Good afternoon

I would like to thank Professor Ellis-Davis for her invitation to join you today and to acknowledge the important work being done by President Walter and Bergen Community College by hosting such an important conference impacting the access and success of all students. I would also like to recognize my husband Donald who joins me today.

I am really excited to be here and to have this opportunity to add my voice to others who believe, as I do in the importance and value of building and sustaining diverse teaching and learning environments in support of student success.

As one of two minority Presidents in the Community College System of New Hampshire and the first African-American President of River Valley Community College, a small rural institution with locations in Claremont and Keene, I view the need to expand opportunities for all students and creating an inclusive teaching and learning environment as very important.

I would suggest that when institutions are developing sustainable plans for institutional growth, that diversity be included as a central component and institutionally, there be an expectation that diversity is defined, understood and embraced to assure the best possible teaching and learning experience for all students, and so I think it is important for colleges to re-examine and if necessary re-commit to expanding its understanding and appreciation of diversity.
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As we expand our general understanding of diversity to include socio-economic class, race and ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation and disability, we should also include the concept of intellectual diversity, which brings significant value to the learning environment through the cultivation of innovation and allows for the infusion of ideas and problem solving strategies needed to address the emerging challenges we will face in higher education.

The Creativity Post, a non-profit web platform that shares quality content on creativity, innovation and imagination, noted that: “When it comes to generating good ideas, solving problems and being creative, make sure you find an intellectually diverse group of people to collaborate with.” Given the significant challenges facing higher education, the need for creativity in problem solving has never been greater.

Adding intellectual diversity to our expectations will allow us to build bridges from problems to solutions, from stagnation to action, from silos to inclusion and most importantly from uncertainty to sustainability in an ever changing space that demands of us to bring our best thinking forward as we build bridges to the future for our students and institutions.

I use the term bridge builder to denote the important work that I believe must be done if our organizations are to thrive.

In my book, Eclectic Insights, the bridge builder is one who has both short and long term vision, and is able to connect the dots, the systems, the people and the strategies necessary, to move organizations from where they are – to where they need to be – based on a variety of factors. As America becomes more diverse, so will our institutions, requiring us to create bridges to success for all of our students, be they – first generation college students or recent immigrants.
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As bridge builders we must break through chaos, eliminate barriers, hire to the mission, train to the mission and help others understand and adjust. As bridge builders, we must model and inspire hope and possibility for all students and most importantly create pathways. Nowhere are these competences more important than in higher education today.

As I reflected on the conference theme and the need to enhance and sustain diverse learning environments, I thought it imperative to recognize the alarming rate at which change is engulfing educational environments and to realize, that our success will be determined by our ability to respond to the shifting landscape, to change accordingly and to create truly inclusive learning environments, where all students, faculty and staff are valued, safe, engaged and accepted. Inclusive learning environments both acknowledge and celebrate differences as a unique part of their culture.

The research of Dr. Patricia Gurin, a psychology professor and researcher in the area of inter-group relations, does an excellent job of identifying the major benefits of enhancing diversity in educational settings.

Her findings revealed that college students who experience, “the most racial and ethnic diversity in their classrooms and during interactions on campus” become better learners and more effective citizens.
Her study is considered one of the most broad and extensive empirical studies of college students in relation to diversity. She noted, a racially and ethnically diverse student body has far reaching and significant benefits for all students and that all students, minority and non-minority alike, learn better when the learning takes place in a setting where they are exposed to others who are perceived different than themselves. Assuring that our campuses are more diverse is for the betterment of all students. We are all made better by each other.

Gurin's study demonstrated that white students who had racial diversity in their classrooms and informal interactions during college benefitted significantly and was shown to have:

- Increased scores on tests measuring complex thinking;
- Increased motivation to achieve;
- Increased intellectual self-confidence and engagement;
- Highest level of interest in graduate degrees;
- Greater understanding that group differences are compatible with societal unity;
- Higher level of motivation to understand the perspectives of others;
- Higher levels of citizenship; and
- Greater likelihood after graduation to have friends, neighbors and co-workers from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

We owe it to our students to provide the very best learning environments and we cannot do that unless diversity is a thread woven through the tapestry of their learning and is an intentional part of their experience.
This is why I am so excited to be here today and why conferences of this type are critical for expanding dialogue and generating understanding of the benefits of cultivating diverse teaching and learning environments.

Much of my earlier research focused on organizational culture and resulted in the development of the 7th Learning College Principle described by Terry O'Banion, in my book “The Seventh Learning College Principle: A Framework for Transformational Change,” as an umbrella principle from which the other six learning college principles could emerge.

