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Inauguration Speech

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I. INTRODUCTION

PAUSE --SMILE

C. When you take on a position of leadership, you take stock of the organization's strengths and weaknesses. So how did that go for me?

First a few things that seem challenging, right out of the gate. Let's begin with the difficult to pronounce Welsh names – that we mispronounce and then others mispronounce our versions: We begin with Bryn Mawr– inevitably read as Brine Mouwer. You say Bryn Mawr -- its Welsh. Then they say, What does it mean? – you say “Big Hill” – which doesn't really help. You also have to answer the perpetual question of why a women's college has a building that we insist on pronouncing Bettws y Coed. Apparently the name has something to do with trees. This is my building in psychology, and I move from that to Pen Y Groes (the president's house)– which has the even more illuminating meaning, “Pen head” or perhaps more elegantly “Cross-head.” A cross head. On a big hill. With trees.

Our College song, in contrast, is in Greek. And it's not just any song – it's not "Happy" or "Royals." No, it's a Greek hymn, in a minor key, that takes years of training to be able to sing without embarrassing yourself.

II. THE FOUR STRENGTHS

A. LIBERAL ARTS - OWL

And there's our mascot. Usually the emblems of higher education are associated with athletic prowess. So what is Bryn Mawr's mascot? An owl. Of course.

But take a closer look at the owl – because it is here that we begin to see our strengths. It's a symbol of wisdom, it has exceptionally sharp vision, and it's a graceful – yet fierce-- skilled bird of prey. And that really does symbolize Bryn Mawr: our commitment to the whole student, including athletics, and our unwavering belief that the liberal arts are the indispensable disciplines for our world – together they weave multiple paths to wisdom. The liberal arts constitute one of the four main strengths that define Bryn Mawr – along with our commitment to women's education, our sense of community, and our pursuit of intellectual rigor and excellence.

Now of late, the value of the liberal arts in the 21st century has been questioned – or more bluntly, attacked. But I can't imagine a more powerful model to prepare our students for the future.

- If you interact with Bryn Mawr graduates – undergraduates or those from our graduate schools, you are met with the irrefutable evidence that an education based on the study of the liberal arts provides unsurpassed preparation for a fast-paced, interconnected world that requires critical analysis, empirical skills, and creativity --- and most importantly, the capacity to draw on all of these in a wide range of unpredictable circumstances.
- We're not simply preparing students for success narrowly measured by the salary for the first post-graduation job (although as a parent of a college student, I am not against a good paying first job!). But our students learn to think ethically, develop cross-cultural competence and interpersonal problem-solving skills, wrestle with the difficult and complex issues of our day and cultivate respect for open debate.
- Employers are eager to find graduates with these skills and I would argue that as a society these same traits are critically needed in our citizens.

B. ATHENA – WOMEN'S COLLEGE

Comment [BC1]: Please read this section carefully with sensitivity to the political climate.

So that trusty owl actually says quite a lot about what we're about. But it's not our only symbol. We also have Athena. And why not? A college with a Greek hymn has to have a Greek goddess. It's noteworthy that we picked Athena. She's the goddess of wisdom..... and military victory – not merely war, but battle waged thoughtfully and strategically. In this respect she's very much like the owl because she demonstrates our second strength: our conviction that our students can be whoever they want to be, and that women's strength and wisdom are essential to our world.

Athena also is the goddess of craftsmanship, of creativity and building, which reminds us that we still have a lot of work to do before women are truly equal in our society and in cultures around the globe.

- Women constitute more than half of entry-level employees, but only 1 in 5 senior executives, fewer than 1 in 10 CEOs, and fewer than 1 in 50 CFOs.
- 18% of computer science graduates in the US are women, down from 37% in 1985 and women hold only a small percentage of the technical jobs in Silicon Valley --- for example only 17% of the technical jobs at Google----15% at Facebook.
- As of 2011, only 19% of legislators worldwide were women and a woman heads the government in fewer than 1 out of 10 countries.

Athena also reminds us that even when equality comes, there will still be something incredibly powerful about an institution designed and structured around women's success. You need only look to the accomplishments of our graduates to demonstrate the value of this approach. And Bryn Mawr always will be a place where gender, in its constantly-evolving meanings, will be at the center, where people teach and learn together across ever-more complex and multiple gender dimensions.

