



Program biography - Dr. Catherine E. Snow

Dr. Catherine E. Snow has dedicated her career to strengthening children's education causes through literacy and learning.

The professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education has focused on early language skills as a pathway toward lifelong learning. When asked what type of candidate would make a strong "educational president," Snow answered, "One who understands that support for families, as well as for excellent educational settings for preschool-age children, is part of doing a good job. The big difference between children who arrive at school almost certain to succeed and children who arrive highly likely to fail is the quality of experience they've had at home and in preschool settings since birth."

A Toledo native, Snow earned a bachelor of arts degree from Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, and master's and doctorate degrees from McGill University in Montreal. Her interest in early learning was displayed in her doctoral thesis, entitled, "Language acquisition and mothers' speech to children."

Snow's research has encompassed the fields of linguistics, second languages, communication styles, parent-child language interactions and language skills in at-risk children, to name a few.

Snow advocates for continuous education funding, commenting, “Teaching kids to read in first grade is at least as hard as designing rocket ships or taking out appendices; the pre-service support and education, in addition to the outgoing professional development, that teachers should have has to match in scope and intensity that provided to engineers, doctors and other professionals.”

Snow has chaired two national panels, including the National Academy of Sciences Committee that prepared a thought-provoking report: “Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children,” and the Rand Reading Study Group that authored “Reading for Understanding: Toward an R & D Program in Reading Comprehension.” She is currently involved in efforts to improve middle school literacy outcomes in partnership with Boston-area researchers.

A consulting editor and editorial board member of several professional publications, Snow has authored and contributed to some of the most respected books about education, such as “Preparing Our Teachers: Opportunities for Better Reading Instruction,” “Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children” and “Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children’s Reading Success.”

Snow received the Morningstar Teaching Award in 2004, a Carnegie Corporation of New York, Institute for Statewide Literacy Initiatives award in 2002 and a Spencer Senior Scholar Award in 1999.

Commencement Address

President Jacobs, Dean Brady, Deans and university leaders, members of the faculty, parents, friends, and, most importantly, to the graduates:

It is of course a great pleasure to be here to share your commencement with you. I say that in full recognition of the fact that I have no memory of who gave any of the commencement addresses at my own graduations, or my son’s, nor for that matter of what any of them might have said. This fact is both alarming and soothing—whatever passes my lips today will be unlikely to trouble your souls for long. I am sure, though, that many of you are asking yourselves, ‘Who is this woman, and why are we listening to her? Why don’t we get to hear J.K.Rowling, who spoke at Harvard a few years ago, or President Obama, who spoke at Michigan this year, or Jon Stewart, who spoke at his alma mater William and Mary a few years

ago, or even Yoko Ono, who is speaking at my alma mater Oberlin College this year, to considerable graduate grumbling as I understand it. I did grow up in Toledo, nurtured on the robust myth that my paternal great grandfather was the first white child born in Lucas County. I did not consider that claim more factual than most of what my father told me – he had a gift for fantasy. But it is undeniable that his mother, and perhaps her parents as well, were born here, that she, Susan Dean Snow, was a longtime teacher and principal in the Toledo Public Schools, as was my mother, Catherine Howard Snow.

I myself am not an alumna of this university, though my parents both were, as is my brother. In fact, I have a sneaking suspicion that my brother John Snow is the reason I am here. He is the classic successful sibling, the one that our parents bragged about. He got a PhD in economics, AND a law degree. He practiced law, moved to an extremely well-paid and responsible position as CEO of CSX, became Secretary of the Treasury during the second Bush Administration, and now directs a hedge fund. Meanwhile, I got one advanced degree, and have lived on the modest wages and with the modest impact on the world of a university professor. So my theory is that the University of Toledo intended to invite John to give this commencement address, but at the last moment someone realized he had already done that in 2003, and furthermore that he already had two honorary degrees from the institution. So in desperation they turned to another Snow – perhaps the parchment had already been inscribed, and this way there was less wastage.

Do I sound jealous of my older brother? Just because he has always been better looking than me, a better athlete, more popular, and richer? Just because he is invited to join school boards and university boards of trustees, though he knows nothing about education? Just because he travels 1st class and I travel coach? Just because he gets paid \$30,000 to give a talk, and I get \$1,000 – if I am lucky?

You would be very wrong to conclude that I am jealous. In fact, I am enormously grateful to have this person as a member of my family because, quite frankly, I would never hang out with him otherwise. Don't get me wrong – I like John, I enjoy his company, I have fun visiting him at his home in Richmond, Virginia, which has more bathrooms than mine has bedrooms. I have many pleasant memories of our lives here in Toledo – playing horse in the driveway when we were kids living on Scottwood Avenue in the Old West End, riding around in the car he drove as an undergrad, which was a bright red and very sporty MG convertible. Going to fairly obscure but sophisticated seeming movies at a place called, I kid you not, 'The Art Cinema' in The Colony shopping mall. Waiting endlessly outside the Spitzer Building in downtown Toledo, for our chronically unpunctual father to emerge from his chronically untidy law office. Visiting my mother at Libbey High School, where she taught. Going to Detroit to see the Tigers in battle

with the Indians—in those years two dominant teams that often fought out pennant battles with each other.

But the most important reason I value our siblingship is because I value discussion, debate, disagreements, encountering alternative points of view. And from John I get those in spades.

You might conclude from the fact that John was Bush's treasury secretary that he is a Republican. He is, not to put too fine a point on it, an unreconstructed conservative of the old school – minimize government, tell the poor to pull up their socks, don't worry too much about the public schools because "our kids" go to private schools anyway, scoff at environmental issues, minimize welfare, torch the safety net, down with Obamacare, and by all means let's not raise taxes on the rich or regulate the doings of American businessmen.

