Walking Together to Transform Lives

Good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for being here—and thanks to the many people who have helped to put Diversity Week together. Unless you’ve ever organized a significant event, you can’t imagine all the details you have to pay attention to. Many thanks to the President’s Committee on Diversity and others who have worked so hard to make this week a significant event for Eastern Washington University.

As I was thinking about this talk, about walking in other people’s shoes, I started experiencing a flood of memories from my childhood and college days. As some of you know, I grew up in Washington, D.C. We lived right in the District.

1960. My mother and I took the train from DC down to New Orleans to visit my brother. I was pretty young—but at the first railway station where we stopped on the way south, I was astounded to see bathrooms and water fountains and waiting areas in the station marked Colored Only and Whites Only. My mother and I didn’t know where to look, where to stand—it was horrible.

Another memory—a little bit lighter. When I was about 11 years old, my parents had two good friends who were men that lived together. I remember asking my mother whether they had girlfriends—and she really struggled to answer me. “They’re probably not going to date girls,” she said—but she was too embarrassed to explain anything more.

In the 1960’s, one of my father’s clients was the president of a union. All the union administrators were males—white males, of course. The secretary to the president was a woman, of course. My father and his colleagues used to say jokingly that Kathy was the smartest individual in the organization. But no one seemed to wonder why the smartest person in the organization was the individual answering the phone and taking dictation.
1964. In my growing-up years, DC wasn’t technically segregated, but our neighborhood was solidly white. At one point, a family from Kenya moved in next door—they were with the Kenyan embassy. In the first few weeks they lived next door, they told my parents they were getting anonymous hate mail from neighbors. My parents were horrified to learn what lay under the polite façade of some of our neighbors.

In the 1970’s, issues began to arise about wheelchair access. Conversations about creating curb crossings and accessible bathrooms were in the news. Lots of people were annoyed at all the money that had to go into such changes. “You never see anyone in a wheelchair,” they complained, not understanding the challenges of someone in a wheelchair who wanted to get out on the sidewalks. Sadly, as thousands of Vietnam veterans began coming home, everyone in DC saw a lot more wheelchairs. Attitudes began to change.

My parents took a conservative stance during the 1970’s when the gender language wars were heating up. Huge controversies arose about the generic salutation of a letter being “Dear Sir.”

Ms Magazine appeared in the early 70’s, and many people were irate at the ridiculous new word “Ms.” People felt it was highly important to differentiate between married women (Mrs.) and unmarried ones (Miss). It didn’t seem to matter for men, who were all called “Mister.” People were flaming mad about all this, The gender language wars were hot. Newspaper editorials and TV pundits made fun of the movement to change the word fireman to firefighter, policeman to police officer, chairman to chair person. “What are you going to do about fisherman? Will we have to say fisherperson, for heaven’s sake.” My parents grumbled about the use of his/her when “everyone knows” that his may indicate both genders.

(Do any of you remember all this? There were heated discussions around our dinner table.)
When I was dean in California in the 1990’s, I still received correspondence starting “Dear Sir.” (Of course, now I get computer-generated mail addressed Dear CullinanM, not a great improvement.)

Title IX came into law in the early 1970’s and also met with huge controversy. Women aren’t meant to be athletes, after all—they don’t WANT to be athletes. And who would ever want to watch them play a sport?

In the late 60’s and early 70’s, I was in college at the University of Pennsylvania. There were no tenure-track women in the English department—and no faculty of color. In the 1970’s when I was a graduate student in the English Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, there were a few tenure-track female faculty, mostly teaching “women’s” literature. There were no faculty of color.

In the late 1970’s, I went on a job interview for assistant professor in the English Department at Tulane University in New Orleans. I was told that they had had a female faculty member in the department once—but she “hadn’t worked out.” They hired a white male who, I was told by one of the grad students, very impressively smoked a pipe during his interview.

