

ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

Reflections from the 2015 Commission



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WELLESLEY COLLEGE

I. INTRODUCTION

In September 2005, Wellesley College launched a year-long inquiry into the future, led by the 2015 Commission and two working groups: one on faculty governance, the other on financial planning. The commission was asked to think broadly and deeply about where the college is now and where it is going. The two working groups were created to locate barriers that could impede the college's ability to reach for the future it desires, and to recommend specific steps to clear away impediments.

This summary of that work (a distillation of a much longer document) is intended to stimulate further discussion. It seeks to invite others to help identify the most promising concepts that could come out of this 2015 inquiry – the ones that could make the greatest difference for Wellesley's continued vitality.

II. WELLESLEY'S SPECIAL STRENGTHS

The 2015 Commission opened its exploration by soliciting stories that would point to directions in which members of the campus community hope to see the college grow in the future. The stories illustrate for a variety of individuals what, to them, is good, and strong, and special about Wellesley College.

Stories that Describe the College at Its Best

We heard stories about remarkable student achievements that arose out of dedicated mentoring by faculty, or that depicted Wellesley as a community rising to a challenge in a way that made people proud and grateful to belong to such a place. There were accounts of individual people or offices coming together seamlessly to make something unlikely or important happen, about individual acts of extraordinary kindness or generosity, and of simple human gestures that made some person or group feel seen and valued in a particular way, or at a time of particular need.

Many of our stories described interactions in which enduring values of the college – caring, humility, patience, thought, persistence – were transmitted and recalibrated across differences, some defined by status and role in the organization, others by life experience. Whether between a faculty member and a student, a recent graduate and an older alumna, a professor and a junior administrator, a union member and a trustee, or people in similar roles from markedly different backgrounds, the interactions of which people spoke enabled them to expand their perspectives and connect to one another, or to women through the generations, or to a world of new ideas. We heard many vivid stories of individual pathways to Wellesley, of first impressions, and of a process of settling in and coming to know that “this is where I belong.”

An Intense and Caring Learning Community

Together the stories weave a collective narrative of a learning community that many who spend time at Wellesley recognize as the place they treasure. This is a community that, first and foremost, values learning and knowledge, intellectual exploration, respectful and probing discourse. It affords individuals wide latitude to experiment and grow. At the same time, it offers the support of a strong and nurturing institution. Wellesley recognizes in its stories a deep sense of purpose and responsibility and a “civility and intactness” that we sometimes take for granted, but that visitors (or those who have been away for a time) often notice and remark upon. The college at its best is experienced as a place of warmth and caring, affection and generosity.

The picture of Wellesley that emerges from its stories, furthermore, is a scholarly community with high expectations of members who set and achieve goals. People here are purposeful and intentional (and often rather intense). The college opens many pathways to success, responds well to individual initiative, and works hard to value every member. Wellesley perpetuates cycles of empowerment: processes through which our students, having been empowered here, go out and find ways to empower others. The commission wondered about the extent to which any of these qualities may be influenced by Wellesley’s status as a women’s college, but drew no firm conclusions.

Cautions and Caveats

Commission members were quick to add that Wellesley, as an academic community, is uncomfortable making claims for itself like those just enumerated. They cautioned that a strong (“conformist”) culture tends to exclude some people, and that a “self-congratulatory” culture can stifle innovation, even become “ossified.” In fact, this tendency towards self-critique and skepticism is another crucial aspect of Wellesley’s strength, and an essential ingredient of the master narrative. And, like any strength, both the congratulatory and the critical bents can become liabilities when overused.

Nevertheless, the story telling highlighted Wellesley’s core values and a felt sense of the college at its best. It reminded us, even as we worried that it might be masking our limitations, that if we can be these things some of the time for some of us, then presumably we can be them more of the time for more of us. And this shared vision freed the commission to begin examining with genuine curiosity some of the places where Wellesley may be stuck or falling short.

Preliminary Conclusions

By the end of the year, the commission was holding a blend of optimism and caution about what the future may hold, hardly surprising, given the temper of the times. On one hand, it was clear that virtually all elements of the commission’s vision for Wellesley in 2015 are already manifest, in varying degrees, at the college now.

On the other hand, our conversations produced a sense of relative urgency about the need for change. Everyone recognized the truth in the comment at our last meeting that “if Wellesley wants to remain Wellesley, the college will have to change itself – in deep, not surface ways.” The status quo began to look like a vanishing (or reckless) option in a world that is changing much faster than the college as a whole seems willing, or able, to move.

