

CEOs for Cities - The Opportunity Dividend

Remarks by David Kalsbeek, November 6, 2008

Background: CEOs for Cities is a national network of urban leaders dedicated to creating next generation cities that hold the answers to many of the challenges our nation faces. On Nov. 6, 2008, David Kalsbeek, senior vice president for the Division of Enrollment Management and Marketing at DePaul University, spoke at the CEOs for Cities Fall 2008 national meeting—Capturing the City Dividend: The Next Four Years. This national meeting agenda identified specific steps cities can take in three action areas—Talent Dividend, Green Dividend, and Opportunity Dividend—to increase their own and the nation’s wealth by billions of dollars annually through bottom-up strategies. Kalsbeek was part of the “Opportunity Dividend” panel, which explored strategies that work to reduce poverty. These are the comments prepared for that panel presentation.

Thank you for your invitation to be part of this panel and comment on the *opportunity dividend* that we can realize by addressing poverty in our urban centers.

I’m intrigued by the work you are doing and the perspective you are bringing to bear on one of the most central issues of our time—the role of cities in our country’s regeneration. I’m particularly intrigued by the way in which you seek to reframe these issues as opportunities, and particularly by the way you see cities as part of the solution rather than the problem. That is a concern we share at DePaul University—an urban institution with an identity and mission inseparable from the city it calls home. Providing access to educational opportunities for students, many of whom are of the most limited means, has long been the cornerstone of our mission and our distinctive purpose.

I am here on behalf of Fr. Dennis Holtschneider, DePaul’s president, who was unable to attend the conference today, but is a stalwart champion for ensuring that extraordinary educational opportunities are accessible not only by those with the means but by all those with the dreams for educational advancement.

Insofar as I do come at this topic from the perspective of a university administrator, it’s pretty predictable that I affirm at the outset that college access is the driver of any substantial *opportunity dividend*, and that it is in educational attainment where the *opportunity dividend* and the *talent dividend* intersect. In my comments here today, I intend to give one illustration of the promise and the potential that lies at that nexus of talent and opportunity, an illustration of what can happen when universities partner with urban school districts in reframing the challenges we face in this regard.

I’m going to talk about one specific aspect of our enrollment strategy at DePaul—that which centers on our partnerships with Chicago Public Schools—but I would be remiss if I didn’t mention at least two other important aspects of DePaul’s commitment to the city, namely (a) its investment in its urban presence, and (b) the way we build Chicago into the curriculum.

(a) You talk of “core vitality,” that is, the importance of urban cores ensuring urban regeneration. We know something about that. In the sixties, DePaul considered moving from Lincoln Park, then a struggling neighborhood, but chose not to abandon that neighborhood. The consequences of that decision are now a large part of our success as a national university. And in the past couple of decades we have invested heavily in our downtown campus in the south Loop and played a major role along with other area institutions in its revitalization. DePaul’s commitment to its urban presence is not just a

commitment to a place, but a commitment to a purpose—an urban purpose that is inseparable from our institutional identity and mission.

(b) Even more than that, DePaul continually engages the city of Chicago to promote, extend and enhance learning across our vast curricula. Immersion in Chicago is in fact core to our curriculum and a characteristic of our pedagogy, and is a defining element of the curricular and co-curricular experience of all DePaul students.

As the largest Catholic university in the nation, DePaul attracts students from across the country and especially the Midwest; and it is the city that attracts students here as much as the university itself. However, the majority of our students are drawn from the Chicago metropolitan area and a significant number from the urban core. It is a point of pride that nearly a third of our freshmen are the first in their families to attend college and that one quarter of our students are from families among the lowest-income bracket in Chicago, many at that level of poverty targeted in the CEOs for Cities research shared at this meeting.

Of course, Catholic universities have long led the way as institutions of social mobility in our cities. It should be of no surprise that the average family income at DePaul is substantially less than at the flagship public university in Illinois and that the percentage of students from poverty-level backgrounds is much greater at DePaul than at flagship public institutions, despite the fact that our tuition is nearly three times higher. I suspect we'd find a similar dynamic in the profile of Catholic and public universities in all of the cities represented in this conference.

