

Remarks offered at annual breakfast of the Committee on Women's Leadership, NJIT.  
October 8, 2015.

Dr. Laura Valente  
Associate Vice President for Student Engagement  
Dean of Students

Thank you so much. Please allow me to take a moment to acknowledge Casey Hennessey and Lucie Tchouassi for coordinating today's event and for giving me the opportunity to talk to all of you for a few minutes this morning. I am honored to be here and I hope I am able to convey the importance of the Committee on Women's Leadership and specifically experiences such as this one.

*Why is it important? Why, in 2015, do we still need to do this? What do we get out of it? What does NJIT get out of it?*

America is a place of equal opportunity, right? Look around this room at this impressive group of women. Just by virtue of being where we are means we reached a certain level of education and a certain level of career success. It means we have had certain opportunities. So, this is it, there's nothing left to do. The work of the women's movement is done and we are in, or are ready for, a gender blind society, right?

I will respectfully, but emphatically, disagree with the argument. Humor me for a moment as I give you a glimpse into the past.

**If she is to be satisfied with the narrow sphere assigned to her by man, not aspire to a higher, lest she should transcend the bounds of female delicacy; truly it is a mournful prospect for woman. We would admit all the difference that our great and beneficent Creator has made, in the relation of man and woman, nor would we seek to disturb this relation; but we deny that the present position of woman is her true sphere of usefulness; nor will she attain this sphere, until the disabilities and disadvantages, religious, civil and social, which impede her progress are removed out of her way.**

That was written by Lucretia Mott in 1854 at the 5<sup>th</sup> American Women's Rights Convention. In 1880 Susan B. Anthony went before Congress and said:

**We women have been standing before the American republic for thirty years, asking the men to take yet one step further and extend the practical applications of the theory of equality of rights to all the people, to the other half of the people- the women.**

Let's fast forward a century:

**Our faith that we can shape a better future is what the American dream is all about. The promise of our country is that the rules are fair. If you work hard and play by the rules, you can earn your share of America's blessings. Those are the beliefs I learned from my parents. ... It isn't right that a woman should get paid 59 cents on the dollar for the same work as a man. If you play by the rules, you deserve a fair day's pay for a fair day's work.**

That was part of a speech given by Geraldine Ferraro, the first woman on a major party presidential ticket, in 1984. Congresswoman Ferraro was Walter Mondale's choice to be his VP running mate. It is now 31 years later and there has not been another woman on a major party ticket and the issues Ms. Ferraro talked about in that speech are just as real as they were in 1984. Sure, the wage disparity is now 77 cents on the dollar instead of 59 cents, but is that enough? Have we made the progress we should have made. Is feminism dead? Do we women still need each other?

Gloria Steinem, in 2002, said:

**A great deal of effort has gone into trying to make feminism misunderstood... just as there have been efforts to demonize the words "liberal" and "affirmative action." Feminism means what it says in the dictionary: the belief in the whole social, political and economic equality of women and men.**

She went on to say:

**As long as women have two jobs, one inside the home and one outside there can't be equality outside. The struggles are in a different place, but very much present. If any young woman is still asking herself if she can combine a career and family, that's a symbol of the kind of change we need, because probably many fewer young men are worrying to the same degree about how they can combine career and family.**

Bringing these thoughts back to today's event and how they relate to the larger experience of women working at NJIT.

I like to think of myself and my women colleagues like this: Each of us is a thread in the tapestry of women employees on this campus. Single threads are thin and wispy. They break easily and blow away in the slightest breeze. Threads woven into a tapestry become **strong and colorful**. A tapestry provides **warmth and protection**. So I ask you if you, or anyone you know, has had thoughts such as:

- I'm a single working mother – no one understands the pressure.
- My child has special needs – who can I tell?
- If I wear this dress, or these shoes, will I be taken seriously?
- How attractive is too attractive?
- I didn't get that raise – I wonder if it's because I'm a woman?
- I'm strong and ambitious- do they think that's a bad thing? Is that too masculine?
- I want to have a baby but I'll never get promoted if I take time off
- Do other women feel competitive with me?
- I can't admit I don't know this.
- I can't admit I'm scared.

These questions are more likely to be asked (and not answered) by individual, wispy threads—women who are isolated, unprotected, easily blown away by the winds of the work world.

Women who are connected to other women – to other threads in a beautiful, strong and colorful tapestry – know there is someone to give advice and support; to share stories and wisdom. The connections we make today allow each of us to reach out to each other tomorrow.

If we willingly offer each other our individual knowledge, support, care and concern, and if we willingly accept the same from others, those worrisome thoughts concerns and questions can become:

- So and so is so smart and capable – she's my role model.
- I trust that if I work hard and show my value I will be rewarded.
- I see a lot of my younger self in so and so. I will mentor her if she'll let me.
- I can confidently articulate why, as a woman, I am the best choice for this leadership position.

We are immensely fortunate to be working at NJIT. There are a number of incredibly intelligent and talented women in key leadership positions. And an even larger number of highly capable women who look to them as a symbol of all that is possible. It is clear to me that the tapestry that is the women of NJIT will be even bigger, even more beautiful than it is right now if every one of us – short threads and long threads, brightly colored and softly colored, old threads and new threads – are tightly woven together to offer warmth and protection to all who need it.