

Inauguration & Convocation 2017, September 27, 2017

José Luis Cruz, President, Lehman College
The City University of New York

I so deeply appreciate your presence here today.

To my partner, Rima, thank you for the life of love and advocacy that we've built together; and know that—just as it was true the first day we met—“entre paños y derivas, por los mares de mi vida, hoy me veo siempre bogando a ti.”

To my children, family, and friends, thank you for your love, your belief in me, and your faith in us.

To Chairman Thompson, Chancellor Milliken, and the Trustees of The City University of New York, thank you for placing in my care the fortunes of this most noble institution.

To our University leaders, colleagues from sister colleges and schools, elected officials, public servants, corporate leaders, community organizers, friends of the College, and friends of the Bronx, thank you for your ongoing support and for doing so much on behalf of so many.

To our Lehman students, faculty, staff, and alumni, thank you for trusting me to lead our collective efforts into the second half of our College's first century.

To my mentors, thank you for inspiring me by your example and for so eloquently establishing the imperatives that I hope will become hallmarks of Lehman College's third presidency.

And to President Ricardo Fernández, thank you for the legacy of your leadership.

During your 26 years as our College's second president, Lehman became one of our nation's top engines of opportunity—recently ranked 4th in the country for our demonstrated ability to propel large numbers of low-income students to the middle class and beyond.

President Fernández, please stand so we can show you our appreciation for the exemplary life of service you have led.

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Lehman's third presidency unfolds at a time of cyber confusion, political disruption, social turmoil, economic inequality, and climate upheaval.

But this is unremarkable—our first two presidencies were likewise launched at times of notable geopolitical change and civil unrest.

What is remarkable is how our campus community has always managed to harness the energy of turbulent times to fuel the next stage of its storied existence.

Lehman's story is the story of the rebellious faculty of Hunter in the Bronx, who gained their independence from Hunter on Park Avenue and went on to transform what was then a 37-year-old branch campus—with its own illustrious history—into what today is one of our country's premier public urban-serving institutions.

An institution that has in turn transformed the lives of over 75,000 alumni and impacted hundreds of thousands of others through its educational, cultural, and community outreach programs and events.

An institution which today is privileged to educate more than 13,000 talented students who embody the aspirations of over 140 different ancestries, and who exhibit the drive of those who strive to make their life here, in the world's greatest city, the city of New York.

Lehman's story is the story of a liberal arts college that upon its founding hoped to “enrich the human spirit and offer to as many as [could] realize their potential, the opportunity to be so enriched.”

A college that today—notwithstanding the growth of its professional programs—remains fiercely committed to extending the benefits of a liberal education to all of its students, regardless of the course of study they choose to pursue.

Lehman's story is the story of a community—of teachers, scholars, and learners—who over time rejected an insular identity and instead embraced the role it was (in hindsight) always destined to play: the role of a quintessential anchor institution in the Bronx.

The words of Leonard Lief—the College's founding president—illuminate that evolution.

In his 1969 inaugural speech, he stated that “for better or for worse” colleges were meant to provide “the milieu for thinking about great issues, not for acting on them.”

But 20 years later, when asked if Lehman College would take a leadership position in helping the Bronx address some of the social ills of the day, his response was more in line with what one would expect today from an invested steward of place.

“Yes,” he responded. “It would be criminal for us to sit by the wayside.”

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In launching our College's third presidency, we have a rare opportunity to set the stage for how we want the next chapter of our story to read.

It was with this in mind that at our Spring 2017 State of the College, I challenged our campus community to double from 45,000 to 90,000 the number of high-quality degrees and credentials that our students are expected to earn by the year 2030.

At the time, I described 90x30 as a grand challenge that, if met, would dramatically increase the likelihood that children currently attending schools in the Bronx—and the surrounding region—would benefit from the value of a Lehman education, either because they would one day earn a Lehman degree themselves or a parent or relative would do so.

Today, I want to add that 90x30 is also a value proposition.

It is a value proposition to compel change agents in the public and private sectors to invest in our venture to become the top contributor to educational attainment in the Bronx.

Change agents who understand that increasing the percentage of adults with a postsecondary education is a national imperative; who feel that access to a high-quality education is one of the most important civil rights issues of our generation; and who recognize that our College's success in the Bronx would serve as a powerful image—a model—for other urban-serving institutions across the country who likewise aim to better serve the underserved.

And, most importantly, I want to add that 90x30 is meant to be a catalyst for the urgent action required to create the conditions whereby the promise of prosperity of a resurgent Bronx is within reach of all those who seek to meet their full potential.

Now, I'll be the first to admit that creating such conditions is no easy feat.

The Bronx is moving forward and trending upward—median income levels are up—and unemployment rates are at historic lows.

But the borough's poverty rates are on the rise—and not all families are positioned to benefit from our booming economy.

The largest demographic living in poverty in the Bronx today? Females aged 25-34.

The income mobility rate for children in poor families? Among the lowest in the nation.

