Convocation Remarks

Andy Shennan, Provost and Dean of the College

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Thank you, President Bottomly. Let me add my welcome to the members of the faculty and administration who are here this afternoon—some new to the college and many familiar colleagues. I'd also like to welcome for the first time the members of the Class of 2014, and welcome back those of you in the Classes of 2012 and 2013. And I salute the senior class of 2011, resplendent in the academic regalia you will wear at Commencement next spring. I feel a personal connection to the senior Class because one of you is my niece. Don't worry, I won't say your name, but after having managed to dodge my convocation speeches for the past three years, I hope you're here today!

My remarks this afternoon are influenced by our setting: It's great to have an opportunity to convene here and to appreciate the loving restoration of this building, renamed in honor of our former president. Reflecting where we are, I'd like to speak about our alumnae, about the tradition of academic and personal engagement that they embody, and about where that tradition stands today.

To me, one of the essential truths about Wellesley College is that our alumnae define us. Take a look at the new website—for example, the page "About Wellesley" where we present ourselves to outsiders. Almost the first thing we say is this: "Most of all, Wellesley is known for the thousands of accomplished, thoughtful women it has sent out into the world for over 100 years—women who are committed to making a difference." If you think about it, the college's mission statement that this references—educating women who will make a difference in the world—casts our fundamental purpose in terms of what students will do after they leave, as graduates. A few years back, when the college launched a very successful fundraising campaign, one of the ways in which we mobilized the campus community was by decorating each of the lampposts on campus with a banner celebrating an individual graduate and her achievements. This was a very direct and visible way of saying that the alumnae are the college and that their accomplishments define us.

But being defined by our alumnae is not without its challenges. At this same ceremony a few years ago (around the time the banners appeared on campus), I recall the president of College Government pushing back a little on our mission statement and telling her senior classmates: We are not women who will make a difference in the world; we are women who are making a difference in the world. And while the banners were a very powerful expression of the alumnae

legacy and an inspiration to future accomplishment, some students said they found them a little intimidating. Living amid these monuments to extraordinary lives and fully formed accomplishments might make even the most self-confident student wonder from time to time: Can I measure up to the women who have come before me? Let me assure you that the intimidation factor can work in the opposite direction. Alumnae marvel at the accomplishments of today's students—your internships and research experiences, your language skills and travels, your resumes. It's not uncommon to hear an alumna say: Well, of course I wouldn't be admitted to Wellesley today.

Alumnae and students might occasionally intimidate one another, but in some sense this simply reflects how much you share in common—an attachment to this place, an attachment to the mission of the college, a love of learning (as the President just reminded us)… and, I would add, a philosophy of full engagement—intellectual engagement in a rich and challenging course of study, personal engagement in a range of experiences (within the classroom and beyond) that prepare you for a life of leadership and service.

In my contacts with alumnae, I have been struck by how engaged most of them were with their academic work at Wellesley and by how powerfully this academic engagement has marked the rest of their lives. Let me give a recent

example. Just this summer, a graduate from the late 1950s wrote about a famous religion course, Bible 104, which was at one time required of all students. She said: "The knowledge I acquired in Bible 104 has enriched my life beyond… belief. I've been fascinated by the history of religions ever since. I've thought about it, asked about it, read about it, talked about it, taken courses in it…. Since Bible 104, I've been in countless art museums and churches, cathedrals, chapels, and shrines before paintings, sculptures, prints, and engravings, and the pleasure I've derived looking at those works immeasurably deepened by knowing the stories behind them…. When I read, or sing in a choir, hear poetry, listen to Dr. King—it's more satisfying, more intense, deeper, more challenging…."

I've heard similar sentiments a thousand times, citing different courses or different instructors or different fields. I dare say that every faculty member here this afternoon who has taught at the college for any period of time has been told that her or his course had a lifelong impact on an alumna; that she still has the paper you graded; still remembers the question you asked in your office hours; still recalls where she sat in your class or when she realized what she wanted to do with the next phase of her life.

What made, and continues to make, such active, engaged learning possible is the coming together of two ingredients. One is the high value that you, as students, place on academic study, your interest in and commitment to intellectual enquiry. There is every reason to believe that your interest and commitment are as high as those of previous generations. It was very heartening to read, for example, in the results of the recent survey of entering students posted on FirstClass, that the most essential attribute for our entering class is a stimulating intellectual environment.

