

A Time for Bridge-Building Leadership

The National Hispanic University
Commencement Address by
Emmett D. Carson, Ph.D.
June 6, 2009

Good morning! Thank you, Mr. Alvarez, for that very generous introduction and for your stellar service in guiding this university as chairman of its Board of Trustees. President Lopez, Board of Trustees, distinguished faculty, proud parents, family, friends and The National Hispanic University graduating class of 2009, I am profoundly honored and deeply humbled to have been asked to share this day with you. I want to thank President Lopez for his outstanding leadership of this fine university as well as the leadership and passion that he brings to educational issues, from pre-kindergarten through doctoral studies, for all children both within California and across this nation. President Lopez, we are all truly privileged to have someone of your caliber and commitment in our community.

Last, but certainly not least, I want to recognize my beautiful wife, Dr. Jacqueline Copeland Carson, whose love and support over 14 years continues to sustain and inspire me.

When President Lopez called and so graciously asked me to be today's commencement speaker, my first question, which I am sure that at least some of you also have asked, was "Why me?" After all, I can claim no Latino heritage and, despite my best efforts, I have made little headway learning to speak or read Spanish. His reply was refreshing: He told me he believed that my ongoing and unwavering commitment to social justice – creating a world where we all live in communities and countries where each and every one of us has the opportunity to achieve our full potential – was a message you should hear. He also asked that befitting a university of the caliber and stature of National Hispanic University that my message urge you to think in new and different ways about the leadership

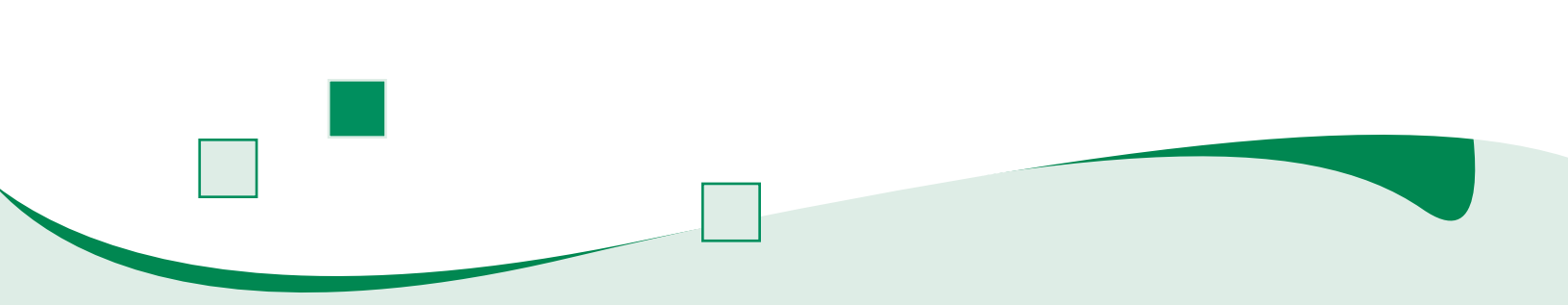
opportunities and challenges that will confront this graduating class.

Graduates of 2009, I know that today is the result of long days and endless nights of hard study and sacrifice. I know that some of you are the first in your family to receive a college degree and others of you have had to overcome significant difficulties. All of you have earned this day and we are here to honor and celebrate your accomplishments.

As you look with anticipation to a future in which it is more likely than at any other point in history that the only limit to what you can achieve will be your drive and hard work coupled with a little good luck, I ask that at some point during the day you thank the mothers, fathers, family members and friends who supported you in achieving this dream. A kind word and a loving hug will tell all who helped you that you appreciate their financial and emotional support and that you are fully aware that you have been able to reach your goals because you stand on their shoulders.

Graduates, I am keenly aware that mine is the last lecture that you have to endure before receiving your degrees and so I will keep my remarks short and talk about only two things.

First, I want to talk about why National Hispanic University is more needed today than ever before. Second, I want to talk about the enormous leadership responsibilities that will fall to the Latino community in general and to the graduates of this university in particular. The Latino community will have an important role to play engaging in and helping to lead the critical discussions that must take place as we shape America's future in uncertain times over the next century.



This graduating class is entering a new age in which the old rules and beliefs are changing on an almost daily basis. We live in a world where we are all connected through the internet and information can no longer be centrally controlled. We can learn about almost anything online and there are multiple chat rooms to talk about each and every subject imaginable. Through this worldwide interconnectivity, we are slowly coming to the realization that, whether we like it or not, we live in one world and we all inhabit the same Mother earth. Whether the issue is global warming, the proliferation of nuclear weapons or the economies of nation states, what happens here affects everyone else and what happens every place else affects us. You will be the first generation of leaders to face the challenges and opportunities of this new global reality.

