



IBHE Board Chair John Atkinson Open Remarks on Racism and Equity at June 9, 2020 Board Meeting

I want to start with a personal reflection on the events of the last two weeks because we convene today in the wake of another deeply troubling incident of fatal police abuse against a Black American.

As we speak, the nation has erupted in protests in cities and suburbs in zip code after zip code, and while we have seen violence and division- there is a growing national voice that is crying out, "enough is enough." That George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Aubery are Black Lives that Matter and that our country must hear, must listen and must change.

I think it is important for me acknowledge that as a white American, who cares about racial and social justice my words, and frankly, my feelings, are inadequate to address the hurting that is going on in the black community right now.

The professor and poet Claudia Rankine wrote an essay after the brutal Charleston murders titled "The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning" and there is a reference in her essay that perhaps best characterizes this inadequacy:

She notes, "there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black...."

I think that's right, there is no mode of empathy suitable for truly understanding, but for those of us who care—and who are engaged in this work—it is my sincere hope that careful listening, thoughtful dialogue and true commitment can lead to action and to change.

This is all happening during an historic health crisis that has triggered a devastating economic crisis with massive unemployment and disruption that has put so much of our society on hold—including the higher education sector.

Many of our fundamental institutions—government, media, law enforcement—are all being called into question, and they are being called to account.

Which is why it is more important than ever that those of us with the privilege of serving the public need to come together and reaffirm our shared values and our core mission, and most importantly **to act on** those values, and this mission.

To that end, I just want to say a few words about our work together.

This board was appointed less than a year ago by a governor with a clear commitment to equity in higher education. And we have begun the important work to drive better educational outcomes for our black, brown and rural students.

We are driven by the alarming statistics showing public college graduation rates for students of color at just half the rate for whites. Low-income students, students of color and rural students are all at risk of falling behind.

The data are clear, the time for action is now. The time for action is now.

When I first addressed the leaders of our public universities last year, I was asked about the increasing trend of outward migration of Illinois students to colleges in other states.

I said the students I lose sleep over are not the ones who are attracted to offers in other states. The kids I worry about are the students who stay, here in Illinois, and who put their futures into our hands. Because that is exactly what they are doing

Under the leadership of Gov. Pritzker and the General Assembly, we have reversed a 17-year period of sustained disinvestment in higher education which has been partly responsible for this outmigration.

By funding programs like AIM HIGH and increasing the operating and capital support to our public universities and community colleges, Illinois has begun to address the affordability crisis which has driven so many students to other states.

By significantly increasing funding for our Monetary Awards Program, once the national model for needs-based student assistance, Illinois is once again investing in the futures of our most vulnerable students.

But we need to do more.

We have challenged ourselves to improve our lagging minority access and completion outcomes and we are developing a new master plan as required by statute and its focus will be driven by equity, and its success, OUR success, will be measured by how we meet this challenge.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 crisis has made this work even more challenging.

Many young people are now reconsidering their educational plans at the very moment when a post-secondary degree is more important than ever. And they need to "stay the course"!

The impact on our state's budget has been staggering, but our governor and state legislators have kept faith with our commitment to students by providing flat funding despite the enormous financial pressures we face.

We have appointed a diverse committee of higher education leaders from across the state to make recommendations on how to safely reopen schools this fall. We will be making those recommendations public shortly, giving parents and students the comfort of knowing Illinois institutions are opening in a responsible fashion, because now more than ever students need to stay the course.

Students and their parents are justifiably concerned that the quality of the college experience will suffer if they must do more of their learning on-line and maintain social distancing for safety reasons.

Some are also asking if it is worth the cost. These are honest and legitimate concerns and it falls to us to address them all. And we will.

Lastly, we have engaged on a public education campaign to help communicate the importance of staying in school during these challenging times and parents and students will be hearing more about why it's so critical for them to stay the course.

Today, we're going to hear from several college presidents about their institution's response to COVID-19 and the plans they have for the fall, and we will hear from some students themselves who are determined to stay the course to degree completion even if the fall learning environment is different than what they expected before.

No matter what, higher education in Illinois is going to be open for business and now more than ever, our students need to stay the course.

Allow me to remind us all of the critical role higher ed plays in addressing some of these health care, economic, social justice crises.

The tradition of free speech and peaceful protest against injustice has so often taken place on our campuses. The humanities taught by our professors help to create understanding and advance the cause of a *just* liberty. The science needed to shape public policy to cope with a pandemic is developed and advanced in our research institutions.

The skills needed to prepare young people to succeed in this economy and in what comes next, are acquired through our community colleges and our four-year institutions. The responsibility for producing educated citizens that are so vital to a healthy democratic society also falls to us.

Above all, the path to a more just and equitable society runs right through our lecture halls and libraries. We are uniquely positioned to meet these challenges and advance these goals—and we cannot let up or retreat no matter how steep the hill.

With so much uncertainty confronting young people today, our job right now is to reassure them that we will survive these trying times together and we will come through this stronger, smarter and better prepared.

And we must redouble our efforts to make sure that "together" means that every student in Illinois is accessing and completing a post-secondary degree regardless of race, ethnicity, income or geography.

There is no more important calling right now, so, I just want to thank you all for your dedication and service and your commitment to equity in education.