



AN INCLUSIVE AMERICA

Convocation Remarks

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This evening I am going to talk about “An Inclusive America”. Over many decades this has been a sensitive subject. Today it is no less so. Over the years, inclusiveness in America has been an important issue. Today it may be more important than ever before.

Demographic studies tell us that in the year 2016, Caucasians will be a minority in America; that is, they will comprise less than 50% of the total population. People of color will make up the majority of Americans. People of color in 2050 will comprise more than 60% of the active work force, so that they will be the major contributors to the Social Security system which will support retirees, most of whom will be white.

In 2050, people of color must be ready in appropriate numbers to take the place of retired white workers in our skilled and professional labor force. Without a fully qualified work force, America will not be able to survive in economic competition with the rest of the world. The quality of life and standard of living of all Americans would fall.

Moreover, the gap between rich and poor in America must not widen and it must not be defined by race, so that the strong majority of the “poor” are Americans of color and the strong majority of the “rich” are white Americans. If such an inequality in the distribution of income exists in 2050, the American system of government as we know it today could implode. There could well be civil strife and our democracy and peaceful way of life could be threatened. A society in which the majority of the votes increasingly belong to people of color and the large majority of wealth is controlled by whites is not sustainable.

In America today, the proportion of college students of African American, Latino American, and Native American ancestry is substantially less than the proportion of the population as a whole. Unless the trend changes, the dire scenarios I just outlined are very real. We need to act today to preserve the American way of life we enjoy today for future Americans, including our children and grandchildren.

As we speak, the U.S. Supreme Court is deliberating on two cases involving the University of Michigan’s undergraduate and Law School admissions policies. The Supreme Court decision is expected in July 2003. This decision will have a major impact on the long-term situation in America I have just described.

RIT is a signatory to a brief that supports the University of Michigan’s purpose in achieving more racial diversity on its campus. However, RIT does not support the methodology used by the University of Michigan to achieve this goal. Further, RIT argues for institutional flexibility in achieving a goal of diversity on campus.

Our approach to student recruiting is to be need-blind and race-blind in our admissions decisions. That is, we consider neither the financial status nor the race of the students admitted. We include in the admissions pool only the students who meet our academic criteria. We recruit comprehensively all over the country and target high schools with a strong record of graduating high quality students of color. The students of color in the admissions pool are the ones who receive offers of admission. Last summer, 10% of our

enrolled freshmen class were of African American, Latino American, and Native American ancestry.

A diverse student body enhances the quality of education at RIT and is critical if RIT is to achieve its mission. RIT's Strategic Plan states that RIT "will lead higher education in preparing its students for successful careers over their lifetimes." We are a career-focused university.

If RIT is to prepare its students for successful careers, its students must be ready to work and live in a multicultural global society. They will be hiring and reporting to, buying from and selling to, and working and partnering with people and organizations of many cultures, ethnicities, and races from all over the world. To be successful, our students must be comfortable in their interactions and be knowledgeable about distinctions and differences among various cultures. The best way for RIT to impart this knowledge to our students is through daily interaction over their entire career at RIT with people from these cultures in our dining rooms, dormitories, libraries, classrooms, ball fields, student clubs, and governance and other extracurricular activities. For this to occur, RIT needs to be a diverse campus.

Moreover, a university campus that is diverse will attract employers because they are looking for graduates – both minority and majority – who have had a diverse educational experience for the reasons just given. Cultural diversity, aside from the career and employability advantages it offers, also makes the campus more vibrant and exciting in all aspects of living and learning.

This evening 3,800 students distributed over 250 degree programs will graduate. 77% of you graduates are undergraduate students and 4% of you are African American, 3% Hispanic American, .4% Native American, and 9% Asian American. 6% of you are deaf or hard-of-hearing. You represent all 50 states. 9% are from 83 other countries. An additional 8% are graduating from our two branch campuses in Central Europe. Some graduates come from poor families and some from rich families.

As you can see, RIT is already a diverse campus, with minority and international students comprising 25% of the total. However, RIT's career and quality of education mission, as well as the long-term interest of America itself, requires that we become even more diverse.

In a comprehensive survey completed just a few weeks ago by a survey research firm, 73% of the RIT students surveyed agreed that diversity is good for RIT and should be actively supported. 67% agreed that most of their fellow students genuinely support racial/ethnic diversity at RIT. 89% agreed that they are comfortable with students of different racial/ethnic groups than their own. 77% agreed that, in general, majority students and students of color get along well with each other at RIT.

If society as a whole would reflect the attitudes of the RIT student body, I think America would be in a better place today.

In America, everyone with talent, integrity, and a strong work ethic should have a fair and just opportunity to enter an open lane to a fulfilling, satisfying, challenging, and better life for themselves and their children.

Each of you graduating today has vast potential to be whatever you want to be. One of you might become the President of the United States. Like the alumni who have preceded you, many of you will become self-made millionaires.

Most importantly, you are – all together – one family for life. You are the RIT family. The friendships and networks you have built at RIT; what you have learned inside and outside of the classrooms; the RIT spirit, pride and tradition – all of these will keep you connected and sustain you all of your lives.

You have worked hard and learned much. The trustees, faculty, and staff of RIT are very proud of you. Thank you and good luck.