The other critical ingredient, of course, is inspirational teaching. Some of you may have seen an opinion piece in the *Boston Globe* last week, marking the beginning of the school year. It was an ode to the principle that not everything in education can be quantified and that teaching is as much an art as a profession. One anecdote that the author relayed struck a particular chord (so to speak): "Recently I met a composer and asked how he got started. Was he musical as a kid? Not really, he said. He'd had a teacher in high school who assigned all the kids to write poems. 'Everyone except you,' she'd said, pointing at him. 'You write me a piece of music.' Forty years later, the composer was still mystified at how the teacher had known to send him in that particular direction. But he remembered the joy of writing that first piece of music, and

the startled sense of excitement he'd felt at being so accurately and deeply seen."

What I like about that story is the implication that true academic engagement is a very individual and episodic experience, not something that can be called up on demand. This resonates with the findings of a study that Professor Lee Cuba in our Sociology department has recently conducted. At Wellesley and at six other New England liberal arts colleges, Professor Cuba and his colleagues charted the experience of a group of students over the course of their four years of college. At regular intervals, each of the students was interviewed and these interviews provide a very rich and illuminating picture of students' evolving view of their education. Most reported finding their academic work intellectually challenging, participating actively in class discussions, and discussing academic matters outside of class. But while the students' overall level of academic engagement increased over the course of their undergraduate careers, the striking fact is that those moments of real intellectual excitement (those "ah-ha" moments that we often talk about) remained episodic. They weren't everyday occurrences. They came about within the context of a specific course or a specific major or (as for the composer in the *Globe* article) even a specific assignment. And they came about when students saw connections between themselves and their academic work.

I don't find this surprising. I think we can reasonably assume that the woman whose life has been so enriched by Bible 104 probably wouldn't say the same about some of her other Wellesley courses. And in that composer's high school class there were almost certainly others who didn't find it such a transformational experience. Teaching is an art, and so, in a different sense, is learning. When it comes to academic engagement or growth, I don't think there are any guarantees.

The college can't promise engagement, but we do have a responsibility to create conditions for those moments of intellectual and personal transformation. We know when this is most likely to happen: when an academic program is rigorous and challenging, when, as students, you are encouraged to take an active and collaborative approach to learning, when you are working closely with inspiring faculty, when you have access to enriching educational experiences away from campus, and when you have opportunities to bring back the fruit of those experiences to campus.

The new initiatives that President Bottomly mentioned all move us in a good direction. In light of the First Year survey that I mentioned a few minutes ago, I'd particularly like to emphasize the importance of the First Year Seminar

program that we are inaugurating this year. These seminars are designed to provide precisely the kind of stimulating intellectual environment that you are looking for—as we say in the catalog, "shap[ing] student expectations of the values, rigor, aspirations and rewards of the intellectual enterprise practiced in a vibrant and supportive academic community" and "build[ing] a sense of intellectual and social community among students from diverse backgrounds in a cooperative and collaborative learning environment."

I suspect that many alumnae, hearing that description of our First Year Seminar program, would say: Haven't intellectual community and engagement, close interaction with faculty and so forth always been central values of the college? There's nothing revolutionary here. But I suspect that in the next breath most will applaud our efforts to develop this new program. Indeed, the true test of whether alumnae are fully part of this community is whether they are as interested and invested in our future as in our past. My experience has been that they are, that they do understand and support our need to reinvent ourselves, and to reinvigorate this College of which we are all a part. Like us, they take pride not only in our tradition but also in our evolution.

Last month, I received a note from an alumna that underscored this yet again. She graduated from Wellesley in 1941—that's right, 69 years ago—and she was

writing to tell me that she'd been sorting through old memorabilia and had come across the course catalog from her sophomore year, 1938-39. At the back of the catalog was a class schedule, or as it was then known the Schedule of Recitations and Lectures. Her penciled check marks show the courses she was considering taking in September 1938. In the note, she expressed the hope that I might find the catalog of historical interest, but she concluded by congratulating the college on how much progress we have made in the intervening years.

I hope that if one of you seniors is moved to write to the dean of the college in 2080, you will find similar interest in your own course schedules and—more importantly—wish to take similar pride in the progress of the college in the intervening years. Looking to the immediate future, I also hope that this year all of you experience that "sense of excitement at being accurately and deeply seen" and that the episodes of academic engagement come thick and fast.

Welcome to Wellesley's 136th academic year—and thank you.