

Remarks for All-University Retreat 2022

I want to thank the organizers of this retreat, which is off to a wonderful start with this morning's panel: I'm deeply grateful to each of the participants for sharing their work and their insights on student success and educational equity. In the spirit of today's theme, I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the late bell hooks, who died in December. Not only did she teach at San Francisco State, her writings challenge us to reflect deeply on what student success means within a framework of racial justice. Her vision of education for equity speaks to the driving purpose of the CSU's equity initiative, and the crucial work that that brings us together today, and every day.

The Atlantic magazine called bell hooks "[one of our nation's leading public intellectuals](#);" the Utne Reader called her one of "[100 visionaries who could change your life](#)." We can be proud that she launched her career here, teaching in our own Women and Gender Studies Department in the eighties. I had the honor of meeting her in 2017, when she [returned to campus](#) to address a capacity student audience in Jack Adams Hall. She spoke like she wrote, as an educator, but also a critic of education. Hooks's vision is fiercely hopeful—in the title of one of her books, she calls education "a practice of freedom," driven by what she calls in another "a pedagogy of hope."¹ But hope isn't the same thing as optimism, as [Vaclav Havel](#) reminds us: it's a conscious choice to imagine how things might be, not a denial of the way things are. Hooks knew that her vision called for "a revolution of values" (as she put it, borrowing a phrase from Martin Luther King, jr.), and she deliberately set that vision against higher education's historic function: to create not equity, but hierarchy, not to lift up, but to weed out.²

¹ bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom (New York: Routledge, 1994); hooks, Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope (New York: Routledge, 2003)

² hooks, Teaching to Transgress, 27.

She shared this critique of higher education in common with Lani Guinier, another brilliant Black intellectual whom we lost just this month. As Guinier argues in her book, The Tyranny of the Meritocracy, Americans have long seen higher education as a proxy marker of class, which draws value from its status as a limited, and not a public good.³ Paradoxically, more than a half-century of expanded access has done little to change this view. As Education scholar David Labaree has shown, the more Americans went to college, the more stratified campuses became, allowing higher education to increase opportunity even while continuing to reproduce privilege.⁴ The most selective campuses came to occupy the highest rungs in a ladder of prestige; the more applicants they turned away, the higher quality they claimed. The false identification of selection with quality permeated even allegedly egalitarian campuses; only instead of turning students away at admissions, they did so after the students enrolled, by quietly but systematically discouraging many of them—particularly BIPOC students—from staying. Hooks, who taught at private as well as public campuses, laments the fact that “repressive education practices are more acceptable at state institutions,” woven into the fabric of a differentiated system.⁵ What Guinier calls the “tyranny of meritocracy” holds that merit can only belong to the select few students, who prove their worth in a competitive system. While students at selective campuses do so by getting in, at less selective campuses, they do so by staying in, and successfully negotiating mechanisms designed to weed them out.

Non-selective campuses essentially moved the selection process from the admissions office into the institution itself, by enlisting faculty as internal gatekeepers. In so doing, they established high-stakes testing and grading practices designed to move students up or out. The very convention of assigning letter grades to students is a relatively recent phenomenon, introduced by colleges in the twentieth century as part of what Cathy Davidson calls the industrialization of higher education. As she notes, the practice of grading would later be borrowed by the

³ Lani Guinier, The Tyranny of the Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013)

⁴ David F. Labaree, A Perfect Mess: The Unlikely Ascendancy of American Higher Education (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2017)

⁵ hooks, Teaching to Transgress, 149.

American Meatpackers Association. But, according to Davidson, “The meatpackers worried . . . that it was difficult to reduce something as complex as the quality of sirloin or chuck to an A, B, C, D, or F.” “Strangely,” as Davidson wryly remarks, “educators were less skeptical about applying grades to student learning.”⁶

Educational research shows that grading can play an important role in helping students learn, when it’s aligned with transparent learning goals and assessment standards. But the research also challenges grading conventions and received wisdom that don’t support student learning: such as, the idea that courses with lower average student grades reflect high academic standards, rather than problems with course design and delivery. Or the idea that raising average grades can only happen by lowering standards, rather than improving student engagement and learning. It’s difficult to see past dominant models of teaching and grading—and even more so, to envision alternatives. This is where efforts like today’s retreat play such an important role, by inviting us to reflect critically on our own practices, and to learn from members of our own community who’re finding success with new models of teaching and learning.

These include colleagues advancing student success like those we heard from in this morning’s panel—and those we’ll hear from next, on their use of high-impact practices like community engagement, collaborative and student-led learning. They also include departments that are working, in line with the Chancellor’s equity initiative, to reduce failure rates by identifying new ways to engage and advance student learning. I’ll just cite one example, from our own Economics Department. On many campuses Introductory Economics is a classic weed-out class, notorious for its high failure rates. Our Econ department determined to take on the problem by rethinking how the class is taught. In a collective effort, the faculty teaching the course’s multiple sections convened as a group to analyze grading practices, reflect on their expectations for student learning, and compare how learning was assessed. To create consistency in assignments and assessment practices, they developed a common course outline, structured around

⁶ Cathy N. Davidson, [The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux](#) (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 204-5.

student learning outcomes. They also created an ongoing faculty learning community to build on their findings and share best practices. And in just two semesters, they've seen encouraging results, reducing failure rates by 5 percentage points, which translates to hundreds of students who are now making progress in their degrees, rather than repeating the class or choosing to leave the university—as students who fail classes too often do, especially our BIPOC students.

The work that Economics is doing bears out what Grace Yoo said this morning: “our students are enough.” All students are worthy and capable of learning, and that education is more than a process of sorting, selecting and weeding--it's a conscious process of growth, that takes all of us working together to achieve. In supporting their students, Economics' faculty found themselves supporting one another: coming together to align their expectations and build on their practices established a new level of faculty community, as the classroom shifted from a private space of closed performance to a collective place of learning and growth. As Bob Bonner put it in this morning's panel, when we care for our students, we also care for one another.

The last two years have been unthinkable challenging, but we can be proud of how we've met their challenges, particularly in supporting student learning and success. At the close of last semester SF State surveyed our students about their experiences with online teaching and learning, and they reported overwhelming appreciation for the efforts faculty have made to maintain high-quality instruction despite the challenges of the pandemic, while also showing students flexibility and compassion—lessons that will continue to benefit our students long after the pandemic. I want to close by expressing my profound appreciation for the extraordinary work this reflects, for the faculty and staff who have worked so hard to support our students and their learning in these difficult times. Finally, I want to give the last word to bell hooks, when she wrote this: “All of us in the academic world and in the culture as a whole are called to renew our minds if we are to transform educational institutions—and society—so that the way we live, teach, and work can reflect our joy in cultural diversity, our passion

for justice, and our love of freedom.”⁷ The work we do today draws us closer to realizing her vision.

⁷ hooks, Teaching to Transgress, 34.