IHDSC Welcome Reception Director Speech
October, 2013

I would like to take this opportunity to welcome you all to our reception that is launching this next phase of the Institute of Human Development and Social Change.

I would like to begin with a quick introductions and some word of thanks: As you are mingling make sure to meet the IHDSC staff—Claudette Carter, Eric Zhang, and the two newest members of our team Alison Garforth and Alexis Stern. They are the backbone of the Institute and are poised to support IHDSCs development in this next phase. I also want to take a moment to acknowledge the leadership of Cybele Raver and Richard Arum – I feel enormously privileged to follow in their footsteps. And, a special thank you to the Deans of the three schools represented in the Institute—Mary Braebeck, Tom Carew, and Sherry Glied—and Provost David Mclaughlin —whose support has been critical to the Institute being what it is today.

Before you turn back to your colleagues, I want to use this moment when we are all together to highlight very briefly the promise I see in this Institute and some of my highest goals in leading this Institute during my tenure as Director over the next 5 years.

I had the opportunity this summer to read about Thomas Edison and the invention of electric light.¹ Edison, while enormously famous as the inventor of the incandescent bulb, actually could not claim to be the first to invent it. Indeed, as patent applications and newspapers of the time will attest, many other inventors before Edison had done so. We identify Edison with the lightbulb not because of a simplified or misguided interpretation of history, but something more important and extremely relevant to us today: the truth is that we remember Edison because he was the person who invented the process that transformed this seemingly brilliant and simple invention called a light bulb to a day-to-day reality. Edison didn’t only invent a bulb, he invented a lighting

system. It was the development of that system (through a power source, feeder, switches, etc) that allowed him to light not just a single lamp or house, but an entire neighborhood and eventually a city. A city in which one light could burn out or be shut off and the rest would remain on. A city in which something as small and inexpensive as a light bulb could end up in every home and dramatically change the world we live in.

Edison accomplished this feat following a few simple principles: Most notably, he did not work alone. This is not a story about a nerdy lone genius wiling away every evening until a stroke of brilliance showered upon him in the late 1800s when Edison discovered that a carbon filament in a sealed glass vacuum could burn for 14 hours straight. The story of the light bulb is much bigger. It is a story that exemplifies the interplay of both “science and technology”; a story that recognizes that innovation is a “complex social process”; a social process that could be supported or stifled by policy and political systems, and best developed by “working people who grappled with tangible problems in their everyday lives”. This is a subtle and significant lesson: It is not one person but the “great laboratories of pure and applied science” that supported the innovation of the invention of the electric light and, indeed, many other innovations to follow.

The approaches advanced by Edison in the late 1800s fueled an engine that eventually blessed us with organizations like Bell labs, and processes like the telephone in the mid-1900s—the invention of the light bulb and the electric system was the beginning of an “age of perpetual innovation”. And, while may be it is too big a goal to hope that we will solve as large a problem as the lack of electric light in cities or the lack of telephone communication across the country, the problems of children, families and communities are as complex and daunting as those technological problems seemed then. And I am increasingly convinced that resolving those challenges requires insights from scholarship that is truly interdisciplinary, scholarship that draws from diverse disciplines such as psychology, education, sociology, economics, policy, as well as disciplines of medicine, neuroscience, political science, anthropology, and even business and law. The Institute has amazing potential—Cybele Raver and the original founders of the Institute built the vibrant intellectual community that is represented here today. I see my
challenge as IHDSCs new director to not only support this community, but to leverage our collective presence to a) bridge the longstanding disconnect between research on human development and policies and practices that can support children, youth, and families in a complex social world, and b) design systems that can spark breakthroughs in ways that innovation was catalyzed in Edison’s labs, in the Bell labs, and others.

So, while I have mentioned in passing some of my short-term goals in moving forward with IHDSC, in terms of greater cross-project intellectual and methodological cross-fertilization and greater visibility, I see an even larger opportunity here. And I invite you to work with me to leverage this unique opportunity—to effectively address the hard challenges of at risk children and families in the US and around the world by working together to solve large and seemingly intractable social problems. Let's work together to create an Institute that can take on this challenge.

We certainly have our work cut out for us. Thank you very much.

Pamela Morris
Director, Institute of Human Development and Social Change