2013 AERA Presidential Address: Beyond the Ivory Tower: The Role of the Intellectual in Eliminating Poverty

William G. Tierney

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What is This?
The author argues that the role of a public intellectual involves a science of knowing as well as the knowledge gained by a researcher’s work and life. Including both, the intellectual moves beyond educational organizations and finds ways to become more involved not only with larger issues of public policy but also with those with whom he or she is engaged. The assumption here is that to help reduce poverty a researcher’s focus needs to move beyond the ivory tower. By way of examples drawn from research pertaining to increasing access to college, the article highlights cognitive and noncognitive factors necessary for academic success.

**Keywords:** college access; college knowledge; cultural portraits; games/social media; public good; public intellectual

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**Part I: Prologue**

### 1975

The year is 1975. I have graduated from Tufts University and find myself in Tahala, Morocco, a small Berber village in the Atlas Mountains. I arrive in Tahala after two train rides, a third-class bus, and a final hike into town. I am lonely. My Arabic is horrible. I can only speak in the present tense—"I am leaving my bags in Fez yesterday. I go to Fez tomorrow. I return in two nights. But I teach today," I tell my high school principal when I meet him.

I am an object of intense curiosity. I am the town’s first foreigner, and in addition to not speaking Arabic I do not speak French.

One lonely evening there is a knock on my door. When I open it I meet Nezmi. He is wearing a slightly tattered brown *djelaba* that is soiled around the edges, and he has on old black shoes with holes in the tops. He is a small rotund man. He grabs my hands as he offers the standard greeting—"Salem alikum." The peace of Allah be with you. I know enough to say in return, "Alikum salem." And the peace of Allah be with you.

He keeps holding my hands and laughs slightly as he tells me he has heard that I want an Arabic teacher. "I will teach you," he says. "We will be friends. Let’s take a walk."

Nezmi teaches me Arabic by taking me for walks in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains above town. As is standard in Morocco, he often holds my hand as we walk, and my awkwardness and the villagers’ initial curiosity give way as everyone sees Nezmi teaching his American.

Although Nezmi is only a few years older than me, I treat him like a respected elder. We do not have a good equivalent in English for what Nezmi is. His life centers on studying the Koran although he is neither a minister nor a monk. When we walk, children come up to him and kiss his hand.

"We are very different, William," he begins that first day. "Do you like us? How are we different?"

That question and my response begin a conversation that continues for many months. He speaks quietly and corrects my numerous grammatical mistakes. He keeps asking what I like and do not like and how Morocco is different from America.

About a year passes and one day we are sitting quietly against a tree watching the sun set.

"Allah has given us many blessings, William," he says. "This day. Our friendship."

"Praise Allah," I say. I am now able to speak in the present, past, and future tenses. Nezmi is leaving in a month for a Koranic school in the south.

"I am sad you are leaving, my teacher," I say, and he laughs at my formality.

"When you go home, William," he says, "try to remember the teachings of Allah. You are a Christian, but remember Allah’s truths: Evil occurs when we forget. Always try to learn. The suffering of the world is from those who neither remember nor learn."

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1University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA
After returning home and picking up a master’s at Harvard I am working on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation at a tribally controlled community college. The tribal college movement started because if 100 children enter high school on a reservation, only 3 will get a college degree. The assumption is that if sending native students away to primarily White institutions produces these abysmal results, then surely tribal colleges can do a better job.

I am the academic dean at the tribal college. Although the title of dean is snazzy for someone who is 25, our college is a series of trailers. For the first time in my life I am getting what I think of as a big salary—almost $20,000 dollars. I buy a car. I buy a leather coat, cheap leather, but nonetheless—I look good.

I am driving to a friend’s house for supper in the early spring. In North Dakota it is still cold, freezing. I have become friends with one of the families. They live in Mandaree in a log cabin a few miles off the main road. The house is beautiful, and the barn even bigger. I arrive and my friend comes out to meet me. She says her father needs to talk with me.