And, If you are at all up on your political geography, your red states and your blue states, you might be able to infer that I, who live in Massachusetts and work at Harvard, disagree with every single one of those positions. I am a Democrat who bemoans the degree to which the Democratic party has moved to the right, so that Democrats are now much more conservative than middle-of-the road Republicans were when I was your age. Every stop on my life trajectory has taken me leftwards from my origins in Toledo. I did my undergraduate degree at Oberlin – the first college in the U.S. to admit women and blacks, and to this day a bastion of alternative thinking. I went to Montreal, Canada, for graduate school, at the time when Quebec was thinking of seceding from the Canadian federation, and I lived next door to a bowling alley that had been converted to a Hari Krishna temple, where American draft dodgers found hard beds and cheap food in return for joining in the robust chanting at 5 AM and 5 PM. I then moved to The Netherlands, one of the European countries that best exemplifies a commitment to and the success of the social welfare state. I worked at the University of Amsterdam at a time when it was so democratized that every semester's course offerings were determined by a department meeting in which everyone, from the secretary to the undergrads to the full professors, got one vote. In the Netherlands, I came to understand the joy of living in a country where one needn't feel guilty about passing up the homeless in the street without giving them money – with good unemployment insurance, freely available health care, mental health services and addiction treatments available to all, the beggars on the Amsterdam street corners had options. Then I moved to Boston, to a place widely known as Taxachusetts, to a state that Mitt Romney felt he had to apologize for when running for president. I started working at Harvard, where I hung out with probably one of the most unrelievedly lefty faculties in the world, and we the faculty are way to the right of our students. When we talk about increasing diversity in the education faculty at Harvard, we are more likely to be talking about hiring a conservative than an African-American or Latino.

So I have been steeped in leftwing views, and as a result my political consciousness was and is in great danger of becoming flabby. My husband, my friends, my neighbors, my colleagues –we all pretty much agree on matters political. I have no one to argue with, except of course my

brother. But with him I can very reliably disagree. I identify strongly with Maureen Dowd, the left-leaning NYT columnist, who lets her right wing brother write her column once a year – if they weren't in the family, why would we bother to talk to them?

I suppose most people are proud when a family member joins the president's cabinet. I admit to you here, publicly, that I was deeply shamed that a member of my family would agree to work with George Bush and Dick Cheney. I spent the four years John was in the cabinet trying to convince him to get out, to make a big fuss about the war in Iraq, the treatment of political prisoners, the violation of civil rights, the undermining of the economy. Before the 2004 election, I told him 'John, if you resigned publicly and frankly, and if you went back to your roots in Ohio and explained to the voters there what a disaster Bush is, you could determine this entire election.' Instead, he came to Ohio and stumped for Bush, and I still blame him for John Roberts and Samuel Alito.

But, as I said, I also value the chance to argue these matters with someone I have known so long, with someone who has to stay in the argument because we are, after all, brother and sister, aunt and uncle to each other's children, great aunt and great uncle to each other's grandchildren, with someone whose good qualities I also must acknowledge. He is friendly, jovial, hospitable, a loving uncle, an effective executive, and, I am sure the University of Toledo is hoping, very generous. I don't argue with John to convince him I am right – I argue with him to understand his point of view, to evaluate the validity of his arguments, to identify the points on which he is right and I am wrong, to sharpen my own case by deeply understanding his. I think that the kind of fierce debates we have are crucial to my functioning as a citizen, and also to his.

So if I dared to offer you advice as you start on the next stage of your lives, it would be to ensure you have a debate partner who will challenge you seriously in your views. If you, unlike me and Maureen Dowd, do not have a politically oppositional brother, then find another family member, or a friend, or expand your access to disagreeable views in other ways. If you are inclined to watch MSNBC, turn on Fox News once in a while. If you are a Fox News fan, then just check out what Rachel Maddow or Keith Olbermann has to say. Follow the policy of the New York Times, which has established the pre-eminent op-ed page in the country by hiring right-wing and left-wing columnists to comment on the same issues from their different perspectives, thus offering the reader the challenge of resolving opposing arguments every single day.

I urge you as well to consider the value of debate in the lives and the education of your children. Schools are all too often designed as places where adults ask all the questions and know all the answers. I would argue that schools only start to educate children when they present them with questions to which there are no answers – true dilemmas that can be endlessly discussed but never fully resolved. I have been part of a team that has designed a curriculum for middle school students organized entirely around such dilemmas – questions like Should physician-assisted suicide be legal? Should voting be mandatory? Should rap lyrics that denigrate women and promote violence be censored? Should it be legal to rent pets? Should junk food be banned

from school cafeterias? We use these dilemmas to teach vocabulary and reading comprehension and writing, and to expose the students to information they should have – that some states do allow physician-assisted suicide, that voting is mandatory in many countries, that junk food is associated with obesity and obesity with diabetes. But more importantly, we use them to teach students that they can and should formulate and defend their own positions on these important issues. We find that their arguments and their persuasive essays are much better if they have had the opportunity to engage in vigorous debate, through which they can hear and understand other perspectives on the issue.

So embrace disagreements. Keep them polite, but keep them vital as well. Nothing can bring you as close to those you love as the chance to see each other's point of view, and nothing can dispel hatred for those who hold opposing views faster than realizing they are your family and your friends.

I congratulate today's graduates, the teachers and administrators who have nurtured their intellectual development, and the family and friends who have supported them, and perhaps occasionally challenged them as well.