

Unknown Unknowns: Meeting the Challenges of Changing Student Demographics

Presidential Address

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In 2002, during a Department of Defense press briefing, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made reference to the “known unknowns” (things we know that we do not know) and to the “unknown unknowns” (those things we don’t know that we don’t know).¹ I must admit that if anyone had told me I would find inspiration in his remarks over a decade later, I would have been more than a little skeptical. Fortunately for my sense of personal integrity, before Rumsfeld used the term, “The idea of unknown unknowns was created in 1955 by two American psychologists, Joseph Luft....and Harrington Ingham” and has found its way into a number of professional discourses, including that of project management where “Unknown Unknowns” is used to describe the *risks* that come from situations so unusual they don’t occur to us.²

Whoever we credit with coining this phrase, it points to a phenomenon facing all of higher education in the U.S., as both of our plenary speakers have pointed to in their talks. We do not know everything about our students, their needs, and how we will address them. These are *our* unknown unknowns. But we must address them and we will.

The demographics of our student populations (as well as that of our faculties and administrators) are changing rapidly. This generation of students does not resemble preceding generations and future generations will also be dissimilar from the present. This is the “known” unknown: change is inevitable. According to Manuel Pastor, Director of the Program for Environmental and Regional Equity at the University of Southern California, birthrates rather

than immigration are now driving the demographics in California, especially among Latino and API communities. The immigrant population is more settled and population growth is tapering off. This is an aspirational constituency for whom equity and inclusion are fundamental expectations. Pastor points to the fact that the makeup of the present California population now is what the U.S. population will resemble in 2050.³ And the changes in our student demographics are happening in the midst of other changes in higher education: budget cutbacks, public demands for greater accountability, rapid technological change, and so forth—all of which require planning and attention.

What is less well understood is what we will need to do and who we as institutions of higher learning will need to be in order to meet the unknown challenges; unknown to our students as well as unknown to us. Yes—we may have a sense of what will be required but we will learn as we do—or as the now-popular phrase puts it—we will need to build the plane while flying it. I think you would agree with me that this is not a recommended approach to plane-building, but it does capture the sense of what many of us are facing.

As I was preparing to write this paper, I remembered that our colleague Nancy Gutierrez, in her recent Presidential Address, explored the theme of narrative—or storytelling—as a way of framing our understanding of this peculiar calling of ours. As Gutierrez explained, the act of storytelling is an act of “imagination, invention, collaboration, and revolution.”⁴ She went on to say that “Liberal education is at work when individuals escape their own unique reality to conceive of a world not their own.”⁵

So, in the course of today’s talk, I’m actually going to tell you three stories and use these to illustrate some themes for us to think about. The first of these is my own story. While my

story is not representative of all the students we encounter at California State University Northridge, all the elements of my story are true for some.

I grew up in in a working class family in the San Fernando Valley. I went to public school in the Los Angeles Unified School District. I was one of six kids. I didn't excel in high school, largely because no one expected me to do so. I wasn't discouraged by my teachers, but neither was I encouraged. When I struggled with Algebra in Junior High, my teacher told me not to worry because—as he said—“Your husband won't care if you can do Algebra.” Nonetheless, I graduated from high school with a B+ average and went immediately to work. No one had ever suggested I might go to college. I moved out of my parents' home and went to work in an office. And, after several years, I began to realize that this was all that I would ever do unless I improved my chances for advancement by improving my skill set.

So, four years after I left high school, I enrolled in a few English classes at the local state university—where they let you attend part-time and where I could go to school at night, after a full day's work. I took three classes my first semester (because three nights a week was all I could manage) and earned three A's. I enrolled in three more classes the following semester and again earned three A's. After a couple of years it dawned on me “hey—I'm good at this!” and I began to take my academic work more seriously. I tried to figure out a way I could carry a full load and still work. So, in addition to going to the University and working, I enrolled in a 3-month course to become a manicurist (that semester I only took 2 night courses). Having completed this cosmetology course, I was able to take four classes from 8:00 – noon, work from 12:30 until 6:00 or 7:00 at night, go home and do homework and study and start all over the

next day. I never took a class I didn't need. I never saw an academic advisor—though I kept a dog-eared copy of the university catalogue on my desk.