At DePaul, the high number and high proportion of poverty-level students is not just a function of our place but of our purpose. Nevertheless, our ability to sustain that profile and that purpose is increasingly strained and constrained by many factors, not the least of which is the dynamic of matching talent and opportunity within the Chicago Public Schools.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) enroll more than 400,000 students, with more than 100,000 enrolled in 137 high schools. Of these students, more than 90% are students of color and 85% are from low-income families. Despite its clear commitment to transform public elementary and secondary education in this city—a transformation that has indeed been dramatic and commendable—still, only 50% of CPS graduates go on to college, and a much smaller percentage than that enroll at a four-year college. The figures are more sobering still when you look at students of color. Less than a third of African-American CPS graduates go on to a four year college (and it's more like 25% for African-American males), while the figure for Hispanic/Latino students is even lower at 23%. Though they graduate, too few poor students—even those with great academic potential—go on to college, especially to four-year colleges, and therefore fail to drive up the low educational attainment rates in our urban core that are the drivers of high poverty rates.

The issues are indeed very complex and have roots far deeper than the schools, of course. But at DePaul, we would argue that while educational *opportunity and outcomes* unfortunately reflect the socioeconomic divisions in our society and particularly in our urban centers, this is not the case for *talent*. Talent spans the entire socioeconomic spectrum. Yet part of the systemic problem has to do with the fact that the traditional *measures* we use to gauge academic potential

are imperfect indicators of talent, especially for low-income students. The way we measure talent, especially of poor students, further widens the chasm between the haves and the have nots. So inequities in economic opportunities are mirrored in inequities of academic opportunities since they are mirrored not so much in talent per se—but in the ways we *assess* talent.

Yet most believe we need indicators of talent and potential because of the imbalance of supply and demand, because we have more aspiring youth than we have exceptional educational programs to serve them, and we unfortunately need to restrict access through *academic selectivity*. Gauging talent and potential through the processes of academic selectivity is how we typically connect talent with opportunity; doing that better and more equitably is one of the more important means for realizing *the opportunity dividend*.

Let me elaborate on that. When I ask people to name the most academically selective institutions in Chicago, most name University of Chicago or Northwestern University, or some of the premier private high schools. So it's often surprising for them to learn how truly selective a small set of our Chicago Public high schools are: we have more than 12,000 students competing to get into about 2,000 available spaces in just 8 of the 137 high schools in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

A few years ago, part of the challenge we might be addressing here at this meeting would be how to convince inner-city low-income students to aspire to a college education. Now, the growing majority of public school children in Chicago (more than 80% according to the Consortium for Chicago School Research) aspire to go to college. But when we see that 12,000 of them are competing to get into only 2,000 available spaces in the selective high schools, we are seeing indicators of a problem of supply, not demand—of *opportunity*, not *talent*. And the consequences of this dynamic are starkly reflected in the fact that these 8 selective high schools account for a third of all of the CPS graduates who actually go to college, and almost half of those who go to a selective four-year institution. Yes, half of all CPS graduates who go to a selective four-year university come from 8 of the 137 high schools.

I submit that achieving the *opportunity dividend* means attending to the 10,000 other aspiring kids who just didn't get into the selective schools and who, data suggest, are as a result less likely to advance to college, despite their aspiration to do so.

So you see, making that first cut is a big step toward making future cuts. In other words, selectivity begets selectivity—and opportunity hinges not on talent per se, but on *metrics* of talent that are the focus of that selectivity process.

What's to be done?

Since we know that the quality and intensity of high school education is the best predictor of not just college access but college attainment, one of the most exciting developments is how CPS has been extending quality initiatives beyond this very limited number of selective high schools that are producing its college-bound grads. Let me tell you about one of them and how we've partnered with it.

Among many new initiatives, CPS has introduced the International Baccalaureate (IB) program as an alternative curriculum in 14 of its neighborhood high schools. The IB program is designed for students in grades 11-12 (though a middle years IB program has also been established) and offers courses for the IB diploma, which is a prestigious secondary school credential recognized worldwide by institutions of higher learning. Nationally, the IB option is often introduced within highly selective schools as an alternative college prep track to options such as Advanced Placement and as a “boutique” gateway program for elite university entrance. Around the world and in the United States, the IB program is typically an alternative curriculum offered to and chosen by the more advanced and advantaged students.

But CPS now has the largest concentration of IB programs of any *urban* school district in the world—indeed any district—and it has established these rigorous programs in non-selective neighborhood schools serving populations that are overwhelmingly minority and from low-income families. For that very reason, it is a distinctive initiative attracting worldwide attention.

And while the numbers are still small—only about 2 or 3% of CPS seniors are graduating from an IB program currently—the implications are profound.

