

United Not Divided: Economic Inequality and the Opportunity Gap
Baltimore Marriott Inner Harbor at Camden Yards
March 30-31, 2016

Welcome Address

March 30, 2016 at 8:45 a.m.

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To quote Baltimore Mayor Robert McLane after the Great Baltimore fire of 1904, "To suppose that the spirit of our people [of Baltimore] will not rise to the occasion is to suppose that our people are not genuine Americans. We shall make the fire of 1904 a landmark not of decline, but of progress."

I summon this quote to remind us of the spirit and resilience of the people of Baltimore. Once devastated by a destructive fire, Baltimore rebuilt. Inequality is a fire spreading in Baltimore and other communities around the country. Together we will extinguish this fire, celebrate and collaborate with those who support the ideals of democracy and inclusiveness, neutralize those who fan the flames, and lift those who have not received the support and opportunity they deserve.

I extend a tremendous thank you to everyone here today. Distinguished speakers, community leaders, ladies and gentlemen: I warmly welcome you to a two-day forum, ***United Not Divided: Economic Inequality and the Opportunity Gap***.

St. Mary's College of Maryland chose to host this forum in Baltimore because many of our students, staff, and faculty call Baltimore home. Our alumni are working in the office buildings surrounding this hotel. They work for the city government and for many non-profit organizations. Many are actually creating jobs for fellow Baltimoreans. We all have a vested interest in seeing Baltimore develop as a prosperous city where all feel safe, where poverty is

reduced, where quality education is accessible and where residents of all neighborhoods can look to the future with optimism and pride.

For too many Baltimoreans, this future seems out of reach. The mounting frustration of inequalities was ignited with Freddie Gray's arrest and death. Today, we see a room full of community members who are willing to discuss this complex and sensitive subject and to keep pushing for reforms that will make a difference in the lives of their family members and neighbors, as well as communities beyond Baltimore. Among us today we have distinguished scholars and researchers who will tell us what is and is not unique about Baltimore's experience. They will put issues many urban areas face in a wider economic, social, and cultural context, helping us understand why so many of our cities are divided and not united.

I would like to thank the *Center for the Study of Democracy* for planning and organizing this forum. The Center has succeeded in enlisting our entire campus to support this effort, including our College students. They have been essential in the event planning and implementation of this event, thereby giving them an opportunity to engage in what we in academia call "experiential learning." This concept is an important element of St. Mary's College of Maryland's mission.

Experiential learning is, to put it simply, the process of learning through experience. It refers to hands-on, real-world problem solving and work that transforms students into active community members and citizens. It encourages civic engagement and prepares young adults for leadership positions while emphasizing collaboration and civility. St. Mary's College was founded on the ideals of opportunity for all, and therefore we have an obligation to promote social responsibility.

By helping to organize this event, our Student Ambassadors have learned grassroots organizational skills and how to connect and reconnect with different communities in this area. They have been able to apply their

theoretical knowledge on economic inequality and the opportunity gap to the real-life situation here in Baltimore and by extension, to other places in this country and around the world. They have developed the conceptual tools necessary for discovering innovative ways to reverse the trend toward increasing economic inequality and divisiveness. With profound understanding of some of the most pressing issues our nation faces, I believe that this exposure and experience will shape responsible citizens.

Liberal arts colleges across the nation are using the tools of experiential learning. Community service, for example, provides a concrete experience. This experience coupled with power of reflection allows students to develop understanding in such areas as civic responsibility, social justice and political consciousness.

Congratulations to all of our students here today contributing and strengthening the voice of the “choir.” The significance of this experience will continue to unfold throughout your life. I am proud to preside over an institution that fortifies young minds to extinguish routine acts of incivility and systemic practices of inequality. We are up against forces that erode civility in government, business and the media. What are these forces? Where do they come from? Why should we care?

