



Welcome Address by HLC President

The following is an excerpt of Barbara Gellman-Danley's welcome address at the HLC 2018 Annual Conference:

We are at an inflection point in higher education and society in general. This year, I felt it was an ethical obligation to address those issues that are permeating our campuses and our lives. Combined, our audience covers many decades of college attendance, and during each there are critical social issues that impact what we learn and how we live.

Let me take you back a moment to my own first night of college. It was September of 1970, at Syracuse University. As I did years later with my own children, my mother and father drove off with an obvious sense of sadness and pride. They were leaving the youngest child to be on her own, knowing their lives would be forever changed. I, on the other hand, raced up to my room and felt free. That same night there was an event at the Hendricks Chapel, used for both lectures and rotating religious holiday celebrations.

The room held thousands. The presenters were from Kent State University, students who witnessed four of their own shot by the National Guard during a protest just four months earlier. The main speakers accompanying them were Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, no doubt the two most notable radicals of the 60s and members of the infamous Chicago Seven. They spoke passionately against the Vietnam War and other notable societal atrocities. Then they stepped back to let the Kent State students speak. All the time, I was in awe, with my legs dangling excitedly off the first row of the balcony. Thousands were now absolutely silent listening to the Kent State representatives, while two were palpably inattentive—Hoffman and Rubin.

They were casually getting a drink or “something else” and basically ignoring the speakers. Suddenly and with no sense of boundaries, I yelled loudly, “Hey, Jerry and Abbie, they listened to you. Why don't you stop drinking and getting high and pay attention to them?” They turned around and listened to my words, then stepped back onto the stage. After a long round of applause for my audacious comments, I settled back in my seat and knew I was home. I was going to love my college years.

A lone student of just 18 years claiming her freedom of speech.

In those days, there were a few movements—women's rights, anti-racism, and anti-war protests, among others. But from the perspective of someone who grew up in the 60s, it felt as if there was a lot of silence in the years that followed.

Until now.

As Martin Luther King, Jr., said so eloquently in his “I Have a Dream Speech,” *“It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment.”* I say, it would be reckless at this moment in time

to stand back and be silent. As I've said previously, HLC is reviewing its Criteria and, with that, we take our stated, written values into account. To remind you, HLC's Guiding Value #3 states:

A contemporary education must recognize contemporary circumstances: the diversity of U.S. society, the diversity of the world in which students live, and the centrality of technology and the global dynamic to life in the 21st century. ... [S]tudents need the civic learning and broader intellectual capabilities that underlie student success in the workforce.
(2018 Resource Guide, page 3)

Our Criteria for Accreditation also address this issue. Proposed Core Component 1.B states:

The institution advances civic engagement in a diverse and multicultural society.

- The institution fosters civic learning and civic discourse.
- The institution's processes and activities ensure inclusive and equitable treatment of diverse populations.
- The institution fosters a climate of respect among all students, faculty, staff and administration from a range of diverse backgrounds, ideas and perspectives.

Other organizations are also homing in on this moment in time:

- AAC&U: Value Rubric
- Association of Governing Boards (AGB)
- A publication, Freedom of Speech on Campus, 2017

As I think back to my own time in college, I also remember several of the signs in recent marches across the world. One read "I can't believe we are having to deal with this again." Yet, here we are.

At HLC, we have an increasing amount of discussions about our role in civic engagement as it relates to quality assurance. Some situations are so disruptive that court cases and the press call them to our attention. Others are less obvious. In thinking about the current state of our country, I did some homework on the trending social movements, those with recognizable hashtags.

Let's try a little stretching exercise. I will read the hashtag and briefly reference each movement or cause. If in any way it resonates with you, please stand and quietly remain standing. This is strictly voluntary and only represents a few of the current movements.

Let the quiet be a moment of silence for all the causes and people impacted by them. A moment of respect.

#BlackLivesMatter

#BringBackOurGirls

#daca and #dreamers

#Environment

#It'sOnUs

#MeToo

#marchforourlives and #neveragain

#nobannowall

#nodapl

#NotOneMore

#SanctuaryCampus
#timesup
#WeRemember
#WomensMarch

Take a look around this room and those with overflow audiences. HLC trustees please turn around and note the passionate concerns of our members.

