

**The Importance of Higher Education:  
Addressing Increasing Diversity and Inequality**

**Remarks at the Marie Fielder Award Ceremony  
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Marie Fielding for Social Transformation Medalist for**

## Speech

Dr. Patricia Gurin

### I. INTRODUCTION

I am so honored to receive the Marie Fielder Medal for Social Transformation. Marie Fielder's life and work represents everything I believe in – commitment to social justice and inclusion of everyone in democratic practices. It means a great deal to feel part of the Marie Fielder Center for Democracy, Leadership, and Education, a place that continues Marie Fielder's work on justice.

I am also delighted to share these two days with my former colleague and close friend from the University of Michigan and long-time Fielding faculty member, Sherry Hatcher. Sherry is one of three close Michigan colleagues who have served on the faculty of Fielding – along with Jody Veroff and Libby Douvan.

So in many ways, this award is truly the most special one in my life.

### II. GOALS

I want to speak briefly about two things:

1) the crucial importance of higher education as we address in this country the interrelated social phenomena of

Diversity, and

Inequality

And 2) sharing just a bit about dialogue – especially intergroup dialogue – as an educational practice that fosters social justice through understanding of these social phenomena and development of skills for intergroup understanding, collaboration, and action.

I know that many of you know and practice intergroup dialogue as there was a session this past week on it.

### **III. DIVERSITY AND INEQUALITY**

#### **A. DIVERSITY**

**Everyone in this room knows the facts of our country's increasing racial/ethnic/religious diversity**

- **What William Frey calls the “diversity explosion”**
- **The rapid growth of so-called “minorities”**
- **The rapid aging of the white population**

**All leading not only to a country where whites are no longer the majority – but importantly**

**To a country where NO racial/ethnic group is in the majority.**

**The BIG QUESTION, I think, about increasing diversity is stated well by Earl Lewis, former president of the Mellon Foundation, and Nancy Cantor, chancellor of Rutgers University, Newark:]**

**It is a question of:**

**“Whether we as a people can rise to the imperative of our fast-changing demography...to see the diversity of our nation (and world) as an opportunity to be embraced rather than a threat to be defended against.”**

#### **B. INEQUALITY**

**How we deal with diversity in the years ahead is all the more important – and difficult – because its rise is interrelated with an unceasing rise in inequality, leaving many behind– especially the less well educated, many from racial/ethnic “so-called minorities,” those located in rural America and in states where technological developments and global economic forces have left many unemployed and underemployed -- leaving many with little hope for their children and little voice and efficacy for democratic participation.**

**IT ISN'T JUST A MATTER OF DIVERSITY**

**OR A MATTER OF INEQUALITY**

**BUT**

**THAT DIVERSITY AND INEQUALITY ARE INTERTWINED – INCREASING TOGETHER AND HAVING A MAJOR IMPACT ON THE SUSTAINABILITY AND VITALITY OF OUR DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND PRACTICES.**

#### **IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

**I commend to you a book, *Our Compelling Interests: The Value of Diversity for Democracy and a Prosperous Society*, edited by Lewis and Cantor. It is full of essays about what must be done to**

**De-couple diversity and inequality.**

**All of the authors stress both the failure of education and yet the importance of education in doing this. Two of the authors – Anthony Carnevale and Nicole Smith (both economists at Georgetown University) state the failure of educational institutions:**

**Education is the weak link in translating America’s demographic diversity into individual earnings and economic competitiveness.... Higher education has not been able to keep up with the pace of unskilling in the movement from an industrial to a postindustrial economy.**

**Still, all of the authors press the case for the importance of education, and especially higher education creating or reinforcing or deepening two sets of skills that are necessary for both economic growth and the vitality of democracy:**

**Technical – analytic skills**

**Cultural competence skills – leveraging diversity in groups and teams, thus building what philosopher Danielle Allen writing in this book, calls “a connected society.”**

**The Fielding Graduate University is making a major impact in deepening both of these sets of skills in its graduates who go on to become scholars and leaders in all kinds of institutions.**

