

Devinder Malhotra, Chancellor
Remarks at the Nellie Stone Johnson Scholarship Dinner
March 22, 2018

Nellie Stone Johnson once told a reporter: “I’m not going to quit. There is too much to do. People need jobs, equality, education.” That was in 1995, and she was just shy of her 90th birthday. The scholarships awarded in her name celebrate not just her life and career, but more importantly her belief in the power of education – especially higher education – to set an individual on a path to a job and to equality.

Education was part of Nellie Stone Johnson’s DNA. Her grandmother was a teacher. Her mother was also a teacher and had earned a college degree. Her father sat on the Dakota County school board. Nellie Stone Johnson had the distinction of being the first African American elected official in Minneapolis to serve on our board, and she received an honorary doctorate from a Minnesota State institution – St. Cloud State University.

Providing access to exceptional higher education is exactly what our colleges and universities do, every day of every week throughout this state, and we are enormously proud that the students who are receiving scholarships this evening will join us on their path to a better future.

As many of you know, this is not the first time I have attended this dinner, but it is my first time as Minnesota State chancellor. I am honored to be with you this evening, as are my Minnesota State colleagues who are here. This includes eight members of our Board of Trustees, five presidents, and four members of my cabinet. We are all here tonight because we represent Minnesota’s flagship higher education system and we are committed to providing access to an extraordinary and affordable education. We believe that higher education has a bigger impact than anything else our state can do to reduce racial and economic disparities. Our colleges and universities are on the front lines in providing access but also the support systems that help students have the best shot at success in college and long after they graduate.

Our students are women and men of every gender and orientation; every race and color; every ethnicity and national origin; every income level and social status and physical ability. That includes more students of color, more American Indian students, more first-generation students, more low-income students, and more veterans and service members than all other providers of higher education in Minnesota combined.

We know that higher education has a direct impact on a person’s ability to find a job, keep a job, and progress to the next job. But education affects more than just the economic aspect of life. It also affects a person’s quality of life. The college educated are more likely to have jobs that offer health insurance and pension plans. They’re more likely to live longer, healthier lives. And their children are more likely to develop strong cognitive skills at an early age. Education has a remarkable payoff for individual life chances, and over the past few decades, its importance has only grown.

We know full well that if we fail to ensure the success of the students we serve, we will not eliminate the disparities that keep too many Minnesotans from becoming the talent this state and all of its diverse communities must have if we are going to thrive well into the future.

That's why the Nellie Stone Johnson scholarships are so important. Even though our colleges and universities are Minnesota's most affordable option for higher education, many students cannot go to college without scholarship support. The Nellie Stone Johnson Scholarship means that more students are able to go to college, stay in college, and find success after college.

Let me end where I began, with Nellie Stone Johnson's declaration of *stick-to-it-tiveness*. She said she was not going to quit. Well, through the scholarships in her name, she has not quit, and she never will.

And so long as our colleges and universities are here, we're not going to quit, either. There really is too much to do.

Thank you!