All right. We’ve made progress. We see more gender equity. Most English Departments look different now. Many more women are coming to college. Now people worry about men not coming to college. Our schools and universities reflect more diversity of race, age, gender, physical ability, economic and social background. We work hard to ensure that our university is welcoming, that we have wheelchair access, lactation rooms, equal athletic facilities for men and women, support for people with varying learning disabilities.

We celebrate Diversity Week. Friday night we celebrated a beautifully moving Lavender graduation.
In TV, movies, and popular music, we hear powerful voices of women and people of color. Shows like *Mad Men* underscore how horribly unfair things used to be. Students sometimes say to me that they’re so happy those days of inequality and sexism are over.

I go to meetings of university presidents now, and I see some women presidents. I see some presidents who are people of color.

We’ve made progress. Some people still complain about “political correctness” when it comes to language, but many of the language wars are over. Many more people accept that language helps to mold our worldview. Language and thinking are deeply entwined. What we say matters.

I tell students that I’m happy to see progress—but we still need to be vigilant, to help effect change. Things aren’t as different as we’d like them to be.

Recent events in Ferguson and Baltimore highlight some things that have NOT changed as much as we would wish. Events in Baltimore looked a lot like events in DC in 1968, after the murder of Martin Luther King. I was in high school that spring. We could smell the tear gas. The National Guard was deployed on our block to protect our neighborhood.

In recent years, we’ve seen the ugliness, the outright craziness, that has emerged with our having a president of mixed race. We’re going to see more and more ugliness as we see a woman running for president. Like our seemingly pleasant neighbors in Washington, D.C., there are still strong veins of fear and hatred out there beneath what appear to be civilized exteriors.

Now social media bring out some of the nastiest behavior. Forty years ago, our DC neighbors wrote anonymous letters; nowadays social media provide endless opportunities for abuse. There is tremendous interest now
in women’s voices; books such as Sheryl Sandburg’s *Lean In* are on bestseller lists.

But women with a high profile who speak about their experiences receive frightening abuse online. Women who have complained about sexism in video games, for example, are horribly attacked on social media. Women of color who speak out are routinely threatened as we saw recently with our colleague Rachel Dolezal.

Lindy West, an outspoken feminist who has written for publications such as *Jezebel*, said on NPR’s *This American Life* that “being insulted and threatened online is part of my job.”

On university campuses Yik Yak and other anonymous sites provide ugly and frightening platforms for abuse. Only recently a female student at Mary Washington University was viciously attacked online after she loudly protested the university’s rugby team chants calling for violence against women—including murder and necrophilia. Soon afterwards—that female student was murdered.

Here at Eastern Washington University we strongly support diversity, access, equality, inclusiveness, and student success. In my few months here, I’ve been very happy to see the open and supportive environment we have here. Yet we too see some ugly and stupid behavior—and we see sexism, racism, hatred, intolerance, hatred—online and in other forms.

So this week we’re talking about walking in other people’s shoes. I want us to think about walking *together* to transform lives. And, as an English major, I’d like us to look at language for a moment more—at two of the words we use every day. Again: language helps to mold our worldview. Language and thinking are deeply entwined. What we say matters.

*University*. In Latin an institution of higher learning was *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, a community of masters and scholars. In
English we eliminated the masters and scholars language from the title. We retained the University part, the emphasis on community, on unity.

(Well, we still have degrees called Masters and Bachelors. Think about that language for a moment. Imagine if our degrees were called Mistresses and Spinsters instead of Masters and Bachelors. There’s another whole conversation about what happens over time to words pertaining to women versus words pertaining to men. However, I digress.)

We’re part of an institution whose very name emphasizes one-ness. We are united in a mission to educate—and, in the mission of Eastern Washington University, we have a mission to transform—to provide personal transformation through excellence in learning.

**Transform.** Here the root words are about changing shape. However, we have broadened the meaning to include change of ideas, of attitudes. We are committed to changing lives. This is a huge and hugely important mission.

And, as part of an institution committed to **unity** and to **transformation**, we must be willing and eager to transform ourselves, to realize that our personal transformation is as important as the work we do to transform others.