#### **V. Intergroup Dialogue**

**Let me briefly turn to an educational practice in which I have been involved since the early 1990s –**

## **Educating students at the University of Michigan in**

**Intergroup dialogue with three sets of goals:**

**First – to increase intergroup understanding, especially group-based inequalities**

**Second – to foster intergroup empathy and motivation to bridge differences**

**Third – to practice coalition building and collaboration across difference to bring about greater justice and equality.**

### **A. What is it?**

**A semester-long, credit-bearing course in which students from two identity groups – Anglos and Latin(x); Arabs/Muslims and Jews; African Americans and whites; men and women; economically privileged and less privileged, etc. – enroll in equal numbers in facilitated dialogue.**

**Sustained and facilitated interactions are the crucial qualities of intergroup dialogue.**

**Like other courses, there are readings and written assignments but the core of learning takes place in active in-class learning activities in which students learn about inequalities not only through sociological material but also through listening to and processing the lived experiences of their peers.**

**It is in the sharing of life experiences – many of them embedded in the power and privileges of the two identity groups -- that participants learn how privilege works, connect empathically, and then practice coalition building by defining and implementing a collaborative research or action project.**

**They learn to:**

- Think critically about inequality**
- Listen to each other – empathically listen**
- Ask questions of each other, and follow up on the ideas of others, not just engage in serial monologue**

- Notice and address identity-based dynamics that inevitably appear in dialogue and collaboration across differences
- Reflect collectively on what they have learned in each class session
- And practice, practice, practice skills for collaboration and action – in intergroup dialogue, **IT ISN'T JUST TALK, IT IS ACTION TO FOSTER SOCIAL JUSTICE**

As President Rogers writes in “Philosophers of Possibility,” dialogue is not a simple process. You have to be engaged for the long term, not simply show up. It takes practice and skills.

She writes that “few people have skills for such work,” and in her view, “colleges and universities are thin on the ground in helping people make the link between the knowledge they accrue and their broader social obligations.”

Intergroup dialogue courses – now existing at many universities – are one way to ensure that we in higher education are not thin on the ground – that we challenge students to make that link and provide learning activities that help them gain the skills to do so.

## VI. Impact

In 2003, when the Supreme Court heard Michigan’s affirmative action cases in which I played a part, I knew that I could not do much about access because I am not in admissions – but I could do something about the limited evidentiary base then available about the educational value of diversity by collaborating with colleagues from eight other universities to:

frame,  
design, and  
obtain resources

to conduct a true experimental study of the effect of intergroup dialogue as an intentional diversity practice.

Conducting a true experiment was possible because students at these 9 universities had to apply to enroll in intergroup dialogue courses. Thus, we could randomly assign

applicants either to a race dialogue course or a control group, and to a gender dialogue course or a control group.

Over three years 26 pairs of race dialogue courses and control groups, and 26 pairs of gender dialogue courses were carried out across these nine universities. It was a massive collaborative undertaking.

The results of that study are described in a book, *Dialogue Across Difference*, written with Ratnesh Nagda and Ximena Zuniga, and numerous colleagues from these universities and published in 2013.

We found remarkably consistent effects across many measures of intergroup understanding, empathy, motivation to bridge differences, and collaboration as well as measures of cognitive and affective processes involved in those outcomes.

It is not just the research, however. It is my colleagues at Michigan's Program on Intergroup Relations that I helped found 30 years ago who have run for twelve years an annual summer intergroup dialogue institute for faculty and professional staff interested in creating intergroup dialogue courses or programs at their universities. Over 150 institutions have participated over the twelve years. This past June 80 participants came from 30 institutions.

**OF COURSE, INTERGROUP DIALOGUE IS ONLY ONE WAY THAT HIGHER EDUCATION CAN HELP STUDENTS UNDERSTAND INEQUALITY AND EMBRACE THE POTENTIAL OF DIVERSITY FOR DEMOCRACY. IT IS ONE, HOWEVER, THAT WE KNOW HAS THE KIND OF IMPACT THAT IS NEEDED TO DECOUPLE DIVERSITY AND INEQUALITY.**

**VII. In conclusion, let me come back to the Fielding Graduate University and the Marie Fielder Center for Democracy, Leadership, and Education -- to your many years of educating leaders who function in many different institutions. It is I who honor you today for your courage, perseverance, excellence and clear-mindedness about social justice.**