Remarks Accepting the Henry Paley Memorial Award  
Of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities  
NAICU Luncheon, January 31, 2012

President Patricia McGuire  
Trinity Washington University

What a wonderful introduction by Tommesha Scott, a Trinity senior and D.C. Achievers Scholar! She is a remarkable example of our exceptional students today, and will be the first among our D.C. Achievers to graduate in May. Thanks as well to Herb Tillery, president of the College Success Foundation of D.C., to Monica Gray on the local team and CSF Board colleague Deborah Wilds who flew in from Seattle to be here today. You are wonderful friends!

Congratulations to the United Technologies Corporation for receiving the NAICU Award for Advocacy of Independent Higher Education. UTC has established the real gold standard for corporate support for higher education.

So many thanks to David Warren and the NAICU Board of Directors for this remarkable award. When David called me to tell me about it, I was stunned, and then when I saw the list of prior recipients, I felt so humble. So many of the previous recipients I have counted among my mentors, role models and friends. I was a young staff member at Georgetown when Father Tim Healy received the first Paley award. Our great friend Sr. Dorothy Ann Kelly of the College of New Rochelle, of such fond memory, was one of my true mentors early in my career; I also had so much respect for Sr. Andy Matesich of Ohio Dominican. My friend and College Success Foundation Board Member Sr. Kathleen Ross, retired president of Heritage University, received the award two years ago. And of course, the great Father Charles Currie, S.J. of AJCU has given me so much valuable advice over the years!

I accept with pride --- not for me in any boastful way, but for Trinity and all of the amazing students and alumnae, faculty and staff, trustees and benefactors who have worked so hard to create this remarkable story. We have a great Trinity group here today with representatives of all of those constituencies, and my thanks to you for your hard work are immense.

Trinity in 2012 is a very different place from the historic small Catholic college of prior eras. We are now a multi-dimensional university; our student body is more than 90% African American, Latina and from international backgrounds, and most come with many financial challenges. Yet, in many ways, we are not at all different from that historic Trinity that the Sisters of Notre Dame founded, as a matter of social justice, to make college accessible for people who were excluded. In 1897, those people were women who were barred from admission to Catholic University; and even today, we continue to serve mostly women, and a few very good men, who face considerable barriers to their dreams of achieving college degrees. We have sustained the ardent belief of the Sisters of Notre Dame that access to a great higher education is a matter of social justice.

In the District of Columbia, we have created a remarkable public-private partnership for college access --- truly a national model --- and I am so grateful to the partners who have helped to make
Trinity’s ‘paradigm shift’ possible: Herb Tillery and the College Success Foundation; Argelia Rodriguez (also a Trinity Trustee) and the D.C. College Access Program (DC-CAP); Emily Durso and friends from the Office of the State Superintendent (OSSE) who administer the D.C. Tuition Assistance Grant (DC TAG) Program.

Thanks to John Childers and all of my fellow presidents and colleagues in the Washington Consortium of Universities. Thanks as well to our valuable business partners, including Barbara Lang and the D.C. Chamber of Commerce, who is also a Trinity Trustee; Janice Abraham and colleagues at United Educators who have backed us up with great insurance and outstanding risk management education; Maureen Dwyer and the team at Goulston Storrs who have helped us to plan our campus development so well; and our very good friend Joe Horning who introduced Trinity to the wonderful neighborhoods east of the river. I know from long years at this work that institutional transformation is truly the work of an entire community, as the Trinity guests here today can attest.

I also accept this award for all of the gutsy, transformative small private colleges and universities here today --- Trinity is not alone in this work --- the small Catholic and religiously-affiliated colleges that have created new models of welcome and hospitality for diverse new populations of college students from all faith traditions. And I share this with the nation’s women’s colleges who have courageously reinvented themselves for new generations of students.

I accept with deep and abiding thanks to NAICU’s board and remarkable staff, not only for this award but for your many years of brilliant political analysis and unyielding advocacy on behalf of our colleges and students.

And to you, David Warren, truly one of the great leaders of American higher education, thank you!

Before stepping away from the podium, and reflecting on this very important annual meeting for NAICU, I have some final thoughts on our collective enterprise.

My brother and sister presidents: we have such a rare privilege --- the power to transform lives through higher education. We also are among the few of this world with the gifts of eloquence and large capacity for communication. We must use these gifts more effectively, not simply in defense of our institutions, but truly on behalf of those who need our powerful voices so mightily, especially our current and future students. We need to come out from behind the ermine and velvet curtains of academic politesse to raise our voices more urgently on the critical issues of this momentous time in human history, exemplifying leadership for those values we all proclaim in various ways our mission statements: honor, justice, equity, freedom.

