

Pell 50th Anniversary Remarks

Suzanne M. Rivera, Ph.D.

February 7, 2022

Thank you, President Spina. And many thanks to NAICU President Barbara Mistick for the invitation to be with you all this evening. I also want to express appreciation for the food service workers who made this lovely meal possible.

With apologies to those of you who *were* hoping to hear from a sports hero or a Hollywood star, I am deeply honored to have been asked to share my own Pell Grant story and why I'm so passionate about increasing access to higher education.

To prepare for this talk, I reflected upon my unlikely path to a college presidency. I wondered how vulnerable I should be with regard to sharing personal stories of adversity as the daughter of a refugee, raised in poverty-- such as doing homework by candlelight because the utilities were turned off for lack of payment, or the indignity of being made by my elementary school to stand in a separate line in the cafeteria for the free-lunch kids.

In the end, I decided to focus, not on a detailed depiction of my austere childhood, but instead on the major turning point in my life: my arrival at college, made possible by financial aid, including the Pell Grant.

In 1987, I arrived in Providence, Rhode Island to attend Brown University (a NAICU member institution)-- where, I should note, our Senator at the time was...Claiborne Pell.

I brought with me only a suitcase I'd received as a high school graduation gift, a trunk, and a black garbage bag containing my bedding from home. There was no shopping trip to "decorate" my dorm room-- I literally had one set of bedding and it went home with me when I'd return for holiday breaks.

I wasn't sure what to expect of college life. I imagined it would be academically rigorous and I thought there would be parties (because I'd seen Animal House). But I didn't know how unfamiliar it would feel to me because I didn't understand the cultural landscape of the academy-- something we now sometimes call "the hidden curriculum of higher education."

Despite the challenges of adjusting to life at an elite college, I knew it was a privilege to be there. I took classes with brilliant professors (including a young Fayneese Miller, now President of Hamline University-- a NAICU member institution). I went to lectures given by world leaders, artists, and thinkers whose names I recognized only from newspapers and books. I joined student organizations and clubs. I got a summer research internship. I began to think of myself as a scholar.

None of this would have been possible without my Pell Grant, and for that I am deeply grateful. Because I know that the liberal arts education I received in college fundamentally changed me. It opened my mind and my heart to new experiences. It introduced me to people I never would have met (including my spouse, with whom I co-founded a club for students on

financial aid). It encouraged me to take intellectual risks. Above all, it gave me the tools to forge a career focused on advancing opportunities for other talented and deserving students, who— by happenstance of birth— are unable to afford college tuition.

And the Pell Grant didn't only help me. Two of my younger siblings attended private colleges with the support of Pell Grants. My sister went to Sarah Lawrence College (a NAICU member institution) and my brother went to Roger Williams College— now Roger William University (also a NAICU member institution). Even more remarkable, my single mom entered college — at age 42— with a Pell Grant and completed her degree at Brandeis University (a NAICU member institution) while working two jobs and parenting my younger brother who is intellectually disabled.

This is why it was profoundly moving for me to see so many people stand when President Spina invited us to reveal our membership in the “Pell Proud” club. We are the visible proof that— in making education accessible for others— a modest investment of taxpayer dollars can compound its value in the benefit to society. Opening doors of opportunity for young people who will make the world better. That is what Pell Grants can do.

So, while I am honored to share my Pell story with you today, I think the real star of this show is not a sports hero or a Hollywood star, or an unlikely college president. It's the Pell Grant. A program dreamed up and advocated for by visionaries who understood that one girl's journey is an anomaly— an exception. But, what truly has the power to transform a society is a policy that fosters economic mobility on a grand scale, for millions of students whose lives are changed by education.

I have been the President of Macalester College in St. Paul, MN since June 1 of 2020. It was a tough time to start a new job in an unfamiliar city. But I knew then, as I know now, that there are few callings more rewarding than leading an institution devoted to building a better future. With the same idealism and commitment to equity that inspired the Pell Grant, Macalester routinely provides need-based aid to nearly 70% of its students— including our international students. 21% of our U.S. students are Pell-Eligible and 16% of all students identify as first-generation college goers. We partner with QuestBridge, and the Posse Program, and TeenSharp, and College Possible, and College Track, and the Mellon Foundation, and United World Colleges—among other programs— to seek out talented and deserving students from every walk of life and to make the transformative power of a liberal arts education available to them.

I see how hard our Pell-supported students work. I know what extra burdens they are carrying. I understand viscerally what it means to have to clear your own path as you go. It inspires me every day. And it inspires my senior leadership team, many of whom themselves were first-generation college goers. Of eight members of my cabinet, four received Pell Grants. That is incredibly powerful testimony about the power of Pell.

Ambassador Rice, Commander Pell: I am here because of your ancestors. I will forever be grateful for their work to make a college education possible for me (and my siblings and my mom). And I hope in some small way to honor their legacies through my work, and through our shared efforts to increase Pell Grants for future generations of students.

Thank you.