III. CHALLENGES FROM OUTSIDE THE COLLEGE

From the outset, the commission was conscious that this is a time of rapid, accelerating, and unsettling change: geopolitical, socioeconomic, and environmental instabilities that threaten to complicate the lives of the next generation, perhaps profoundly. Potential complications for the college are suggested by indications that higher education in the United States is undergoing a “historic shift,” with demand increasing but changing fundamentally, distance and for-profit educational systems taking hold, and tertiary education “becoming a global commodity traded across political and geographic boundaries.”¹ Times of rapid change open opportunities to organizations that are flexible and light on their feet. Wellesley possesses the resources to be flexible, should the college as a whole coalesce around exciting new directions in which it wishes to move.

The commission scanned the environment, asking what trends will likely be affecting the college and/or its students and graduates by 2015, and what those effects may be. Globalization and technological change were identified as drivers of massive change, along with political and social polarization, climate change and other ecological concerns, economic inequalities, anti-intellectualism, world conflict, changing gender roles worldwide, new and more hostile perceptions of higher education, the rising costs of college, and the pressure to measure educational “outcomes,” among other issues.

Some of the powerful social trends are core to Wellesley’s existence: gender relations (women coming to the fore),² higher education (the “commons” losing ground to the “marketplace”),³ the purpose of college (the “practical arts” eclipsing the “liberal arts”).⁴ The dominant factor is change itself, high-velocity change (technological, economic, social, moral). Students in the future will need to be adaptable and flexible, and so will the college. At our final meeting, one commissioner expressed the aspiration that, by 2015, the conformity captured in the ubiquitous term, “the Wellesley way,” will be a faint memory.

IV. THE COMMISSION’S CENTRAL CONCERNS

The 2015 Commission saw as its task to imagine how an excellent college can leverage its strengths now to become even better 10 years hence. Its discussions clustered around six areas of concern.

1. The Women’s College Question

During the fall, the commission deliberated about what makes a Wellesley education distinctive, and what we would like to see as key markers of the college’s educational distinction in 2015. Wellesley’s choice to educate only women is an integral part of our current identity; it is also a strategic question that will surely confront the college in some form at some time. The commission spent the bulk of its

1 Watson Scott Swail, “Higher Education and the New Demographics: Questions for Policy,” *Change*, July-August 2002: 15-23.

2 Edie Weiner and Arnold Brown, *Future Think*, Prentice Hall, 2006: 9-10.

3 David L Kirp, *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line*, Harvard University Press, 2003.

4 Kirp, *Shakespeare, Einstein*, 2003: 5.

time on other topics that seemed more pressing or more promising, most relating to the quality and depth of student learning at Wellesley. Nevertheless, the question of single-sex education did surface repeatedly.

The commission asserted that in 2015 (and probably beyond), Wellesley will be a women's college. That commitment means different things to different people at Wellesley and reflects a very wide range of personal experiences. And it is evolving with society's changing gender norms and scripts. But behind the stories that define Wellesley at its best is a visceral and palpable sense that being a women's college lies at the heart of it. We can be sure that the meaning for Wellesley of being a women's college will continue to evolve and change in the years ahead. And the institutional identity that seems self-evidently natural to those of us close to the college may become increasingly less so to those at a farther remove, a trend the college should monitor.

Still, for now, Wellesley has a clear consensus that educating women is who we are and want to be, for our students (current and prospective), for our alumnae, and for a wider circle of women around the world. We assume that there are various ways in which our being a women's college colors our recruiting efforts, produces a distinctive student body, shapes students' educational experiences, influences our curriculum and pedagogy and our faculty, permeates our culture, affects our expenditures, and lives in our alumnae. But we are too sophisticated about gender issues in all their complexity, fluidity and particularity to want to make general and essentialist statements that are difficult to justify.

We know who we are and that our active choice to be a women's college nourishes Wellesley's strong sense of institutional identity, purpose and pride – among our students, our faculty and staff, our alumnae, and our other supporters. We view the choice as important, too, for others who are working, in the United States and around the world, to free girls and women to achieve their full potential and to contribute to social progress.

Wellesley College played a decisive role shaping leadership models for women through the twentieth century and we intend to enhance that role in the twenty-first. We are comfortable, confident, and united in our belief that to provide a great liberal education for women is to advance the cause of justice, directly and indirectly, at home and around the globe. The 2015 Commission concluded easily that Wellesley is prepared to go forward in the next decade embracing the potential and possibilities that flow out of our status as one of the leading women's colleges in the world.

2. Making Clearer Choices

A strong theme of the commission's discussions – and one of the clearest points of consensus – was that this is a time for Wellesley to channel its energies, sharpen its positions, and clarify its essential purposes. Wellesley exists to provide an excellent liberal arts education for women who will make a difference in the world. The commission reaffirmed that mission, and recognized that to sustain the college's excellence, in a time of rapid change, we will need to build upon our strengths without becoming captive of our past.

