

REMARKS BY CHERYL L. HYMAN
CITY CLUB OF CHICAGO
October 6, 2015

I want to thank you, Mayor, along with Paul, Jay, my Board Chair Chuck Middleton, the other CCC board members, Dr. Michael Amiridis, and my parents who are here today.

My boss, Mayor Emanuel, is a man of few words. Shortly after his first election in 2011, still in the very early days of our Reinvention initiative, he gave me a two-word mission: "Double Down." Now, those two words were actually way longer than our typical exchanges, where the Mayor simply just says, "Cheryl!" and then he stares.

The great thing about the two of us working together is that we're both very patient people, and we're not at all competitive.

Now, it is true, however, that neither of us has time for complicated deliberations when decisive action is required.

One example of that is the Star Scholarship, which did not exist when I was here at City Club last year. The Mayor and I both believe that the opportunity for a college education and a career should not be determined by one's bank account or immigration status - but by one's commitment and drive.

So with few examples on how to do it, we created the Star Scholarship, which gives qualifying CPS graduates free tuition and books for up to three years at City Colleges.

I am hugely proud to say that this fall semester, the Mayor and I welcomed the inaugural class of more than 900 Chicago Star Scholarship recipients, who come from more than 100 high schools all over the city.

Today, as a small token {of our collective appreciation for his leadership, here are some Star Scholarship recipients with a memento for Mayor Emanuel.

The Star Scholarship illustrates our mindset, which is at the heart of my speech today. This mindset is summed up by the City Colleges' tagline: "An Education That Works" and it works because we don't allow any excuses. It works because we make it work. The staff makes it work. The faculty make it work. The students make it work. The community makes it work. And we do it without excuses.

Both the Mayor and I have worked to create a culture within our organizations where the priorities are clearly articulated, where urgency is of the essence, and where people feel empowered to act.

At City Colleges, our culture centers on student success.

We evaluate our own success by whether our students reach their academic and professional goals: Are students completing their programs in a timely manner? Do they have the credits to successfully transfer to a four-year university?

Do they have the skills to get a good-paying job in a growing field?

To fully live this student-success philosophy, we have begun a difficult but vital move away from a culture where the fear of change reinforces the status quo to one where we embrace innovation, however disruptive it is to our own comfortable habits.

The effort to revolutionize our culture started on my first day in 2010. We used data to give us an unvarnished glimpse of where we really stood, laid out clear goals, and insisted on daring new ideas instead of the excuses that once ruled the day.

Often, I was asked “why don’t we just do this or that?” And I would say, “good idea, let’s do it.” People often were taken aback because they were not used to being given a license to act.

Well, preliminary data is in for FY2015 – the fifth year of our Reinvention initiative – and they show what you can achieve if you put the excuses out of your mind and you put your mind to making it work.

Back in 2010, we were averaging about 2,000 degrees a year and had a federal graduation rate for first-time, full-time students of 7 percent that was by any measure inexcusable.

Today, our graduation rate stands at 17 percent, more than double the pre-Reinvention rate.

This past academic year, we awarded nearly 5,000 degrees, up more than 100 percent since the Mayor came to office. With more than 11,000 total completers.

So we literally can say we did double down.

Before Reinvention, our graduation rate was the second-worst among the community college systems in America's top 10 cities.

By 2013, the last year for which national data is available, our rate had improved 86 percent, compared to an average of 5 percent for the other colleges. We've surpassed Houston, Dallas and Philadelphia and are closing in on Phoenix and New York... Again, I'm really not that competitive.

We are not where we need to be, and nowhere near where we want to be. But we already are well on our way to proving wrong all those who doubted our students.

The numbers, however, only are a mere barometer for the more fundamental undertaking that will determine whether our reforms are lasting and truly sustainable long into City Colleges' future – and that is our change in culture.

Recently, I was named one of the 10 most innovative college leaders in America. The Mayor told me not to let it go to my head. So I'm pretty much over it. I recognize this award and others are not a reflection on just me but on the thousands of

people at City Colleges who have embraced our call for high expectations and who are helping make Reinvention a true success.

The important point here is that I didn't receive the honor because of our graduation rate increase or some other data point.

It was awarded specifically because we are challenging the status quo and driving change at scale, and in the process overcoming many justifications for underachievement.

The truth is that we will only realize Reinvention's full potential if, collectively, from City Colleges administrators, to students, faculty, the public and the media, we shed a legacy of excuses and, instead, figure out how to make it work.