When there is rapid social and technological change in difficult economic times, all of us struggle to put events into a context that will allow us to make the future more predictable and less uncertain. The election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States was a watershed event. On that historic election night, in his very first words to a transfixed global audience, then President-Elect Obama stated:

“If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.”

When an African American man wins a landslide victory for President of the United States, all reasonable people are forced to rethink what they believe to be true about racism and opportunity in America. Without question, President Obama’s victory means that any one of us—male, female, person of color, and, one day, gay or lesbian—has a real chance to become President of the United States.

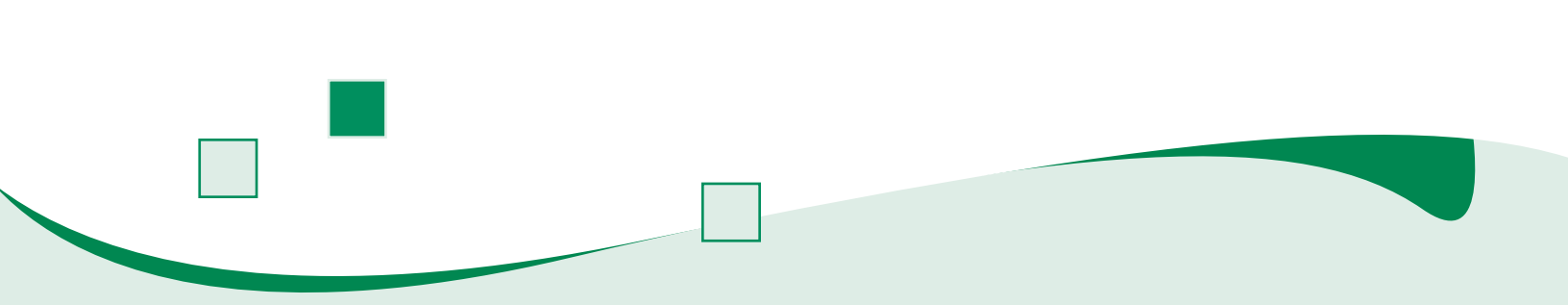
Unfortunately, some have wrongly interpreted President Obama’s victory to mean that race and ethnicity are no longer issues in American society. They suggest that in this new so-called post-racial society, social clubs, professional groups and universities that are built on racial and ethnic ties are relics of the past.

From this false point of view, National Hispanic University, and other institutions of higher learning like it, are based on a premise that no longer is necessary. After all, why is an institution of higher learning that predominantly focuses on educating Latinos needed in a post-racial America? Doesn’t the continued existence of such institutions actually slow down progress toward achieving the full transition to a post-racial society?

I fully and completely reject such thinking. The reality is that the case for National Hispanic University, as well as the historically black colleges on which it is modeled, is as important in a post-racial society as it was in the post-civil rights era that has ended—perhaps even more so. Let me provide at least three reasons for why this is the case.

First, a post-racial world does not mean that racial and ethnic cultural identification no longer matters and that we all become indistinguishable from each other, devoid of cultural identity or heritage. Quite the contrary, the promise of America always has been that we can each be who we want to be, worship what and how we believe, and hang out with the people whose company we choose. Our nation’s founders believed in these principles so strongly that they wrote them down as the first amendment of the Bill Rights. The first amendment states:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”



One of the most important measures of whether we have achieved the goal of a post-racial society will be whether we are more able to live full lives within our cultural identities rather than feeling pressured to either have no cultural identity at all or feel forced to adopt the identity of the dominant culture.

The second reason why we continue to need institutions like National Hispanic University is that decades of the systematic exclusion of people of color from social and economic opportunities is not undone simply because we have had an historic election. Despite significant educational gains in some areas, Latinos continue to have the lowest high school completion rate of all racial and ethnic groups.

Moreover, the report, *Minorities in Higher Education 2008*, found that young Latinos and American Indians actually have less education today than previous generations. While 18 percent of older Latinos had at least an associate degree in 2006, only 16 percent of younger Latinos have been able to achieve this goal. These statistics show that we will continue to need a National Hispanic University, as well as historically black colleges and universities, and women's colleges, for some time to come.

