Last year in my Convocation remarks, and indeed throughout the year, I talked about finding joy and other forms of positive affect in our lives here, and I talked about becoming a community that celebrates itself and its accomplishments with less modesty. But, in the back of my mind, I worried that, for this community, the pursuit of positive emotions like joy, contentment, pride, pleasure, and hope would somehow be seen as antithetical to excellence, rigor, achievement, or the intellectual seriousness that are so important to Bryn Mawr’s identity. We all treasure the fact that this is a place where students and faculty can come to be intellectually engaged and curious, to be serious about their studies, and to be in a community that shares their love of learning. Over the summer, for various reasons, I spent some time reading in the area of positive psychology, and I saw in this research a more scientific affirmation that positive affect is actually supportive of Bryn Mawr’s serious institutional mission. So I am back with that same message (joy and celebration), this time with theory and data.

While I want to recognize that there are people in our community who struggle with mental health issues and of course we will be working hard to support them, today I’ll focus on aspects of positive psychology that suggest that an individual’s experience of joy or excitement for their work, the experience of being fully engaged in that work and the inclination to connect that work to things bigger than oneself can build a community where we all support each other through the hard times – like when we feel disappointed in our performance, struggle with mental distress, or suffer from having just too much to do.

Positive psychology is the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive. It is about happiness, but it is so much more complex than that term might suggest, given the way it is typically used. Positive psychology divides happiness up into three realms. First, it is experiencing positive emotions like joy, love, contentment, pleasure, and hope for the future. The idea is to increasingly experience more of these positive emotions and fewer negative ones. Second, it is understanding positive individual traits and using them daily in our lives and work. These traits include capacity for love, courage, compassion, resilience, creativity, curiosity, integrity, self-knowledge, moderation, self-control, and wisdom, and the state of flow – more on that later. Finally, it is living a meaningful life and connecting what we do to foster better communities and contribute to things that are larger than ourselves. In this arena we work to build strengths like a sense of justice, social responsibility, civility, nurturance, work ethic, teamwork, purpose and tolerance. Meaning increases through connections to others, future generations or causes that transcend the self.

I would argue that rather than detract from academic purposefulness or seriousness in our work, these elements of positive psychology support engagement and success. I, therefore, see these as intimately related to our mission. Well-being is actually synergistic with deeper and more expansive learning and achievement. How so? Here are a few data points.
Positive mood produces a broader attention, more creative thinking, more interest in exploration, and more holistic thinking. People who experience more positive affect are more likely to persevere, particularly after failure, more likely to help others, and self-report better health and perceived health.

Using our talents and skills in optimal ways can lead to flow. Flow occurs when you deploy your highest strengths and talents to meet the challenges and possibilities that come your way. This state is so gratifying that people will seek it for its own sake. People describe flow as invigorating, they feel ecstatic, proud, fulfilled. Our concentration is fully engaged in the moment, self-consciousness is lost, our sense of time is distorted; work can feel like play. And while flow sounds a little ’70s, we do find it here during a great class or lecture, in writing or researching a paper, in pursuing lab work, or as we perform on the stage or on the playing field. We should embrace flow, look for it, and not let insecurity or procrastination hold us back.

As a community, the third element of positive psychology – striving for meaning and purpose – seem central to who we are. Positive psychology tells us there are good reasons to connect to things larger than ourselves through the creation of new knowledge or ideas through community engagement or through our own reflection on the work that we are doing. Like any field of academic study, there are imperfections with positive psychology and one should use proper caution interpreting the data. That said, my critical read of this work suggests that experiencing more positive affect in all of its complexity can only foster excellence, focus, persistence, and ultimately achievement at the highest levels. There is no shame or lack of rigor in pursuing joy. It will only make all of us better at what we do and healthier in how we do it.

Now the other area where I have pushed is in the area of celebrating our achievements. In my observation, we are reluctant to claim our excellence. We are too modest. In fact, rather than celebrate success, we have a tendency to focus on the one thing we did wrong and forget to also enjoy and claim what went well. It turns out that studies have shown that when people share the news of a positive event in some way (when they celebrate even in this small way), they experience greater positive affect beyond the lift of the event itself. This is called capitalization. And you get even greater capitalization when the person who is told the good news responds positively. So don’t just share your news, also listen responsively to the good news others share and acknowledge it.

So I want to argue that, as a campus, we need to develop our capacity to celebrate what we do well. In addition to the many other good reasons not to keep the accomplishments of our faculty, students and staff a secret, data suggest that it will contribute to our subjective well-being. In that spirit, it is my pleasure to share some good news that is good news in itself and that will lead to the celebration of the accomplishments of another.

On April 17th, we will have the pleasure and honor to award the Hepburn Medal to the Honorable Sonia Sotomayor, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. The celebration will include a gala, as well as an event just for students at which
Justice Sotomayor will deliver remarks and take questions from the audience. The Hepburn medal recognizes women who change their worlds: those whose lives, work and contributions embody the intelligence, drive and independence of the four-time Oscar winner Katherine Hepburn and her namesake mother, an early feminist activist. As the first Hispanic and third female Supreme Court justice, Justice Sotomayor is truly a trailblazer. Her twenty-year service to the federal judiciary reveals her unwavering commitment to public service. Equally important, Justice Sotomayor’s many opinions from the bench, whether in the majority or expressing critical interests from a dissent, exhibit wisdom, unflinching commitment to justice, and fundamental dedication to real equality in our diverse society. In these and other ways, Justice Sotomayor truly embodies the Hepburn spirit. How lucky we are to be able to celebrate the accomplishments of Justice Sotomayor with this medal?

Today is the first day of work of the 2014-2015 academic year, and I look forward to engaging in the year’s work with you. Welcome back, and an anassa kata to our new students, our new faculty and to the Class of 2015.