Paige is one of the tribal elders, and he commands a great deal of respect. Because of diabetes he has lost one and now both legs. I sit with him and have a cup of coffee as often as I can. I have never seen him angry, and he always tells his stories in a low rumble that makes me lean forward.

Early on, during one of the first times I meet him he sees me looking at my watch and says quietly, “You White people. You are always in such a hurry. Take your time. Slow down. Listen.”

He does not say this in an angry or loud way, but I am ashamed.

I go in to speak with Paige and remove my gloves to shake hands. It is still cold, and my leather jacket is zipped all the way up.

“Bill, I need your help,” he says. I am very excited that someone like Paige would ask me for help. Perhaps he needs me to write something for him, or he wants me to go to tribal court?

“I have a calf in breach,” he says. I look at him with no understanding.

He tells me it is calving season, and one of his calves is in breach. He explains to me what this is and shakes his head. “I can’t pull. I can’t pull her out. I need you to help.”

I nod, still not really understanding. I grew up in the suburbs. We go into the barn, and there is a cow on her side in labor. There are chains connected to the legs of the calf, and he says to me, “Now you need to be gentle and strong. Pull that calf out.”

For the next few minutes I dig my heels into the ground. I am pulling, pulling, pulling. The calf comes out with a pop and as it does I fall on my back into the hay. My leather jacket is splattered from top to bottom. Paige wheels himself over to me and gives me his hand to pull me up. “Good job, son” he says and smiles. “Welcome to the res.”

By 1984 I am done with Stanford and have another master’s and a Ph.D. in hand. I have suffered through courses in decision analysis, economics, and statistics, but most of my time is in anthropology studying with Shirley Heath, Renato Rosaldo, Joseph Greenberg, and George Spindler.

David Tyack, a historian, and Shirley Heath are on my dissertation committee. I have found graduate life exciting, but daunting. I keep reading. I do not know anything. At one point I say to David that I will never be able to write anything. David smokes a pipe in his office and sits back and nods. “I’m older than you,” he says, and in a nondescript voice between puffs continues, “But if you choose this life, it means a lot of evenings reading and writing. You have to love it.”

When I finish my master’s thesis on Jean Jacques Rousseau and this unknown Frenchman in 1983, Pierre Bourdieu, I wait outside Shirley’s office for her to give me the good word. Actually, I do not really need the good word. I know because I have written it: This thesis is superb. Shirley comes down the hall, opens the door, and before I sit down starts in. “You’re not convincing. Look at this introduction. And it never ties back at the end. What’s your argument? You’re just stating things; there’s no analysis.”

Her voice becomes a blur as I gaze out the window trying to make sure I do not burst into tears. A quiet fills the room. She takes my wrist, looks at me, and says quietly, “Argue with me. You always argue. C’mon.”

I suppose if you want to know where things began, this is what I would say. If you are doing a life history of my intellectual trajectory it is these sorts of moments where it would start. It was a long time ago, but when I think back, those are the sorts of things that made an impact on me. Those are the sorts of things I remember.

Part II: The Year as President of the American Educational Research Association (AERA)

You have asked about my year as president. We accomplished a lot. We joined a group—Scholars at Risk—to emphasize our concern about human rights and the protection of academic freedom; we adopted a resolution on human rights. Three task forces published reports that ultimately had useful impacts. We changed one journal and started another for the first time in a generation. We reauthorized spending monies on research conferences that reflected the diversity of the organization. After the tragedy of Sandy Hook we offered commentary about how to reduce gun violence in schools. We filed an amicus brief on affirmative action.

I learned a great deal during that year. I could not have accomplished as much as I had without the support of the council and Felice Levine, the Association’s executive director. I have always maintained that if patience is a virtue it has not been one of mine. I wanted the Association—I wanted—to do more. That is where the theme of the conference, Education and Poverty, and my talk came in. It was so long ago. It seems like yesterday.

What should be our stance as an association in dealing with poverty? What should my stance have been? What is the role of the academic? Here is what I thought then but did not really say in my presidential address.