Lastly, the real value of racial, ethnic and gender-specific institutions is that they provide a window through which the rest of us can better understand the complexity and dynamism that exist within various communities. Racial and ethnic communities are not homogeneous with a single, shared, point of view. On the contrary, as the old saying goes, if you ask the opinion of one person of color what you have gotten is one opinion from that person of color.

Yes, all institutions of higher learning have equal responsibility to educate all people; however, that does not mean that race and gender-specific institutions are no longer needed to provide an environment for training a new generation of leaders who can envision a future informed by an understanding of the past.

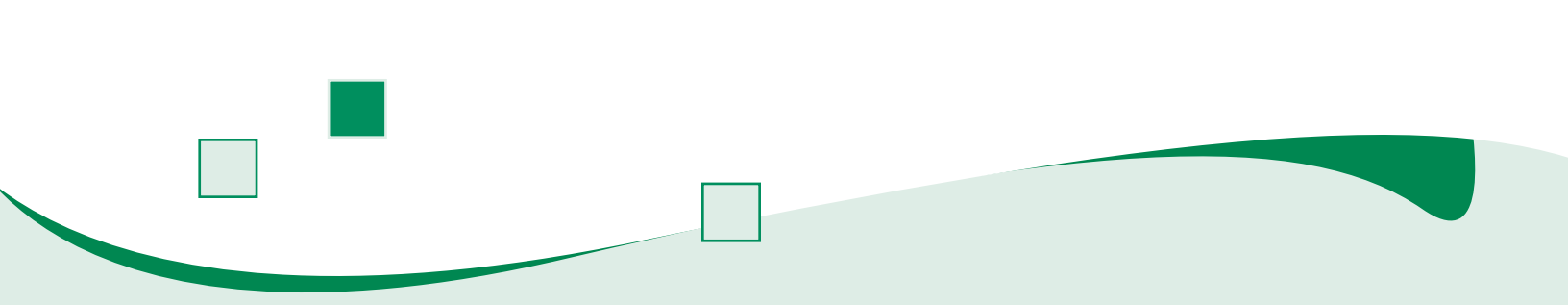
Racial, ethnic and gender-specific institutions allow for the full diversity of views to flourish whereas within the context of traditional university settings time only allows for a singular view of any one community if any view about those communities is expressed at all. Unfortunately, all too often, traditional institutions of higher education seem to still ascribe to the view of the one-to-none policy of learning. Either they provide a single point of view about what a racial or ethnic group may think or provide no view at all, as if those communities were invisible or irrelevant.

Graduates, as you go forward to help bring a diversity of perspective to the societal changes we so desperately need, do not forget to support National Hispanic University, through your time and financial support, in its mission to prepare others to follow in your footsteps and stand on your shoulders.

Now, I do not have to explain to this audience that America is undergoing a profound demographic shift that will result in our country becoming a minority-majority nation. Within our minority-majority nation, Latinos will represent an increasing percentage of the total population. The question is not whether Latinos will have greater opportunities for leadership but rather what will be the character of leadership you will offer the nation. I want to use the time that I have remaining to offer a few candid observations on this topic.

To start, public statements that suggest that it is now "your turn" do not ease the anxieties of others with whom you hope to partner or lead the way on critical issues. Such statements, and the attitudes behind them, only serve to undermine your future leadership role. Second, when something is inevitable, it gives you time to plan—so use this time wisely.

As I stated earlier, the Latino community will enter leadership at a critical time in world history. We are now in the second year of a global recession that will likely usher in a change in societal values. The increased global competition will continue to put downward pressure on U.S. salaries. In



addition to our economic security, the threats to our environmental and physical security have never been greater. Scientists tell us that the climate changes that are under way will adversely affect how people live and the emerging water shortages will create untold hardships. Terrorism and the proliferation of nuclear weapons will result in our having to make very difficult choices.

This is the world that you will inherit, the world in which your leadership skills, along with others, will be so desperately needed. I believe that the Latino community has unique gifts to bring to these challenges. The Latino Diaspora is truly amazing in that it allows you to form bridges and linkages across different groups. Latinos as a community consist of people who are black and white, gay and straight, politically liberal and conservative. There are Latinos of nearly every nationality and you share a broad cultural base. There are Latinos who are Catholic, Jewish and Muslim, among other faiths. All these factors uniquely position you to establish a new collaborative leadership style for the 21st century in which you are bridge builders across and between groups rather than continuing the zero-sum game of pitting those same groups against each other.

Moreover, your history in the United States provides you with a unique empathy that can be drawn upon to build bridges across very different communities.

