Ethnic Studies

At the March Regular Board Meeting during Citizens to be Heard, a group of the PAC representatives held signs, chanted and falsely proclaimed that I was “eliminating the Mexican Studies Program.” The Higher Education Coordinating Board even received a call from a Texas State Legislator asking if this were true. So, rather than perpetuating misinformation and allow this falsehood to stand in our community, I felt the truth required some consideration.

The truth is that the PAC faculty know that I was present at the Celebration that initiated the Mexican American Studies program last year. In fact, in my public remarks then, I emphasized my support of Mexican American Studies by describing one of my proudest accomplishments. During my presidency at Onondaga Community College, I was deeply disappointed that the college, which shared the name of the original people, had never had any relationship with the Onondaga Nation. I worked closely with the Onondaga chiefs, especially Oren Lyons, the Spiritual Chief of the Onondagas, to establish not just a relationship but also a Native Studies Program. This initiative was not motivated solely to respect the Nation itself and better educate our current students and community, but to attract local Onondaga students who often left their homes to attend Indian Schools in the Midwest where they felt more wanted and comfortable. I learned an important Onondaga cultural underpinning from Chief Lyons and the Clan Mothers: “Every decision made has the 7th generation in mind.” The leaders always considered the future, and how key decisions they made would impact their future. Their experience and wisdom resulted in a philosophy that limited current political and strategic influence on policy development in order to focus on the future; just like our Board.

I shared this story at the Mexican American Studies Ceremony last year, and was excited when one of the participants told me he had met Oren Lyons years ago when visiting the Onondaga Nation. I was the first to raise the Onondaga Flag on our campus next to the American Flag, and
was so pleased when I visited Onondaga Community College several years ago to see that the Onondaga Nation’s Flag still flies, that the relationship Chief Lyons and I initiated 25 years ago continues to be strong.

I also shared in my remarks that I too have a personal investment in Mexican American Studies, for I fully understand and appreciate the value of one’s culture, history, language, art, traditions, and philosophies as a path to greater self-worth and pride, which ultimately leads to greater personal success. I have been on that same journey to discover, understand, and appreciate my own Scottish heritage. I’ve visited the graves of my ancestors in Kingsbarns Scotland; explored Scotland’s history broadly and my family’s convoluted wanderings more narrowly; visited family and national sights in Scotland; and even had the absolute joy and pride to have been the Commencement Speaker at a college graduation held in Stirling Castle, where the ancient Kings of Scotland presided and where the great Battle of Bannockburn was won. I play the bagpipes, and for years performed competitively as a piper with Oran Mor, one of America’s great Bagpipe bands. I’ve often piped for friends’ weddings, including my parent’s 50th wedding anniversary. I piped the Houston Community College graduating class in 2006 upon leaving Houston for San Antonio. I even proudly wear a kilt because I believe fully in the value, pride, and power of my cultural roots. Although, I have to reveal that my daughter wouldn’t let me pipe at her wedding because she wanted to be the only family member to walk down the aisle wearing a skirt!

We are pledged as academics to teach our students critical thinking, a skill that requires practice across every discipline, better mastered when reinforced in every venue in which students study, explore, and learn. One of the reasons I so strongly support Ethnic Studies in general is that it is more holistic than most of our disciplines, as it incorporates multiple disciplines and perspectives. The very foundation of learning at the collegiate level is predicated on the ability to think critically, to question, to sort-out the right information from the chaff, to separate truth from falsehood. Unfortunately, this is not what some of our students are learning right now. As educators, we are obligated to assist and guide them in practicing this skill, and can do so only if we hold
them accountable to the high standard of discovering the truth; and, frankly, hold ourselves to that same high standard.