

The Louder the Noise, the Deeper the Change

*President Patricia McGuire
Trinity Washington University*

Remarks for AISGW
October 19, 2017

We gather this evening to “think differently together” as the theme of your program states. While I am from a different sector of education, so many of our issues are similar. My specific topic is to address issues of change leadership in education, particularly for the private sector, and I’ve entitled my talk “The Louder the Noise, the Deeper the Change.” What does this mean? Isn’t the school leader’s job to keep the peace? Not necessarily. Sometimes the leader has to provoke constructive conflict in order to achieve the kind of deep and lasting change necessary to revitalize institutions. The best kind of change generates discussion and often debate or controversy. If you don’t hear any noise, you’re simply not doing your job.

Let me start with a few observations that may seem obvious but help to frame our thinking about the big issues we face. Change is one of the most hated, feared words in the institutional vocabulary. Too many constituents --- alumnae and alumni, boards, parents, benefactors, neighbors --- too many think of the school leader’s job as a museum curator. Alums want things to remain exactly as they were on the day they graduated, a snapshot of their own version of perfection. Boards want a healthy school but with no controversy. Parents want their children to have the time-honored education and traditions that built the school’s reputation for quality, and in absolute safety every day. Neighbors want you to do it all in the exact campus envelope and buildings that have been there since the dawn of creation, with no expansion or construction noise or removal of dilapidated buildings that they suddenly revere as historic rather than just decrepit.

But we school leaders are not museum curators, carefully tending to the shrines of past greatness --- though ensuring the ongoing vitality of what makes us best is of course a part of our responsibility. Our roles are more like directors of motion pictures, no frame quite the same each day, each minute, and often with a cinema verite quality, filming without any script whatsoever. We are masters of improv, ready to take even the weirdest incidents of infinitely variable human behavior and turn them into teachable moments. At the same time, we are temporary stewards of great institutions that must thrive beyond our finite terms of office, and that role requires vision and planning and astute talent management as well as fiscal wizardry and the ability to woo donors while understanding what the plant director is saying about the urgent need to re-tube the old boilers. Everyone expects a happy ending to our movies and we do have a responsibility to deliver just that after all of the drama and plot twists. Most of all, we must have a deep and abiding commitment to the power of learning to change human lives and souls.

So much for the philosophy of leadership. Today we confront massive forces of change that stretch and stress our utmost talents and capacity to manage the results. The major forces of

change are external, but their impact on our institutions is life-changing, perhaps life-threatening for some. The large categories of change are well known: Demographics, Politics, Economics, Technology, Communications. These forces are creating large institutional disruptions for schools, significant social change in communities, and even destabilization of political and economic conditions that pose longer term threats to the educational enterprise, making leadership even more vulnerable to crisis.

Tonight, I want to talk about these change forces through the lens of demographics since that change wave keeps the focus directly on our students, and it is one of the most powerful disrupters we face in education. The noise around the changing dynamics of race, ethnicity, social class, language, religion, sexual orientation, citizenship, abilities and other characteristics of our students is often a loud cacophony.

We know that the racial and ethnic composition of our national population is changing rapidly, that by mid-century the majority will be non-white, a change already rising in schools everywhere. We know that this change is provoking terrible forces of resistance and eruptions of hatred and even violence in the dark corners of this country where ignorance stokes the fear that feeds white supremacy, hatred of immigrants, Muslims, people who are the unwelcome “other.” We also know that the rising majority of black and Hispanic children often live in families and communities that have been historically impoverished and marginalized --- economically, educationally, professionally. Many of the children will be the first in their families to enter college, perhaps some the first to finish high school.

While public K-12 education has been ground zero for this changing student body and national population, many private schools are also responding affirmatively to the call to welcome more students of color, more children from the margins. Loosely grouped under the headlines of “diversity” or “access” or “inclusion,” we respond enthusiastically to this new demographic reality with a large sense of the moral righteousness of our openness, but with some well-placed trepidation about the impact a broad disposition toward welcoming new populations will have on the traditions, culture, community dynamics, faculty and staff capacity, parent behaviors, economic challenges of our schools.