Part III: The Presidential Lecture

Until the early 21st century, education in America was viewed as a public good (Calhoun, 1998; Kezar, 2004; Tierney, 2006).
Being America, we argued about this forever, but we called for more education for our children and citizens since the time of Horace Mann. The assumption was that individuals and the country benefited from an educated populace, not simply in training but in democratic engagement. First elementary and middle school and then high school became standard. By the mid-20th century college had become of increasing importance. The belief was that a way out of poverty and into the middle class was education.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry's (1959) searing portrait of racism in the 1950s, at the end of Act I, Walter, the husband and father of the poor Black family, thinks he has come into some money that will make him wealthy and let them move into a house. In a long soliloquy to his 7-year-old son in the family living room where the boy sleeps, Walter dreams of better days and says to the boy,

> And I'll pull the car up on the driveway—just a plain black Chrysler, I think with white walls, no black tires. More elegant. Rich people don't have to be flashy. I'll have to get something sportier for your mom, maybe a Cadillac convertible to do her shopping in. And I'll go inside the house and your mom will come downstairs and meet me at the door and we'll kiss each other and we'll go up to your room to see you sitting on the floor with the catalogues of all the great universities in America around you. All the great schools in the world! And—and I'll say, all right son—it's your seventeenth birthday, what is it you've decided? Just tell me where you want to go to school and you'll go! Just tell me what you want to be—and you'll be it! Yessir! You just name it, son, and I will hand you the world.

Walter's comments made me think of a life history I had done of Robert Sunchild, a pseudonym, a Native American academic who died of AIDS in 1991 (Tierney, 1993). Here is part of what Robert said during my talks with him:

> In the 8th grade I won the spelling bee for the school, and my parents didn't want to go to the city championships. We know now that it's important for a kid, but my mom didn't know any better. I don't blame her at all. As I progressed in school and people said I was a good student I remember my mom saying, "If I have to scrub floors on my hands and knees for you to go to college I will." She really tried. (pp. 122–123)

His comments made me think of a series of cultural portraits we did in the Pullias Center in 2004 (Tierney & Colyar, 2009). One that I did was about a high school student I worked with who ended up going to Stanford. He graduated with a master's degree in engineering. He was a poor student who was born in Ethiopia and moved to the United States when he entered high school. As immigrants his parents knew about the importance of education. I visited his family one day and after a phenomenal meal, the father said to me, "Everything is so rushed here. In our country we are always visiting. There is time. You'll have coffee now. In our country we have three cups."

Over the next hour we sipped coffee. They spoke about Ethiopia and about their hope that their son would go to college. At one point the daughter said, "Everything is so expensive here. He has to get a loan." The son responded, "No, I need a grant. A fellowship. We have a low income. I must be sure to get a grant. We can't pay."

Eventually I took my leave. As I walked to the door the father shook my hand. "Please help my son. He is a good boy. He must go to college."

The problem by the turn of the 21st century was that America considered itself exceptional—and we were. Toqueville (1840) invoked the idea of exceptionalism in his 19th-century travels, and the idea stayed with us. He said, "The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional" (p. 36). Unfortunately, in the early years of the 21st century we were exceptional in the wrong way.

Rather than having more economic mobility our country had less. True, White middle-class mobility was similar across countries, but the United States "has more low-income persistence and less upward mobility" (Jantti et al., 2006, p. 2). Based on analyses that utilized the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.), intergenerational mobility was among the lowest for the United States of all industrialized countries. Moving out of the poorest sector of society became even harder. If you were born poor, then you had a 40% chance of remaining poor as an adult (Economic Mobility Project, 2012).

We also needed to understand the impact of concentrated poverty. The proportion of high-poverty schools had grown roughly 10% in the first decade of the 21st century (Aud et al., 2013). We knew that socioeconomic integration mattered; some even argued that it trumped extra resources in boosting achievement. As Reardon and colleagues noted, "The desegregation of public schools in the 1960s and 1970s was highly visible. [It] led to significant changes in the quality of schooling available to black students" (Reardon, Grewel, Kaolgrides, & Greenberg, 2012, p. 901).

