

Staying True to Our Roots

BY DALE ROGERS MARSHALL, PRESIDENT

I studied political science as an undergraduate at Cornell, and I loved it enough to want to continue my studies. I applied for a national fellowship to attend graduate school at the University of California at Berkeley and I got it. But when I told one of my political science professors at Cornell that I had won a Woodrow Wilson fellowship to graduate school, he said, "You shouldn't take it because you will just get married and it will be wasted."

Well, luckily, I didn't take his advice and I did take the fellowship. But I've remembered the incident. It's only one small example of an age-old pattern of gender discrimination. For my 25th college reunion I wrote about what that professor had said, without identifying him. Imagine how surprised I was when, out of the blue, I got a letter from him. It said very simply, "Is it too late to say I'm sorry?" The world had changed and so had he.

Our college has a long and distinguished history in advancing equality for women. In 1834 women were not admitted to most colleges—not to Harvard, Yale, Princeton or Williams. So Judge Laban Wheaton, at the urging of his daughter-in-law, Eliza Chapin Baylies Wheaton, founded an educational institution for women with the goal of promoting equal opportunity.

Over the years Wheaton created a culture that encouraged women to realize their full potential as strong individuals. Pioneering women's colleges played an important role in the suffrage movement, and the women's movement of the 1970s. In the early 1980s, Wheaton developed a nationally recognized, gender-balanced curriculum that added works by and about women to the traditional liberal arts curriculum, which ignored women.

Wheaton's past achievements for women shape our commitments for the present and the future. Fourteen years ago, Wheaton decided to admit men as well as women. That decision in no way represented a reduced commitment to women's equality. Instead, we made a commitment to promote equality in a new way—to promote it for both women and men. We are dedicated to being a model of gender equality.



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The gender-balanced curriculum gave us a head start in creating an exceptional coed college with a special culture that values every member of our community. Our faculty, which is unique among coed liberal arts colleges because it has equal numbers of men and women, plays a vital role in creating this atmosphere. We also are helped by our successful and accomplished alumnae/i, who are incredible role models for our students.

When people visit Wheaton they feel the difference right away. We have a cooperative, collaborative culture that keeps the values of our past and is supportive of both women and men. Prospective students often say, "You have the best of both worlds here."

We believe that equal opportunities for women and men benefit all. As our students move on in life, they undoubtedly are involved in organizations with high-achieving women as

well as men. The respect and empathy for gender, all racial and ethnic groups, religions and nationalities that we encourage are every bit as important as computer skills or the ability to speak a foreign language in usefulness to you and to those around you.

At the Posse retreat last year, we were asked whether men and women are equal in our society. My answer was, "No, not yet," though we have made a lot of progress. Wheaton isn't perfect, either. We are just 14 years old as a coed community—we are still in adolescence.

How do we make more progress toward gender equality on campus and in the larger society? Opinions differ. In the spirit of our Honor Code, we can have respectful debates about what it means to promote gender equality and how those values are lived and how to move forward. Those conversations will make us stronger.

When a Wheaton College alumna was interviewed for a job by a male interviewer, he was asked, "How will it be for you to have a woman supervisor?" He smiled and said, "No problem, I went to Wheaton, where men quickly learned to respect women." And, I might add, vice versa.