Let me share here a bit of the Trinity story. We have been experiencing a great deal of demographic change and institutional transformation across the last three decades, and while our story may be more radical than yours will ever be, some of our experience may be instructive.

Founded by Sisters of Notre Dame in 1897 because the then-new Catholic University would not admit women, Trinity’s first century was largely characterized by being very small, very elite, serving mostly white Catholic women from the parishes of major cities on the east coast and Midwest. But coeducation at the men’s colleges and the changes in religious life after Vatican II had a distinctly negative impact on Trinity’s enrollment and finances as women flocked to the newly coed universities in the 1960’s and 1970’s and nuns left the convent, causing an erosion in the financial base known as “contributed services” that kept many Catholic institutions afloat. By the time I became Trinity’s president in 1989, we had just about 300 full-time traditional students; part-time programs for adult women and coed graduate programs for teachers were keeping us afloat. But sister alumnae and the faculty expected me to “restore” the old college

despite the social forces that made that impossible. We had intense discussions of mission and viability. In one tense strategic planning discussion at the board, when alumnae trustees were still demanding a restoration of the old school, a Sister of Notre Dame finally stood up and declared, “We founded Trinity because women could not get access to a great higher education, and there are thousands of such women at our doorstep. Stop talking about restoring the old school, open the doors to the new populations who need us!” And so we did.

But race and social class are powerful disrupters in American life, still today, and 25 years ago many of our constituents were just shocked to think that large numbers of impoverished black women from DC and nearby counties could earn the same degree --- wear the same pedigree, if you will --- as prior generations of Trinity Women from Brookline and the Main Line. We went through some very tumultuous times in the 1990’s, even having an episode of picketing out on the front driveway with alumnae carrying signs that read “Fire McGuire.” The noise was very loud at times.

But with the backing of a very strong board and an unyielding sense of mission from the sisters, we persisted through the controversial times. Today, Trinity is thriving. Our student body is 95% African American and Latina; we serve a large population of very low income students, about half from DC, and we have more recently welcomed Dreamers in large numbers, about 100 this year. And by the way, we just completed a very successful \$32 million capital campaign with our new academic center named for an alumna in the Class of 1953 who gave the lead gift of \$10 million. So, despite the opposition and confusion two decades ago, we persisted and prevailed, and the alumnae came back to the family with greater generosity and more pride than ever.

I often thank God that email and Twitter and Snapchat did not exist back then! Today, large demographic changes are occurring in an environment infected with some very dangerous and difficult political dispositions in which a single incident can become a raging conflagration thanks to the wonders of technology and new communication patterns through social media. Recently, a friend who is the head of a private school in another city discussed this story: a white student created a racially offensive snapchat that went viral. The head of the school issued a very clear statement condemning the action and reaffirming the school’s values. But one of the parents took offense at the school president’s message, saying it was all talk and no action, and demanded the president’s ouster; the angry parent then sent the critical letter out on social media. In just a day, what was a truly despicable act by one student, and, frankly, a clear failure of parenting in the home, became a wide institutional crisis casting doubts on the credibility and effectiveness of school leadership. That’s one story, but let’s be real, it can happen to any of us, especially in these times of high racial tension and ready availability of instantaneous communication to the world.

For any schools, colleges or universities to engage successfully in demographic change to promote greater diversity and access for under-served students, institutional leaders, boards, faculty and benefactors need to be clear-eyed about the opportunities, challenges and consequences, and prepared to address them effectively. Among other considerations, aside from the general angst about social change, these issues are paramount:

