

OFFICE OF U.S. SENATOR SHERROD BROWN

Senator Brown's Prepared Remarks at the Second Annual Ohio College and University Presidents' Conference April 1, 2009

Welcome to the second annual Ohio College Presidents' Conference. With today's turnout, I hope this event is something we will continue in the future. Thank you all for being here and for your service, both public and private, to the students of our state.

As I travel the state and listen to community and business leaders, students and educators during more than 130 roundtables I've held in all 88 Ohio counties, I know there are great things happening in our state. I know great things are happening because of the conversations I've heard today about what you're doing in your communities.

I thank you for your efforts in education, workforce training, alternative energy, biomedical research, community service, and other issues affecting Ohio's students. I have watched so many of you work with high schools and middle schools to reach students earlier and show them higher education is an option. Many of these students would be the first in their families to receive a college degree and I've seen the success of these students on campuses in Dayton and Lorain and all over our state.

Last night at the host steering committee dinner, three out of the ten college presidents said they were the first in their families to go to college. I've been hearing that a lot recently, especially in the last 5 years. I applaud those of you who are particularly aggressive in bringing first generation students onto your campuses. These students are graduating in rates increasingly closer to the graduation rates of other students. This accomplishment is not an accident. It shows a real affirmative action, in the broad sense of the term, from all of you that made a difference.

And it's our educators, parents, and role models that continue to make a difference today.

Many of you knew my mom, who passed away about a month ago. I am very thankful for many of you sent very kind notes to me and my family.

My mom was 88 years old and lived a very active life. She was actively involved in the presidential race in November and chaired a campaign for a local senior levy, which passed, of course, because she was running it. During the last three and half weeks of her life we had her in hospice home care, which is a most amazing thing to watch. Many of you who have cared for a family member can appreciate the empathy hospice nurses show to strangers and the care they show in the last phases of people's lives.

On a more humorous note, during the last five days or so of her life, my brothers and our wives were by her side, and she asked me to sing a song from our early church days. We grew up in the Lutheran Church, and I went over to the bookshelf and pulled a book of verses.

I sang O Beautiful Savior, one of mine and my Mom's favorite hymns. After I sang a few verses, she smiled and said very nice, but you know, you sound much better in a group.

Nothing ever changes in this world.

My mom was an educator, never a college president, but she always put premium on learning. I think that's a big reason I am in this job and on the HELP Committee, and involved in the issues important to you.

And it's a big reason why I felt it was so important for Congress to reauthorize the Higher Education Act last year, which incorporated many of the things we talked about during our first college presidents' conference.

The Higher Education Act expanded Pell Grants, cleaned up college lending, and simplified the financial aid process. We're not exactly where we want to be, but we're moving there.

The Higher Education Act also increased support services for veterans, increased early childhood educator training, and expanded rural education access.

Building on those efforts, this week we re-introduced SECTORS, which some of you have worked on. Senator Patty Murray and Senator Olympia Snowe are co-sponsors with me on this bill. SECTORS brings together business, labor, workforce investment boards, and community colleges to take advantage of industry clusters around the state and the region.

Industry clusters exist around the country, in Silicon Valley, the Research Triangle in North Carolina, or Route 128 in Boston. But it's not just high tech jobs either.

Think of tourism in Florida, or insurance in Connecticut, or food packaging in Pennsylvania. These are successful clusters that build around a skilled labor force.

SECTORS will promote long-term competitiveness for Ohio industries and employment opportunities for Ohio workers.

As we've learned through the regional conferences that were held last year, we must continue to explore partnerships and ways to leverage government investment in education.

I attended the first and the last of the regional conferences that started last December.

At the conference in Cleveland, co-hosted by Barbara Snyder at Case Western, Luis Proenza at Akron, Tom Chema at Hiram College, and Roy Church at Lorain County Community College, we discussed strategies to increase communication between academic programs and businesses to better address the emerging needs to of both academia and industry.

In Cincinnati, Nancy Zimpher and UC hosted a conference that addressed how Ohio's educational system could better support early education and career opportunities in urban areas through internships and co-ops. We heard from several students who benefitted from these experiences.

Another issue I wanted to bring up was yesterday, the House passed its version of the community service bill to expand Americorps, from 75, 000 slots to 250,000 slots. The Senate overwhelmingly passed the America Serve Act last week.

This is a real opportunity to set up community service programs and provide students financial incentives to work in their communities and pay for college. Students will earn a stipend almost equivalent to a Pell Grant that has to be used for education.

We can use the Serve America Act to create opportunities for students and our communities to harness this generation's commitment to volunteerism and community service.

Part of our responsibility should also be setting an example for social responsibility. I sent five or six of you a letter about Russell Athletic, a clothing company that some of you have contracted into licenses agreements. Russell has not lived up in my view, and hope in your view, to the standards and values of this country. I urge you to look at your license agreements, and with your students, serve as a symbol to ensure no slave labor is used to produce your sweatshirts and other university clothing.

I hope we can work on together and use this is as a teaching experience for your students who are expressing a clear desire to be part of a socially conscious community.

Let me now provide you brief introduction of the people you will hear from today.

I am honored to introduce Senator Patty Murray, who has been an outstanding Chairwoman on the HELP Committee's subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety. Her leadership on workforce development directly relates to our efforts in Ohio.

After Senator Murray, you will hear from Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who will discuss a new direction for education in this country. He will discuss President Obama's budget that invests in a new framework for Pell Grants to make college more affordable for our low income and first generation students. I urge you to ask him questions and explain what you can do and what we need.

You will also hear from Senator Lamar Alexander, Chairman of the Senate Republican Conference and a member of the HELP committee. Senator Alexander has been a leader on education since his days as a Governor, US Secretary of Education, College President, and I might add, the proud parent of a Kenyon student.

We will also hear from Ohio's Chancellor of Higher Education, Eric Fingerhut, and State Superintendent of Education, Deb Delisle, on their efforts to transform education in Ohio.

We will then separate into breakout groups so we can continue our dialogue. We will take an hour lunch break followed by a presentation and tour with Dr. Billinger, the Librarian of Congress.

Let me close by thanking you again for your leadership and service to our state.

Education in the 21st Century must be seen as a multi-dimensional catalyst that improves lives, creates opportunity, and strengthens our communities when our country needs it the most.

I look forward to continue working with you to ensure all Ohioans have access to a first rate education that leads to a stronger middle class, a stronger Ohio, and a stronger nation.