

Educating youth in an urban university: First things first!

Opening speech for the Kean Federation of Teachers

9/13/06

By: Maria del Carmen Rodriguez, President

Good afternoon, all union members and other colleagues who may be here with us today. Brothers and sisters, it is with great joy that I salute you as we begin a new semester (fall 06). I am hopeful that you took advantage of the sunny summer days to rest and re-energize your bodies, minds and spirits. I am also hopeful that all of us have come back with inspiring goals of achieving the solidarity needed in meeting the challenges ahead of us.

Many union officers have spent a number of hours during the summer tying up loose ends and getting us ready for the new academic cycle. We just sponsored a breakfast for newly hired faculty. Five officers of the union presented the new faculty with useful information. Many of them joined as full union members and received a welcome package. I urge the rest of their colleagues as well as any others who are not full members of the union to do the same. By becoming a full dues paying member, you fully support our daily efforts and initiatives. I also use this opportunity to welcome all new employees and I ask them to stand up so that we can recognize you. For the rest of the membership, do whatever you can to make their period of adjustment as smooth as possible.

Now, let me focus on my basic message to you today. The times we live in are full of challenges and stressors both at Kean as well as on a global scale. We are in the business of educating the new generations of this local community, state, nation and world. During the summer, I did some reading relevant to my professional area of expertise and also for my relaxation. One of the books that truly stayed with me was the memoirs written by Victor Villasenor, a Chicano professor. The title of the book is *Burro/Genius* (NY, Harper Collins, 2004).

The book vividly narrates the remarkable journey of this man from his humble beginnings dealing with limited economic means, limited written English skills and a severe learning disability to a successful career as a published writer. Because of the limitations mentioned, he was constantly ridiculed by teachers and peers alike. Victor was endowed with three remarkable gifts: anger that instilled his thirst for justice,

perseverance and a powerful imagination. Despite the odds he confronted, he put his gifts to good use and maintained total focus on his main goal: to become a writer and inspire teachers in America. At the present time, Victor has been compared to the exquisite talents of John Steinbeck and Gabriel Garcia Marquez (the last one been a recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature).

In his book, Villasenor makes a plea to all teachers: work with the whole student, not just with his/her brain. He highlights the importance of the environment that promotes free inquiry and self-exploration led by a caring teacher. We must allow the students to become fully engaged in their learning process so that they can genuinely explore their dreams, fears, ideas, values and sorrows. Villasenor is convinced that being an educator is one of the most prestigious occupations, and it gives us great power and responsibility. With our craft, we help students discover their full potentials.

The students we serve at Kean University present us with similar challenges as the ones experienced by this author. Just as an example, I have been interacting with a Kean undergraduate student for the last year. He comes from a working class family with a strong work ethics. He has witnessed domestic violence repeatedly at home which distracts him from his academic work. His confidence has been shaken by the tragedy at home and he has been unable to fully confide in the counselors assigned to him for fear of retaliation. In spite of all, the young man finished the spring semester with some low and high grades. The mother constantly reaches out to me so that her son can be helped and complete his education, so vital to his future. Another example is a female graduate student, mother of three, who was doing work to complete her advanced degree. One day, when she came to discuss an assignment, she asked for advice. She confessed that after being mugged at a mall parking lot, she developed panic attacks that were making her life miserable.

These are just two of the many students we serve who are desperately trying to succeed against serious odds. Some of the barriers are personal, a lot of them are family-based, and some of them are exacerbated by the working conditions we endure right where we work.

The most important challenges faced by this urban university are the insufficient public funds assigned to Kean and all other public institutions in higher education, the questionable use of entrusted funds by the Administration, the hiring patterns favoring transient over resident faculty and the complete lack of oversight that has negatively impacted this institution and all other sister institutions due to the elimination of the Commission on Higher Education.

Let's take a look at the institutional budget. The administration claims that the reduced funds total \$12 million dollars. The analysis conducted by the union treasurer Prof. Ellen Comerford (based on the data reported by the Administration to the University Planning Council and the statistics disseminated by the Governor's office) concludes that the university has lost only 4.3 million dollars. We need to ask what the Administration is planning to do with the non-reported funds. Answering this question is part of their accountability as a public institution.

Let's look at the faculty ratio. Kean hires about 900 adjuncts and there are about 384 full time faculty. The number of full time faculty continues to be at the same level as when the student body totaled 8,000. The Administration needs to explain a basic question. How do you expect 13,000 students to be fully engaged in their learning process with an unbalanced ratio of almost two adjuncts to every full time faculty? For the record, we know what good work adjuncts do. But it is obvious that a faculty with job instability cannot commit to the same level of energy and concentration as full time faculty if the professional is worried about being employed when the semester is over. How does this University define learning? Just by looking at the hiring practices, how much value is placed on students' learning? Are we truly working for greatness? Are we just paying lip service to greatness? How does each department's academic integrity fare with this labor crisis we just described? What is the direct impact of this hiring pattern on students' retention rates? Does the Administration see the connection?