- **Mission:** if the only reason you're considering widening access to your school is because your enrollment is declining and you need new markets, you will not succeed. While it's certainly true that many schools, including my own, achieved diversification of the student body as part of an overall business improvement strategy, the change must be first and foremost rooted in a clear and abiding sense of mission both for your current students and the new populations we seek to welcome. You must understand the importance of diversity as an educational imperative for all students to learn how to make their way as citizen leaders in our very diverse society; you must understand that access does not guarantee a great learning experience for the new students you welcome unless you embrace who they are and what they need completely and make sure that all constituents of the school also welcome them. Mission, not money, is the most important of all considerations, and mission informs other decisions.
- **Characteristics v. Mission:** some people confuse superficial characteristics of a school with the actual mission. In the controversial days at Trinity, so many people --- alumnae, people in our public communities of interest --- would say to me, "You've really changed the mission of that school." But they were not right. In opening Trinity wider to new populations of marginalized women, we found new life in grounding this change in the historic mission as it came to us from the founding Sisters of Notre Dame, to provide a great higher education to women who could not have access to college. In 1897, those women were a primary audience of white Catholic women of some means. In the 1990s and on through today, such students are primarily women of color in the city, women who have scarce means but large desire to expand their own intellectual horizons in order to improve the economic and social conditions of their families. A Middle States team visiting in 2006 commended Trinity for making this historic mission modern for new populations. Another Middle States reviewer observed that it was significantly harder and more provocative for Trinity to stick with our primary mission to women in the modern age than if we had simply accepted men and become a middling coed liberal arts college. In a deep sense, our persistence in sustaining our historic mission to women changed everything, and the change gave us new life in exciting and challenging ways.
- **Money:** of course money is important, but diversification of your student body will probably not solve your money problem, and in fact, it may add to it. And yet, if you are serious from a mission perspective of the need to educate students for the diverse society of the future, you need to find the money to make that diversity happen. Many people have asked me: how does Trinity do it? Our full-time daytime student body is about 80% Pell Grant eligible, with a median family income of just about \$25,000. This year we are also enrolling about 100 Dreamers, undocumented young women who are not eligible for any federal financial aid so we have to figure out how to cover everything for them. We learned an interesting lesson about welcoming new populations with so much financial need: people are eager to help support worthy students, and we have acquired many new philanthropic friends who had no prior connection to Trinity, who would never have given us the great support we've received if we had not changed our focus to include the women of the city.

How can private schools do this? I realize that at the college level we do have the federal and state financial aid systems that you do not have in private K-12 schools. I know you are more dependent on charitable gifts and fund raising is endless. But the goal is important, and the philanthropic community will respond to your case if you make it well and persuasively. The real issue is about choices and priorities --- buildings and campus amenities or scholarships and student support? Is reshaping your student body as much of a priority as reshaping your physical campus? The priorities of your vision and strategic plan can and should inform the priorities of donors. Are new populations of students part of your strategic plan?

- ***Academics and Support Services:*** Changing demographics also drive changes in academic programs and support services. Too many schools, colleges and universities seem to miss this central consideration when embracing the idea of access to achieve greater diversity. This problem is central to the current debate in higher education about access for low income students to elite colleges. The problem is rooted in a deeply entrenched belief that low income students of color will profit mightily from being in the august presence of the great faculty and grand traditions of elite schools. This point of view puts absolutely no burdens on the schools while imposing all of the expectations on the students to conform to the elite campus. This academic arrogance is manifestly unfair to the new students and more traditional students, often leaving both the students and the institutions damaged.

Preparing for demographic change requires faculty, administrators, staff to undertake deliberative change processes. Early in our change experience at Trinity, faculty would grumble that the students were unprepared. One day I gave a talk to the faculty that is still notorious: This is the life you've chosen, I told them, and part of that choice is being open to the thought that perhaps it's not the students who are unprepared, but perhaps WE are the ones who are not prepared for them.

Yes, we had episodes of rage and pushback among faculty who insisted that the canon IS the canon and we should not adapt reading lists and pedagogies to changing student populations. The noise emanating from the faculty lounge was loud and contentious at many points along the way. But with generous retirement incentives, eventually an entirely new generation of faculty came on board who embraced our changing student body with joy and completely transformed curricula and pedagogy and opportunities for our new populations. We've seen the changes most remarkably in the sciences --- ten years ago I had scientists who claimed the students could not learn. Today we have booming science programs in gorgeous new laboratories and our students are winning prizes in research competitions and securing prestigious summer research internships at places like Harvard, Stanford and MIT. The students are the same across that decade; the faculty are different, and what they teach and how they teach has transformed opportunity for hundreds of our students.

- ***Politics and Communications:*** There's so much more I could talk about but the night draws late, and so I will end on this one final note about deep change and the noise that will surely come, but it's all worth it. We do live in perilous times, and there's so much

pressure to keep our heads down and just try to keep going, hoping against hope that this era will soon go away. We cannot indulge that feeling. We are leaders of educational institutions. The problems we face as a society today are manifestly problems of education.

