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Good evening. The man in the video you just watched is Gene Kranz. Kranz served as the flight director at NASA on the Gemini and Apollo space missions.

He delivered that speech to the mission control team the day after the ill-fated Apollo 1 mission resulted in the death of 3 astronauts.

Kranz found himself having to reshape the culture at NASA after it seemingly had lost its way. His words—and his emphasis on toughness and competence—have become known as the Kranz Dictum. They popped into my head as I gathered my thoughts to share with you this afternoon.

I had a flashback to a prior speech I had given to members of the City Club in Chicago during my time as the Chancellor of City Colleges of Chicago.

During that speech, I shared this video and talked about resilience and grit as part of the journey that I once took—and the journey taken today by the students of the City Colleges. They, like the students who attend your institutions, are predominately low-income and students of color.

They are counting on us to help them find a foothold out of poverty or have their shot at the middle class, and we cannot let them down.

That's why I came here to deliver this message. Young people of color are depending on you and it's more apparent than ever that...

Houston , we have a problem.

The share of African Americans with an associate degree is almost 25% less than the population as a whole (this is the gateway to your institutions). **THIS IS A PROBLEM!**

Graduation rates at a 4-year historically black college or university is 59 percent. However, at Harvard, Yale and Princeton, graduation rates top 90 percent. HBCUs do much better than some institutions, **BUT STILL WE HAVE A PROBLEM!**

While more people are working, there are fewer qualified people available to fill high-paying skilled jobs, which means our equity gaps are growing rather than shrinking. **BIG PROBLEM!**

So, if students are graduating from our four-year institutions with a degree and soaring debt but no opportunities, **WE HAVE A PROBLEM!**

And if predominately white institutions are offering a better value to students of color than HBCUs, WE HAVE A MAJOR PROBLEM!

But is purposeful disruption the answer to solve our problems? I would argue it is our best hope.

Let's start with the basic definitions of the terms.

Merriam-Webster defines purposeful as having or showing determination or resolve. Being steadfast, single-minded, meaningful and intentional.

And disruption is a disturbance that interrupts an event, activity or process.

When the business world talks about disruption, it talks about innovations that create NEW markets or disrupt EXISTING ones, not the smaller piecemeal "reforms" we too often focus on in higher education. We need to borrow from this thinking. When applied to the education sector, however, purposeful disruption takes on an added meaning.

First and foremost, we must be single-minded in our commitment to student success.

That means acknowledging that we can't solve new challenges with old models. Old models slow us down.

People often resist the idea of thinking of education as a business, but that's a luxury we can no longer afford. The education market is estimated to be about \$1.3 trillion, with \$475 billion of that attributed to higher education.

Even so, I worry that the sector does not seem to recognize that our use of outdated delivery models makes us ripe for disruption from non-traditional players.

Don't think that's a real possibility? Just look at companies like Uber, Starbucks, Amazon, and WeWork, all upstarts which managed to disrupt entire industries.

The common thread among the casualties of disruption is their failure to adapt quickly to change. Mark my words, disruption to the education sector is coming and it's not far off.

The increased validity and penetration of nontraditional providers, for-profit institutions, and free online education are already a challenge.

The question we must ask ourselves is are we better off disrupting ourselves than being disrupted—and are we ready? (everyone wants to call themselves a disruptor but no one wants to be disrupted)

Because piecemeal change is not disruption.

Disruption is when you create new markets.

Disruption is when you interrupt what's already in existence.

The reality is that if we don't figure all of this out, someone else will—and our students will follow.

My perspective is that there are 3 additional inputs required to truly drive purposeful disruption in the education sector—urgency, pace, and culture.

Like I said earlier, we have a problem. The question is whether or not we are acting with urgency?

Have we become complacent because of our accomplishments?

And, as we act with urgency, are we being diligent about benchmarking and measuring our results so that we can know if we are behind or ahead?

If you recall, I mentioned earlier that disruption requires interruption. And if we're being really honest, you know the culture of higher education does not do well with change, especially if it is sudden.

Embracing purposeful disruption means agreeing to be disagreeable. We will not always agree, and we have to find a different way of dealing with our disagreements.

If we don't, then we miss the opportunity to infuse our solutions with diverse perspectives that can help to create new models. Additionally, continue to perpetuate an environment where disagreement is viewed as a challenge as opposed to an opportunity.

If you are only able to execute the things that everyone agrees on, then chances are you will not achieve your overall goals. Everyone will be happy, but more students will be left behind!