Civility is not only about being polite, but also “having an authentic respect for others when expressing disagreement, disparity or controversy” as Cynthia Clark and Joan Carnosso from Boise State University have defined it. “It involves time, presence, a willingness to engage in genuine discourse and a sincere intention to seek common ground,” they continue. Lack of civility in our public life erodes democracy. According to a recent poll conducted in January this year by Weber Shandwick, 74 percent of Americans say that civility has declined in the past few years. According to the same poll, 64 percent say they have stopped paying attention to political conversations and debates and 61 percent say incivility is deterring people from entering public service.

Lack of civility seems to have become a norm in our public life. Americans have grown increasingly accustomed to an “us” versus “them” mentality. Deep ideological differences have separated Democrats and Republicans often to the point of gridlock. Interestingly, according to several studies on post-war congressional productivity, Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society Congress has generally been regarded as the most productive Congress. For the past 50 years, the trend has been toward declining legislative productivity.

Why is this so? Why do we have parties who cannot agree? Is it because deep ideological differences separate Democrats and Republicans and feed the “us” versus “them” mentality?

A recent study led by Professor Nolan McCarty from Princeton University, titled *Political Polarization and Income Inequality*, suggests that the growing ideological gap between the Democratic and Republican parties “is not just due to politicians’ impotence or their unwillingness to work together. It is due, at least in part, to a deeper, structural problem: the widening gap between the rich and poor.” The states that have the highest-level of inequality, according to the study, have also tended to see the most political polarization.

This study suggests that economic inequality has acted as a catalyst for growing polarization in American political life. That, in turn, has increased incivility. Thus, economic inequality does not only push people from the ranks of the middle class into poverty and make social mobility increasingly difficult. It also erodes our democracy and the way we treat each other.

What can we do about it? If we don’t reverse the trend, where does it lead us?

These are the questions I want to pose to our highly respected speakers today. I must believe they will be able to dispel pessimism and give us confidence that our middle classes will not keep shrinking, that our poor people, especially people of color who are the least educated in Baltimore and everywhere, will have opportunities to get quality education and find their way out of poverty.

For my part, I want to end with a positive note saying that we can all do something to make a difference. St. Mary's College of Maryland's mission statement includes a commitment to diversity, access, and affordability. One of the ways in which we live up to our mission is to provide underrepresented students with an exceptional education. We have a long-running program called the DeSousa-Brent Scholars Program that actively recruits talented students who are from low-income families, have attended high schools with fewer resources, and who are first-generation or underrepresented minority college applicants. These students routinely demonstrate how a strong support network equates to success in life and, at St. Mary's College, their six-year graduation rate is indistinguishable from our majority students and that rate, at 78%, is the highest in the state.

Distinguished speakers, ladies and gentlemen, none of us have easy solutions to the issues our nation faces today. Thus, it is so important to come together to learn about the challenges, discuss solutions, and keep these important issues in the forefront of our political and community leaders' agendas like we are doing over the course of the next two days. Once again, thank you for coming to this much-anticipated forum ***United Not Divided: Economic Inequality and the Opportunity Gap***. I wish for us all a successful forum filled with goodwill, civility, and a positive spirit of collaborative efforts that can move us from here to there.

<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/08/31/current-congress-is-looking-a-little-more-productive-so-far/>

Clark, C.M, & Carnosso, J. (2008). Civility: A concept analysis. *The Journal of Theory Construction and Testing*, 12 (1), 11 – 15.

Sarah A. Binder, “Polarized We Govern?” Brookings Research paper. ERIES: Strengthening American Democracy | Number 86 of 104. Paper | May 27, 2014
<http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/05/27-polarized-we-govern-congress-legislative-gridlock-polarized-binder>

Civility in America: An Annual Nationwide Survey by Weber Shandwick. (WS is a leading global communications and engagement firm in 78 cities across 34 countries and operations extending to 126 cities in 81 countries)

<http://www.webershandwick.com/news/article/nearly-all-likely-voters-say-candidates-civility-will-affect-their-vote>