Our environment seems to find and nurture a quality in Bryn Mawr graduates that is quite special, that practically screams "I can do anything." – in the working world, in communities and in families. It's a kind of striving, a way in which our graduates connect what they do to meaningful purposes larger than themselves, to live deeply examined lives – without regard to-- or in spite of-- barriers or conventions.

I remember a particular moment when this quality became clear to me, in perhaps an unlikely place: on a Little League field. As a Little League parent I found myself at countless games, looking out over an array of fields. On this particular day I surveyed the typical scene: moms on the sidelines, dads scattered around the field with the young players. But on the far side I noticed a woman on the field, catching for and coaching an excellent pitcher.Right down there on the field, with the dads, coaching her son toward excellence.

I moved closer and she stood up, revealing Bryn Mawr lettering down the side of her sweatpants. I soon learned that not only was this alumna a head coach, she also was a Commissioner of the whole league.

That's what Bryn Mawr instills in its students – the abilities to engage, to lead, to be your best self in the myriad roles we play in our lives. It's in our very being, in the assumption that our students can and should do anything, claim any space.

C. SENSE OF COMMUNITY

While our hymn and goddess are Greek, it doesn't take but a moment to notice that our architecture is very much *not* Greek – it's high gothic. You can't walk 50 feet without running into a gargyle or a turret.

That's because M. Carey Thomas wanted Bryn Mawr to look like Cambridge and Oxford so it would signify a serious scholarly community, where academic engagement was THE enduring value and focus.

At the time, I am not sure President Thomas recognized the pricetag of deferred maintenance on a gargyle or a turret for that matter. Nevertheless, 129 years later, this architecture continues to frame an intimate sense of place, which defines our third major strength: community.

It's a small campus, a beautiful campus, and it encourages us to interact. Faculty and students work closely together; and our undergraduate and graduate students form collaborative connections that foster a larger intellectual community. Our students hail from many different kinds of communities of their own, and from all over the world, and come together to help create a vibrant living and learning environment where they can pursue their passions. Bryn Mawr's dedicated staff are the heart of Bryn Mawr – and they are integrally woven into the social and academic fabric of our campus. Our generous alumni share their experience and accomplishments with our students and with each other, creating powerful networks of support and opportunity --- not to mention the best life long friendships.

Comment [BC2]: Is there a way to bring alumni in here? I have been worrying that they don't feature prominently enough. Ruth – maybe something here about the lifelong friendships?

(SLOW) ----It is important to acknowledge that membership in this community is not always easy and sometimes can even be painful, as we have experienced first hand this past week. And yet our sense of place makes us stick with it ---- the promise of what we can make Bryn Mawr and our belief in the infinite potential of our community will not let us give up.

This sense of place creates an environment in which everyone – students, faculty, and staff – has both the opportunity and the responsibility to be a full member of this community. Our treasured honor code imbues each of us with a deep sense of personal responsibility and connection to each other. It means that we struggle together to understand the diversity to which we are so deeply committed and it means that we must constantly define and re-define how best to live and learn together. It is a work-in-progress, and that's community at Bryn Mawr.

D. INTELLECTUAL RIGOR

The gargoyles and the turrets also point to Bryn Mawr's fourth major strength, one captured in a single word I don't believe you'll find so prominently in any other college's mission statement: *rigor*.

Comment [BC3]: Maggy --- do think that this is OK given your research.

Intellectual rigor permeates our curriculum and our campus culture. In fact, if you're on campus during the academic year, you might come across some of our students playing a game some call Misery Poker. Picture two students sitting on a bench, one complaining to the other, "I've got two papers and a midterm this week," only to be trumped by her friend, who declares, "Well I've got three midterms and group presentation."

Misery poker is a time-honored ritual, although one I think we could do without – many of you have heard me encourage us to spend less time playing it. But it is linked to a larger, more positive aspect of the culture at Bryn Mawr, one that's important, immersive, and immensely fulfilling: A culture of intellectual curiosity and engagement. Graduate and undergraduate students have the opportunity to learn in a community of smart students who are passionate about learning, without having to hide or worry about how they are regarded. They are expected to succeed, and we value the exchange of ideas, the promise of diverse opinions and transformative encounters.

Rigor is not a value in and of itself, but it is the pathway to the trait that defines this college --- our abiding commitment to academic excellence.