As the Consortium for Chicago School Research shows, these IB students are coming from poorer neighborhoods than the selective high school students, and from families with fewer educational resources at their disposal. While their test scores *entering* high school were *lower* than those of the selective school students (in other words, they didn’t make the first cut of selectivity due to traditional measures), they are *graduating* with better grades than the selective school students and going on to college at a very high rate. While their standardized test scores are more modest (around a 22 on the ACT on average), they are enrolling in four-year colleges at almost the same rate—80%—as CPS graduates with ACT scores of 27 and above.

DePaul works closely with these IB programs in the lowest income neighborhood schools through our recently established Center for Access and Attainment, and has earned a reputation locally, nationally and internationally as an “IB-friendly” university; so much so, that now about one out of every five of all IB students in CPS apply to DePaul. Those IB graduates who enroll at DePaul are more likely to be of the lowest economic strata. While their ACT scores are well below that of others, the important thing (and I’d suggest the most important thing) is how well they are doing at DePaul. By any measure—grade point average, retention rates or graduation rates—they are outperforming their profile and other students from the city by a considerable margin. We believe that this type of success is what happens when alternative measures and perspectives are used to connect talent with opportunity in the college selectivity process.

There are several lessons here, and reflect the following tripartite commitment.

1. There are lessons here related to the potential for extending rigorous educational opportunities in novel ways as CPS is trying to do. Traditional college-prep educational programs often begin with selectivity at their core, and are tailored to the few. There is ample evidence that there are better predictors of talent than standardized test scores; programs like IB in the neighborhood high schools offer evidence of college potential that do

not disadvantage the disadvantaged as much as the measures currently provided by the testing industry.

2. There are lessons on how much we can learn through disciplined inquiry into how the plight of the poor in our primary and secondary schools affect long term educational attainment and opportunity. I mentioned the Consortium for Chicago School Research, an organization based at University the Chicago that is bringing great insight and evidence to the table about educational outcomes for the poor; and this research is not just an academic exercise but is analysis designed to inform policy and shape programs and progress. I strongly urge you to look at the Consortium's work and see how similar research and policy centers can be structured and funded at the research universities in your cities. It is, so far as I know, one of the few large-scale efforts of its type and is surely a model for other cities to follow.
3. There are provocative lessons here about the stratification of higher education institutions in America.

When we think of college access strategies in our cities we often seem caught between mass access strategies on the one hand, where we move large numbers of low-income students into low-cost two-year institutions; or on the other hand, strategies that cherry pick the few, very best students and get them into the top institutions in the country (often on full tuition scholarships). Both have some merit, but both likely have limited potential for addressing the talent and opportunity dividend. The former approach is often a revolving door of college participation with no eventual attainment, and the latter is not a scalable solution to the pervasive inequities in our society.

As mayors and CEOs addressing the opportunity dividend, you will likely find that the real action regarding college access and attainment for the least advantaged in your cities will be at mid-tier four-year institutions. These are the universities that are equipped to promote educational opportunity and degree attainment for the poor precisely because they are able, and increasingly willing, to shift from traditional metrics of talent (e.g., standardized tests). These universities also partner with programs in the secondary schools that provide a broad base of students the opportunity to demonstrate their potential and talent—despite not excelling on traditional measures of college readiness.

Here's my final observation:

It's been fascinating to watch the growing attention to how the most prestigious research universities in the country are making unprecedented commitments from their endowments to help poor students enroll. Yet there has been little attention to how inconsequential these commitments are. The typical conclusion is that there will be more poor students at these prestigious institutions as more financial aid becomes available. However, I'm afraid the more damning indictment is this: the very reason these institutions are prestigious in the first place is because they don't enroll the poor and in fact can't enroll the poor; the metrics that grant prestige are the very metrics that disadvantage the poor. The measures they use to secure and cement that prestige also ensure that these highly selective institutions' best claim to fame is and forever will be their ability to make a silk purse out of silk. Despite evidence that alternative metrics of talent

may be better predictors of college success for the poor, the traditional metrics of talent that these institutions are wedded to in making their admission decisions are the metrics that bring them prestige in the eyes of the American public, corporate leaders, and philanthropic foundations. These traditional metrics will never favor the poor, so these institutions cannot — and likely can never—be at the helm of the opportunity dividend.

It will be the mid-tier universities in your cities, those that are willing to forego the obsession with traditional notions of prestige, who will be more likely candidates for thinking differently about how best to measure the talent of low-income students in novel ways, and are therefore much more likely to partner meaningfully and substantially with local urban school districts in making this intersection of talent and opportunity a pivotal part of our regenerative strategies for our cities.