Too often, there's a tendency to look everywhere but inward when we're not succeeding like we think we should. More often than not, the problem – like the solution – lies in ourselves.

This is a hard truth for anyone involved in this reform effort, one that can make some people uncomfortable and who may think I am insensitive to others' struggles.

But it's a truth I am comfortable speaking because it's my truth. You see, I had to learn it myself first. I had to learn it on my own but also thanks to my parents who have shown me what it's like to beat the odds after overcoming many

tremendous challenges themselves. My parents were the first people who taught me you have to learn how to make it work.

Anyone who says “once you move past excuses there’s no looking back” isn’t being fully honest. These are not lessons that are learned once and for all. Each day, I have a conversation with myself and I call myself and what I am doing into question. When the excuses loom large in my mind, I have got to force myself to just focus on doing whatever it takes to make it work, for the sake of all those who rely on it.

Now, Reinvention isn’t just about telling people to “make it work.” Our job is to give them the tools they need to get it done.

To do that, Reinvention has been organized around four strategies.

First, we had to make our programs more relevant to the real world.

Second, we had to create more structure for our students by giving them clear pathways to careers and four-year colleges.

Third, we had to give our students more support.

Fourth, we had to improve our operations so our reforms were long-lasting.

The goal of our relevance strategy is to develop programs that deliver true economic value.

The Mayor and I launched College to Careers in 2011 and through College to Careers, our faculty and staff have worked with industry leaders and four-year universities to ensure our programs and facilities prepare Chicagoans for the 600,000 jobs coming to our region over the next decade in key industries.

We aligned each one of our colleges with one of the seven areas with the highest forecasted jobs growth over the coming decade.

When I started at City Colleges, we had more than 200 programs. Some of those programs, employers told us, bore no relation to the job market. In other cases, market data indicated there were and would be plenty of jobs in a given field, but employers told us our graduates were never going to get those jobs with the skills we were teaching.

Based on that invaluable real-world input, we have discontinued 41 certificate programs and launched 22 new ones. Last year, we awarded 22 percent more certificates than before Reinvention. Many of our certificates are in such demand that students routinely already have jobs by the time they complete their program. We have more than 150 industry partners, with 3,000 students hired to date.

These numbers are evidence that with the right mindset and the right partners, you really can make it work.

We are not the only ones to think so. A few weeks ago, journalist Ron Brownstein noted in the National Journal that Chicago under the Mayor's leadership is one of the few cities in America with a job boom that is systematically working to connect the people who live in our neighborhoods to this job growth.

He noted that this connection is being made in Chicagothrough our work at City Colleges.

But even with all the proof and validation in the world, there are those who still say we're taking students down the wrong path. That's especially true when it comes to what we call consolidation.

As part of the College to Careers effort, we have begun to move some programs among colleges. All healthcare, for instance, is headed to Malcolm X College, and all Transportation, Distribution and Logistics is headed to Olive-Harvey.

There are those who lament this new way of doing things as a supposed betrayal of our mission as a community college system.

My response is that the true betrayal was to once promise all things to all people, and to deliver on too few promises for too few people.

Today, not every one of our programs is in every community. But for the first time in a long time we can say we offer true opportunity to everyone in every community.

Now, people make excuses for our students – excuses we typically don't hear from students themselves. One leading excuse is that our students won't travel to attend college outside of their neighborhood. Now, that troubles me on several levels because it reflects condescending and even insulting assumptions about our students.

It suggests they are not committed enough to go after what they want.

That they won't or can't get out of their neighborhood or their comfort zone.

Well, you know what? I was once one of those students and I know what they are capable of.

After I graduated from Olive-Harvey, I traveled first from my grandmother's home in Roseland to IIT for my bachelor's courses, then from my home south of the city to North Park University for my Master's, and then from my job downtown to Northwestern in Evanston for my MBA.

The facts show that when it comes to getting the education they need and want, our students too find a way to make it work.

Behind me are maps that show that each of our colleges already draws students from every corner of Chicago.

Those maps also show that our students' comfort zone is whatever zone will advance their life goals. So please let's give our students more credit.

And because we recognized that the students, faculty and staff impacted by these changes might need to travel more, we created a free City Colleges shuttle bus system that better connects our colleges to the CTA and to each other. We've made it even easier for everybody to make it work.

To those students who don't or won't travel to seek the quality education they profess to want, here is a tough-love message that I also had to learn first-hand: The world is not coming to your doorstep to give you anything. Opportunity may indeed knock, but you've got to open the door and do your part.

Students might as well learn that lesson now while in college before the real world teaches it to them the hard way.

