

The Nation's Challenge: Education Opportunity for All
Ivy Tech Bloomington Commencement Address
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President Snyder, Chancellor Whikehart, trustees, honored guests, members of the graduating class. In 2007, Ivy Tech-Bloomington surprised and honored me by inviting me to serve as its commencement speaker. Today, I am doubly honored to not only be invited back to address the 2012 class, but also to be the recipient of an honorary associate of science degree from this distinguished institution. I will treasure this occasion.

Chancellor Whikehart specifically asked me to recount my story about how education helped transform the life of a poor, immigrant boy from a working class family to become dean of one of the nation's premiere education schools at a top research university. It is a story I have shared many times with many audiences in various settings, and I am happy to do so again with the 2012 graduating class. However, before I do, let me reflect for a moment on some of the major events that have transpired in the world over the last five years. It has been anything but a quiet, predictable period.

Starting soon after the 2007 commencement, the world fell precipitously into the Great Recession. Unprecedented numbers of men and women throughout the country lost their jobs, their homes, retirement savings, and even their confidence in the future. The Recession affected practically every family in America and the country is still struggling to pull out of that period of economic devastation. Amidst a deepening recession and a world transformed by accelerating globalization, Americans elected their first African-American President, Barack Obama, in 2008. In one of his earliest speeches as president, Obama said "So let there be no doubt: the future belongs to the nation that best educates its citizens."

Indeed, there is no doubt that in a 21st century global economy, education, more than ever before, is the key to the future. Every life is precious and all students – white or black, Latino or European, rich or poor, immigrant or native – deserve an opportunity for a quality education. But in America today, Latinos, who are the fastest growing segment of the population, also are the most educationally underserved. In 2010, the Latino population in the United States surpassed the 50 million mark for the first time. Made up of legal and illegal immigrants as well as descendants of immigrants, Latinos now are the largest minority group in America. If as a nation we fail to achieve educational equity for Latino students, we will create a structural underclass of people who by their sheer numbers will threaten the very foundations of our democratic society. Speaking at the IU commencement ceremonies last week, President Michael McRobbie called attention to the inseparable connection between liberty and learning. Quoting from a letter written by the third president of the United States and the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, to James Madison in 1787, President McRobbie said that a well-informed citizenry was, "the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty."

That was true at the founding of this nation and it is still true today. In America, a nation of immigrants, education still is the great equalizer. And that's where my story begins.

I came to this country in the early 1960s as a Cuban refugee. Like many other immigrant families in those days and today, my parents gave up everything they knew and everything they had so that my sister and I could have a chance for a better life. My parents are not educated people; my father is an auto mechanic and my mother, in the Cuban tradition of the day, was a homemaker. After arriving in Miami with just the clothes we wore and a few personal items, out of necessity my mother went to work in the leather factories of South Florida while my father borrowed money to buy a few tools he needed for work. He started by putting the tools in the trunk of a car he also bought with borrowed money so he could start by fixing cars of friends and acquaintances at their homes.

College seemed incredibly far from my grasp when my family and I first arrived in this country. I was one of many in the large Latino student population that had moved into the Miami-Dade County Public Schools System in South Florida. The overwhelmed schools were not particularly friendly or supportive of kids who were different. Unfortunately, as it is increasingly the case today, there was a great deal of cultural insensitivity and resentment about the new arrivals. The teachers struggled because they did not understand children with cultural and language differences. Teaching English and helping Latino students adjust to the school system were a matter of trial-and-error with students like me, not the result of any well thought-out, evidenced-based strategy for addressing the special needs of what was even then a rapidly growing minority population.

First, the schools put us into immersion programs, the sink or swim type of approach to educational acculturation and language acquisition. When that did not work, they put us in transitional programs where we were supposed to learn English and then seamlessly move into regular classrooms. The last method they tried with us was bi-lingual programs where all the Spanish-speaking students were in separate, special classes taught mostly in Spanish. It was in one of those classrooms where I had an experience that transformed my early education.