The 7th Learning College Principle directs attention to "creating and nurturing organizational cultures that are open and responsive to change and learning." In essence the creation of inclusive educational environments, where all participants are valued, and the teaching and learning environment is focused on improving and expanding learning for all students.

In light of the disruption being experienced in higher education, it is my opinion that it will be those environments that best understand and are most equipped to respond to issues of inclusion and diversity who will ultimately survive the tsunami of changes coming our way.

If we are to be truly successful, we must stay ahead of change and out innovate through envisioning and designing new ways to respond and deliver education to students, new ways to provide training and development to business and industry partners and new ways to lift and sustain the socio-economic development of the communities we serve.
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Change is not optional. We will not succeed, if we stay the same and not introduce new ideas and new ways of being. The glacier pace of change in Higher Education is no longer acceptable, you have only to look across the country to identify the large number of college closures, enrollment declines, funding challenges, calls for heightened accountability to bare witness to the simple fact, "if we do not change—we will be changed."

I invite you to think back to the many changes that you have witnessed in higher education.

Have your students changed?; what about technology and its uses to enhance the educational experience? Think about our delivery systems and the expected rate of delivery, have they caught up with how students are learning? Learning anytime, anyplace, anywhere is real and our ability to deliver on these expectations strategically and effectively will make all the difference.

The students we serve are not the same; their expectations for learning are different. They are highly engaged with technology and social media and their expectations in the classroom have accelerated beyond what existed a mere five years ago.

Even our language has been changed as a result technology, I remember when a friend was someone you knew or at-least had met or when following or poking someone was not necessarily a good thing and tweeting was something birds did.

Key changes in Higher Education in the past five years have also included the ability for a larger number of schools to offer degrees in a variety of formats; most significant is the growth of online education, changes in access, admissions requirements and financial aid availability.
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As a result of these and other changes have come greater expectations for seamless learning experiences, recognition of experiential learning, the development of stackable credentials and the need to assure that every experience, every course, every program and every degree count. All as it should.

As we make our way through this phase of disruption and chaotic transformation bridging to the new normal, it will be important to focus attention not only on what we should be doing differently, but to what we should stop doing, as a result of outdated or misaligned practices, which do not do serve our students or colleges well.

Each of our institutions has these practices and we need only ask ourselves two basic questions to discover them. The questions are: How does this practice improve and expand diverse teaching and learning environments? And, how do we know?

These questions allow us to focus immediately on our intended outcome and align a measurement. If it does not improve or expand learning as we have defined it or if we cannot define how we will know it does indeed improve or expand learning, it should provide immediate pause, reflection and a possible need for reconsideration.

Advancing diversity will require more than institutional will or ability to engage. It will require strategic visioning and leadership that positions each of our colleges to effectively compete and succeed in an ever changing global marketplace.

It will require us to work together to identify best practices and as I described in my book “Partnering for Success: How to Build Strong Internal Collaborations in Higher Education,” it will require a dismantling of silo thinking within institutions to create communities of CARE for our students, where Compassion, Appreciation, Respect and Empowerment frame the direction.
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The National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education, added that in-order to further advance diversity during this unique period in higher education, will require leadership that understands the complexities of diverse learning and work environments.

Just as many key sectors of the American economy continue to experience huge and disruptive transformations resulting in radical change – Higher Education is also transforming.

One clear example of disruptive change in higher education and how more traditional institutions are rethinking their business model is MIT and Harvard's collaboration and creation of free online courses through EdX, where students are able to earn certificates of mastery.

This paradigm shift has led to many questions about what college is or isn't, the definition of student and the meaning of a college credential. The convergence of forces driving change, like disruptive technologies, eroding sustainability of the higher education business model, tuition tipping points and excessive student debt are evoking continuing questions about the value of a college degree. The work that each of you are doing to demonstrate that value and modeling that importance at your institutions is critical to answering these questions.

If we are to sustain, we must pay attention to both the access and success of our students and to establishing open and responsive teaching and learning environments that are diverse and inclusive.

In the Final Report entitled: Diverse Learning Environments: Assessing and Creating Conditions for Student Success, presented to the Ford Foundation by the Higher Education Research Institute, they recommended several outcomes which I believe are helpful for institutions wishing to advance diversity and improve student success.
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They emphasized the need to increase the number of educators and researchers well versed in the issues of diverse student populations and the need to create the conditions for realizing the benefits of diversity in the learning process, including establishing a climate for diversity.

I am convinced that conferences of this type serve to move us closer to the realization of these outcomes.

This is one of the most wonderfully complex times to be in higher education and will require of us to bring our best thinking to the forefront. I am hopeful for the future and am excited about the bridges that we will build to take us there.

Once again thank you for inviting me to share my thoughts with you today and with the time we have left I’d welcome any questions you have. Thank you, again.