Employers won't build their facilities across the street from your house just to make it easier for you to work.

But, our students are rising to the challenges and proving they respond to quality and opportunity. Today, nearly 9 in

10 City Colleges credit students are enrolled on a College to Careers pathway.

A related excuse I hear too often is that consolidating programs in one location will disenfranchise the poor.

Well, my response: Lower-quality education – however close to your home – will not break the cycle of poverty. We will only break the cycle of poverty if we chose quality over proximity.

Now, I too was poor.

I know what it's like not to be sure where you're going to sleep at night. I know how financial instability can make you want to give up.

Poverty makes you hungry – but it does not deprive you of the ability to learn.

I once was hungry. I know that you can either listen to your empty stomach, or you can trust your gut.

But it's not enough for our programs to be relevant, we have to provide the students with structure to put their goal within reach in a timely manner.

Under this second strategy of structure, we have developed more than 100 semester-by-semester pathways in our College to Careers focus areas that guide our students on the road to their transfer and career destination.

We are also introducing demand-driven scheduling which eliminates the traditional college schedule where classes are scattered throughout the week. It groups courses into blocks of time, and gives students a view of their complete program starting day one, making it easier for students to plan work, family and other responsibilities around their classes.

This strategy too has had its share of detractors.

An excuse I have heard is that our insistence on clear road maps will deny our students a chance to engage in self-discovery. That education should be about self-discovery.

Well, now, that's pretty funny to me.

First off, our students never tell me they are at City Colleges to find themselves.

What they tell me is that they are here to find a career and they simply want us to help them get there.

As I found out first-hand, it's pretty difficult to engage in self-discovery or find anything else if you can't make rent.

So we set a goal – that all City Colleges students would be on a pathway this fall, and by the end of this semester, we will have done it. We will have made it work.

In creating clear pathways that link City Colleges programs to four-year colleges and careers, my goal is to spare current

and future City Colleges graduates the setback experienced by one former Olive-Harvey College student I know well: Her name is Cheryl Hyman.

In 1993, I proudly graduated from Olive-Harvey College with my Associate of General Studies degree, and headed off to the Illinois Institute of Technology to major in computer science. But I was in for a rude awakening. When I got to IIT, I found out many of my credits would not transfer and I went right back to being a sophomore.

When I was at Olive-Harvey, nobody laid out clearly what courses I needed to take. That contributed to my finishing my associate's degree in three years rather than two. What's worse is 17 of the credit hours I took were not even transferable to IIT.

Now, I can tell you those 17 extra credit hours sure didn't help me discover myself, they cost me an additional year at IIT because of all the courses I had to take over, and so it took me a total of six years to get my bachelor's instead of four.

Today, not only do we have a pathway in IT and other academic areas, but they have been validated by IIT and other four-year institutions so students know their courses will be accepted for transfer.

Now, the degree I received, the Associate in General Studies – or AGS for short – was a four letter word at City Colleges by

the time I became Chancellor... because it lacked relevance, leading to the problems I experienced.

Since then, we integrated AGS with our pathways system, so students in the AGS take relevant courses, and since the AGS is our most flexible degree, it is the degree that can maximize transfer credit to a four-year college.

Too often we get caught up in an alphabet-soup debate about which associate degrees are best: AA, AS, AAS, AGS, AAT, AES, AFA. Before pathways, students had problems transferring credits with all those degrees, not just AGS.

Look, degrees alone don't transfer. Credits and people do.

Today our transfer rate to four-year institutions following graduation is up 9 percent since Reinvention.

In addition to taking courses that did not transfer, I was also placed in remedial courses in both English and math that I probably didn't need to take.

And, again, here I have walked in our students' shoes. About ninety percent of our students –no matter what high school they came from – CPS or not – come to us without being so-called “college-ready” in English and/or Math.

There is no shame in this for me. Having overcome it is just another way I show students and the excuse-finders that a

challenging start in college is not a death sentence for your dreams.

And I aced both of those remedial classes as well as harder classes in those subjects, highlighting a problem we are fixing.

The tests often misplace students into remediation.

So we are refocusing our own thinking on completion-readiness, rather than college-readiness.

That means, we are looking at our students' true ability, their academic record and their non-cognitive skills, rather than simply test scores.

I strongly dislike that word, remediation, by the way. I believe remediation should be for buildings, it shouldn't be for human beings.

We are working to move past the entire concept by embedding academic skills-strengthening into college work. The goal is to play to students' strengths rather than dwell on their weaknesses.

