Fall 2013 Convocation Address  
September 3, 2013

Freshmen students, welcome, again. I am sure that in the past week, you have learned a lot of very important things:

- Bryn Mawr time. Before long you won’t even find it strange to ask: “Meet you at 4 – is that Bryn Mawr time?”

- Everything has a Welsh name. Pretty soon names like Bettws Y Coed and Pen Y Groes will roll off your tongue. Not only that, but you will even know how to spell them!

- Our College song/hymn is the most difficult you can imagine singing – not like the fight song of Notre Dame. As best I can tell, we need our degree to take four years so that you have time to learn both the melody and the words to the song!

- In no time, each of these fun and peculiar Bryn Mawr ways and countless others that you will learn will seem like second nature to you.

We are so excited to have you here, and we are eager to see how you will shape this place, just as Class of 2014 has done.

I want to offer a special welcome to our graduate and post bac students. You have made a very special choice to come a graduate or post bac program that is located within a liberal arts women’s college. You probably did so because you want an experience that goes beyond the narrow focus that can sometimes accompany graduate study. You are an important part of the fabric of the Bryn Mawr community and part of what makes us special, and I want to encourage you to engage in this community fully and to thank you in advance for the ways in which you make this campus distinctive.

Apparently at Convocation it is tradition for the President to talk a bit about the year ahead. I spent some time at the end of last year and over the summer talking with faculty, students and staff. I want to share two important themes that emerged in these conversations:

The first is how much we as a community value our education model, the residential liberal arts college, and still think that it is the best education that we can provide. This affirmation comes at a time when there is increasing pressure to justify and quantify the results we get for our students. I believe that a liberal arts education – particularly when delivered by scholar/teachers is the best preparation for any life – and I heard this so strongly from the faculty, students and staff with whom I never spoke. Consider some of the things that our students learn here.

There are very few jobs, graduate schools or places where our students might work or volunteer that wouldn’t be thrilled to have a student who could: Closely read a document, critically reflect on its meaning, develop a cogent argument and provide data to support it, ask interesting and important questions, perform research to answer those
questions, discern what information is important, write and speak clearly, produce a piece of creative work and understand its meaning, and explain what they know to others. Our students know how to do these things. Additionally, our students are comfortable thinking outside of the normal constructs, tasking themselves to challenge the ideas they have become accustomed to.

Our students seek out opportunities and are inspired to take those opportunities and transform them into meaningful experiences throughout this campus and beyond. As you heard earlier today, our students are comfortable not just with change, but with transformation. What about students who believe that persistent effort often leads to excellence? There are those who have discovered how to take the language of being an agent of change beyond words and ideas to tangible action. What more could you want in an employee, volunteer, graduate or professional student?

It is true that our model is being challenged. We may need to be able to articulate in more precise ways and, in fact, even measure our results, but now more than ever we have to fight because we (our faculty, students and staff) are in the best position to make the case. One can’t look at the students before us today and not believe in the power of the kind of education that we provide.

The second theme that I picked up in my conversations with the community was that we are ready to be a more positive, passionate and joyful place. We need to balance critical reflection and self-criticism with joy and celebration. Too often, we tend to get bogged down in how much we have to do and the few things we haven’t done instead of what we have accomplished. We do something extraordinary, but our trained sense of critical self-reflection helps us find the one thing we did wrong. A little of this kind of self-criticism and humility is good and probably contributes to our excellence, but too much will suck the happiness out of this place. We have to remember how much fun it is to learn, to teach, to ask the questions we want to ask and to go look for the answer. We need to remember how rewarding it is to work and learn at a place that has such an important mission – the undergraduate education of women and the graduate and post bac education of students in the humanities, sciences and social sciences, including social work.

I hope that this year we can find a good balance and take more pleasure in and find joy in our work. I hope that we can celebrate with enthusiasm when there are things to celebrate and, quite frankly, find ways to have more fun and more balance in our lives. So an important part of this year is to focus on articulating how the fundamental elements of a BMC education, graduate or undergraduate, are keys to success for any pathway, and to find ways to celebrate and enjoy what we get to do here every day.

I want to end by saying a few special words to our seniors:

- Be sure to make the most of your final year in this special place. You are not going to get to do this again, so have no regrets. Take the course that you always wanted to take (even if you don’t think you will be good at it). Take time to go into to the city, or to have that extra cup of coffee with your friends after dinner.
• Enjoy what you are doing this year. This is when you get to bring together all that you have learned. You are finally figuring it out. Enjoy those moments of accomplishment as you integrate, synthesize and produce, and think about how far you have come since those first ESem essays or first problem sets.

• Don’t focus and complain about what you have to do. Don’t train the freshmen to play misery poker. Instead of spending time complaining, sit down and get it done. Use your complaining time to do something fun!

• You have made wonderful friends here. When else in your whole life are you going to get to live with all of these amazing people in the same time and place? If you do nothing else, take time to enjoy them.

• Don’t let people freak you out by asking what you are going to do when you graduate. The liberal arts are the core of a Bryn Mawr education. The habits of mind and heart that you cultivate here will free you intellectually and spiritually. They will connect you with the globe you inhabit and with the deepest parts of yourself. They will be your foundation for a future of lifelong learning and your touchstone as an engaged and committed citizen of the world. You know how to think, communicate, question, research, learn and work with others. You have a lot to offer and wherever you wind up, you have the tools you need to be successful. Don’t worry!

Today is the first day of work of the 2013-2014 academic year, and I look forward to engaging in the year’s work with you. Let’s do it Mawrters!