

Remarks for All Campus Work Day, 2009

A presidential transition is an exciting thing, both for the college and for the new president. It is also, I am very much aware, a tremendous amount of work for the college! On my first all campus workday, therefore, the most important thing I have to say is “thank you” to all the faculty and staff who have dedicated so much good work to making the search process, my first months at Sweet Briar, and the upcoming – even onrushing—Inauguration so successful and so much fun. Virtually all of you have contributed to the transition – whether by serving on the search committee, or organizing schedules and documents and phone calls and interviews, or by preparing and serving meals for celebratory events, or by helping Rick and me collapse and recycle all our packing boxes, or by installing additional electrical outlets in Sweet Briar House to feed our technology habits. I appreciate all the work that has gone in to managing this transition and I owe you all a sincere debt of thanks.

The second thing I would like to say is how very happy I am that I have come to work here. It’s hard for me to believe it, but it’s getting close to a year ago now that I was contacted by a representative of a search firm, a person whom I happened to know from a variety of contexts, who opened our conversation by saying “I’ve found your dream job for you.” And she was right! Ever since last February, when I had the good fortune of being invited to join all of you in the work you do, I’ve been astonished at my good fortune. Sweet Briar stands tall and on a firm foundation. The excellence of the education that takes place here, the transformative power of the experiences that students have here, and the humanity of the community that has developed here were evident to me from my first acquaintance with the College.

That excellence, that power, and that humanity have been generated by the work of all of you, gathered here in this room.

And Sweet Briar is on a trajectory to even greater things. Over the past several years, impressive work has been done by many faculty and staff to increase enrollments, expand resources, control costs, and strengthen and stabilize the College's finances. If you review at the College's recent history, you see that Sweet Briar has gone from strength to strength. This has not always been easy to do and it has required some difficult conversations and decisions. But the faculty and staff have worked together to meet many challenges and the College is very much the stronger for it.

And yet, as we are all aware, in the last year Sweet Briar has hit a patch of choppy water. Our nation's economy, and indeed the global economy, has been volatile and in recession. Many families have been affected by unemployment, endowments and personal investments have lost value, and both credit and philanthropic support have been limited. These factors have affected virtually all of American higher education and they have affected Sweet Briar too. As we launch the work of this academic year, the value of our endowment is not what it once was and enrollment, while strong, has fallen short of our goal. For the foreseeable future we will therefore be operating under unusually strict resource constraints.

I would like to emphasize two points about the present situation. First, it's undeniable that at this moment we are paddling upstream through some swiftly moving and choppy water. We are going to have to paddle faster and harder than usual to steer through it, and we are

going to have to navigate carefully and thoughtfully so as not to be swept off course.

But the second point is that we are more than capable of doing what we need to do. Sweet Briar has amply demonstrated its ability to pull together, face the issues, and respond to challenges with imagination and integrity. And there is smoother water up ahead. All around the campus, while we are coping with the challenges of the present we are building toward and investing in the future.

The Fitness and Athletic Center, the Green Village, and the upgrade to our IT network are examples. After a year in which many campuses were unable to complete building projects, Sweet Briar's new buildings are finished (or nearly so!) and ready to serve. These are major construction projects that reflect the College's commitment to environmental responsibility and which will greatly enrich the quality of students' experience on campus. What an exciting and positive note on which to start the year!

I would like to mention, briefly, some new initiatives which will be getting underway this fall. The first has to do with technology. Sweet Briar's technological capacities are essential to our ability to attract and to serve the best scholars – whether faculty members or undergraduates – as well as to the efficiency of our administrative operations. In order to assess where we are and help us think about where we would like to be with technology, I have engaged NITLE to conduct a site visit and offer us some perspectives and recommendations to consider. Some of you may be familiar with NITLE as a non-profit organization serving selective liberal arts colleges with programs and services related to instructional technology – and also as

the organization I was leading before coming to Sweet Briar. You will all be receiving more specific information about this site visit in an all-campus email message on the 24th; I'll simply say now that I do hope you will take advantage of the opportunity to participate and to contribute your ideas and suggestions.

I also hope you will participate in a series of presidential conversation circles that I have planned. Faculty and staff will have the opportunity to sign up to participate in “conversation circles” which will be held at Sweet Briar House throughout the fall. Circles will be limited in size so that all can actively participate, and each circle will address several questions – about the participant’s aspirations for Sweet Briar graduates, about how teaching or working on campus now is different than it was a decade ago, and similar topics. Comments from these circles will be captured and aggregated and will be used to help direct and inform future planning discussions. You will be receiving more information about how to sign up very soon.

(I will of course be conducting analogous discussions with students and with alumnae.)

Finally, I'd like to note that the College is placing very high priority this year on enrollment. Last year, Dean Cheryl Steele's Co-Curricular life team launched an “every contact matters” initiative to good success. Even in this challenging climate, it appears that retention has increased, which is very good news -- So this year we are further extending the “every contact matters” approach. I strongly encourage faculty and staff to respond to the invitation to participate in this initiative and help us keep retention on an upward trajectory. On the admissions side, I am glad to report that to date it appears that

inquiries from prospective students are higher than at this time last year. Dean Ken Huus and the admissions team are developing new informational resources to support recruitment, including an updated series of department and program profiles. Soon Dean Huus and I will begin working with academic programs and departments to help us better articulate the points of distinction and proudest achievements of each of Sweet Briar's programs. This will help Admissions represent the academic programs more compellingly to prospective students, and I very much hope that each program and department will participate in this effort.

So, that's a brief introduction to some important aspects of the work of this year. I will end this summary by saying, simply, that meaningful work is among the greatest and most rewarding joys of life. As educators we are richly blessed: we enjoy the great good fortune of good work to do, and good people to do it with. And I am grateful to you all for having invited me to join you in the good work of educating Sweet Briar women.