I didn't waste any time. I didn't join a club or participate in extracurricular activities. I didn't apply for any scholarships because I wasn't poor (I had a job, a shared apartment, a used car). It took me seven years, but in that final year the end was in sight. I was going to have a B.A.—the first person in my family to earn that degree. But I still had no idea what I was going to do. It was in my last semester of my final year that one of my professors asked in passing, “What graduate schools are you applying to?”

And here is a key moment in my story. A turning point in my life, though I didn't know it then. “What is graduate school?” I asked. He briefly explained what it was about and I replied “Why would I want to do that?” He then explained that all of the faculty in the department assumed that I would be going on for a doctorate and would one day become a professor like them. “Can I go to graduate school here” I queried? Unfortunately, CSUN did not have doctoral programs. So, after some discussion, I decided to go to the University of Southern California. (I didn't know and they didn't think to advise me that one ought to apply to more than one graduate program). I wanted to study ethics and USC had the only ethics program in Los Angeles and since I lived in L.A. that was where I would have to go. Fortunately, I was accepted into the program and fortunately was given a teaching assistantship that covered tuition.

It wasn't until years later that I would come to appreciate what my undergrad professors had invested in me and how well I was prepared for this challenge. Although I had not enjoyed some of the perks and privileges of my classmates, I had a work ethic to match any

of them and stamina that exceeded most. I finished my doctorate in five years. The entire time I went to graduate school I continued to work as a manicurist, I bought and managed a nail salon, I was a full-time grad student and teaching assistant and, in the semester in which I finished my dissertation, I also taught five classes at the same university where I had been an undergraduate.

Thirty years later I am a full professor and for the past 11 years have been the Dean of the College in which I was an undergraduate. But it was not the future I imagined when I graduated from Granada Hills High School in 1970. At that point in time, my highest aspiration was to be a flight attendant so that I could travel the world.

So why—besides the fact that Nancy Gutierrez encouraged us to be storytellers—did I start with this story? According to Alasdair MacIntyre, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”⁶ The stories our students tell provide and reveal the meaning in their lives and the values they embrace and espouse, and the question for us is, “what are we to do”?

Gutierrez asserted that in our storytelling “...we are always making the world, in tandem with our audience.”⁷ In his recent book, *The Storytelling Animal*, Jonathan Gottschall explores the way in which, as he puts it, “stories make us human.”⁸ According to him, “We are, as a species, addicted to story,” referring to human beings as the “primate *Homo Fictus*”⁹ who “force narrative structure on the chaos of our lives.”¹⁰ Communications scholar, Walter Fisher, argued that narrative allows for greater participation in meaning-making. Human beings, according to Fisher, are “symbol-using animals” who create and communicate stories so that we may order human experience and establish communities.¹¹ The efficacy of narrative is due

to the fact that not only does it claim to “be true” but it can also “come true” for those who hear it.”¹² What in our students’ stories ought we work to make come true and how might we go about doing so? What in their stories can change us in response?

Recall MacIntyre’s claim that we can only ask what is the right thing to do (what is the moral action?) after we have determined of what story we are a part. Like me, many of our students come to college underprepared and underfinanced. They have multiple demands on their time and energy. They have no clear goal in mind nor do they even know that one ought to have a goal or a plan. They have no friend or family member with a college degree who could serve as an advisor and guide. In other words, betting on their success is a *risk*. So, let’s think a bit more deeply about risk.

“Unknown Unknowns” describes risks that are so out of the ordinary that these risks don’t occur to us. We don’t plan for them, we don’t anticipate how we might respond to them. Yet at some point we must address these risks if we are to make higher education achievement available to an increasingly diverse citizenry. A little over twenty-five years ago, Sharon Welch published her book, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*.¹³ This book was a response to the challenges posed by the nuclear arms race and the threat of nuclear war and provided reflection and guidance for social activism in the face of evil. But, what sticks with me about this book, the reason I still think about and remember Welch’s work, is that she suggested that we (as a nation, a people) needed to think differently about the value of risk-taking in the work of social justice.