A crucial part of personal transformation is being able to walk in someone else’s shoes—and also to walk together, to walk as one. **Uni-**versity.

On Friday evening, I listened to the personal stories of some of our students at the Lavender graduation: students who have been abused, disowned by their families, bullied and harassed and intimidated. I tried to imagine walking in their shoes.

Over my years in public higher education, I have met so many students who are overcoming challenges: students who live in their cars, in garages-
-students who have fled incredible violence in their home countries and in their own homes. What was it like in their shoes?

I’m so proud of the many faculty and staff who have helped students, who have truly helped them transform their lives. And those students have changed us as well.

Another memory. In the 1990’s, I had a student who had accompanied his mother and brother when they fled Vietnam in the 1970’s. The father was left behind in a prison camp. One day in class the student told us that his father was free, that he was coming to San Francisco the next day. The family hadn’t seen him in nearly 20 years. The student was so excited. The whole class was excited. We all wrote messages of welcome for the father, to add to the celebration the family was planning.

But, in the next class, when the student came in, he was very subdued. “My father is so old,” he said. “He’s so broken.”

It was a horrific moment. That class—students from twelve or fifteen ethnic and language backgrounds, students whose home countries in some cases had been bitterly at war with each other over the centuries—those students came together. The class became a supportive community for that young man. That class had a huge impact on me—all of us were changed by our work together that term.

It’s incredibly hard to walk in anyone else’s shoes. We can only imagine what someone else is feeling, what experiences someone else has had. But as we celebrate diversity week, we should take time to think about what it means to celebrate our differences while also valuing our one-ness, our unity, our human-ness.

We are a university. And we’re an institution with a mission to transform.
Being a uni-versity means it’s crucial that we take down the siloes, the walls between us. It means paying attention when we say “they” and remember that we are “we,” we are one. “They” can be a really ugly four-letter word.

If we are truly about transforming, if we are truly a uni-versity, we need to walk in other people’s shoes, and with other people. We are celebrating diversity, and we are valuing our one-ness.

That means we’re one with other people—not just with people who look like us or people we like. It’s easy to complain about behavior we don’t like or don’t agree with—or don’t understand.

It’s harder to try walking in someone else’s shoes, to try to understand what’s going on—to help bring about positive change—whether that’s change in the university, in others, or in ourselves.

We’re incredibly lucky to be part of this university. Universities are change agents. This university has been responsible for enormous changes—in students who have spent time with us but also changes in families, changes in the whole region.

And, of course, students continually contribute to transforming the faculty and staff. Students change us while we change them.

Universities nationwide, worldwide, have played a crucial part in bringing about the changes that we have seen in our lifetime. Equality and access, issues of free speech and political freedom: political and social change has been led and supported by universities. Around the world, university students, faculty, and staff have stood in harm’s way to help bring about change.

Everyone in this room who has worked at a university over time has helped to bring change: through teaching, curriculum, hiring staff and faculty, responding to student needs, improving campus climate. And the world of
2015 does look and feel significantly different than it did in my memories of 1960, of 1968, of the 1970’s.

But we can’t relax; we can’t remove ourselves from the fray. We can’t ignore the larger world, the communities beyond our university borders. We can’t assume that there will always be progress. We can’t ignore the issues, the attitudes, the challenges swirling around us. Community engagement is one of the strategic pillars of this university. We must engage.

Eastern Washington University must continue being an agent for positive change. People here are making a huge difference. And I know that we can continue transforming lives by working together.

I hope that those of you who are students today will be able to look back over decades, as I can, and see that progress has continued, that our communities have become better places than they were way back in 2015, back in these dark ages. I hope you’ll be able to see the ways you’ve helped to make a difference.

Other people’s shoes can be very uncomfortable, even painful. However, only by walking in them, by walking together, can we continue to transform lives, including our own. We still have a lot of work to do.

So I’m happy to join you this week as we celebrate our diversity, our beautiful differences, as well as our one-ness. I look forward to walking more miles together with you.

It’s incredibly inspiring to be here working with you all. Thank you very much for being here today.