We also knew that effective policies existed to deconcentrate poverty and desegregate schools. The recession during the first decade of the 21st century made things even worse. The Census Bureau (Bishaw, 2012) reported that 46 million Americans—nearly 1 in 6—were living below the poverty line of $22,000 for a family of four in 2010. In absolute numbers that was the greatest number of Americans living below the poverty line since they started keeping records in 1959. Children were particularly affected. Of children younger than 18, 6.5 million lived with an unemployed parent in 2010. One in 5 children lived in poverty. In the District of Columbia, Mississippi, and New Mexico, it approached 1 in 3. Inequality in the United States had risen to a level not seen since the 1920s. In the 1960s the income of the wealthiest quintile was 30 times greater than the income of the poorest quintile. By the 2000s it was 80 times greater (Gordon, 2004).

Back then, if we wanted to lessen inequality, what were those levers that we ought to have pulled? Closer to home, if inequality was a concern, then what should I have done? What is the role, the responsibility, of the intellectual to help eliminate poverty? That was the question that motivated me when I constructed my talk. We needed to come forward with the best research that existed to solve these problems; but there was also something to be said for hearing, listening to, respecting the life stories and challenges that young people faced as they tried to use education.
as a route out of poverty. But I did not talk about that in my address. I will tell you why in a minute. Let me tell you first of a student I knew.

Some years ago I mentored a high school student who participated in the mentoring program I started. He was extremely respectful. He was an altar boy; he went to daily Mass; he was an honors student. And he was undocumented. His family members were in the process of getting their green cards. In 2004 in California everything seemed set for him. He was accepted to University of California (UC) Santa Cruz, and we celebrated. He was the first in his family to go to college.

Then he showed up in my office one day in June. He was upset.

“What’s up?” I asked.

He handed me a letter from the university denying him financial aid because he was undocumented even though he was in the process of getting his green card. I looked at him, and he uncharacteristically exploded. “You told me if I worked hard, if I studied hard, if I worked on my writing, that things would be okay. Well I did. This isn’t fair.” He gasped for breath and repeated, “This isn’t fair.”

Silence filled the room that afternoon.

He looked at me and said more as an accusation than a question, “What are you going to do?”

I spent the better part of a month making phone calls to various agencies and individuals. Finally, quietly, we were able to get him the financial aid necessary for him to attend Santa Cruz. Periodically during college he checked in with me either to ask a question or just to see how I was doing. One day he emailed me and told me the good news.

He graduated with a 3.0 grade point average and majored in psychology. He spent 2 years working with the poor in Los Angeles. He considered the priesthood but laughingly told me one day, “I like girls too much.” He eventually applied for a Ph.D. in psychology and became a community psychologist.

There was no small irony that someone who was undocumented, whom others spoke of employing the epithet “illegal” spoke to me in terms of fairness. America is supposed to be a society that is fair. In his young life he had internalized this notion of fairness. He had played by America’s rules and understood what is fair and what is not.

He raised a question that had followed me since Morocco. But Jose’s question put it front and center: “What would I do?”

The university has been viewed as a fortress removed from society to study society. The metaphor of a cloister of men, mostly men, removed from the rough and tumble of society is one that pervaded academe from the time that the notion of the ivory tower began back in the 15th century. In the 19th century the United States was an academic backwater. Our institutions were largely inward looking, either training students for religious life or training the rich for a life of leadership circumscribed by the social skills learned in college. Even with the explosion of higher education in the later decades of the 19th century with the Land Grant Acts and the beginning stutter steps toward the creation of research universities the assumption was that the academic needed to be disengaged.

True, we had public intellectuals. But the academic reward system throughout the 20th century remained wedded to the notion of blind peer review. Work being judged worthy of publication went into outlets largely read by other academics. When I was young I was cautioned not to be involved with one or another movement. To focus on my research. To keep my head low. Advice I did not heed. In AERA in 2013 there was a constant tension about the sort of work we should do. There seemed a sense that one sort of research mattered, and if it mattered, then those who did another kind of research did not matter. People tended to talk only among themselves. I wanted to bridge that divide, but I failed.

