Last year, one of my fellow college presidents sent an email to her campus community about the nationwide protests in the wake of the shooting by police of Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri and the chokehold-induced death of Eric Garner in New York City. In her email, she expressed solidarity with those feeling anger and despair at the decision by grand juries not to indict the officers involved in those deaths and outlined ways her college would be responding.

She was surprised, however, to find herself in the middle of a controversy, because the email was titled, “All Lives Matter.” For her, this phrase represented a natural expansion of “Black Lives Matter,” which had become the slogan of an emerging movement against excessive police force and for racial justice in the United States. What she didn’t realize was that “All Lives Matter” already was being used on social media by those opposed to the “Black Lives Matter” movement, those who sought to deny or minimize the history of racial injustice that was the source of the pain and motivating demands for change sweeping the nation.

As a small liberal arts college, we at Bryn Mawr dedicate ourselves to the free exchange of ideas in a safe, welcoming environment. Our goal is for everyone to feel free to speak up, to listen, to learn, and to teach. Yet this story I’ve told you about another campus reminds us that ideas are not free-floating. They exist in social contexts and are intertwined with complex histories not only of progress and triumph, but also of pain and inequality. It reminds us that we cannot understand what words or ideas mean without investigating their history. This story also reminds us that we presidents are fellow learners on this journey.

So as we mark a new beginning with Convocation – a time to journey forward in anticipation and excitement – we remind ourselves that civility and openness depend on our willingness to learn about the contexts of which we might be unaware, to hear each other’s stories, and to tell those stories to one other. The diversity of histories represented in this community shaped by different nationalities, religions, classes, sexual and gender identities, races and ethnicities (to name just some of our identities) means that all of us will be unaware of some of the values and concerns of those with whom we work and live. We are strongest as a community when we are both sensitive enough to learn from others and generous enough to teach others before we judge them.

In this spirit, I want to tell you a brief story about a black life that matters and one of which you might not be aware. After attending Dunbar High School in Washington, DC in the early 1920s, Enid Cook gained admission to Howard University, one of the nation’s premiere historically black colleges, where she earned straight As her first year. The next year, 1927, Enid Cooke transferred to Bryn Mawr. It was not an easy process. She and her supporters had to fight for her admission against those who didn’t want an African American woman at the College and who thought she was not prepared for the academic challenge. While Enid Cook finally was offered admission, she was not permitted to live on campus, but instead was required to live with a local family, creating hardships her fellow students did not have to face.
Yet Enid Cook was not to be thwarted. In 1931 she became the first African American student to graduate from Bryn Mawr, earning degrees in chemistry and biology. She went on to earn a Ph.D. in bacteriology from the University of Chicago and become a lecturer in the department of medicine from 1937-1944. She married physician Arcadio Rodaniche and moved with him to Panama, where she served as the chief of the Public Health Laboratory for four years and then as a professor of microbiology at the University of Panama until 1974. A gifted scholar and pioneering woman in the sciences, Cook published more than 50 articles in the field of arthropod-borne viruses over the course of her career.

Not much has been written about Enid Cook’s life, and she is not nearly as well-known as she should be: The racial attitudes and prejudices of her time have unjustly diminished her place in the historical record. But we are doing our part to recognize the courage, determination, talents, and accomplishments of this remarkable Bryn Mawr woman. I am pleased to announce that the new space for the programs that had been housed in Perry House, Bryn Mawr’s previous residence and cultural center for students from the African, Caribbean and Latina diasporas and their allies, will be called the Enid Cook ’31 Center.

Naming a dorm for Enid Cook, after unjustly denying her the right to live on campus, seems a fitting way both to honor her importance in our history and to move forward from that past. The larger Enid Cook Center also will stand as a testament to the accomplishments of the many women of color who have attended Bryn Mawr and as a reminder of the work that remains in creating a more just and equitable world.

Historically, Perry House had two functions: First, to provide a welcoming, affirming space for students on a campus that has not always felt that way for everyone. And second, to serve as an educational space, the location of the Black Cultural Center. The Black Cultural Center has been without a stable, permanent home for the past few years. The new space, at the heart of the campus, will allow the Center to better realize its educational mission. I’ve been excited to see our students at the core of the planning of the Perry relaunch. I’m grateful for their work and for the efforts and vision of the Relaunching Perry House Committee and the many friends of Perry House, both on- and off-campus.

But the opportunity to realize the vision for the new Cook Center must be shared by all of us. It cannot be the sole responsibility of the students. We must care for the physical space, lend our professional support to the Black Cultural Center, and be partners and resources for the vibrant programming that is to come.

Bryn Mawr’s history has been fraught with bias. It denied admission to Black women until Enid Cook; it did not allow Black students to live on campus until the 1950s; and its lack of attention to issues of racial justice spurred the demand for the creation of Perry House in the 1970s. We must remember this history, but my hope is that we also can look to the future and think of the Cook Center as a proactive creation. It is my hope that the Cook Center will serve as a catalyst for change and a hub of education, no longer on the periphery but as a core element of our educational mission.
Indeed, as I noted earlier, central to our community culture is the valuing of the free exchange of ideas: encountering competing views; engaging those views thoughtfully and critically, with evidence and sound argumentation; and remaining open to revision of our own views. And we do this in a way that is respectful of all perspectives and those who hold them, even when, especially when, we don’t agree. This kind of civil discourse can be challenging and it can be uncomfortable. But the rewards far outweigh the difficulties. I believe we are creating an environment that will make this civil discourse more accessible and more rewarding than ever. With the Cook Center we take another step forward in creating the basis for mutual trust and mutual responsibility here at Bryn Mawr. And I fervently hope our work will go beyond this campus, and that we will be a force in the world for productive dialogue, constructive disagreement, and positive change.

Now, we also have another new residence hall that needs a name. We have thought about this and I can tell you today that for this year, this space will creatively be called “New Dorm.” And for the dining hall formerly known as Haffner, we will be using “New Dorm Dining Hall.” Seriously, though, we didn’t want the names of these spaces to be an afterthought. We will take our time and settle on a name that reflects something important about our community and our goals moving forward.

And that’s what I’d like to close with today, a few hopes as we move forward for this academic year. Actually, this is a thinly veiled excuse for giving you some advice. I apologize in advance for the sappiness, but along with purchasing new school supplies and maybe some new clothes (more than are probably necessary), I love the start of a school year because it affords such a great opportunity to start anew.

My first piece of advice is to pay attention to what you love, and follow your passions. We are a place that supports the pursuit of knowledge and action. We have the time and space to take intellectual risks, and to commit to ideas that fire our imaginations – and that just might change the world in big and small ways. Also remember that effort, perseverance and openness are what matters. Bryn Mawr is a challenging place and it’s supposed to be hard. That’s part of learning. But work means more when it’s joyful and rewarding. So embrace the challenges and learn from your mistakes, but remember to empower yourself to find your passion and enjoy what you do.

My second and final piece of advice is to be a vital part of this community. Embrace shared governance and self-governance by attending Plenary on September 20th at noon, join the staff association, volunteer for a campus committee, and go to faculty meetings. We all need to show up, or this community won’t work.

That concludes the unsolicited advice portion of the program.

The first days of the semester are some of my favorite days on campus as all of the great adventure is in front of us. I look forward to engaging in the year’s work with you.