The cornerstone of this excellence is our outstanding faculty -- scholar-teachers dedicated to creating knowledge, imparting it to our students, and giving them opportunities to create new knowledge themselves. This model of intellectual dialogue has sustained higher learning for centuries, and it remains our most important and defining asset.

Additionally, we build excellence through the high-impact educational experiences that our size and focus afford students: first-year seminars, small learning communities, writing-intensive courses, original research and intensive self-directed exploration, experiential learning, fieldwork and clinical experience. Research shows that these practices promote better learning, more engagement, and superior outcomes. And at Bryn Mawr, this is precisely where we excel.

III. CONCLUSION – THE FUTURE

So we are an unusual and wonderful place, a mix of traditions and innovations, dedicated to the pursuit of a distinctive and essential academic mission, now and into the future. But we also inhabit a landscape replete with challenges – of cost, of the perceived value of a liberal arts education, of disruptive technologies, of social inequality, and the loss of public confidence. In fact, Pat McPherson, reflecting on the beginning of my presidency in the *Alumnae Bulletin*, wrote, “Kim may need the stomach of a goat to deal with the very full plate before her.”

So the Greek hymns and the Welsh names didn’t send me packing, but did these more serious challenges make me think twice? Not for a moment. I am standing here because Bryn Mawr is in a position not only to cope with this environment, but to thrive in it.

I am optimistic because we understand our core strengths and we will be unwavering in our commitment to them: our liberal arts model, our faculty of scholars, our distinguished graduate programs, a diverse student body committed to academic and personal engagement, a first-rate staff dedicated to the highest professional standards, our promotion of women's success, and our intellectual power. We know who we are and what we do well. And that allows us not to be threatened by a changing landscape, but rather to have the flexibility, the confidence and the spirit of innovation necessary to imagine the liberal arts in a time of exploding information technology, unparalleled global connectivity, and social, political and economic uncertainty.

And although this was certainly not true at our founding, I am confident that we will be a place that treats diversity as a form of excellence. And more importantly, we will work **together** to create a campus climate that is experienced as safe and supportive by all community members. We will be a place that wrestles with issues of discrimination, bias, inequality and justice --- through thoughtful and respectful dialogue --- as well as meaningful actions.

We will also be thoughtful and creative as we address the challenges of cost and affordability facing institutions like ours. There is no magic solution, but we affirm our commitment to making a Bryn Mawr education available to talented students of all backgrounds.

Because we no longer enjoy the public's unexamined trust, we are being asked to prove our broad social value in more direct, concrete ways than ever before. We are being asked to measure things that previously were thought to be unmeasurable. And we will meet that challenge head-on. We will be unafraid to measure what we do: if anyone can measure graduates' ability to lead examined, purposeful, and fulfilling lives of learning and personal growth, it's Bryn Mawr. We are secure in the intrinsic value of our undergraduate and graduate programs and our ability to capture and demonstrate that value in creative and compelling ways.

As we take stock of what we do, we also must communicate our outcomes in a way that is new for us: loud and proud. This is one area where Bryn Mawr's culture of modesty does not serve us well. We need to shorten our self-description from a 40 page narrative that basically says, "It's complicated," to a concise set of qualities that captures our essence. We will continue to let our actions and accomplishments communicate volumes about us, but we must not be afraid to speak boldly about our excellence. As a community of students, faculty, staff, alumnae, parents, and friends of the College we must get the word out about what we do, how well we do it and why it's so important. We will be graceful, but we will not be quiet.

Finally, I cannot leave the podium today without a little psychology – it is what I'm trained in, after all. Research suggests that an individual's experience of joy and excitement in one's work – the experience of being fully engaged and challenged in that work – and the opportunity to connect that work to some larger purpose or greater good -- are directly related to well-being, engagement, productivity and even success. Rather than detract from academic purposefulness or seriousness – more positive affect like joy and happiness in our community can only foster excellence, focus, persistence and ultimately achievement at the highest levels.

I want to reiterate what I said at Convocation, there is no shame or lack of rigor in pursuing joy --- it will only make us better at what we do and healthier in how we do it.

So let us end on that note: Let us take every opportunity to inject creativity and joy into what we do, to counter the pressures of perfectionism, to help our students' intellects and imaginations flourish, and to let excitement and discovery thrive – to the betterment of us all, and to the world our graduates will help transform.