The best work in 2013 said that we needed more people moving from high school to college (Bohn et al., 2013; Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Cheah, 2012; Lumina Foundation, 2012). If we ever wanted the economy to restart again, we needed more people in some form of postsecondary education even if to earn a certificate. If we wanted to help end poverty, then the schools needed to be better. More of our students needed to be prepared for high-wage jobs and greater civic engagement. For my own work that meant we needed more people attending college. So here is what I said in my talk.

We know we are losing ground with regard to participation in higher education when we look at comparable countries (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2009, 2010a, 2010b). We know that a bachelor’s degree is likely to earn an individual significantly more money than if he or she only has a high school degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). We know that not everyone needs a bachelor’s degree—but a high school degree is no longer sufficient for the vast majority of our students. And we know from Russell Rumberger’s (2011) thoughtful work on dropouts that those who will fill jobs that need only a high school degree will need better preventive measures that keep them from dropping out. There is a need for better workforce preparation.

We also know that too many students who go on to college are not college ready. Look at my own state of California. Close to 60% of students at the California State University (CSU) and 26% at UC need to take a remedial course in writing or math (California Legislative Analyst Office, 2011; Long & Boatman, 2013; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010). And this is after having taken a college-ready curriculum.

What do we do? What do we do to increase the number of students going to college? What do we do to ensure they are college ready?

Based on my work, as well as a collaborative effort for the What Works Clearinghouse, there are five points we can make with a modicum of confidence based on the evidence (Tierney, Bailey, Constantine, Finkelstein, & Farmer Hurd, 2009; Tierney, Venegas, Colyar, Corwin, & Olivérez, 2004). The way I think about this is that with finite time and finite resources a school cannot do everything. What might we recommend to increase access to college and to create a college-going culture in low-performing schools?

**Recommendation 1: Offer Courses and Curricula That Prepare Students for College-Level Work, and Ensure That Students Understand What Constitutes a College-Ready Curriculum by 9th Grade**
The simple point is students and their families need to know sooner rather than later about which courses they need to take, and those courses need to be available (Adelman, 2006; Allensworth, Nomi, Montgomery, & Lee, 2008; Long & Boatman, 2013). In California I can tell you by the 10th grade if the student is on track to meet the requirements to get into UC. There is no magic here. It simply calls for a clear set of academic courses and the ability to inform students about what they need to do. I have always found that students will rise to what we expect of them. But we must have expectations.

**Recommendation 2: Utilize Assessment Measures throughout High School so That Students Are Aware of How Prepared They Are for College, and Assist Them in Overcoming Deficiencies as They Are Identified**

Some people are big on assessment (ACT, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b; Howell, Kurlaender, & Grodsky, 2009; Karp, Calcagno, Hughes, Jeong, & Bailey, 2007, 2008). My concern is that simply testing someone does not do much. If I am ill and go to the doctor and she says I need an MRI, fair enough. But if a year later I go back to the doctor and she looks at me, concludes I have cancer, and pulls out the charts and says, “Yup. You sure do,” I reckon I would be pretty angry. Or if she sent me a message a few months after the test with a bunch of numbers that I did not understand, I am not sure what I would do if I felt perfectly fine. But that is basically what we do far too often with high school students when it comes to college readiness.

To be sure, there is a fair amount of research that points out that we need to know how students are doing (Achieve, 2009). But students need to know how they are doing as well.

We would say that a doctor who took a test, found out I was ill, and did not prescribe a path to wellness committed malpractice. What about when kids are tested and we do nothing or do not inform them or their parents in culturally appropriate ways?

That is the second half of this recommendation. Assessment, by itself, will not do much. We need clear assessment measures (Constantine, Seftor, Sama Martin, Silva, & Myers, 2006). We need a clear, honest, straight-forward conversation with the student. And we need a plan that we adhere to in order to overcome any problems.

