

Presidential Inauguration of Kimberly Wright Cassidy

Bryn Mawr College

September 20, 2014

It is such a pleasure to return to Bryn Mawr College on this special occasion to celebrate the inauguration of Kim Cassidy as your ninth president.

Bryn Mawr is very much in my blood. My father was a mathematics professor here from 1939 until his retirement forty years later. I still remember his move in the 1960s from Dalton Hall to the brand new Physical Sciences Building. My mother came to Bryn Mawr on full scholarship. She was a first-generation college student from center city Philadelphia, graduating in the class of 1942. I spent the first 17 years of my life in a faculty apartment right on campus, enjoying the many activities that brought us faculty children together with students.

I realized, in preparing for today's ceremony, that I've had the pleasure of knowing six of Bryn Mawr's nine presidents. My memories begin with Katherine McBride stopping by our apartment on Christmas Day as my brother, sister, and I played with our new toys. I don't know if Christmas Day visits to faculty families are on your agenda, Kim!

Harris Wofford was a close friend of my mother during and after his years on campus. Pat McPherson has been a mentor to me throughout my career -- she is the reason I am a college president today. I served on the search committee that brought Nancy Vickers to Bryn Mawr. Although I only served on the Board one year during Jane McAuliffe's presidency, we have stayed in touch regularly. And I can remember meeting you, Kim, in your very first year on campus as a new faculty member in Psychology.

So, greetings from the ninth President of Pomona College to the ninth President of Bryn Mawr College!

Today it's appropriate to think about Bryn Mawr's distinctive place in higher education at this important moment in the 21st century. Like Pomona, Bryn Mawr is a distinguished liberal arts college that shares two identities: it is a cloister --and it is a crossroads.

What does this dual nature mean? It defines a creative tension between these two directions that has been a part of the best in higher education for a long time. Back in the Middle Ages universities were pulled, on the one hand, toward the religious traditions connected to their founding and to their role in educating the clergy. This was the cloister. On the other hand, they also embraced a more skeptical mode of inquiry that challenged existing norms and brought a healthy dose of real-world reality. This put them at a crossroads.

In the United States, liberal arts colleges have always faced choices between following traditional modes of education -- the cloister -- and connecting to the world around them -- the crossroads.

In 1828 Yale, with 325 students, was the largest college in the country. A report from that year describes the challenge Yale was facing to its liberal arts model of education:



“From different quarters, we have heard the suggestion, that our colleges must be *new-modelled*; that they are not adapted to the spirit and wants of the age; that they will soon be deserted, unless they are better accommodated to the business character of the nation.”

--*Liberal Education for a Land of Colleges: Yale's "Reports" of 1828* [David B. Potts, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 6]

The dilemma for Yale almost 200 years ago was whether to maintain the core classical education based on Latin and Greek or move to a more practical curriculum that included, among other subjects, modern languages. They did both.

Bryn Mawr has succeeded in that rich liberal arts tradition, blending cloister and crossroads. Here today, the classical languages and classical art and archaeology are thriving and their connections to the modern world are a vital part of the curriculum. A prime example is the distinctive program on the Growth and Structure of Cities which looks back to the classical era. Bringing deep historical perspective to the modern world is something that this college does superbly.

Liberal arts colleges faced a strong challenge following World-War II when the United States embarked on a major expansion of university-based and federally-funded scientific research. There was some fear that small colleges would be relegated to the backwaters of higher education, unable to compete. In fact exactly the opposite took place: colleges like Pomona and Bryn Mawr soon became the destinations of choice for students interested in getting involved right away in hands-on scientific research. However, the dilemma we faced then and continue to encounter now is how to convince 17-year olds that: first, science is very much a part of a liberal arts college and, second, a liberal arts college is actually the best place to learn to become a scientist.

Now, in 2014, our colleges face similar pressures and demands from the public, the media, and the government. Too many people fail to understand the importance of that dual tension between cloister and crossroads and the excellence in education that it can create. They argue that a liberal education is a frill that we can no longer afford, that efficient training for jobs is what we should focus on. We are told that our cloistered colleges will be put out of business by online education.

Don't worry. We will overcome this challenge as well. The very best preparation for the jobs of the 21st century is a liberal education, which includes the study of subjects from the classics to the sciences to the Praxis courses that Bryn Mawr has pioneered to connect more deeply with communities around and with real world problems.

Bryn Mawr College has been a leader in using technology to enhance education. This has led to an enormous enhancement of educational opportunity and a leveling of the playing field, with information resources and direct personal connections from the entire world at our fingertips. We are successfully positioned at the crossroads.

Now this era's challenge is in the opposite direction. We need to find ways for our students to step back from the overwhelming flood of information and social networking to focus, in depth, on significant problems, whether in literature, in science, or in policy. We need to cultivate our

cloisters more than ever -- to encourage our students to stop multitasking and immerse themselves in the ideas, creative opportunities, and challenging conversations and interactions that are part of their education and the life of a college.

What an exciting time this is for Bryn Mawr College and for your new leader!

Kim, you will face challenges, but there is no better job than the one you hold now. For many years I have carried with me the words that poet Marianne Moore wrote for Bryn Mawr's fourth president, words now carved on McBride Gateway. Moore spoke of Katherine McBride's "exceptional unpresidential constant: a liking for people as they are."

I hope you will find this as helpful as I have, Kim. You will change things at the college; you will help to change lives. But we all must start with an appreciation of each of the members of this community (faculty, staff, students, alumni, Trustees) as they are.

And to the Bryn Mawr College community I would say, support and encourage your new president. Share your ideas, and offer her your energy and leadership in support of the mission of this great college. Treasure her, sympathize with and help her during difficult times, rejoice in good times, and have fun together!