



Nancy Cantor
Speaker and Honorary Degree Recipient - Bio

Nancy Cantor is the 11th Chancellor and President of Syracuse University, as well as Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences.

A native New Yorker, Dr. Cantor came to Syracuse from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where she was chancellor. She has held a variety of administrative positions encompassing all aspects of a research university--from chair of the department of psychology at Princeton to dean of the graduate school and then provost and executive vice president for academic affairs at the University of Michigan. She received her A.B. in 1974 from Sarah Lawrence College and her Ph.D. in psychology in 1978 from Stanford University.

Dr. Cantor is recognized for her scholarly contributions to the understanding of how individuals perceive and think about their social worlds, pursue personal goals, and how they regulate their behavior to adapt to life's most challenging social environments. She is co-author or co-editor of three books and author or co-author of numerous book chapters and scientific journal articles.

She has been an advocate for racial justice and for diversity in higher education, and she has written and lectured widely on these subjects. At the University of Michigan she was closely involved in the university's defense of affirmative action in the cases *Grutter and Gratz*, decided by the Supreme Court in 2003. Cantor has also lectured and written extensively on liberal education and the creative campus.

Dr. Cantor is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and is a member of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences. She has also received the Distinguished Scientific Award for an Early Career Contribution to Psychology from the American Psychological Association, and the Woman of Achievement Award from the Anti-Defamation League.

She is the past chair of the board of directors of the American Association for Higher Education and former chair of the board of the American Council on Education. She serves on the board of the American Institutes for Research and the advisory board of Future of Minority Studies, Paul Taylor Dance Foundation Board of Directors, and as an Honorary Trustee of the American Psychological Foundation. She has served on the board of trustees of Sarah Lawrence College and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, as a member of the National Advisory Board of the National Survey of Student Engagement and on various advisory boards and study sections of the National Science Foundation and the National Research Council, and a Congressional Commission on Military Training and Gender-Related Issues.

She is married to Steven R. Brechin, an environmental sociologist and a professor in the Maxwell School and the College of Arts and Sciences. They have two children, Maddy and Archie.

Speech

University of Toledo Commencement
Nancy Cantor
1 p.m. May 3, 2008
University of Toledo Glass Bowl

Congratulations to the Class of 2008! It's wonderful to celebrate with you, and it's so good to be here – in a place my family and I visited frequently during our 15 years in Ann Arbor.

Indeed, I have many ties here, ties to people – my former colleague Lloyd Jacobs, now President of your fine university, Provost Haggett, whom I knew at the National Science Foundation, and my dear friend and mentee – if I might claim a bit of influence on her – Carol Bresnahan, a distinguished faculty member here and soon to be Provost at the College of New Jersey.

My connections at Toledo are to both *people* and *places*, critical in my life, and remembered with great joy and warmth – numerous trips with my children to watch the Toledo Mud Hens (when they played in what I gather is now described as the “quaint old stadium”), to the zoo and the museum, to restaurants (many better, I might add than in Ann Arbor)!

And that is part of my theme today. Cherish the *people and places* that constitute who you are as you leave this home, this place that you have made your own.

Graduation is a two-pronged celebration – on one hand, we are celebrating your accomplishments to date, that is, your “place” now, but of course, we are also anticipating the new place that you will be making for yourself in the world.

Indeed, so much of our lives resemble this dialectic between our current state – the *place we have* – and our future possibilities – the *place we will make*. And the path we take between having a place and making a place is built so importantly around the *people* – teachers,

colleagues, friends, family, heroes and heroines, even foes – who shape our experiences along the way.

Two reminders– then – never sit too comfortably in the place you are (even as you celebrate getting there), and never forget that there are people who will define how you get to the next stop.

Before we think about you, we should take a moment to think about the ground on which we stand: not only this magnificent stadium and the campus of this great metropolitan university, but also this city and this region that have been a frontier and a crossroads and today become a crossroads for your lives.

This was the ancient home of Mound Builders who constructed more than 10,000 works of earth and stone. This was an indigenous trade route that ran for hundreds of miles. It was covered with forests and water, and it was home to native people who successfully resisted the taking of their land until after Ohio gained statehood. When the vast Black Swamp was drained, and great canals and railroads were built, Toledo grew from 1,000 people to more than 50,000 in only 40 years.