When you consider what is required to drive purposeful disruption in higher education, Gene Kranz offers a thoughtful and pragmatic approach.

It's about taking accountability for your problems and changing the culture to be tough and competent.

Competence extends beyond your academic training, it means going outside of your area of expertise, geography, and comfort zone to discover and explore new, valuable ways of thinking and solving problems.

You have to understand the real world.

How things are changing.

You must realize that you now have competition and understand what new competitors are emerging and how are they evolving or reinventing their delivery models.

That brings me to my definition of toughness.

When I say be tough, I'm referring to honing your tolerance for high risk decisions and accepting the fact that personal sacrifice is required.

Let me take a quick breath here.

As you can probably tell, I'm deeply passionate about this topic.

And I'm fully aware that not everyone will agree; however, if my remarks spark dialogue and spur action to help the young people in our communities across the country, then I'll continue to be the champion for the unpopular position.

I have to be a champion because these students are working to overcome challenges that I've faced in my own life.

Let me tell you a little about myself:

Long after becoming an adult, I found a letter that I wrote to President Reagan when I was just 12 years old. It detailed my great displeasure with the transportation problems we were having in Chicago.

In my very-well-thought-out 12-year-old mind, I had a simple solution that I felt would be fairly easy for the president- given his far-reaching power- to make things happen quickly.

Needless to say, it didn't work out that way. But in hindsight, that moment may just have been the spark of my activist mindset. (joke about platform heels and wig)

My teenage years served up a healthy dose of challenges—while growing up in the Henry Horner projects on the west side of Chicago, both my parents struggled with substance abuse. Through the grace of God, both survived and are doing well, but not before it took a toll on our family.

I dropped out of high school, and eventually found myself living on the streets with little hope for the future.

After watching many of my friends die or end up in jail, I knew my future would be no different unless I became my own advocate. I realized that the only path to a better life was that of a quality education.

I kept thinking to myself, “This can’t be it. I want more for my life. I’m better than this. I want a real job.”

Filled with determination, hope, and a passion for technology I signed up for a six-month trade school that promised to harness my passion and lead me towards a career in computers. I thought “this is it.” Who needs four years when I can do it six months?

SPOILER ALERT: it didn’t work.

After six months, I was no more prepared than when I went in. I walked away with a handful of useless certificates, no job offers and debt! (this is why what we do is urgent)....

This was an early setback in my journey, But I refused to give up on my passion for computer science and programming. I wanted to attend the Illinois Institute of Technology, but I didn’t have a lot of support.

I was told things like, “Girl, forget it.” “Have you lost your mind, you won’t get in.” “It is too expensive and one of the best schools for computer science.” “You’re a high school dropout from the West Side of Chicago.” (this is why we need to get away from that common refrain).....

While going to school full time at Olive Harvey Community College, I worked any job I could find. After earning my associate degree, I not only attended IIT, but I graduated with honors, earning a Bachelor of Science in computer science!

That’s right, this high school dropout from the West Side of Chicago later went on to earn master’s degrees, and eventually, an MBA. With some hard work, I was promoted to Vice President at a Fortune 500 company and later became Chancellor of City Colleges of Chicago—the same school which gave me my start.

Most recently, I authored a new book published by Harvard Education Press, called *Reinvention*, a candid reflection of my almost decade-long tenure as Chancellor.

So that’s my story. It’s a big part of why the activist spirit of that 12-year-old girl is standing in front of you today.

I’m here because my story is the story of so many of the students you serve. I’m here because I know the challenges that minority serving institutions face. And I’m here because the statistics tell me that HBCUs are ripe to either drive disruption or be

disrupted.

Consider the following:

HBCUs enroll 10 percent of all African American undergraduates.

HBCUs produce 17 percent of all African American college graduates.

HBCUs generate 24 percent of all bachelor's degrees in science, engineering, math and technology fields earned by African Americans annually.

At the same time, all of us in this room know that HBCUs have the potential to dramatically shift the lives of the students who attend them. Recently, the American Council on Education published a report based on the highly cited data from the Equality of Opportunity Project.

The paper concluded that income-mobility rates tend to be two to three times higher at minority-serving institutions than at non-minority-serving ones. In other words, HBCUs are vastly more effective at lifting their students out of poverty than other institutions.

The higher rates occur despite the fact that minority-serving colleges are educating the "country's most vulnerable students," the study notes, often with relatively limited budgets.

