of the tuition price. Tuition next year will be \$19,700 --- we are striving to keep it under \$20,000, with the total cost of attendance under \$30,000. That's still a lot of money. But with Trinity grants averaging 40% or almost \$8,000 of tuition, a student who receives a Pell grant and perhaps state or local grants along with private scholarships might pay only \$2000 or less on tuition, which might be covered by a federal loan.

Figuring out the student financial aid map is certainly confusing for many students and families. We have found that there's no substitute for personal conversations with every single student. A few years ago, we created an Enrollment Services Center that is the "one stop shop" for financial aid, registration, billing, transcripts, grades and all related concerns. Students can stop by the Enrollment Services Center to discuss their bills, sign up for payment plans, figure out their timetables toward degrees, and simply get help with solving a problem when they don't know

where to begin. The concept of the centralized and easily accessible “one-stop shop” has promoted retention and student satisfaction, reduced stress for many students, and made us more effective in helping students make progress toward completion.

### **Succeeding: What Does Success Look Like?**

There’s so much talk of “college success” today but true measures of such success are elusive. Graduation rates are a surrogate measure that, when deconstructed, reveal a deeply flawed database and no real measures of learning. The current standard calculation for graduation rates by the federal government takes one entering cohort of full-time first-time freshmen and tracks them for six years at the same institution. If they stay in the same place and complete during that time, it’s called the graduation rate and is somehow a measure of success. But in fact, it’s more a measure of time-in-place that tells us little about student learning.

Moreover, because more than half of college students transfer at least once, they drop out of the calculation of the graduation rate --- yes, transfers are considered dropouts for this purpose, even if they go on to complete degrees successfully at other institutions. There’s no real tracking of transfer students, students who need to stop out for family or other personal reasons, or adult students who stopped out years ago and then return to complete their degrees. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education calculates that more than 72% of today’s college students are “non-traditional” by age, family circumstance, work, independence or other characteristics that belie the idea that only Gidget goes to college. Too many public discussions about higher education, however, still focus on Gidget, the quintessential 60’s stereotype of a “coed.”

Knowing the flaws in graduation rates as true measures of success, we need to look for other ways to determine whether a college is truly effective in helping a student become successful. At Trinity, we have been focusing on student success in the first year of college, whether she is able to acquire the knowledge, skills and values that will support her advanced study, whether she is able to engage with the process of becoming a self-actualized learner, a person who accepts and models our community values of honor and integrity.

Three years ago, in an effort to create a more intentional framework for students who came to college lacking the preparatory skills that would support their success, Trinity’s faculty revamped our entire first year program and general education curriculum to create the building blocks for success. We don’t have time today to discuss all of the details, but the broad outlines are these: every student is assessed at entrance to be sure she gets exactly the right academic program from the start, and she is placed in a learning community with no more than 18 other freshmen. The learning community is led by a senior member of the faculty who is also the advisor for the group, and often, the faculty member is in the student’s field of interest. The curriculum emphasizes the building blocks of academic success: critical reading skills, math and quantitative capacity, writing proficiency. We provide extensive support for faculty who incorporate critical reading and writing objectives into their content courses, and for students, we have specialists on the staff who can provide additional tutoring and instructional support for math and reading.

The results are clear already: three years into this program, our retention of students from first to second year has increased dramatically, and our faculty report improved academic performance in the upperclass years.

Other colleges and universities have other ways of measuring and promoting student success, of course. What's important for you, the college access counselors to know, is that collegiate success should not be a game of chance or a Darwinian reality show in which people are expected to drop out or be voted off each week. While we may not be able to ensure every student's graduation on a 4-6 year timetable for a wide range of reasons, what we have to be able to ensure is that the student will make academic and intellectual progress every day of her collegiate experience, gaining the knowledge and skills that will serve her well in her professional and personal pursuits, realizing the intellectual and even spiritual fulfillment that comes with progressive academic attainment.

Every year I read the application essays of the first year students who enroll at Trinity. These essays give me insight into their experiences, conditions, attitudes, hopes and dreams. The words of my students inspire me like nothing else, and I share quotations from these essays during orientation so that all students can know that their stories are a true call to action.

Last year, one student wrote a reflection on the inspiration of Rosa Parks in her life, and her motivation to succeed in college as a result. Listen to these words:

*Mrs. Parks serves as my role model ..Unfortunately, all too often, many African American youth are stereotyped and expected to have unwanted pregnancies, drop out of school, and become incarcerated. I am determined to help break the mold. .... When I go to college and successfully complete my major, I will be the first in my family to hold a college degree. I believe one can rise from the bitterness of obscurity to accomplish the dream of a lifetime... Just as Mrs. Rosa Parks has inspired and motivated me and left her footprints in the sand of history, I, too, not only want to make an impression, but an impact."*

Our job every day is to help that young woman and countless other students like her to "rise from the bitterness of obscurity to accomplish the dream of a lifetime," to succeed in ways that will make it possible for them to make not only "an impression, but an impact." There can be no greater work in this life. We are all privileged to be part of the grace and goodness that comes with transforming lives for the better.

Thanks for listening.