



Dr. Gail O. Mellow

Acceptance Speech Upon Receiving the 2017 TIAA Institute Hesburgh Award for
Leadership Excellence

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I am humbled and honored to receive this award. I want to thank Molly Broad, her amazing leadership, and the American Council on Education; Ron Pressman and Roger Ferguson from TIAA, and my colleagues in this room. I also want to invoke the memory of Father Hesburgh, whose life's work inspires this award.

No person does this alone. My support team starts with my family – my wife Diana, my daughter Nicole, daughter-in-law Paige, my two grandsons Rafael & Luca. I also want to thank the extraordinary team of LaGuardia's faculty and staff, our students who inspire me every day, and my CUNY colleagues. This award is really more of a tribute to their work than mine.

As president of LaGuardia Community College in NYC, where the majority of our 55,000 students are immigrants, I hope the people in this room share my fierce resolve to ensure that colleges and universities remain steadfast in our commitment to a diverse America. In thinking about how to accomplish this formidable task, I am reminded of a quote from the American author Viet Tang When: "Americans, on the average, do not trust intellectuals, but they are cowed by power and stunned by celebrity." I agree. And so it seems essential right now that we work collectively as a higher education community to regain American's trust.

But doubling-down on what we already do cannot be our strategy. There are two ideas that I believe are critical to regaining trust.

The first is to acknowledge the primacy of the system of American higher education. The American system of higher education is all of us: publics and privates, large colleges and small, urban colleges and rural ones, spanning from community colleges to Research I's. We are stronger as a deeply connected system where scholars and students flow easily among our many institutions—rather than a group of competitive businesses vying for brand prominence or market share.

It is also important that we acknowledge how we sometimes can isolate ourselves in the rarified nature of the academy, clutching its benefits around our shoulders like a mink stole. We have to understand which kinds of college we privilege, for whom, and why. I feel this most acutely as the president of a community college in an America where most low income students, most immigrants, and most students of color attend community colleges, but which are, sadly, the least-funded sector of higher education.

The second idea I want to share is the critical role of faculty as teachers. In a moment, our luncheon speaker Joi Ito will elucidate how the technology and communication revolutions change the place and structure of innovation. I feel the communication revolution personally as I find myself walking in an American landscape where the fog of disinformation obscures truth and facts; where the geography of public discourse is no longer grounded by science or expertise, but rather has become a morality play enacted between emotionally scripted sides.

Scholars tell us that authoritarian governments manipulate information in the public sphere to create cynicism and confusion. The communications revolution, therefore, has formed both new cracks and new bridges. If the digital world is disrupting at lightning speed what we used to take for granted, how do we teach students to navigate a world no one has seen?

The answer must be to support college faculty to teach ever more powerfully, so that students learn the habits of mind needed to enter, and master, the swirl of change. I seek college classrooms where faculty and students begin to knit together a coherent whole from the raveled sleeve of our country's disparate parts – our hallowed *E Pluribus Unum*.

Right now, American college faculty are teaching the most diverse group of students ever to learn together in the history of the world. Together, let's spark a renaissance of extraordinary college teaching. I believe it is central to our ability to sustain our global, digitally-driven, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, human community.

Thank you.