It became a center of industry and commerce and a seedbed for artists, dreamers, innovators and crusaders. The automated glass-blowing machine was invented here. So was the first modern roller coaster. Residents of Toledo, many of them white, admired and promoted the work of the great African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar long before he became nationally known and decades before a line from his poem "Sympathy" would become famous around the world: "I know why the caged bird sings."

Men and women far ahead of their times worked for social justice. Samuel "Golden Rule" Jones was a manufacturer who believed in profit-sharing and paying a "living wage." After he was elected Mayor in 1897, he opened free kindergartens and instituted an eight-hour day for city workers. Josina Lott, who believed that every child could learn, opened her own school when she realized in the 1930s that children with disabilities were being turned away from public schools. She went on to establish in Toledo one of the nation's first sheltered workshops for developmentally disabled adults.

Over the years, the people of this city have overcome great odds in their struggles for excellence and for fair play, creating great institutions like this university, the Toledo Museum of Art, and the *Toledo Blade* newspaper which has done some astonishing investigative reporting. Today it serves us well to remember their determination and courage and to take strength from their example, because all of us, no matter where we live, are again on the frontier, facing an era we are just beginning to understand.

An earthquake of change in culture, technology, and the economy is underway, affecting the lives, hopes, and plans of every one of us and bringing with it unprecedented opportunities if we are willing to grab them, to be thoughtful about change.

The parallels between Toledo's history and that of Syracuse – my home– are plentiful. Both are places that grew quickly through the hard work of pioneers. My favorite description of early Syracuse comes from a visitor in 1820, who said “it was so desolate it would make an owl weep to fly over it.” Then, at a time when America had no trained civil engineers, a group of amateurs—some of them former judges and surveyors---set to work with "unwearied zeal" and built the Erie Canal that Thomas Jefferson had called “nothing short of madness.” The rest is history.

Today both cities stand on the shoulders of risk-takers who banded together to make things happen and create opportunity while defying great odds and the conventional wisdom of their day. Now, once again, Toledo and Syracuse face great obstacles in a landscape of global competition as harsh and foreboding in its own way as it was in the 19th Century.

So what do we do to drain the next Black Swamp, to build the equivalent of the next Erie Canal? There is good news and a caution here.

The good news is that precisely all the hard work you've done to prepare for today is just what you'll need to make your next place for yourself and for all of us. Universities – and their graduates – are at the very epicenter of the revitalization of America's older industrial cities. They and you will anchor the vital work to be done.

You're also at the center of the best hopes for our knowledge-based economy. You have the entrepreneurial spirit – that unwearied zeal to make things happen. Over the last few years, you've lived in a diverse community of scholars, and you've experienced living and working in a global context, inundated with information, where connections are instantaneous and sharing is critical. You're capable of doing the hard social work required to open up opportunity, to make sure that a modern day band of pioneers---as inclusive and creative as possible---gets working to build a new place for us all.

That's precisely what the University of Toledo has prepared you to do. You have the flexibility to keep your balance in a world where change is the norm, where it is critical to stay nimble.

That's the good news. The caution – and there always is one -- is this: Just as it took struggle and unwearied zeal to build the great canals that connected this region to the World, "connectivity" alone, even in our facile cyber world, “does not guarantee communication," to paraphrase Vartan Gregorian, president of the Carnegie Corporation. Or as Henry David Thoreau once wrote, "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas, but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate."

So, you have the tools – the wiring or infrastructure so to speak – to build the next great network of connections. Just make sure it's used to forge the best and strongest communications, the kind that carry meaning through a sea of information overload.

In fact, there's a certain irony to our world of fast-paced change and free-flowing information – an irony that's critical for you to recognize as you prepare to venture out into it.

The same new information technology and the biological revolutions that empower us with knowledge – about our make-up and the happenings in our world –have created so much change and uncertainty we can feel a bit immobilized. In such a climate, how can we maintain a sense of control, make thoughtful decisions, and keep our eyes on the ball? Can we follow the lead of the Mud Hens, who are doing even better in their new place at Fifth Third field than they did in “rustic” Skeldon Stadium?

