Good afternoon!

Thank you Patrick for inviting me and for this opportunity to share a few thoughts on higher education and students of color.

This IU program is greatly appreciated, especially as it takes place during one of the most fiscally challenging times higher education has endured in decades. To those of you affiliated with the university, don’t take the support of programs like this for granted. Don’t squander it on philosophical or ideological differences.

For those of you participating from other colleges and universities, I challenge you to take the lessons learned here back to your own campuses. Commit yourselves to implementing just one idea that will improve or extend your efforts to facilitate the academic success of students of color.

I bring you greetings from North Carolina Central University, America’s oldest, public, liberal arts college for African-Americans where our goal is to create and sustain a culture of academic success—a culture characterized by high levels of learning, retention and graduation.

As a graduate of a historically black college and now the chancellor of one, I want to encourage you to consider spending some time — even if it’s just one semester— at such an institution. I assure you that your cultural and intellectual horizons will be expanded beyond measure. The IU/HBCU STEM initiative is just one of many programs that I encourage you to explore.

As we gather here this afternoon, we do so amid a national and international climate of pessimism, cynicism, and criticism. We’re trying to decide whom to blame for the state of the economy and the overall decline in the quality of life that we once enjoyed or at least, that we hoped to enjoy.

As we gather here this afternoon, one in 15 Americans lives in poverty, which is an all-time high.

This, however, is a moment pregnant with opportunities for us to become agents of change rather than critics, cynics or perpetrators of the status quo by our failure to act.
Efforts to reform education at all levels are not new. I’ve been engaged in higher education long enough to witness several national initiatives, both positive and negative. With the launch of the Sputnik, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act.

President Obama referenced it in his Inaugural Address when he said, “Half a century ago, when the Soviets beat us into space with the launch of a satellite called Sputnik, we had no idea how we would beat them to the moon. The science wasn’t even there yet. NASA didn’t exist. But after investing in better research and education, we didn’t just surpass the Soviets; we unleashed a wave of innovation that created new industries and millions of new jobs.”

Then, there was the Educational Opportunity Act of 1964, the same year the Civil Rights Act was passed. The Act created an experimental program called Upward Bound, aimed at preparing high school students to become the first in their families to attend and graduate college. When it was reauthorized in 1972, direct financial assistance to low-wealth students was added to the bill. That was the beginning of the Pell Grants.

Education faced its toughest challenge during the Reagan Administration. Federal funding was cut in half! President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act emphasized test results and inadvertently, teaching to the tests. Similarly, Race to the Top was intended to spur K – 12 reform by instituting performance-based standards for teachers and principals.

With all these plans and proposals, two things remain unchanged:

1. The intractable difference in educational achievement at all levels from preschool through college, based on race; and

2. The fact that most often, the programs designed to improve things have been designed by those who lack the cultural competence to do so. Efforts have been and continue to be prescriptive and punitive.

No Child Left Behind, standardized testing, reduced funding…all of these are important issues, but they are not what I want to talk about here today. I want to talk about what you and I can do about them!

How can we use our views, passion and commitment to change the narrative on the one hand and to improve opportunities for your generation and subsequent generations on the other?

According to the 2010 Census, 37.5 percent of the population is now “of color.” The Wall Street Journal stated white babies accounted for less than 50 percent of births in 2010. By 2042, there will be no ethnic majority in America.
But if you look at the college graduation rates, students of color lag behind the Caucasians. For persons 25 years and older, 30 percent of whites and 52 percent of Asians are college graduates. The numbers for African-Americans and Hispanics are 20 percent and 14 percent, respectively.

First-place Canada has a per capita graduate rate of 56 percent for 25 to 34 year olds. If America is to regain its prominence in the world, the education of its citizens of color must become a priority.

President Obama launched the American Graduation Initiative with a stated goal of regaining world supremacy in per capita college graduates by 2020. That goal cannot be achieved without a focus on students of color — now — at middle schools, high schools and colleges all across the country.

Here is what I believe must happen at the university level.

**To all executive-level administrators here today,** your commitment must be reflected in the investments you make. It is not possible for your institution to be truly excellent without embracing equity and diversity. If you look at the top 10 national universities in *U.S. News & World Report*’s ranking, all have robust diversity programs and they’ve made major investments in them. Six of the ten including Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, Stanford, University of Chicago and Duke University have high-level executives in the role of orchestrating their diversity initiatives. A recent Harvard study indicates that this is what works — making a top-level manager responsible for the achievement of the organization’s diversity goals.