**Recommendation 3: Surround Students with Adults and Peers Who Build and Support Their College-Going Aspirations**

Connections matter (Cave & Quint, 1990; Gandara, 2002). I often will ask high school students whom they talk to about college, and they will say no one. There is a fellow I know who got into and graduated from UC Santa Barbara. When he got accepted he emailed me, telling me he got in and said, “Thought you’d like to know.” He did not tell his mom right away. He did not have any friends who were going to college—in fact, it was uncool. He attended a high school that did not celebrate going to college. So we need to think about how to have students aligned with peers and adults who talk about college.

**Recommendation 4: Engage and Assist Students in Completing Critical Steps for College Entry**

Applying to college is confusing—especially if you are going to an elite university. Students do not know how to write the college essay. They do not know what people are looking for. “I want to be all I can be” is not the sort of verbiage that works. I come from a middle-class family. I can remember sitting at the kitchen table with my mother watching guard as I wrote my college essay for Tufts University. And I can remember my mother, the English teacher, reading it over, correcting the spelling and punctuation.

I spoke with a student a few years ago and asked her if she knew where she wanted to go. She said she had narrowed it down to Santa Monica College, CSU Los Angeles, and UC Berkeley. I asked why. She said her friend went to Santa Monica College, her brother went to CSU Los Angeles, and her teacher said UC Berkeley was good. She looked at all three websites; they all had women’s soccer, so that is what she decided. She did not understand the difference between a community college and a university. The point is not simply delineating the differences across institutions but enabling students to apply to those institutions where they are best suited (Bergin, Cooks, & Bergin, 2007; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Seftor, Mamun, & Schirm, 2009). Too often, highly talented low-income students never apply to top colleges. My job, our job, is to raise aspirations rather than to level or destroy them.

**Recommendation 5: Increase Families’ Financial Awareness, and Help Students Apply for Financial Aid**

We need to help students and their families understand college costs (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2007; Grodsky & Jones, 2007). When I went to college my parents were the bank. I never asked if we could afford to go to college; my question was where to go. But for students I work with, the cost of college is confusing. If you have never used a bank or taken out a loan, then all of this is intimidating. And college can seem ephemeral. Should I work with my dad tomorrow watering lawns and get $8 per hour or delay for 4 years and get a college degree that I am not sure will land me a job?

I think of these issues as fitting within two primary frames. One frame pertains to the cognitive capacities students have so that they are ready for college. When 60% of the students heading off to the 4-year CSU need a remedial class in either math or English, you do not need to be Albert Einstein to say we need to do something to improve students’ academic preparation.

The other frame pertains to what I think of as college knowledge (Conley, 2005). Students do not know about academic life. As a high school sophomore my parents and I met with my guidance counselor. We started talking about which colleges I might want to apply to and which courses I needed to take. My older brothers went to college. The situation is extremely different for the students I work with today, many of whom do not even have a college counselor. In a high school where the drop-out rate is north of 40% and the college-going rate south of 30% there
is not a great deal of college knowledge among the students. Instrumental issues such as which tests to take and when as well as deadlines for applications and scholarships are often missed.

Larger issues such as time management, note taking, and financial literacy complicate the college-going-readiness-completion undertaking. Some of us arrive at academe’s doorsteps ready and assuming there are those who will help us if we have questions. Others of us arrive not ready. We are either unaware that there are individuals and offices that might help, or we assume that we should not ask for help.

If we are going to fight poverty, then we need the best research that exists that we might build on to improve educational outcomes at all levels. But to say that suggests that we do nothing or say nothing until we are certain, and certainty is not a quality I am comfortable with in the 21st century.

Take my work on games and social media (Corwin et al., 2012; Tierney, Corwin, Fullerton, & Ragusa, in press). We know that the student-to-counselor ratio should be about 250:1; nationally it is about 450:1; in California in the schools in which I work, it is 800:1 (American School Counselor Association, 2010; College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, 2012). Things are not going to change, and it is surely ineffective to ask overworked teachers to take on the confusing task of counseling kids about career and college choices. Part of my work during the past several years has focused on working with the Game Innovation Lab at the University of Southern California. We have been building games for high school students.

