Diversity Breakfast Remarks  
Vice President and Chancellor Phyllis Wise  
November 9th, 2012

What a room full of marvelous people. I want to thank you for taking the time out today to come to the twenty-seventh celebration for diversity. It's clearly something that's been important to us for a long long time. I'm pleased to be able to talk with you this morning about my thoughts and my growing vision about diversity at Illinois. Last fall, I set out on a listening and learning tour, and this year earlier at my town hall meeting and on my blog, I've talked about four goals for this year and one of them is centered on diversity. For me this is a foundational issue. This is all about excellence. It's all about the critical role that diversity plays in the future of the success of this university. [applause] And today is actually the first time that I've had a chance to devote a whole talk to this issue, so I want your feedback as we go along during this year, as we plan and execute on a fairly ambitious way to even deepen further, our commitment to diversity. Let me say at the very outset that aspiring to increase diversity on our campus, in our students, on our faculty, and on our staff, is not a new idea; certainly isn't something that I thought of for the very first time. Many universities, including ours have tried for many many years to do this. Many people have been well-intentioned and devoted a lot of time to this. To increase the number of underrepresented students, to increase the number of underrepresented faculty and staff has been an issue, obviously for a long, long time. So I want to share with you a bit about what we are been doing, and then concentrate on what we want to do in the future.

We have a Diversity Administrative Coordinating team call the “D.A.C.T”. We have a Committee on Race and Ethnicity called “C.O.R.E.”. We have a Council on Gender Equity, a Committee on Access and Accommodation, the LGBT advisory committee, and so many others. And many of you have served and continue to serve wonderfully on these committees. And so first I really want to express my appreciation for all the work that preceded my coming to Illinois last year.

We have the ‘Inclusive Illinois’ program, and you can see the program on your table; the Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Relations, which grew out of Project 2012. We have many ethnic and gender, and women's studies units, that have become actual academic homes. We have instituted LGBT minor, in gender and women's studies. We are accessing the outcomes of all of these as we go forward and plan.

So why do I think we need to even work harder and smarter? Why do I believe that we have to accelerate our rate of change and increase the slope of the curve to greater diversity? Why do I think we have to try even harder? And it's really because I believe that this is a matter that will allow our campus to be even more successful at being the excellent, premier, public, research university that we are. This is a matter of excellence, which is tied inextricably to diversity. When it comes to meeting society's most complex challenges, the more diverse the group of people are that are around the table, discussing, brainstorming, and figuring everything out, the better the solutions will be. So this is purely and simply a matter of excellence.

In many respects, what we've seen by the word diversity is actually narrow, and people sometimes consider this as only racial diversity. That is, how many African Americans do you have in your faculty, or in your student body, or on your staff? How many Latino or Latinas do you have? How many Native Americans do you have? But really, this is really much more than just racial diversity that we’re talking about. It must encompass not only the way you look, but how you think, where you come from, and what you believe. As a comprehensive university we have to have a comprehensive definition of diversity. And so, even just this last week, the academic senate adopted a diversity values statement, and I’ll read you only part of it. I quote":

*We support diversity of worldviews, histories, and cultural knowledge across a range of social groups including race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, abilities, economic class, religion*,

and all of their intersections. So what we’re talking about today, is a far broader definition of diversity I think, than we’ve considered most recently, as we tend to narrow the definition of diversity. It’s beyond a shared, broad idea of diversity. We as a university need to reframe the context in which we’re considering this issue. When we talk institutionally about diversity, on this campus, and across nation, and really across the world, the discussions seemed to be based primarily on fairness and equity. And so we tend to talk about pushing a more diverse representation because it is fair and because it is right. But really that is something of the past. Even today’s environment that we live in, what we really are talking about here is not because it's fair or right, but because it is always more than just that. What is fair and right should always be the foundational compass of the decisions that we make as educators and community leaders. But diversity no longer hinges only on social justice and equity. We live in a time when we must move the basis for the debate beyond fairness and equity to the fact that this is an essential part of excellence. When we make this the starting point, and the basic assumption of our conversations, then we really open the door to a different kind of conversation.
For us, greater diversity is not only the viable root to excellence and success in competitive environments in which we are and in which we will be ever more. It’s not just a path. It’s the path. We need to institutionally internalize the idea that diversity is in part for the competitive and economic advantage that it brings to us. We’re sitting really at a perfect time to be thinking about this broader definition.

In 2003, the Supreme Court ruling on the University of Michigan affirmative action, Justice Sandra Day O’Conner wrote as part of the majority:

“Major American Business have made clear that the skills that are needed today in an increasingly global marketplace, can only be developed through the exposure to widely diverse people, culture, ideas and viewpoints”.