But the job of achieving diversity cannot be relegated just to those with diversity in their title. All vice presidents, deans, department chairs and directors must be held accountable. Moreover, those who teach and administer programs must possess a high level of cultural competence, passion and commitment to address the needs of students of color and other diverse populations.

In these austere budgetary times, equity and diversity must remain high on the priority list.

**To those who administer initiatives designed to attract, retain and graduate students of color,** the old models must be re-conceptualized. A silo mentality constrains the development and infusion of a culture of diversity throughout the institution. There might be a summer bridge program in Academic Affairs and a mentoring program in Student Affairs, but while they may be laudable individual programs, they cannot effectively serve the students’ needs.

Why? Because these isolated ventures ignore the total student experience, from customer service issues in the cafeteria, to their treatment by campus police, from lowered faculty expectations, to prejudicial treatment in the residence halls. Only through collaboration across divisions can we begin to accomplish the goal of
retaining and graduating greater numbers of students of color. All units must identify and implement strategies to achieve diversity and be held accountable for their success. This will require changes in the deployment of human, physical and fiscal resources. And this is why it’s imperative for “diversity” to be in the title of a cabinet-level executive.

Program administrators must raise their expectations for the students, and make them clear from day one. The research is unequivocal. We get what we expect, so we must expect more. It’s a disservice to the students, the university and ultimately, to the state and nation, to allow anyone to skate through. It lessens the value of the credential in the marketplace when college graduates cannot demonstrate the skills or knowledge expected to accompany their degrees.

And it takes persons with credibility and cultural competence to call this out when they see it. Universities must take a leadership role in establishing partnerships with professionals of color, as well as community-based agencies, to build a broader, smarter support network for students while they are attending college and after they graduate. Show students what success looks like.

Universities also must establish partnerships with middle and high schools to secure the pipeline and expand the pool by instilling the notion of the inevitability of higher education among students of color. We can’t allow students any excuse for not succeeding. We cannot be enablers of failure.

More than 100 years ago, Horace Mann opined that, “Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men (sic people), the balance-wheel of the social machinery.”

More recently, U.S. Secretary Arne Duncan has said that “education is the civil rights issue of our time.”

Administrators must believe that students can succeed and must eliminate all barriers to success including their self-doubt.

**Students...You can change the world!** We need only look at the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, opposition to the Viet Nam War, the freeing of Nelson Mandela, the election of Barack Obama and of course, the Arab Spring. The world has witnessed the fall of dictators in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, largely at the hands of the young. And democracy is still on the move in the Middle East. Next year, we may add Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and Algeria to that list. Facebook and Twitter may have done more to spread the cause of democracy in the Middle East than all of our American blood and treasure.

I implore you to use your energy and passion to push back against the cuts to education generally, and to student aid at the state and federal level, in particular.
You should ask the question why our K – 12 system is funded through real estate taxes rather than through general state revenues.

That’s how Canada does it. Imagine, you don’t choose where to buy a home in Canada based on the quality of the local school system because public schools are about the same everywhere you go.

What does that mean? The true north offers truer equality of opportunity and as a result, it has the most college-educated population on the planet and a higher standard of living than the United States. America used to be number one.

I challenge you to organize, educate, advocate and agitate. Frederick Douglass said it best when he said, “If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.”

Students, you must embrace excellence. Whatever sacrifice it takes, even if it means working 18 hours a day, that’s what you have to do. Work together to achieve success, rather than competing with each other. And break free of your silos too. True collaboration transcends ethnic boundaries. Work to change the universities of which you are a part. Make them better places to learn and to succeed.

As I bring my remarks to a close, let me say unequivocally that achieving the inclusive excellence that we seek requires your active engagement. You can’t be a spectator. You can’t be a distant critic. You must be models of success. You cannot allow yourselves to blame racism, sexism, or any member of the “ism” family for your lack of success.

Brian Andreas, author of Mostly True Collected Stories, wrote, “In my dream, the angel shrugged & said, If we fail this time, it will be a failure of imagine & then she placed the world gently in the palm of my hand.”