- Your community knows the importance of fair and consistent immigration policies and the futility of thinking that our nation can simply build the electronic equivalent of the Berlin Wall and believe that our immigration issues will be solved. We need you to engage in bridge-building leadership.
- You know what happens when entire neighborhoods lack ready access to wholesome foods and how that directly leads to obesity and related health disorders for children. We need you to engage in bridge-building leadership.

- You know first-hand what happens when the educational system is broken and children attend school every day but are not inspired to learn. We need you to engage in bridge-building leadership.

- You have painful experiences with the consequences of predatory payday lenders and mortgage brokers who rely on racial and ethnic profiling rather than credit worthiness to unfairly and disproportionately target specific communities for higher fees and more expensive home mortgages. In Silicon Valley, Latinos were four times more likely than white borrowers to receive high-cost subprime loans, which appears to be based on profiling rather than credit worthiness. We need you to engage in bridge-building leadership.

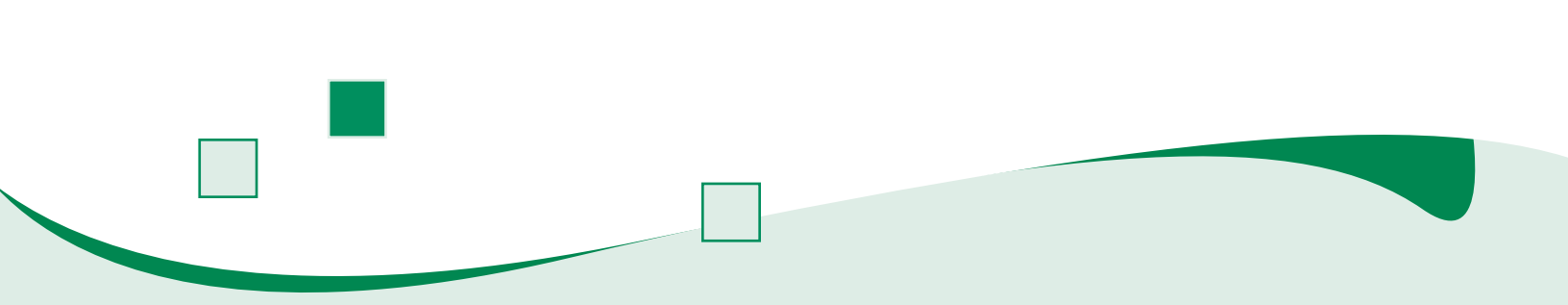
All of these things help me to fully understand what Supreme Court nominee Sonia Sotomayor was trying to convey when she said:

“I would hope that a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who hasn’t lived that life....”

She was saying that her experiences as a Latina woman allow her to bring a different viewpoint and context from others who haven’t lived that experience.

Try as I might, I do not think that I will ever know what it means to walk in anyone else’s shoes other than my own. This goes to the heart of what I was saying earlier. The idea that we all think and perceive the world the same way, or should be compelled to do so, undermines the founding principles of this country, which encourage us to celebrate our very diversity. America is special because of our racial and ethnic diversity and to actually deliver on our nation’s promise of justice for all will require justices who represent and understand all of our varied life experiences.

I do believe that the unique experiences of the Latino community position you to help create and



establish a new, collaborative, bridge-building, leadership style of the 21st century that will be markedly different from the “it’s our turn” leadership style of the past. I believe that the breadth of the Latino Diaspora makes you well suited to help lead in a global society in which opportunities and challenges are not bound by a specific geography. Finally, I believe that you understand that our nation’s greatness and future promise within communities, across the nation and around the world will come from the opportunities we create by opening doors to people rather than closing them.

National Hispanic University has fulfilled its obligation by giving you the necessary skills to achieve these goals. Only two things stand in your way. First, you must look forward in creating this new bridge-building leadership model and not backward. The leadership of President Barack Obama may serve as a model in this regard. Second, and this will be most difficult, like other communities, you must openly acknowledge, discuss and address the racism, classism, sexism and machismo, and homophobia that are hidden deep within the Latino community. I do not underestimate how hard these conversations will be but the burden of leadership is never easy. You can not address social justice for others if you are unwilling to openly confront it within your own community first.

I truly believe that God and the universe put the right people at the right time in the right place, people who have been given the right skills, talent and history to help take us forward. To the Graduating Class of 2009, I say to you: this is your time and I believe that you have the courage and responsibility to seize this moment.

Thank you for allowing me to share this day with you. Buena suerte! Ustedes son nuestro futuro. (Good Luck. You are our future.)