We are inventing a series of games about college. The first is *Mission:Admission*. We are trying to instill in students the idea of college knowledge. We are trying to invent a series of games that is fun, strategic, and social. The theory of action is one of the group rather than the lone individual. We work with students to build games. Student game designers know more than we do about likes and dislikes, so we have worked with them at a preliminary stage. They tell us what works. We then sent *Mission:Admission* out for review to improve it. We revised it again and put it on Facebook. We have been doing research to see if this works. The research on games and social media as tools for learning is far from definitive (Corwin et al., 2012; Tierney et al., in press). A grant from Institute of Education Sciences (IES) enables us to evaluate the effectiveness of games on college-going. Does playing the game lead to greater understanding of the admission process? *Future Bound* is a game for middle school students—same format, design, and assumptions.

Recent studies suggest that text messages might increase enrollment of low-income students (Castleman & Page, 2013). More than 75% of all teenagers text, and they send more than 60 texts a day (Lenhart, 2012). Our purpose, then, is to make use of emerging technologies to improve student learning and access to college. To determine the impact and effectiveness, we have to conduct research that has not been done yet because of these emergent technologies.

So that is what I pretty much said in my talk.

But I should have said more. I should have gone on and pointed out that as we move toward understanding we also must listen. And once we know we must act. And we must get out of the rarefied halls of the academy and engage in dialogues—dialogues of respect.

If we know that those points I mentioned matter based on the best research out there, such knowledge takes us only so far. My experiences during the past 20 years have less to do with my pontificating and more with listening, and at times, that has to do with bearing witness to the struggles and challenges that young people face in their daily lives. And from this listening comes a sense not of how I see the world but of how the students I have hung out with matter, how they view the world, how they think the world is changing. In his thought-provoking Distinguished Lecture for AERA, Michael Cole (2010) spoke of the importance of leveraging the cultural resources of the family to change the cultures of the classroom. At times it seems that some of our solutions try to strip culture away as if it is either absent and irrelevant or detrimental. I try to make sense of students’ lives, but to do so I need to spend time and to listen in a manner that Mike Rose (2012) does in his writing about working adults.

One of my mentees once said when I suggested that we might do a life history, “I’ve had a different sort of life. I went to school and everything, but I was alone at school, especially middle school. If what you want is a typical kid, that wasn’t me” (Tierney, in press).

The Ethiopian student whose home I visited and with whose father I drank coffee once spoke to me about his first name. Some teachers had a problem saying it, and they suggested he change it to a more American name, one that was easier to pronounce. I asked him what he thought when people suggested he change his name. He shook his head: “No way. My parents gave me my name. It means something special in Amharic. I like my name.”

Another student said to me, “Sometimes people just don’t want to listen. Why listen to me? I’m just a teenager.” I have found such comments commonplace in my work with urban youth. If I want to develop a game that these sorts of youth will use, then I need to listen to the consumer. All too often narratives about one’s life, the sorrows, joys, and fears, are narratives that either do not interest people or are impossible to have in a manner that is other than brief or facile or that happens within the confines of a therapist’s office. “I think about these things all the time,” a student said one day, “but I just don’t talk about them…”

I appreciate for those of us whose obsession is affecting policy or advancing theory that an N of 1 or 3 or 10 or 60 can be problematic. But these young people pointed out what I actually find with every child I meet—everyone has a different sort of life. My role is not to merge these lives together as if we are all homogeneous, or should be, but to think about the exceptionalities; from these unique identities I might be able to say something based on evidence to a teacher or legislator or parent or the individual. And when we document the lives of the sorts of students I work with there is also a moral urgency that may resonate in a manner that is not always possible elsewhere.

**Part IV: 2025**

After I stepped down as president of AERA, life resumed. AERA, with its 25,000 members in 2013, has changed incrementally
The prophets of doom and gloom were proven wrong by 2025. The Association grew to 35,000 members. The annual conference still took place in a specific location, although there were meet-ups in several regional cities. More people now attended remotely across the globe than at the conference.