And this was in 2003, almost a decade ago. And that statement could not be even more true today. We’re already seeing this in the private sector, and I hate to think our educational institutions lag behind the private sector, and behind corporations. We like to think that we educate business and corporations, but in fact, the private sector has really understood this very very clearly. In the recent U.S. Supreme Court case about affirmative action at the University of Texas, seventy-three organizations filed a ‘Friend of the Court brief’ in support of the University of Texas. One of those was submitted on the behalf of one hundred corporations, top corporations of the world including Abbot Labs, Microsoft, Walmart, IBM, Boeing; some of the corporate leaders in our community. And the argument that they put forward was one of the strongest testimonials that was presented. So I quote again.

“These companies that collectively have revenues in the trillions of dollars, hire thousands of graduates from the University of Texas, and other major research universities” such as ours. Such as ours not in the quote, “every year. For [them] to succeed in their business, they must be able to hire highly trained employees of all races, religions, cultures and economic backgrounds. It is also critical that all of their university-trained employees have the opportunity to share ideas, experiences, viewpoints and approaches with a broad and diverse student body.” And I’m going to emphasize here, “This is a business and economic imperative.”

So, in some senses I hate things to always be because of money, but it is really interesting the that the corporate world gets this, and they are doing it for their own competitive edge. Actually, we need to do it for our competitive edge. As with so many critical societal issues, there are tipping points, and I think we are really at one. When economic realities manifest themselves. And when you have corporations of this magnitude, the Fortune 500 corporations, weighing in with this kind of language, we’re at a point when we can more our traditional discussions about diversity to a new level. As strange as it may seem, we share something in common with Abbot, and Boeing, and these other great successful companies: we are going to succeed and lead only if we become more diverse.

We can redefine the terms and reframe the philosophical discussions, and we can talk and talk, and we can meet and meet, but nothing will happen unless we really translate this into actions. And, so, this year I have asked the diversity committees that already exists to think deeply about their 2030 strategic plans for diversity, and that this effort compliment and interweave with the Vision of Future Excellence as we look thirty to fifty years out. Sounds like a long time away, but actually it’s just around the corner. One of the critical things identified in the Vision of Future Excellence during that exercise was the issue of social equality and cultural understanding. And there were six sort of pillar themes and throughout all of them, diversity interwove itself in every single one of them. So I’m going to be working with a new small group of people to really go out and listen and learn from chairs, and deans about what we think we can do in an ambitious but practical and accountable way, to make sure that diversity stays as part of our DNA, or becomes part of our DNA. That is not going to depend on whether I stay here, president Easter stays here, or any single one of us stay here, but it just gets passed on generation after generation and becomes so natural that we don’t have to think about what we are doing because it is part of what we are.

We need to make these investments on two fronts. We need to build the numbers. We need to create also, even more importantly, the respecting, inclusive environment that transforms the needs of our real community into reality. That makes us a family; that welcomes and continually works with the diverse students that we have here, the diverse faculty that we will have here, and the diverse staff. Our status as one of the top institutions in the nation actually works against us in some respects when it comes to our current efforts to retrack and retain a diverse population. That is to say, that we are competing with the Stanfords, the Harvards, the Berkley’s, the Michigans, for the very finest students, the very finest staff, the very finest faculty, the most diverse of all these groups. And I have to say that particularly at the undergraduate and graduate student level, and the faculty level, for top minorities and women candidates, in nearly every field, it is a seller’s market. We always come up against the conversation that we have with candidates whether or not we’re talking with students we’re trying to attract, faculty we’re trying to attract, or staff that we are trying to attract, that they have a offer from one of these other great universities. We need to build our capacity to win the competition from these individuals, to get them here, and to ensure that once they get here,
they are welcomed, respected, engaged, comfortable. So getting them here is only the very first step to the success of our community and of our university.

That’s the other component of the competitive aspect. We need to truly build a inclusive, open community of scholars on this campus. In a presentation at the August Board of Trustees meeting, Alejandro Lugo-himself a former Larine Y. Cowan award recipient- talked about the importance of having mentors and teachers who look like you and who have had life experiences like yours. Just as it is going to be a priority for us to develop a broadly representative population, we need to do so in an organized way, that we make sure every single step is covered. And this is going to be part of what we’re doing everyday during the coming years. It’s complex work, it’s hard work, it’s complicated, and sometimes it’s frustrating. Building diversity in practice, on a campus, that we’re not only counting statistics, is the key. It isn’t enough just to have a representative of every race, or nation, or belief, that isn’t really diversity, that’s just math and geography coming together.