Welch provided a critique of our culture’s usual approach to facing issues of justice. She argued that we most often believe that the right thing to do—the moral thing to do—needs to

be framed in terms of the certainty of the outcomes. In other words, we ought not to invest scarce resources unless we can be relatively certain that such investments will provide a measureable and positive result. Unfortunately, this leads more often than not to a culture of despair because the odds against success, the uncertainty of the outcomes, are often so overwhelming that we give up before we act. Welch reminds us that “human action falls short of perfection” and “may be tainted by unacknowledged ideological blinders—the influence of class, race, or gender privilege. Our vision is always perspectival.”¹⁴

Welch encourages us to think boldly. The fact that we may not succeed, or may not witness success, or even be able to determine what success might fully look like, is no reason not to move forward. We must take the risk because the moral thing to do is to risk in the face of uncertainty—even when to do so seems foolish. “It is possible” says Welch, “to combine skepticism about the likelihood of certain, total victory over injustice, and persistent, energetic work for justice.”¹⁵ This is the work that, as educators, we have committed ourselves to do. We believe that access to higher education is an issue of social justice. My professors took a risk. We must take risks ourselves, with our students.

In addition to the value of risk-taking, a second lesson that can be drawn from my story is the value of serendipity. Mine was not an intentional path to an academic life and I think this is a good starting point for us in thinking about our current and future students. Many of our students do not plan to go to college; many of our students have not made any plans at all before they come to us. Or, if they have planned to go to college, that is about all they have planned. They didn’t prepare for college in high school, they haven’t necessarily thought about a major—or what the relationship is between choosing a major and their future career path.

They might well be in college because they have heard (from friends, from teachers, from television or movies) that a college education will help you make a better living. Many of them are the first in their family to go to college. They often “stumble” into choices that later prove providential.

I am reminded of an observation made by Donald Hall in his 2002 book *The Academic Self*. Here Hall reminds us that while we like to think of our profession as a meritocracy where innate talent, hard work, and subject mastery are rewarded, “...we almost never talk about how our careers, practices, positions, and successes are very unpredictable [and often depend on] a series of arbitrary occurrences that account for...the successes [we] have had.”¹⁶

In this book, Hall tells his own tale of a serendipitous decision, and I hope he will forgive me from borrowing a bit from him to tell my second story. His story involves going to a movie while in graduate school, and stopping by a used bookstore while waiting for the film to start. Here he bought a little red book for \$4 (a tough choice because it meant he would not be able to afford a soda at the theater). That little red book sparked an idea for a conference paper proposal. The proposal was accepted. The paper was then accepted for publication in a major journal. He then, on the basis of this paper and publication applied for a teaching position he would not otherwise have pursued, and, eventually, received an offer for a tenure-track position. As he says, “I am where I am today...because I had an extra fifteen minutes to kill before a movie and decided to buy a little red book instead of a Diet Coke.”¹⁷

Hall’s observations remind me of the wisdom of my first Associate Dean, Gordon Nakagawa, who (along with colleagues in our Educational Opportunity Program) developed an advising model they called “Mentoring on the Run.” This is the recognition that mentoring need not be

a formal and structured relationship. Rather, it is a commitment to the idea that student success is the first priority of the university and that all of us who serve the student population—faculty, advisors, staff, and even we administrators—have many opportunities to support student success. We never know when our interaction with a student—a question we ask, advice we give, insight we offer—will provide that student with precisely the right thing at the right time. We take time out for serendipitous moments to occur. We believe that no interaction is meaningless. This is mentoring on the run.

What if my professor had not asked me in 1980, “What graduate programs have you applied to?” Or what if he had concluded that I was too dumb for him to waste his time on when it became clear that I didn’t know what he was talking about? He did not do this. He saw this as one of those serendipitous moments and spent a good long time talking with me about my interests, grad school options, and future possibilities. An incidental conversation changed the direction of my life. Might I have found my way to a doctoral program anyway? Maybe—but it is just as likely that I would not have done so. And when I think about the course of my life—from manicurist to College Dean—it is serendipitous moments such as this that helped me find my path.

