

## **Remarks Accepting the TIAA Institute Hesburgh Award**

**President Patricia McGuire  
Trinity Washington University**

*March 14, 2016  
At the ACE Meeting in San Francisco*

How deeply grateful I am to the TIAA Institute for this remarkable award. Thank you, Skip Spriggs, and please convey my gratitude to all at TIAA. Thank you, Molly Broad! Throughout my tenure as Trinity's president, you and the many fine leaders of ACE have been exceptional colleagues and advocates for me and for Trinity, as well as all in higher education. Thank you!

I'm so honored to accept this magnificent award in the name of one of my great heroes, Father Ted Hesburgh, not so much for myself but for our entire community at Trinity in Washington. I'm very pleased that several Trinity Trustees are here with me today, our remarkable Board Chair Sr. Patricia O'Brien, a Sister of Notre Dame whose day job as senior vice president at NEASC keeps all of New England on their toes! Thanks to Dr. Lois Wims, the provost at Worcester State University, who is also a Trinity Trustee.

I'm especially grateful to and pleased to share this award with Trinity's Provost Dr. Carlota Ocampo, who does the very hard work of leading our faculty through continuous curricular reform to ensure a great education for our students. Our faculty and staff work so hard to ensure the success of our students; they richly deserve this honor, as do so many alumnae and friends who support Trinity very generously. And, most of all, our students at Trinity --- they who are the reason we get up in the morning, the motivating force for the hard work that went into transforming Trinity --- the students whose stories of courage and triumph over often-shocking life conditions make the rest of our accomplishments seem pale by comparison.

Trinity's story is, indeed, quite remarkable, and we are grateful that through this award the lessons we have learned might be an example for other universities. A researcher studying Trinity in the mid-1990's --- a time that I will simply say was our "hot mess" phase of transformation --- remarked to me that, "Trinity is the canary in the mineshaft" of higher education. I didn't take that as a compliment; we did not view ourselves as an expendable experiment. But at that time we were dealing with the ramifications of our decision to focus more purposefully on the educational needs of low income women in the District of Columbia.

Race and social class are powerful disrupters in American life, still today, and 20 years ago many of our constituents were just shocked to think that large numbers of impoverished black women from east of the river could earn the same degree --- wear the same pedigree, if you will --- as prior generations of Trinity Women from Brookline and the Main Line. This is the fundamental problem that we often don't name in all of the discussion about widening collegiate access: changing race and social class balances is deeply threatening to the old order elitism that is a thread of steel in institutional tradition. Cutting that thread to welcome a very different group of students, those who have lived on the margins, mostly students of color, risks outrage, resistance

and loss of support. Nobody says it that way, of course, what we hear is: “Oh, we’d love to enroll more low income students of color, *but can they really do the work here?*”

We might remember Toni Morrison’s Nobel Prize speech in which she used this allegory of the Tower of Babel: *“The conventional wisdom of the Tower of Babel story is that the collapse was a misfortune. That is was the distraction, or the weight of many languages that precipitated the tower’s failed architecture. That one monolithic language would have expedited the building and heaven would have been reached. Whose heaven? And what kind? Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives...”* (Toni Morrison [Nobel Prize Lecture](#))

Despite oft-stated claims about wanting to provide more access, too often higher education seems more like that Tower of Babel falling down because of our failure to understand the other narratives. A true commitment to access and success for new populations of students is not to let a chosen few in with the expectation that they alone will bear the burden to conform to our language and customs, but rather, that the institution, itself, will learn their language and customs as well, and incorporate those into a new canon of learning and institutional life. That’s the essence of transformation. This is the reason why certain currently fashionable theories about access, such as [“undermatching,”](#) can be quite pernicious, since these theories urge admission for a fortunate few “high-achieving-low-income” students (a highly sanitized phrase) while expecting those students to adapt completely to the prevailing institutional norms, risking the loss of their own unique narratives. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of other students, predominantly African American and Latino who are the future leaders of the new American majority, remain on the margins. In its most extreme form, institutional obtuseness about adapting to different student narratives leads to bizarre ideas involving [“drowning bunnies.”](#)

Now, the quite remarkable news is that the canary in the mineshaft lives! Trinity thrives today. But make no mistake about it, to make a college truly accessible to students who have lived on the margins, the institutional change cannot be marginal. It’s not a fig leaf, it’s a heart transplant, and it’s very hard. But it’s also essential, not only for the students, themselves, but also for the sake of the nation that our new majority students must be prepared to lead. If higher education can’t do social change well, who will?

Father Hesburgh wrote in 1976 that the best gift a president can give to students is the gift of good example. He wrote, “There are great moral issues facing young and old alike today... the young [should] perceive clearly where we elders stand on issues like human rights, world poverty and hunger, good government, preserving the fragile ecosphere...”<sup>1</sup>

He could have said the same things today. We are in a period of increasing political and moral crisis deeply rooted in the fear of great social change. The rise of the demagogue is a symptom of profound anxiety about the coming tsunami of demographic change. My students at Trinity are riding the crest of that wave.

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<sup>1</sup> Hesburgh quotes in this speech from the collection Theodore Hesburgh, *Higher Values in Higher Education*, 1979, Andrews and McMeel publishers.

Of all places, our nation's colleges and universities should be the best possible examples of how to manage this kind of social change effectively. We are the stewards of one of the great pillars of a free society. Higher education is, or should be, the intellectual backbone of our nation, that "certain trumpet" of reason and fairness, the liberal conscience with a passion for justice, tolerance and peaceful solutions to complex problems. We measure the effectiveness of our stewardship in how well our students carry these commitments forward through all of the work of their lives.

Higher education must be the great counterweight to government, particularly when the tendencies of the power class incline toward the repression of speech, intimidation of free press, neglect of the fundamental needs of the people especially those who live on the margins of this wealthy nation, the building of walls and rejection of refugees, the dismissal of basic civil and human rights as mere "political correctness" rather than essential moral principles for a just society. When politicians say they [love the uneducated](#), that really means they fear the power of education as a democratizing force which is also a check on abusive political power. Throughout human history, education has been the best, and perhaps only, antidote to tyrants.

Hesburgh was unafraid to speak truth to power; from locking arms with Dr. Martin Luther King, to confronting U.S. Presidents on civil rights, war and poverty, to making sure the Vatican knew that Catholic higher education must be a place of academic freedom. If he were here today, he would compel us to take the risk of joining him as advocates and activists for reason and common decency in the face of increasingly irrational provocation. He believed that, "as a means of moral and intellectual survival," the essential task of the university is to form our students "with that sense of moral responsibility and judgment required to manage change and to use knowledge for mankind's betterment and progress, instead of for its destruction."<sup>2</sup>

Today's growing collegiate population of historically marginalized Black and Hispanic students, the future leaders of the new American majority, must learn this with as much urgency, if not more, as prior generations. If the current political mood is any prophecy, the battles they will wage for civilization's soul loom large.

Father Hesburgh's been gone for a year, but his influence lives well among us. We pay him tribute in our advocacy and example for our students now and the generations yet to come, for the imperative of education for all as essential for a good society that lives in freedom and hope, protecting civil and human rights, proclaiming justice and peace.

Thank you for honoring our work at Trinity in Father Hesburgh's name.

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<sup>2</sup> Hesburgh, *ibid*.