We have about 4,000 Chinese students on this campus this year. But if they only spend their time with other Chinese students, and don’t feel welcomed and integrated into the campus life, then we really haven’t achieved very much. We may be diverse on a spreadsheet. We believe that we are like, number two in the nation, but who cares about that if we haven’t provided our students, with the very best learning experience, so that they can go home, wherever that home may be, whether it’s illinois, or back in China, and become leaders, and have the kind of views that we want to instill in them. We thrive on crossing boundaries while we talk about research, and we talk about teaching, and we talk about multidisciplinary in-collaboration. It is ingrained in us and it’s done sort of unconsciously, and that’s what we need to do, in terms of diversity. The intersections of numbers and life is where you find the payoff, and we all promise, that we will do more than just talk about this topic.

Building a campus and a local community that doesn’t just bring these perspectives to campus, but brings them together, requires a sustained, unrelenting, commitment from my position, but from the position of everyone who’s in this room. The chancellor only has a certain limited amount of influence, and it will only come to really be part of the everyday life of this campus if we can convince every single one of us, you and me, that we can never forget about this. So I know this morning that we have a number of friends from the community-from churches, from city government and from county governments, schools, and other organizations and agencies, and I’ve had the opportunity to meet many of you, both in groups and one on one. And the common message that I’ve heard over the last year is that you want to partner with us. What I want to tell you is that we want to continue to partner with you in even more effective ways. I also understand that the message of the partnership is really an equal one, and we have the responsibility to use our resources and our policies to make this a better place for all of us. Whether or not you are on our campus, or around our campus. I know from discussions that I’ve had that we owe a great deal of our success to retaining students of color, students of different cultural backgrounds, students of different religious backgrounds, and even students of different ages. So what I am committed to is making sure that we offer everyone that comes to this campus, that they can call this home because they are welcome here and they will be “used” in the best sense of the word to help to educate us for the future. We are going to incorporate our goals around creating this diverse community around our planning and resource allocation this year, and for years to come. Our efforts cannot and will not stop at the central administrative level, but will seep down to every level beyond that. Mandates for me, will not succeed. One of our aspirational peers at the University of Michigan, in the early 1990s started what they called the Michigan Mandate. And they very quickly increased the number of faculty of color, and also students. But without unrelenting efforts on this front, what has happened is that they have slid back to where they were, almost where they were in the early 1990s. We cannot let this happen here. We are going to find ways to incentivize this kind of issue in diversity to reward it, to hold people accountable after we develop the right metrics in terms of what we are doing.

So over the next few months there will be other events beyond this one. Later this year we will host a national Faculty Women of Color in the Academy conference, bringing together president’s, chancellor’s, administrator’s and faculty members to speak about the challenges at their campuses, so that we can learn from them and hopefully we’ll have something to give them as well. This spring, we’ll celebrate the Sesquicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation with academic and artistic programs across the entire campus. And out of the Transformational Leadership Initiative which we started in partnership with the two mayors, we are committed to focusing on K-12 education so that students are prepared to come to universities like the University ofIllinois, and obviously we hope that most of them do come here. In Illinois right now, in the K-12 years, nearly 50% of the students in these schools are students of underrepresented minorities. That means that within a decade, a majority of students who want to potentially want to come to the University of Illinois will makeup four-fifths of our freshman class that will not be white.

And I would argue that with our current policies and practices, if we don’t accelerate our efforts, we will not be ready for the class of 2025. So if we let this happen, if we just go along on our path that we’ve been on, which is a good one, if we go along on that path, I think it’s going to be difficult to justify our relevance to the society around us. We
are going to make measurable and honest progress. We are going to take actions and invest our resources in ways that continually build out on the base of our diverse community. And we will do so in ways that make growth both achievable and sustainable over the long-run. This commitment isn’t about another set of administrative rules and policies, it really is about programs that touch the lives of every single level of our community.

So in conclusion I just want to say, I thank you very very much for being here. I want to end with just a little bit of a personal story. My parents immigrated here from China in the late 1930s, both to actually complete their educations, my dad had gotten his M.D. in China, he came to get his PhD from Northwestern, my mom had gotten her nursing degree from [inaudible] University and came to get her masters in nursing education at Columbia. They were supposed to go back to China on the twelfth of December, 1941. And when they bombed Pearl Harbor, they were not doing commercial shipping across the Pacific for a long time and my parents ended up staying here. They probably became the strongest American-ophiles that you can imagine. I was born here, and I think sometimes of the difference in my life, that five days made basically because I would have otherwise been born in China.

I was very lucky. I mean, I had parents who thought about higher education. I don’t ever think they ever thought that I wouldn’t go to college. It was always “where” and “how long”, I think my father thought I was under-educated because I didn’t get both my M.D. and my PhD. [laughter] But suffice it to say that I’ve been really really fortunate to be surrounded by people who gave me great advice and mentored me throughout my life including and up to today, and I expect you to advise me and mentor me as we go forward in this critically important issue of diversity because it is all about excellence.

I feel like I’ve lived diversity all my life. And so, because I’ve been so fortunate I want to make sure that other people have the same kind of experience that I did. Thank you very much. [Applause]