

Keynote Speech
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Thank you. It's an honor to be here and a special honor to be able to deliver these words to all of you and to my good friend, Martha Kanter.

First, to Martha or as she has been insisting recently, her Excellency the Chancellor: you go, girl!

Really, this is a big accomplishment for you professionally and one for which congratulations are deeply deserved. You have earned this position by listening and leading, by reaching out and reaching in, by working closely with students but also reaching out to be a leader in the Silicon Valley, by building coalitions across difference and by also having courage to hold your ground when there was conflict. I am impressed – and obviously, so were the folks who selected you.

But if congratulations are due today, they should really go elsewhere: to the students, to the faculty, and to the broader community: you are lucky to have Dr. Kanter as your academic leader. And I know that I speak on behalf of all of her older and trusted friends when I say: treat her right or, as our new governor might add: “I’ll be back”.

Why are you also so lucky? To see this, we must understand the role of the community colleges in general and Foothill-De Anza in particular.

You live in a valley of firsts: first in terms of employment and businesses in information and internet technology, first in terms of quality higher education institutions based on the region – Stanford, Berkeley, and yes, even grades-shy UC Santa Cruz -- and nearly near first in the state in terms of cultural diversity and immigrant presence.

Of course, the valley has also recently been propelled to the first ranks in some areas that are less salutary: first with some really wild business ideas about that internet, and more recently first in terms of the rapidity and depth of job loss in the state. Indeed, the region's passage from dot.com to dot.bomb has brought a steepness of economic decline that is unparalleled in post-war U.S. economic history: it's been sharper than in Detroit after that region was battered by Japanese auto imports and more rapid than the famous LA recession of the early 1990's, a recession that was triggered in part by the slowdown in defense spending and helped to trigger a civil unrest that was one of the worst in U.S. history.

Of course, the younger amongst us will note that those declines did have some upside: the economic disaster in Detroit helped create Eminem and the social frustrations in LA yielded Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, and a whole slew of West Coast rappers. We're still

waiting for the valley to step up with say, Silicon-T or PWA – programmers with attitude. It could happen.

Until then, we're left with an important question: what was behind the boom and how do we come back as a region and a community?

The answer, researchers like Anna Lee Saxenian of UC Berkeley tell us, is not simply elite colleges, top engineers, and fast-moving businesspeople. In her book, Regional Advantages, she singles out the community college system in general and DeAnza-Foothill, in particular. She argues that the system was superb at two important tasks: preparing people for university work and also preparing people for IT work through first-rate technical training. So you have a jewel of a district in California's overall educational framework, you have a jewel of a person to lead you in the coming years, and you and other community colleges have the challenge of being the back-bone of a state and regional recovery.

There is another and very compelling reason why the community college system is so important to all of us. Even as the economy boomed in 1990's, the gap between those winning and those left behind accelerated. By 2001, California, once a proud beacon of opportunity, had become the third or fourth most unequal state in the Union, depending on how you measure it. Moreover, it has been becoming more unequal faster than 45 other states – outpacing such paragons of progressive thinking as Mississippi and Alabama.

This is not sustainable – to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, a leader almost as visionary as Martha Kanter, a house that is so divided will not long stand. We cannot continue to grow when some remain stranded behind by lack of skills and lack of networks. And the community college, with its crucial role as the accessible entry point for all people, has become an essential linchpin in the battle for social justice and economic empowerment. Indeed, for immigrants it has become the equivalent of 19th century settlement houses – the community colleges provide orientation, education, and incorporation into the dream of America.

I know the role it can play. My father came to this county in the 1930's, immigrating with papers that were, shall we say, imperfect. When World War II came, he was given a choice of being deported or joining the U.S. Army and fighting in Europe. He couldn't decide and gave a penny to my cousin, Carlitos, to flip. My dad looked at the penny, then put it in his pocket and headed off for the dark days of war. He and the penny came back, and a generation later, his son is a full professor in the premier public university in the land – one I hope that many of you will attend.

It's a great story, it's an American story, and it is the wrong story. It's wrong because it's incomplete: it makes it sound like my family did it in isolation, individual immigrants driven only by our desires or *ganans*. But we had more than *ganans*: when my dad came home from the war, there was a GI bill that allowed him to buy a house and paid for him – a guy with a sixth grade education – to enroll at L.A. Trade Tech, a part of

that region's community college system. There, he learned about electricity, something that still baffles me when the lights in our house flicker, and was able to move up from being a janitor to being an air conditioner repairman.

He also had a union -- which meant that his wages were good enough to support a family, even as a janitor taking classes at night. We had decent public schools -- which meant that I could get an education that I could count on. And there was Affirmative Action -- which meant that a kid like me had a shot at a University willing to take a chance.

You know, that's the American story: the public support which make it possible for us to realize our individual dreams. And community colleges are an important and essential part of that story -- and sadly enough, because of the erosion of unions, public education, and Affirmative Action, the community colleges remain one of the few remaining supports for moving on up.

And that makes Martha Kanter's job all the more important—it is the community college system that in an era of both downsizing and diversity can help provide the fabric to weave us together and to give us the skills to make our future.

The challenge is clear, particularly for DeAnza-Foothill. The Valley, as I've said, has been first in many things. The new challenge is to be first in something really important: opportunity, inclusion, and social justice. We are lucky: these are Martha Kantor's values, these are Martha Kantor's goals, and with your help, they will become the realities for this district and for this valley.

So Martha, let me end where I began: you go, girl. You go toward this cherished prize of coming together as a people: the promise of America is in front of you, the winds of change are behind you, and lots of us got your back. Thank you.