School administrators envisioned a classroom where Latino students would learn subject matter in their native language while at the same time learning about the expectations for student behavior in American classrooms. However, they did not realize that when you put a group of Latino students together, in addition to the language differences, they bring a combination of learning styles and behaviors that do not conform neatly to American educational norms. The result is a very different climate than what you typically find in a traditional, middle class American classroom. We were the class administrators thought of as "the troublemakers."

One day, the vice-principal came to set us straight. He was a rather intimidating person and in general displayed a style of behavior foreign to us. He stood in front of the class and banged his fist on the desk while pointing at the students. Of course, I had no idea what he was saying because I did not speak much English. But I could tell by the sound of his voice and the way he acted that he was quite serious. I turned to one of my classmates who spoke better English and said – ¿José, que dice ese hombre? Or José, what's that man saying?

At that point, the principal rushed to me, grabbed me by my arm, pulled me out of my seat and walked me to the front of the class. While still holding my arm, he went on to tell the class "See, this is what I mean, you don't respect authority. You are going to have to learn that when an

adult is speaking you need to be quiet. You must respect authority; after all, this is America and you better start behaving like Americans!”

I did not understand what was happening, but the principal took me down to the office and summarily suspended me from school. He was making an example out of me.

When my parents heard I had been suspended they were very upset. They did not know what I had done because they did not speak English and could not communicate with school officials. Even if they did, they would not have known what questions to ask. They assumed I must have misbehaved terribly to earn a suspension and were deeply disappointed. From their perspective, I was letting them down. After all, they had sacrificed everything that was dear to them - including their home country - so that my sister and I could have a better future. And though they were not educated themselves, they knew education was the key to their children’s success. Thus, in addition to the school suspension, they severely punished me at home.

I learned a very important lesson that day - I learned to keep my mouth shut! From that day on, I never participated in class activities, never raised my hand to ask a question, never initiated class discussion or in any other way engaged the learning process. I didn’t make trouble. I wasn’t a truant. I just sat in class and quietly let time go by. Soon, the system forgot about me. I became invisible.

I was steered into vocational education by well-intentioned teachers who thought I was not college material and should at least learn a skill so I could get a job after high school. In those days, though, vocational education was not real preparation for jobs—then vocational education did not entail new technologies, cutting-edge preparation for emerging industries, or any other serious attempt at workforce development. Ultimately, I enrolled in a co-op program where I went to school half-day and worked part-time in a clothing store to earn the credits I needed to graduate. I figured I was set; after graduation, I would work at the store full-time and live happily ever after.

Although perhaps not so surprising today, then the unthinkable happened – an economic recession hit the country right after the school year ended. The store closed. I felt both shock and despair. I was not prepared to do much of anything and I had no idea what I would do with my life. Lucky for me, that summer, a friend of mine who was studying at the University of Puerto Rico mentioned a word I literally did not understand: college.

College? What is college? I said.

He explained that college was a place of ideas. I could learn about math and the arts, about science and the great thinkers that have shaped human history. He told me I would meet people from places I had never heard of and grow to appreciate diverse perspectives on questions of faith, values, race, and many other issues inherent in the human condition. I still did not fully understand all he was saying, but it sounded good to me. After all, my options were not very good—I had no skill for meaningful employment and I had nowhere else to turn.

Fortunately, Miami-Dade Junior College, which had an open-door admissions policy, welcomed any student with a high school diploma or a GED. My family was so poor that I immediately qualified for federal financial aid. At first, I struggled, but in those early classes I started to appreciate the importance of effective oral and written communication; I started to develop the ability to think critically and solve problems. Suddenly, I was learning about the great Existential

doctrines of Soren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus. I was reading the great books by Cervantes and Dostoyevsky. I was debating the meaning of the “I Have a Dream” speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., learning about Einstein’s Theory of Relativity and analyzing the mysteries of Darwin’s Natural Selection. Education was transforming my worldview and I simply could not get enough of it.