Few issues are more serious for the long-term health of our society than the widening gap between rich and poor in this nation, as it also has been around the globe. The wealth gap is an abyss along and across which our students stand arrayed, with their families and communities and neighborhoods stretching far behind them to the horizons we cannot imagine. Those on the side of wealth and privilege are diminishing while we see the great surge of those on the side of economic stress and financial fear. We can and we must be the loudest voices and most
aggressive advocates on their behalf in a society that, in too many places, still does not comprehend the full meaning of equal opportunity and real educational justice.

Every human person has a right to be educated to the greatest extent possible. Education is the best hope this nation has to narrow the wealth gap and restore economic security for all. Surely, the wealthiest nation in the history of the earth can protect this right with economic and public policies that make funding for education the highest priority. We appreciate and applaud President Obama’s leadership on this issue.

Equally surely, every college and university in this room --- some very wealthy, some very constrained --- can find it in ourselves to open the doors a little wider, to welcome more students we might never have imagined before on the hallowed hallways of Old Main. We can surely show more courage in blowing past the old barriers to access: so, for example, our magazine rankings might slip a few notches if, instead of emphasizing selectivity rates (how many students we keep out), we promote higher Pell Grant recipient rates (how many low income students we serve). Tuition and cost are actually within our power to control, if we have the willpower to do so. We could call out rating agencies that exalt ever-higher tuition rates and ever-lower discount rates while penalizing institutions that serve larger proportions of low income students of color. Just a few examples, we could cite many others.

Every human person has a right to an education that opens intellect and imagination to the potential for those wild, risky, radical ideas never expressed before. Protecting this right is the whole point of academic freedom. The essential freedom of liberal learning is the distinguishing characteristic of higher learning versus the lower grades. The most robust exercises of academic freedom defy easy containment in tests and measurements and data collection. Oh, yes --- assess we must, and assess we will! But let our assessment methods render clearly the quality and frequency of our expressive use of academic freedom to advance genuine higher learning.

Our students have the right to have a truly higher education. The diminishment of our purpose in higher learning is a constant threat today. I am struck by the fact that even as some public officials promote broader access to college, at the same time they insinuate a disturbing disregard for the true nature of higher learning. My students at Trinity today have as much right to spend long hours plumbing Shakespeare or Chaucer or John Locke as I did.

Promoting access to college on the one hand, while emphasizing more applied learning at the expense of the liberal arts on the other hand, betrays our purpose. Let’s be clear: a college education is not the same as job training. Yes, if we do our work in teaching and learning well, our graduates must and will be employed as they choose, and, over time, in work they might not even be able to imagine today. But assessing the worth of a college education by the factoids of early salaries measures the entirely wrong educational values. Do we really want a system that rewards schools for producing more investment bankers of dubious ethical capacity while punishing those whose graduates choose relatively low-paying careers in teaching, social work or nonprofit service?

We certainly want all of our students to earn degrees, but let’s be very wary of the increasingly loud message that we should make it easier to graduate from college. This popular mantra
suggests that academic rigor is not important. The rhetoric on graduation rates, using the notoriously flawed IPEDS data, will have the unintended but inevitable effect of more graduates with less education, since the one clear way to improve completion rates is to forsake genuine learning in favor of social promotion. Broad access should not mean easy graduation. Completion is certainly the goal, but the pathways to completion for many new populations of students today are very different from the traditional routes enshrined in IPEDS data.

Our students have the right to learn in free and independent colleges and universities. Whether public or private, all must be independent in mind and heart. Higher education is one of the great counterweights to government in a free society. We love our friends in government and pledge our cooperation and partnership. But we are not government. We are independent from government in order to fulfill our most essential purpose in the democracy, which is to teach our students how to enjoy, employ and advance the freedoms of our society --- including the freedom to call out the government when it forgets that it works for the people, not the other way around.

Yes, we must be accessible, affordable, and accountable, and so many of us have been for a very long time. We can do even more without sacrificing our free and independent voice. Our stewardship of this shared enterprise in higher education demands our constant advocacy not for our own comforts, not even for our institutions per se, but for the students whose lives we are privileged to share, whose intellects we are responsible to enlarge, whose hopes and dreams we advance a little more each day through the power of true higher learning. The good we make possible for our students will bear great results for our nation.

Thank you!