Susan E. Rice
Remarks to the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
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Good evening, everyone. Thank you, NAICU—to your President Barbara Mistick for her leadership, and to your chair Isiaah Crawford for that kind introduction. I'm very glad to be able to join you for this wonderful celebration. And, I'm grateful to be here with my friend Clay Pell, who—with his tremendous dedication to public service—carries on his grandfather's extraordinary legacy. Thank you, Clay.

My brother John and I are deeply gratified to accept this award on behalf of our late mother, Lois Dickson Rice, and I appreciate the chance to share a few words tonight not as a policymaker, but as a daughter.

Fifty years ago, in 1972, when the financial aid reforms that would become known as Pell Grants were first signed into law, I was seven years old. To me, Lois Rice was simply "Mom." She drove the carpool, arranged playdates, and cooked family dinners. After school, she'd often take us back to work at the College Board's Washington office, where my brother and I would play on the electric typewriters and distract the staff.

At the time, I knew how unusual it was to have a professional working mother, with her stylish ultra-suede dresses and frequent travel to New York. But, it wasn't until years later that I came to truly appreciate the remarkable legacy reflected in that citation you just heard—to realize the incredible impact of the work that came out of those electric typewriters.

I'm fortunate to have played many roles over the course of my life and career, but one of the titles of which I will always be proudest is to be the daughter of "the Mother of the Pell Grant."

As I hold this beautiful crystal, I cannot help but think of all those young people holding diplomas because of Senator Pell, my Mom, and so many others. They didn't necessarily set out to transform the landscape of higher education. But, as we reflect on the 50th anniversary of Pell, it is amazing to consider how profoundly they did just that.

A few years back, when I was working on my memoir, I wanted to figure out how many people had received Pell Grants. To be able, in some tangible way, to quantify their impact. And, I was surprised to learn that nobody really knew. It had apparently never been calculated before.

With the persistence I perhaps inherited from my mother, I reached out to the Department of Education and asked them to investigate. After some prodding, and a critical push from Clay, analysts at Federal Student Aid studied the archived data. They crunched the numbers. And, in 2019, a helpful FSA analyst informed me that they had come up with an approximate number of unduplicated BEOG/Pell Grant recipients since 1973: 80 million.

It's an incredible number. Now, over 80 million Americans, stretching from that first year of recipients to present-day leaders like Dr. Suzanne Rivera and Michelle Vasquez, who will speak tonight.

But, when you consider how many of those Pell recipients have gone on to shape so many other lives—as doctors, lawyers, and artists, as engineers and public servants—as college presidents—the true impact of Pell is incalculable. With half a century's hindsight, it's easy to imagine that the success of Pell was preordained.

But, as that great video reminds us, a program that now enjoys the support nearly 90 percent of Americans was not popular in 1972.

Powerful forces were arrayed against the idea of giving students themselves financial aid grants. It was an "acrimonious battle," in my mom's words.

Passing Pell took tenacity. It took patience. It took passionate advocates—from students to community college presidents, from an aristocratic Rhode Island Senator to a dogged Black female College Board executive—to achieve.

Fifty years later, I don't need to tell you that the cause of my mother's life—the battle to make college affordable to all—is not over. Pell grants don't go nearly as far in covering costs as they did in 1973, and too many students today graduate—or don't graduate—burdened by a mountain of student debt. The fight to expand access and opportunity in higher education continues, from state legislatures to the halls of Congress.

And, whether you lead an Ivy or a two-year institution—whether you oversee a faith-based college, an HCBU, or a school of art and design—everyone here has a role to play in that effort. Many of you are direct beneficiaries of Pell's legacy. We need all of you to carry that legacy forward.

Because each one of us intimately understands the transformative power of education to open minds and open doors.

A belief in the value of education is what drove my mother's parents, two Jamaican immigrants, to send their five kids to college on a janitor and a maid's salary.

It's what propelled my mother to become valedictorian of her virtually all-white public high school, to become student body president at Radcliffe, and, ultimately, a trailblazing leader in education and corporate America.

My mom liked to look back on her life—a life made possible by the power of education and, which advanced education for others in turn—and say, "Not bad for a poor colored girl from Portland, Maine."

Tonight, as we mark this momentous milestone for Pell, I think I can say, "You're right, Mom. Not bad at all." As always, you make me so damn proud.

Thank you again, NAICU, for this great honor and for your continued leadership in expanding educational opportunity for all Americans.