What does this mean for accreditation?

Clearly you care.

What would you tell students coming into your colleges and universities?

What responsibility do you hold for their freedom of speech and also their safety? When are the lines crossed beyond civility? When are speakers exercising their first amendment rights and yet intimidating others who may be present? This is indeed a very challenging time for higher education. The inflection point is now. The voice of all ages, the opportunity for extremely important teachable moments.

Imagine if you wrote a letter to each incoming student and what you might say. Let me share one example, written by an aging activist inspired by her very first night as an undergraduate.

Dear Student,

Congratulations on your decision to enrich your life through higher education. Whether you are a full-time attendee, a part-time student, living on campus, commuting or coming to us online, you matter.

We are indeed proud to have you as a member of our college (or university) community. The welcoming committee and many admissions and counseling staff will give you all the specifics about the curriculum, enrollment, support services, sports and social activities. Avail yourself of this and in particular, the faculty and advisors for your classes. You stand on the shoulders of all educators who are dedicated to working with you toward completing your goals.

You live in turbulent, passionate and exciting times. College has changed dramatically in recent years. When you sit next to a student of a different age, know you can learn from that person. If you see someone of a background different from yours, know that he/she is seeing the same in you. Greet them, listen to them, welcome them. Your education will be so much stronger if you make the space for differing opinions.

Be confident enough not to know it all. Some of the greatest research proves many original hypotheses are flawed. Find your passion. You may have a class that sparks an interest to support your original goals or completely unravels them and sends you in a different direction.

We call that the teachable moment. Respect your fellow classmates and everyone affiliated with your college or university. The adult learners bring a deep portfolio of experience; if you are in a younger age group, embrace that. The reverse is true. Wisdom is not age specific; it comes with a variety of experiences that inform our lives and our identities.

Invite the lone transfer students to some event. Know they are coming into your college without the same experiences as you, if you began as a freshman. Imagine yourself sitting on the quad as thousands of people go to a football game, while you remain alone. Embrace inclusion. Open your arms to those from different racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Do not build walls around you; break them down. If the only people you associate with or respect look like the person you see in the mirror each morning, you are only cheating yourself.

Step out and set an example. Waiting and watching works at times, but if it is your regular practice, you will live a life of limitations versus opportunities. Attend a religious ceremony different from your own. Remove your metaphorical masks and listen closely to the people around you. Dip your toe into cold water; dive into the deep ends of life.

Become color brave. Be proud of your cultural heritage; share it. In the scheme of things, we can stand much better together than they we do alone, although always retain your own identity and heritage. Look for the rainbow that can be the arc of an open-minded person.

Take the hand of someone of a different gender or gender preference. Everybody needs a friend and a really good hug now and then.

Respect both women and men. "Yes" means yes, and "no" means no. You will go through a lifetime trying to understand the opposite sex, but one understanding must be clear: always respect them.

Regardless of your age and background, read and study about the issues that define cultural differences. Try to let go of your own preconceived notions. It will free you in ways you might never imagine.

Allow others to speak openly. It is more than a First Amendment right; it is our duty as citizens of the world. Treat them with civility, and do not cross the lines of inciting violence or instilling fear.

The college experience is amazing. Your faculty, staff, administrators and volunteers stand ready to help you cross the finishing line, whatever that may be for you. We want you to be a graduate of not just the institution, but a graduate of a good life. At the end of each day, look in the mirror and ask yourself if you have availed yourself of the best education possible, one that begins by welcoming new ideas. Only you will hold that answer.

*Dear student, may you walk the halls of not only buildings, but of your mind.
Whether you are on a campus or at a distance, reach within, for your heart will guide you.
A lecture hall full of supporters stands ready to walk with you on this journey. Ultimately, the journey and the choices made are yours. Own it.*

Congratulations, and good luck.

Barbara Gellman-Danley, President, Higher Learning Commission

#higheredcares