Let's compare how the Rutgers University Administration responded to their budget situation. The Star Ledger reporter Kelly Keyboer discussed recent changes implemented there in her article of 9/2/06. A Rutgers spokesperson indicated that they have given 185 layoff notices and not even one was for full time faculty. The spokesperson commented: "We did our best to protect our academic units." We commend the Kean President for also not laying off faculty. But the secretive budgetary process at KU stands in sharp contrast to the transparency of that at Rutgers, where their president opened all the books for public scrutiny and to foster dialogue and collaboration in pursuit of consensus.

As we all know, Kean has restricted travel funds and sabbaticals for full time faculty in the most recent years. These are basic resources for faculty's scholarship and intellectual renewal. As a matter of fact, these programs cost very little and the sabbaticals save the University money. More and more faculty members and professional staff are given administrative duties which distract them from their basic responsibilities: teaching, scholarship and continued self-improvement. It is faculty's scholarship activities, professional growth and/or supporting students. It is faculty's scholarship that enriches programs, departments, our teaching, and our connection to students.

Similar challenges are confronted daily by our professional staff and librarians who work demanding schedules but are constantly denied opportunities for professional advancement and promotion.

Despite these unsolved challenges, the University is going full steam ahead to operating a satellite in Ocean County and “nearby” China. The University talks about serious budget cuts while it diverts financial as well as faculty resources to these new locations. These proposals for expansion were almost unilaterally conceived and with no significant input from most union members before its stamp of approval. Let’s remember an old saying: “one, who stretches beyond realistic boundaries, ends up with empty hands.”

Our professional work implies amazing honor and excitement. We grow and so does Kean. Kean University has undergone many face lifts in recent years. This is fantastic. We welcome change. It is an integral part of the process of teaching and learning. But it is more responsible to embrace change that is consistent with our mission statement. The Union has consistently encouraged suggestions from its members to help guide its changes. It was direct member involvement that led to agreements such as the Untenured Faculty Research Initiative, TRFI, improved Range Adjustments, streamlined 1<sup>st</sup> hear faculty review, and others. Every decision made by this University should be made not just to bring revenues but with a comprehensive analysis of its impact on students already admitted. Where is the Faculty Senate’s voice as students of this university are greatly taxed with higher tuition and fees every year for fewer services and less full time employees to assist them?

As for the Union, we would continue to be vigilant of our contractual rights. We would continue defending our members in all areas where their rights are violated. In fact, Kean is at the top on the numbers of grievances filed when compared to all other eight sister institutions in the State during the last three years. We would continue to put pressure on the Governor’s office with the coordinated help of the State Council so that the Administration responds to the budget questions that they have been unable to answer.

We have plans to support new faculty by offering a mentoring program conducted by experienced faculty under the consultation of a distinguished Kean retired professor- Dr. Beverly Amick. She plans to start training the mentors pretty soon. We also plan to have a health fair during this academic year to bring preventive information to all our members and increase quality of life issues. Finally, we know that if we want to impact the institutional balance of power at this University, we would have to be more politically involved in this city’s politics. I urge all members to become politically active and demand

accountability from local legislators whose decisions so gravely affect us every day in the workplace and beyond.

I sincerely wish that we are able to share our talents and perspectives with one another as we deal with the challenges that characterize this university. By sharing talents with each other, we would stay updated, vibrant, and meaningfully connected to the Union and our students.

There is no single employee that does not play a significant role at this institution. Trustees, administrators, secretaries, professional staff, librarians, resident and adjunct faculty, custodians, police officers and maintenance workers, all play a vital role in the sustenance of the organization. When a University decides unilaterally and does not allow for meaningful input from all these constituencies, our mission suffers. Most important, students pay a negative price for this lack of meaningful governance in wasted funds and misguided efforts.

I wish you all wisdom and stamina as we plan lessons, ideas and activities that we try in our classrooms. Let us serve the students with the respect, dignity and inspiration that they deserve. Invest in their minds, bodies and spirits as the author of Burro/Genius reminded us to do. We would be growing in mutual understanding with our students and putting in practice the university mission statement. It is this conscientious work that makes us all proud union members. In closing, I leave you with one of my favorite quotes:

“LIFE MAY NOT BE THE PARTY WE HOPED FOR, BUT WHILE WE ARE HERE, WE MIGHT AS WELL DANCE”.

Let us all remain focused and unified in the best principles of unionism for the good of our students and our beloved university. Thanks very much.