Here is where the social psychologist in me screams out – *do it with others!* When the *place* around us is full of shifting ground, we need the right *people* to give us stability. We need cooperation over competition; empathy rather than individuality; common cause not just self-help.

I hope you will remember, long after this day ends, that this is a world where we need each other more than ever before. We live in it, we are responsible for it, and we are responsible to each other. Your own growth has always been achieved through and with others. The connections are there, but real communication takes work!

Now, I must admit that I always assumed that it was the academics who got that message and that you would find in the business world, a more dog eat dog existence – something for which we might not have fully prepared you in our universities, where we stress interdisciplinary, collaborative, integrative thinking. But my ego-centric academic naiveté was shattered recently when I took part in IBM’s global innovation outlook conferences –in which large corporations complement their particular strengths by collaborating with others (even arch competitors) to build networks of shared knowledge for innovation. More and more, this is an open source world, and collaboration is the name of the game. We need to rethink the American myth of the self-made woman or man; our ever-changing world requires an open mind, a willingness to take risks, and a large dose of sharing and interdependence.

Fortunately, you're ready for that world and its networks, ready for open source lives, 24 x 7. After all, you've mastered Facebook and YouTube, right? But I have one plea: Really think about the others around you. Just because you can see them or read about them instantaneously halfway across the globe, don't assume you really know them. Don't assume that you even know those living right around the corner. All of us, while superficially connected, are separated also by culture, religion, race and ethnicity, class, and in so many other ways less easily named. Empathy is hard work, as hard as anything you have so brilliantly accomplished at this great university.

Universities can create opportunities to engage in “difficult dialogues” across the divisive fault lines of our world. So can communities and churches and political parties, through inter-group dialogues, and so can we, in the many opportunities that arise in our daily lives. If we really listen to each other, we will be able to see constructive alternatives to fixed ideas about seemingly insoluble problems. Such exchanges between us require a diversity of people and ideas: In the university. In the workplace. In our neighborhoods. In our culture. And in our politics.

It is critical not to get complacent, not to get self-satisfied, thinking that all you need is *you*. Better, if you pardon a reach back to my generation, *all you need is love*. As Johnnetta Cole, president emerita of Bennett College for Women and Spelman College, once said, "You cannot fully understand your own life without knowing and thinking beyond your life, your own neighborhood, and even your own nation." You are standing on the shoulders of giants, and you, too, are needed as a pioneer.

The notion of being a pioneer –of forging something new – needs some updating in our brave new world. And it will mean different things to each of us.

For me, being a pioneer now means understanding what it means to be the “first” in some of the positions I take on (first woman and Jewish Chancellor at Syracuse, for example). Most importantly, it means *not* taking that as a personal achievement, but remembering that I am standing on the shoulders of countless others who struggled for justice and fair play. It also means accepting the responsibility to look out for others and somehow open the way for them.

For me, it also means remembering exactly how I got here – the profound influence, for example, that growing up in the 60s had on me – the energy, and yes perhaps a bit of headstrong risk-taking – that came with the optimism of the women’s movement, the civil rights movement, and the peace movement – as much as the events surrounding Vietnam sadly divided the country, and led us to forget the hardships also faced by our own soldiers as they returned home scarred by war. A memory we should not forget today.

For me, even more personally, it means remembering my family, and trying not to turn every debate today into a flash back to my childhood dinner table battles, trying to get a word in edgewise with my much smarter, louder, and older brother. At the same time, it means being moved even now by the desire I had then, to give voice to the things in which I firmly believe.

It means feeding off of the powerful memories I have of riding the New York City subway 45 minutes each way to school. Rush hour in a New York City subway – lots of faces, people, cultures, all coming at you, and if you are little like me, you either run for cover – where? – or you learn to join it with gusto. Join it with gusto, but watch yourself and find some others to lean on as you go!!

For you, being a pioneer, building that new home, that place for the future will evoke different memories and imply different paths than mine. But it will surely involve something like a new subway ride.

In many ways, you have completed one long frantic, hectic, but exhilarating ride and you deserve a great sense of completion today – you did it, you're done, you made it home. And yet, the force of today is really about all that is ahead – that next ride! On the way, what's essential is to weather change well, to profit from new opportunities, and to be---yourself---an agent of thoughtful, constructive change. You are ready, and now is *your* time. Congratulations!