From the beginning, HBCUs have played a vital role in shrinking the equity gaps that students of color still face before, during, and after their time in college. But those gaps persist, stubbornly, and our work is nowhere near done.

As education emerges as the new civil rights movement, you will assume even greater responsibility to not just shrinking but eliminating achievement and equity gaps.

You offer one of the few opportunities for social mobility for low-income, first-generation college students.

You were born from disruption and you must embrace that legacy.

So, how can HBCUs drive purposeful disruption using the Kranz Dictum of being tough and competent?

### 1. Purposefully Collaborate

Combine different perspectives to create new solutions.

When I was chancellor at City Colleges of Chicago, I invited employers who helped

inform and shape our curriculum to educators, administrators and community leaders who served on focused task forces.

Internally, I brought MBAs and change-management experts, consultants to help us develop and implement new solutions to the challenges we faced. As a result, we were able to drive transformative change that almost tripled graduation rates by the end of my tenure.

As you continue on this journey, remember Kranz's directive to be tough.

Let me tell you, driving change is hard, but doing so as a black woman with a non-traditional background against an entrenched politicized culture was no easy feat.

I'm still wearing some of those battle scars. Misogyny, direct and subtle racism and overt obstructionism became routine battles that I have fought and fight everyday.

And you know what? That's been my truth my entire life as a black woman in America. But that's never been my story, and it's never going to stop me from achieving my goals. AND it certainly won't stop me from fighting for those coming behind me. I won't let it and I firmly believe that students, faculty and leaders, can't either.

That's why I always share this cautionary note. While collaboration is vital, especially in higher education with its history of shared governance, it cannot be the end product of our efforts.

Leaders should strive for consensus, but they also need to know when to move forward for the sake of our students—and to hold others accountable for doing the same. Focusing on 100 percent consensus instead of accountability will lead to continued inertia, not the change our students so desperately need.

That brings me to #2. Make Constant Change Part of Your DNA.

We live in a world of constant change. It's the one thing you can guarantee, that and paying your taxes. Change is the new norm that our sector must learn to live with and adapt to.

To survive and thrive we must develop infrastructures that allow us to constantly monitor and engage based on what is evolving in the environment around us. We must revamp our systems and structures to changing the way our institutions operate in ways that challenged business as usual.

Continuous change, informed by real-world data must become a part of our DNA, not a one-and-done process.

According to a recent study by the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University, there will be 165 million jobs in the economy by 2020, and 65 percent of those positions will require some form of postsecondary education.

To be successful and help our students compete for these jobs, purposeful disruption and continuous change must be at the top of our agenda.

And finally, #3. There are no sacred cows. Everything is worth challenging!

HBCUs have the ability to be among the most nimble institutions within the higher education sector. You have the ability to innovate and reform much more quickly in order to keep up with rapid changes in the labor market.

But like leaders in other disruptive organizations, you will need to be persistent in the face of those who want to keep doing things the way they have always been done. If there are no sacred cows, there are also no sacred policies, positions, or practices that are exempt from change.

There is no law of nature that can compel institutions to change. It comes down to leadership, management, and establishing the right framework for operational and culture change. Having a framework and an infrastructure to guide continuous change is important for many reasons, but one of the most important is because it provides continuity.

A clear vision, backed by real-world data on progress, is what's needed to help escape the temptation of pursuing the flavor of the month when it comes to reform.

You must marry an overarching vision with practical, innovative solutions that reflect the realities that students face on campus and in real-world.

Scared cows will limit your innovation!

As you return to your respective schools, I urge you to keep Kranz's two words – tough and competent – at the forefront of your thinking.

And more than anything else, you must decide whether you are living up to the Kranz Dictum. That was something Gene Kranz worried about long after his tenure at NASA ended.

At the turn of the century, decades after NASA had met its audacious goal of sending man to the moon, he was asked if the agency had managed to maintain the culture he had worked so hard to put in place. Here is what he said:

“In many ways, we have the young people, we have the talent, we have the imagination,



we have the technology. But I don't believe we have the leadership and the willingness to accept risk, to achieve great goals.”

That's where you come in. Be tough. Be competent. But above all, be fearless at taking risks—risks to drive the kind of disruption that can change the trajectory of the lives of the students we serve.

After all, if we don't collectively commit to lead purposeful disruption, in less time than you might think, you and your institutions could become victims of it.

The world won't get any better if we just let it be, we got to change it—just you and me.

Thank you!