

Worldly education

BY DALE ROGERS MARSHALL, PRESIDENT

When I wrote to the entire Wheaton community about the college's response to Sept. 11, I had no idea of the reaction it would prompt. That letter, which was sent to all alumnae/i, parents and students, has elicited more reaction than just about anything I have written during my years here at the college. Many people wrote back with encouragement and advice, checking in from points all over the globe. I have been touched by the strength, thoughtfulness and wisdom of our truly worldwide community.

One parent who responded to my letter summed up, with great eloquence, the reason for the new sense of urgency I feel for advancing Wheaton's mission in these troubled times. Reflecting on the experience of leaving his daughter at college, he commended Wheaton for its strong commitment to being engaged with the world in all its diversity.

"One perspective which came up over and over again (as you probably know, since you've very likely read the book, *Making the Most of College*) was the importance of rubbing together students of various ethnic and religious backgrounds in housing and in every other aspect of college life," he wrote. "In having the faculty, the student leaders and even the physical setup of the rooming situation emphasize this encouragement of opening oneself up to different lifestyles and worldviews, the college sets the tone of tolerance from the very first day."

Tolerance may not be all that is needed to envision a better future, but it is certainly a vital ingredient. And it begins with understanding, or at least the willingness to understand other viewpoints and uncover new ideas. The liberal arts—science, history, the arts, sociology, religion, political science, psychology, literature and more—contribute to unifying the human knowledge that comes from a diversity of experience. I have always believed that Wheaton's educational programs fulfill an important larger purpose, and recent events underscore the validity of that mission. It is important work that can make a tremendous difference for our future.

This issue of the *Wheaton Quarterly* includes a sampling of student and alumnae/i perspectives on the shocking events of Sept. 11 and our struggle to understand the world in light of



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what once had been unimaginable. You will also find a story about how the Wheaton campus has responded in times of national crises, past and present. The common thread running through this issue—and every issue—is the tireless engagement of the liberal arts with the world at large.

Current students now understand this at a personal level; a recent *Newsweek* cover story dubbed today's college students Generation 911. This is certainly true at Wheaton. As I talk with students in class and at campus events, I sense the realization that their futures will be directly shaped by this crisis and an awareness that they can, and will, contribute to resolving the issues now before us. And they are responding to the challenge.

There is a new interest in international events on our campus. Student attendance at panel discussions on Sept. 11-related topics has been very good.

While some students have concentrated on contributing to relief efforts, others have begun debating the meaning of these events and our nation's response to it. The student-run Progressive Alliance, for example, has been particularly active in sustaining a critique of U.S. foreign policy and of the war on terrorism.

Some conservative pundits have pointed to on-campus debates about, or protests of, the war on terrorism as "proof" that our nation's colleges are less than patriotic. Personally, I couldn't disagree more. In my view, it is uniquely American to debate such matters publicly. An open, confident and strong society can tolerate disagreement and honor the freedoms for which so many in our nation's history have struggled. I am particularly proud that Wheaton has been able to sustain a full range of discussion about these events with civility and respect. The tone is quite different from the debates during the Vietnam War, which I experienced very personally. My father was Secretary of State and I was teaching at the University of California at Berkeley while protesters streamed by outside my class, which was held in a first-floor room with floor-to-ceiling windows during those noon rallies.

At its best, the liberal arts draw vitality from engagement with the world. In grappling with the issues of a difficult time, Wheaton demonstrates a strength of which we can all be proud.