

Striving towards equity



Dr. Michael Benitez Jr. speaks at Clark College's annual celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

"Today we're going to have a little of what I call 'critical fun,'" said Dr. Michael Benitez Jr. as he began to speak to the crowd gathered to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy in Gaiser Student Center on January 20. True to that promise, Benitez delivered a talk that was enlivened with humor—but also tackled serious subjects like racially based bias in this country's social and economic systems.

"For 60 years, the data have told we need to change, but for some reason, we're not looking at the data," said Benitez, showing charts that revealed gaping discrepancies between African-Americans and whites in sectors like home ownership, wealth accumulation, and imprisonment. "We're looking at things the comfortable way. Instead of looking at the needs of

the oppressed, we need to take a look at the comforts of the dominant.”

Benitez acknowledged that most people in the auditorium probably were able to take advantage of at least some of those comforts. “This is the tension for those of us working for social justice,” he said. “Our complicity in the system that we aim to dismantle.”

Benitez spoke engagingly about both receiving and being denied privilege—being able to say and do things as an able-bodied man that a woman or person with disabilities might not be able to say or do, but also being a target for police as a Latino man. “There’s a reason I was pulled over four times by police on a road trip,” he said.

Benitez is the Dean of Diversity and Inclusion and Chief Diversity Officer at the University of Puget Sound. He recently completed his doctorate in educational leadership and policy studies at Iowa State University. He has served higher education in different capacities for the last 15 years, including academic affairs, student affairs, diversity and inclusion, and teaching.



President Bob Knight announces the college’s new Social Equity Plan at the college’s annual celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King

Jr.

Appropriately for an event celebrating Dr. King's legacy, the speech was preceded by the announcement of the college's new 2015-2020 Social Equity Plan. "We are being serious about this as we move forward with social equity," said President Bob Knight in announcing the plan. "We want to make it fair and just for everyone at Clark College to achieve their dream. I will be at the forefront of it."

"This is everybody's plan," said Clark College Multicultural Retention Manager Felis Peralta, who as a member of the college's Cultural Pluralism Committee helped develop the plan. "It does not belong to the Cultural Pluralism Committee. It does not belong to the Office of Diversity and Equity. Everybody has a part of making Clark a better place for everyone."

In his keynote speech, Benitez praised Clark for taking a stand on social equity. "I'm glad to hear the word 'equity' in there," he said. "Because without equity, there no such thing as inclusion. Without equity, there is no such thing as diversity."

Photos: Clark College/Nick Bremer-Korb