Coincidentally, as I was finishing up writing this talk, a student who used to work in my office, scheduled an appointment with me. I don’t see him very often these days, though he is now a graduate student in our Creative Writing program and the Graduate Senator in our Student Government. When he arrived I asked him, “What’s up?” and he replied “I came to ask you some questions about choosing a doctoral program.” And everything I had been thinking and writing about became suddenly real and concrete. And here is my third story.

Originally, Alberto Garcia¹⁸ came to work in my office on a random assignment for one of his English classes. Students in the technical writing class have the opportunity to do internships in a variety of settings; one of them is working for my Grant Writer. I'm not sure we were his first choice, but it was convenient for his schedule. He arrived, not sure what he had gotten himself into. He had tats up his arms and was a rather shy and quite young man. His parents had brought him to California from Mexico when he was three months old. His parents were—and still are—undocumented and when he came to work in our office he was not certain if he would ever be able to legally use the degree he was working so hard to earn. But his parents insisted that he would earn it.

That chance placement, and the “mentoring on the run” that our grant officer did over the course of the next semester provided opportunities he never imagined—including representing CSUN at the 2015 HACU conference, and receiving a scholarship for the California-Mexico Dreamers Study Abroad Program which allowed him to change his residential status to what is called “Advance Parole” and which means he needn't worry again about being deported. This year he will return as a Peer Leader for the same program, and now he is researching doctoral programs.

The prioritizing of student success can (and I think most likely does) drive our work as deans. Why else would we do this job that is often misunderstood and under-appreciated? It's not for the fame and the glory! I think, perhaps, we too often undervalue the impact we have on the lives of our students, especially as we move into administrative roles that take us out of the classroom. We don't often get thank-you notes from students for creating an accessible

class schedule, offering a mentoring workshop for faculty, or balancing the budget. But if we do such things well, it can and does make a real difference in the experience of our students.

As I mentioned earlier, I was trained as an ethicist and for we ethicists, all stories must have a moral, right? What is the moral of my story? “We don’t know what we don’t know until we know it.” Our lives are shaped by—and we should embrace—hard work and serendipity, careful planning and mentoring on the run. Openness, above all, to possibility. Much of what I have accomplished is because of generous faculty and colleagues, serendipity, and just dumb luck.

Many of our students don’t know what they don’t know. They do know that they want more than they and their parents have. Our students come from differing racial, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic groups. They are gay, straight, trans. They are democrats, republicans, independents, and green party voters. Our responsibility is to share what we know, as we help them navigate the unknowns. We know things they don’t know. We don’t know everything they need to know but we have to assume at least some of them will need what we know. Higher education will change their lives in ways they cannot imagine. It provides opportunities they do not know exist. We can—and do—make this possibility “come true” in the lives of the students on our campuses. It is, as Welch said, our “persistent, energetic work for justice.”

¹ *Wikipedia*. 27 September 2016. Web. Accessed 10-29-16.

² *Ibid*.

³ Manuel Pastor, “*The Next California*: Demographic Shifts, Economic Change and Implications for Higher Education,” April 21, 2014. Spring 2014 “Dialogues with the Provost” lecture at California State University Northridge.

⁴ Nancy A. Gutierrez, “Storytelling and the Deanship,” 11-8-2014. [www.ccas.net/files/2014 Annual Meeting San Antonio/Presentations/Storytelling and the Deanship CCAS N Gutierrez.pdf](http://www.ccas.net/files/2014%20Annual%20Meeting%20San%20Antonio/Presentations/Storytelling%20and%20the%20Deanship%20CCAS%20N%20Gutierrez.pdf). Web. Accessed 10-6-16.

⁵ *Ibid*.

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- ⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 201.
- ⁷ Gutierrez
- ⁸ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), 2012.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, xiv.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xvi.
- ¹¹ Walter R. Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," *Communication Monographs* 51 (March 1984): 3.
- ¹² Michael Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981, 1982), 229-30.
- ¹³ Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* 107-08.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* 172.
- ¹⁶ Donald E. Hall, *The Academic Self: An Owner's Manual* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2002) 14.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.* 14.
- ¹⁸ Not the student's real name