Last year, seventy percent of our new graduates started out in "remediation," showing that with the right help, they can make it work.

Even with all those remedial students, we set another record for the most completions in City Colleges history. Our students' challenges didn't change. Our mindset changed.

The theoretical lack of college preparedness is most acute at Kennedy-King College, where the percentage of remedial students is the highest among our seven colleges.

And yet it is Kennedy-King that was awarded the Rising Star award by the Aspen Institute this past March for having tripled its graduation rate under Reinvention, to one of the highest of any community college anywhere in a large American city, and the highest by far at City Colleges.

Yes, I am talking about Kennedy-King College in Englewood, a neighborhood the media likes to paint solely with the brush of violence, ignoring this bright spot that literally saves lives through education every day.

Did we transform Kennedy-King by magically getting rid of our students' life and academic obstacles? No, we did it by getting rid of the excuses and telling our students, our faculty and our staff that we will figure it out and we will make it work.

The third strategy of Reinvention is to increase student support services. I will remind you that we have added tutoring centers, math centers, career centers, transfer centers, wellness centers and veterans' center at every

college. We have cut the student to advisor ratio by two-thirds.

A few years back, some people inside City Colleges literally told me our students were beyond help. Sadly, we still hear that refrain. We didn't listen then and don't listen now. We've looked beyond the excuses and we have found a way again to make it work.

The fourth strategy is improved operations.

When I arrived at City Colleges, I found a lack of financial discipline. City Colleges only reconciled and closed its books once a year. There was little budget transparency. And the seven colleges were run like their own little independent kingdoms, meaning there were administrative redundancies everywhere.

That led to another popular excuse when I started: we can't help our students because there just isn't enough money.

People simply couldn't imagine a different way of doing things and their first instinct was to call for more resources, when all we needed was to be more resourceful.

We consolidated back-office functions at the District Office and to date, we've cut administrative overhead by 6 percent. We in-sourced a lot of expensive vendor contracts. That has led to \$66 million in savings that have been reinvested in the

classroom, helping us secure and maintain a double-A credit rating that is fueling our capital plan.

As you may recall, under Reinvention, we launched a \$524 million capital plan to address decades of deferred maintenance.

As part of that plan, we decided to build a \$251 million new Malcolm X College and manage the project ourselves.

Immediately, I heard: “It hasn’t been done this way,” “the public sector can’t pull this off” and “you can’t do it in that time frame.”

This upcoming January, Mayor Emanuel and I will open a new Malcolm X College on the West Side, two years after we broke ground. We made it work with an on-time, on-budget delivery.

Now, I would like to also tell you that we will soon be cutting the ribbon on the new 100,000 square foot Transportation, Distribution and Logistics Center at Olive-Harvey College – a facility one-tenth the size of Malcolm X and for which construction started at the same time.

But, that project is being managed by the State of Illinois and it was stopped dead in its tracks on June 30th due to the budget crisis, denying our students a facility that should be preparing them for the 110,000 TDL jobs coming to our region.

But we are fighting so hard to get this project back on track because that's the least we can do when we see how much adversity some of our students overcome to reach their goals.

Take Howard Spiller. Howard has been taking five classes a semester at Daley College, and he has been accepted into our Guaranteed Admissions program with UIC. That's the headline.

The story behind the headline includes: Leaving high school without a diploma. Surviving with help from food pantries. Developing an auto-immune disease. Overcoming two strokes.

Howard has had every excuse in the world to give up. But Howard told me, and I quote: "Chancellor, giving up is simply not an option."

Howard, please wave.

I submit that if Howard can achieve all that he has, and that if a girl named Cheryl from the projects on the West Side of Chicago can end up a few months ago in Seattle discussing the future of education with Bill Gates, as I was privileged to do, we should not ever accept excuses from ourselves or from anyone around us.

You see, Reinvention isn't just an initiative. It's a mindset that doesn't allow excuses and insists on finding a way to make it work.

The biggest obstacle to taking Reinvention to its fullest extent – and making it stick – is not the challenges of the students we serve or even decreasing State and federal funding.

Similarly, the biggest barrier our students face isn't their zip code, it isn't their skin color, it isn't their finances, it's not even the holes in their education and it's certainly not that they have to catch a bus from one college to another.

The biggest barrier is having people in their lives, in their colleges, telling them that those circumstances mean they can't succeed, meaning that they can't make it work.

So, next time, when you see someone who feels like it's all just too much, especially a City Colleges student or staff person, tell them: "No excuses, and let's together figure out a way to make it work."

Thank you.