We face challenges like never before to teach our students how to discern fact from fiction, to understand the political uses of communication for good and for evil, to be able to parse the accusations of “fake news” and public lies and private misconduct among people who should know better.

We face huge challenges in teaching our students how to construct peaceful, productive communities amid great diversity when the current threads of racial, ethnic and religious bigotry and hatred against certain groups of people is often overwhelming at times, and too often stoked by political leaders and social media trolls. It’s very hard to teach about good citizenship when public role models are so scandalously lacking in the qualities we would normally expect leaders to exhibit. But in that vacuum, our own leadership is even more important.

Just this morning former [President George W. Bush](#) said in a remarkable speech on Democracy and global issues in speech at the institute that bears his name: *“We need a renewed emphasis on civic learning in schools. And our young people need positive role models. Bullying and prejudice in our public life sets a national tone, provides permission for cruelty and bigotry, and compromises the moral education of children. The only way to pass along civic values is to first live up to them.”* (President George W. Bush, October 19, 2017)

We must educate our students to be leaders for the common good. Writing earlier this week in the Washington Post, former Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson decried the fact that the idea of the common good seems to have disappeared from public discourse. He wrote that the belief in human dignity must animate politics, and this belief means that we *“... seek a society in which every person can flourish. This is the definition of the common good — which is not truly common unless it includes the suffering and powerless. The common good ...is the result of prudent public and private choices that strengthen community — the seedbed of human flourishing — and ensure the weak are valued and protected.”* ([Michael Gerson](#), The Washington Post, October 16, 2017)

We must give our students the tools and the power to make those *“prudent public and private choices that strengthen community.”* But our students bring into our classrooms all of the biases and ignorance and vituperative slang they have absorbed whether at home or among peers or on the internet or who knows where. We cannot presume that being smart or talented or rich equates to being kind or fair or generous of spirit. It is our obligation to teach our students affirmatively and intentionally by our own examples of moral courage and professional devotion to advancing the human condition; we must insist that social justice is not some marginal fantasy but truly a central value for a good and peaceful society.

We, ourselves, may have many different political beliefs and social opinions, but as educators we must surely find common ground, and hold that ground, in the imperative to teach our students how to live truthfully, how to bridge differences and resolve conflicts peacefully, how to be

leaders for humane solutions that build healthy communities rather than being the ones who carry tiki torches across the grounds to ignite fires of fear and hatred and reaction and violence.

In some political circles today it's fashionable to mock education, especially a strong liberal arts education that is not tied to a specific job training outcome. There is a tendency to exalt education as a means to earn money, which is certainly one outcome, but there is an equally strong effort to debase education as a means to ensure the kind of minds and personas necessary to exercise the conviction of moral leadership in the public square. But an effective and successful Democracy depends heavily on this kind of well-educated population, one that knows the lessons of history in order to build a better future; a free people able to have healthy debates without trashing people who disagree; citizens who do not kowtow to demagogues but hold leaders accountable for honesty and mature, temperate behaviors in the discharge of their duties.

We need to educate the leaders of our future who can rise to the challenge that [Senator John McCain](#) issued last week when he said, as he received the Liberty Medal, *"We are living in the land of the free, the land where anything is possible, the land of the immigrant's dream, ... We live in a land made of ideals, not blood and soil. We are the custodians of those ideals at home, and their champion abroad. We have done great good in the world. ... We have a moral obligation to continue in our just cause..."* (John McCain, October 16, 2017)

Education is the best, perhaps only, means we should find rational, durable solutions to sustain that "just cause," to find solutions to the problems we face in a world wrestling with rising nationalism and ongoing terror and still deep poverty and human misery in too many places. Education is essential for the kind of discovery and innovation that ensure the ever-renewing progress of humankind.

Nelson Mandela was right: "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." ([Nelson Mandela](#), Speech at launch of Mindset Network, July 16, 2003)

Be that change! Make a lot of noise doing it every single day!

Contact:

President Patricia McGuire
Trinity Washington University
125 Michigan Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20017
202-884-9050 phone
President@trinitydc.edu
www.trinitydc.edu