Although it took a great degree of angst and, again, a great many Jeremiahs predicting the Apocalypse, all of the journals went online. The result was greater access to AERAs work and greater breadth of the sorts of work we did.

What about me, you ask? In 2025 did the hopes I had come true for the Association? In 2025 I say that it depends on whether the glass is half full or half empty. The theme of that conference in 2013 was Education and Poverty. Some good came of it. A bunch of papers were published. Good arguments ensued about what to do. Some of our work made its way into the public arena. The task forces made an impact. Faculty began to talk about ways to move tenure policies in a manner that supported greater engagement with communities. The rapid rise of adjunct faculty made that task force critical. The Association eventually moved aggressively to seek out new members. A preoccupation with school violence and bullying placed the Association’s work front and center.

But the needle on poverty has barely budged. A dozen years after the conference, the educational landscape does not look that different from how it did during my presidential term. Dropouts in 2025 are still too high, and college-going too low. The poor and students of color in particular are still underrepresented. Although moderate progress had been made here and there, urban schools are still the lonely places I mentioned in one of my presidential notes.

What about me, personally, by 2025? Well, not that much has changed. I still write and teach. I still play the field when it comes to methodology. Being a professor is what I do. It is part of me. I am still good at it, so in 2025 I see no reason to stop.

Part V: The Past Is Prologue

So we arrive at today. Yes, I retired a while ago. I have surprised myself that I am doing what I said I would never do. I still read education research. I even keep up with AERA. It makes me laugh to think one of my student’s students is now president. Boy, am I old! But it is 2050. AERA still plugs along. The insularity is less. The quality of research seems more engaged.

You want to know if I have any regrets. Would I have done anything differently back during that year? Sure, who would not do things differently? It is always possible to change something in one way or another to improve on it.

The talk—could I have improved the talk? I have thought about that from time to time. Retirement lets you think about the past. I have a regret if you want to know the truth. As I mentioned I became president during a particular moment in the Association’s trajectory. We emphasized research, but we defined it in a particular manner. Our focus tended to be on one another rather than those outside the academy. All too often we wanted to listen only to those with whom we agreed, and we dismissed everyone else.

The result was my talk. I focused more on the science of knowing and the import of knowing what we know. Do not get me wrong. Those factors that schools could do to increase college-going were essentially correct.

But 25% of the membership in 2013 was graduate students. When you factor in age almost half of the Association was younger than 40. I could have spoken to them more effectively. I should have spoken to them more effectively.

But I punted. I opted for the safe speech with that little bit at the end about how more research needs to be done on games and social media. It was as if I were saying that the obligation of intellectuals was to speak to one another and to produce good research. And good research got defined by what I learned as a scholar.

I did not believe it then. I do not believe it now. The obligation of the intellectual has to be beyond the ivory tower. To eliminate poverty we have to be engaged, involved. And that involvement is based on the totality of my life, not simply my role as the researcher, the disengaged academic trying to develop quality work. Perhaps if I had said that more clearly we would have made a greater impact.

Sure, the elegance of one’s research design and methods is essential. But I look back. I think of those students who said that no one was listening to them, that they felt alone. I think of Shirley telling me that I should argue with her and how I learned to argue and respect different points of view. I think of being on the reservation and Paige’s quietly criticizing me for being in a hurry, for not listening. I think of Nezmi in Morocco back in 1975 asking me how we were different and what it meant. All of these things go into, went into, who I was as president, as professor, as Bill. I do not think you can cordon things off in a bottled-up way. I wish I would have said that.

What I should have done is not give a buttoned-down talk. I should have looked back over my work and life and spoken not only from the head but also from the heart. Now that I think about it, what I should have done was begin the talk by saying, “The year is 1975.”

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**AUTHOR**

WILLIAM TIERNEY, PhD, is a university professor, the Wilbur-Kieffer Professor of Higher Education, and a codirector of the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California, 3470 Trousdale Parkway, Los Angeles, CA 90089-4037; wgtierney@usc.edu. His research focuses on access to college and reform and innovation in postsecondary education.