

*Hope College senior Yessenia Ordaz Aguirre delivered the following speech at the college's annual Women of Color and Senior Recognition dinner April 11, 2012. She was one of four women selected by the Office of Multicultural Education to present remarks at the dinner. Ms. Aguirre is a member of the ACEH Board of Directors and formerly served as a youth advisor to ACEH.*

I want to start out by saying that Hope College is a very special place to me. I am thankful for the way that my eyes, mind, and heart have been opened during my four years here. I am thankful for the size of the campus because I believe that it had a lot to do with what I learned. It has not been easy to get where I am now, and not just academically, but also in many areas of my life that I did not even realize existed until Hope. I believe that many institutions face the same type of challenges that exist here; however, because of our small campus we can clearly see all the work that still needs to be done. I could made this speech about the moments at Hope that brought me a lot of joy, but I chose not to because too many others---that actually get heard--are already doing that. So instead I want to make a speech that doesn't criticize Hope but challenges its credibility.

The best way for me to do this is through sharing the only truths I know about my experience at Hope; these truths strand from the contradictions during my four years here.

So here I go.

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Holland, Michigan

Hope College

Yessenia Ordaz Aguirre.

That doesn't really flow, right?

Well, it's not supposed to.

However, many fought for me to be here, and for you to be here to listen to me.

So here we find ourselves in a situation in which

I was not a part of the original mission of Hope College,

And neither were many of you, if you are honest with yourselves.

Yet, we are here!

Did that sound a bit harsh?

Well, let me explain:

Arizona's SB 1070 and HB 2281

Georgia's SB 87

Alabama's HB 56

Detention Centers

Operation Streamline

Close to 400,000 deportations a year-- increasing even more since 2008

Families forced to be separated

Globalization

Immigration

Poverty

Hunger

More than 5,000 immigrant deaths have been confirmed since 2001, although the actual death count is inexact because the desert efficiently disposes of the dead.

The DREAM Act

The injustices faced by migrant children and migrant workers.

What are the alternatives to deportation?

Why is there poverty?

Do people see the negative effects of free trade?

Why are there more people of color in prisons than any other race?

Do people see the discrimination in the U.S jail system?

Hispanics constitute 16 percent of the overall U.S population yet they are 32 percent of the people in state prisons.

Casey Anthony vs. the Troy Davis case

Trayvon Martin

Howard Morgan

Tulsa, Oklahoma, shooting spree

Does anything I am saying affect you?

Well, these topics matter a lot to me

But the Hope community does not talk about any of the issues I mentioned.

Not because it does not affect them, it does in every way.

I doubt that the salad you just ate was harvested and picked by white farmers.

So please, let's take a moment and be honest with ourselves.

All of the issues I mentioned are more than topics to be discussed and create opinions about.

These are topics that hurt and are breaking people's cultures. These are more than topics; they are the reality faced by many people in our community.

This is my reality.

I carry the obstacles of my people with me every day.

I have friends that fear deportation on a daily basis.

I have friends that work picking crops every season.

I have friends that cannot go to college because they do not have a social security number.

I have friends whose parents are about to try to cross the border.

I have friends that are in detention centers.

I have friends that are considered unintelligent because of their strong Spanish accent.

And still I have friends that worry so much about assimilation that they forget where they come from.

I do not expect every conversation at Hope to revolve around these topics, however, it would be appreciated if they were brought up in classes more; especially when the Hispanics account for more than 35 percent of Holland's population.

During my high school years here in Holland I was committed to understanding the Hispanic community. I had not been surrounded by so many people that resembled me since moving back to the U.S. I wanted to understand the local Latino culture. Me, being first-generation Mexican-American was not the same as someone being a Mexican-American from Holland, Michigan, and I wanted to understand those differences.

After my involvement in the Hispanic community and my four years of high school here, I ended up at Hope College.

I did not know what to expect. I had never been to college before. I did not understand what a private Christian institution consisted of. And all I knew was that my passion rested on my people.

I identify with the quote and constantly say it:

"You do not know you are a fish until you are out of the water."

And that is exactly how I have felt at Hope year after year; I was constantly being reassured that I was indeed a fish in its community.

I don't intend to sound like a victim; rather, I want to be honest about my experience. I had just entered a campus that seemed oblivious to the reality about the actual Holland community. During orientation students were warned to not go beyond 16<sup>th</sup> street. That could have been said for many reasons, but all I knew was that beyond 16<sup>th</sup> was where most of the Hispanic community lived.

Is that what students were being warned about? To be scared, once they are not in an environment that resembles theirs?

To me they were being warned to stay away from me and the community that I love.

Hope encourages students to do good deeds like raising money for cancer research and to support hungry children in underdeveloped worlds. While those are also very credible things to do, it is disappointing that students are not pushed to care for the realities in their own communities.

I realize that it's a huge mission to get students to care about issues that they do not see playing out in their lives directly. But students learn what they are taught and value what they see modeled by their leaders. If students saw this modeled more, they could possibly learn to care more deeply about issues of justice.

Before my first semester at Hope I received endless mail that told me about how excited the Hope community was to have me. However, during these past four years the more time I spent observing Hope's students and community the more I felt that the only thing people seemed truly passionate about and actually cared about was a basketball game or some type of sport.

I do understand that college should be fun and basketball games should be a part of the experience, however, it is also important to prepare students to become concerned citizens of a diverse and global world.

Seeing these complexities in the Hope community made it clear where I was in its priorities. I could be a "good" student and accept it, but it is extremely difficult for me to try and live by the quote:

"It is what it is."

Because I know and trust that it certainly does not have to stay this way.

I did not choose to be born where I was, I did not choose the color of my skin, my gender, or my sexuality. But, these are part of my identity that I love. I am trying to change a place that is stubborn, proud, and at many times egocentric, so that people like me can one day be accepted into the culture of Hope.

Most students on Hope's campus do not care about issues of race and privilege. It is a scary topic, and it is uncomfortable, and, yes, it might challenge who we think we are, yet isn't that what college is about?

I feel that at Hope we have a distorted view of what blessings are. Here blessings are used to stay put, stay comfortable, to keep being built up, and maintain the status quo--which ultimately translates to, don't change.

Hope College, I am challenging you to please challenge your students to be more consciously aware and sensitive to how their attitudes, beliefs, values, and actions affect others. And I mean challenged to the point that they understand that we are interconnected and intricately a part of each other's lives. Regardless of our beliefs or values, we should be concerned about fairness, justice, and equality.

And while we could agree to disagree, where is that going to get us? Hope has to go beyond that and let students be impacted by one another--through sharing stories like today, through going to events where you might feel like a fish, through finally getting out of our comfort zone and appreciating someone else's culture, experiences, and perspective.

As a Chicana, I do hope that Hope feels my presence once I leave. I want to make sure that others that come after me do not feel that they need to compromise their culture or their values to fit in.

If they feel that their being does not fit within the boundaries of Hope, they should not leave. They should stay and challenge it; otherwise things will remain the same.

Please, Hope, stop protecting your students and allowing them to graduate without understanding or wanting to understand others beyond themselves.

I want to thank my family, dear friends, and the Office of Multicultural Education for helping me keep going during my time here..

And in spite of my challenges, I appreciate and cherish all that I have learned at Hope and the support I have received along the way.