Although I was literally learning about college while in college, with that exposure I quickly realized I wanted to be a lifelong learner. I could not imagine where that desire would lead, but I knew education had awakened in me a desire for knowledge the depth of which I had never known. After Miami Dade, as you heard during the introduction, I transferred to the University of Florida in Gainesville, where I earned a bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate degree. The university invited me to stay on as a member of the faculty. I earned tenure as a full professor, later chaired the department from which I graduated, became associate dean of the College of Education, and then finally dean, before leaving to take on the position I currently hold as University Dean of Education at Indiana University. I’m not telling you this to brag about my accomplishments; rather, I want to impress upon you that I was not tracked into meaningless vocational education in high school because I lacked academic ability. Once offered the chance of a college education with dignity and respect, I excelled.

Education has taken me on a tremendous journey from the humblest of beginnings. Fortunately, my parents had a vision of a better life for my sister and me—one I could not begin to foresee. My parents are still around and, in 2008, they proudly watched me being inducted into the Miami-Dade College Hall of Fame – the place where my love for education blossomed. I humbly joined a remarkable list of people who started there, many with a similar story of starting from scratch after leaving Cuba. Among them are the Havana-born actor Andy Garcia, whose parents also brought him to Miami in the 1960s, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Nilo Cruz, who came in 1970. Each of them undoubtedly saw the possibility of what they could achieve through the power of education.

I know my parents would be equally proud if they could be here tonight to see me receive an honorary degree from Ivy Tech. I certainly have had a chance to succeed because of the opportunities afforded me through education. The right people at the right times have helped me climb from being that “invisible” student in the Miami public schools to being a highly visible leader among schools of education deans in the United States. And maybe the best motivation I received came from my father—who at age 86 still does occasional work on cars that need it. My father used to remind me about the need to work and study hard by holding up his mechanic’s hands in front of me. If you have ever seen the hands of a mechanic who has worked on engines for more than 40 years, you know they take on a very distinctive look. Forty years of burns from hot engines, cuts with fan belts, soakings in grease and gasoline, and exposed to a myriad of other harsh conditions made it clear that my father’s hands were the result of a life of hard labor. He would put his hands in front of me and say, “Look Gera, look at my hands. I want you to get an education, because I don’t want your hands to look like mine when you’re my age.”

I hope that each of you will remember that you have in your hands the ability to transform and enrich your life and that of others because of the accomplishments you celebrate here tonight. Education truly is the great equalizer in our society— allowing all, immigrants or native Hoosiers, the chance to excel through hard work and perseverance.

Another major international development since my remarks to the Ivy-Tech graduating class of 2007 occurred just last year, when a group of courageous Navy Seals brought the world's most wanted terrorist to justice. But the greatest threat to freedom everywhere is not foreign terrorism, it is hopelessness. The terrorists involved in the recent London bombings were homegrown terrorists. They were not jihadist infiltrated from other countries to attack the British. They were people who for one reason or another had lost faith and hope for the future.

That is why I am an advocate for the federal DREAM Act, which provides young undocumented immigrants a means to work and participate in American society by staying out of trouble and attending college or joining the military. For every child like me, and like many of you here tonight, who gets a second chance to succeed, there are literally millions who do not get that chance. Freedom depends on having a fair and just society where everyone has a meaningful opportunity to pursue his or her dreams. As a nation, we simply cannot afford to deny opportunities to those willing to work hard to achieve their goals. You certainly are among that group and I commend you on your achievement. As you go forward into the workforce or in pursuit of further education, remember your roots and those who through their sacrifice, love, guidance and support have made it possible for you to celebrate your graduation today.

Each of us who have had the opportunity to become educated has a special responsibility to not only do the best we can at whatever we choose, but also to inspire and help others reach their dreams. As it is said, to whom much is given, much is expected. In the words of the British writer Gilbert K. Chesterton, "Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another." It is now your time to pass it on.

Thank you and congratulations!