The growth rate of the school-age population in the borough? Among the fastest in the state.

And at 28 percent, the Bronx is next to last in educational attainment of the 62 counties in New York State.

The magnitude of this challenge could paralyze most.

But imagining what a better-educated Bronx would look like provides a powerful impetus for us to forge ahead.

If all Bronx residents 25 and older who today have at least a high school diploma earned a bachelor's degree, their fortunes and those of the borough would be vastly different.

These residents would earn an additional \$6 billion in annual income and generate an additional \$2.8 billion in annual tax revenue.

More than 57,000 would be lifted out of poverty, and an additional 43,000 would receive employer-provided health insurance.

And tens of thousands would no longer need Medicaid, supplemental nutrition, or housing assistance.

So forge ahead we must.

And as a nationally recognized vehicle of upward mobility, Lehman must assume a lead role in the story that is taking shape as we speak—the story that one day will recount the renaissance of the Bronx.

Because, borrowing the words of President Lief, “it would be criminal for us to sit by the wayside.”

Now, I need to ask you to please indulge the baseball fan and physics nerd in me for a minute.

Are there any Yankees fans in the house? Good, I expected as much.

Any physics nerds? I'm pleasantly surprised!

Just as the trajectory of an Aaron Judge home run is determined at the point of contact by the baseball's launch angle and exit velocity, so too will the trajectory of our students' success be shaped by our initial approach to 90x30.

The endgame may be in 2030 but the journey to 90,000 requires deliberate, intentional action today.

To this end, here are five priorities for the years ahead:

First, we will build our institutional capacity to not only expand access, increase completion rates, and reduce time to degree, but also to ensure that our graduates become educated, empowered, and engaged members of their communities.

We will do this by increasing the net number of full-time faculty and staff and expanding professional advancement opportunities for all those who do their part to advance our mission.

Second, we will establish a robust data analytics operation to accelerate the graduation rate gains that in the past five years have established Lehman as the University's fastest improving senior college.

We will do this by deploying Lehman 360 and other best-of-class information intelligence tools that will provide us the actionable data we need to improve the effectiveness of our educational pipelines, enhance the impact of our pedagogy, and streamline our academic and administrative policies and procedures.

Third, we will optimize our resource allocation practices, continue to increase revenue from grants and contracts, and work to expand our virtual and physical infrastructure—including breaking ground next year on our new 50,000-square-foot, \$53 million Nursing Teaching and Research Center; and advocating on behalf of the 160,000-square-foot Phase II Science Hall project currently contemplated in our five-year capital improvement plan.

When completed, these two buildings will increase our College's instructional capacity by 22 percent and do much to enhance the quality of our educational environment and sustain the enrollment growth inherent in 90x30.

Fourth, as a means to accelerate our progress and ensure the coherence of our actions, we will double down on the strategies outlined in the Connected CUNY Strategic Framework and our College's Achieving the Vision plan—including those strategies designed to better support our faculty's research, engage scholarship, and encourage creative activities and those meant to enhance our students' career prospects in the knowledge-based economy.

Fifth, we will continue to solidify our identity as the most important, mission-critical senior college of the world's greatest urban university.

We will do so by leveraging our institutional self-study process, mobilizing our College's stakeholders to advance 90x30, and celebrating our 50th anniversary with a level of exuberance and joy that will do the Boogie Down Bronx proud.

To support these priorities—and as a down payment on our success—we will add at least 10 net new full-time faculty lines and five staff positions in the next two years.

We will strategically fill 25 full-time faculty lines and fill 25 currently vacant staff positions next year.

And we will establish a \$3 million Equity Innovation Fund to reward excellence and spur innovation, as we work in the years ahead to bridge the gap that separates our current state of affairs from our professed aspirations.

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Now, given the backdrop against which we operate, our resolve will surely be tested. But when this happens, let us draw inspiration from how our namesake pursued his life's work.

In 1969, on the occasion that our College was dedicated to his memory, Herbert H. Lehman was described as “a peaceful [but] militant fighter against the injustices which demeaned man”; “a courageous statesman, who welcomed dissent, who challenged the existing order, but who at all times was steadfast [in] his devotion to the rule of reason”; “a leader who believed that an educated generation was the true hope not only of a free America but a free world.”

The Governor never compromised his conscience. And we will never compromise our mission.

In closing, let me restate my confidence that in the years ahead we will not only further establish Lehman as a driver of transformative change in the borough we call home, but also inspire others to better support the millions of talented students beyond our borough who are coming of age in America today, but who—because of the color of their skin, the balance of their checking account, their place of origin, who they choose to love, or the tenets of their faith—have not yet been afforded the opportunities to meet their full potential.

On this note of confidence—and hoping for a very enthusiastic response—I now ask all of us here today—if we are in fact ready—for the hard, important work that lies ahead.

Are we ready?

Ok then. Let's roll up our sleeves, sharpen our focus, open our hearts, steel our resolve, and get the job done.

Thank you!