The college is going to need greater flexibility, organizational resilience and openness to new ideas, and, at the same time, stronger internal systems of accountability, collaboration, and communication. It will have to become a more fluid learning organization, better positioned to capitalize on the forces of change, and better able to make and defend potentially divisive choices, while remaining true to the purposes that will ensure continued success. Wellesley will need to be clearer about those purposes and about the essential ingredients of the excellent education students can expect to receive here.

This focus on focusing follows a period of innovation and expansion enabled by The Wellesley Campaign and reflects a feeling that the college's chief challenge at the moment is to take stock and attend to the coherence of the curriculum and the integration of students' educational experiences, in the classroom and beyond. Without arguing for a retrenchment from the advances of recent decades – in interdisciplinary study, experiential learning and faculty-student research partnerships, in study abroad options and global education initiatives – the commission did see a need for more faculty guidance of student choices. We may be approaching a tipping point where the proliferation of options, combined with students' personal freedom to choose what to take and leave, could begin to erode our quality.

The general theme of making better and clearer choices arose on many levels: throughout the planning process itself; in concerns about the student culture (how driven today's students are, starved for time, over-programmed, bereft of the ability to stop and reflect); in issues that arose around faculty governance; and in the work of the financial planning working group. It was a pervasive theme.

3. A Clear Choice: Student Learning

The commission discussed and ratified the statement that “student learning is our top priority.” Although this sounds benign, even banal, it could in fact be radical if it were to become a filter through which every important decision were to pass, requiring, over time, that the college develop its own empirical quality metrics against which to gauge the extent and depth of student learning.

This was emphatically not an affirmation of the oversimplifications and distortions being introduced into the U.S. educational system in the name of accountability to the public for outcomes, or “value added.” Rather the commission was focused on ways in which the college could be more accountable to itself, to its students, to its mission.

The commission concluded that Wellesley needs to find new ways for faculty to hold themselves and each other – and to hold departments and programs – accountable for student learning. We discussed many steps that could be taken down this path; the details are less important than is the strong perception of the need to have a better grasp of how well the college is serving today's students.

In addition, the commission wants to see the college transfer to students more responsibility for their learning. Although we often express the wish that our students would take more intellectual risks, we see several cultural and structural obstacles – grading practices, the increasing importance of graduate degrees, and faculty incentives, exacerbated by the current system of student course evaluation (the SEQ) – that seem to stifle just the sort of pedagogical experimentation we ought to be rewarding to unleash faculty creativity in the classroom and enhance student learning.

The mandate to the commission was to raise and explore important questions, not to flesh out detailed answers at this time. It was, however, quite clear to both the commission and the governance working group that the faculty as a whole needs to engage in a serious discussion of how to create better structures for making collective choices about the college's most essential purposes, and the directions in which the educational program ought to be moving in the future to ensure Wellesley's continued success.

4. Faculty Leadership for Academic Renewal

The commission saw some urgency to ensuring that the faculty (as a collective and in every department and program) is accountable – to one another and to the college as a whole. They share responsibility for the quality of all students' educational experiences at all levels of the curriculum and for the college's reputation as an institution of integrity and high standards in teaching, scholarship, and service.

Members' concern about this issue arose in part from the commission's conclusion that Wellesley needs stronger leadership in academic departments and programs, and greater certainty that all departments and majors are meeting basic standards the faculty should want to set for student achievement. Members felt that we need to be sure we are challenging even our most advanced students, are engaging students from wide ranging backgrounds, and are coaching all our students, in their partnerships with faculty, to assume responsibility for their learning and to dedicate the time and effort it takes to do excellent work.

A number of questions and controversies surfaced within the commission about what the college's most fundamental educational commitments and goals are and ought to be. Are we educating students for leadership, for citizenship, for service to others? Are we teaching them critical thinking and moral reasoning, encouraging creativity and intellectual risk taking, forming character, making sure they are learning how to learn?

These discussions, which were rich and wide-ranging, exposed the many limits on our ability to guarantee the quality of *all* departments, for example, or to ensure the mastery by *all* students of a comprehensive set of skills. We wanted to avoid setting unrealistic aims. Underlying such questions were deeper ones about how directive or permissive we think the college ought to be in its expectations of students, and still deeper ones about how to build faculty consensus on any of these matters.

We noted limits on our resources, too, and wanted to hold ourselves to the discipline of recognizing that asserting a claim for the college does not make it true. If we are too casual about our rhetoric, it was pointed out, we will be mouthing platitudes. Our principles of shared governance presuppose that the college's educational goals and priorities come out of the faculty. This raises the question of what basis there is for believing that the faculty as a whole would or could assume responsibility for developing the clearer institutional objectives the commission came to view as vital for the college's future success.

The governance working group has discussed these and related issues of faculty self-governance throughout the year. The discussions open an opportunity for the faculty to move in new and more satisfying directions, toward addressing issues that have long been in the air. The working group reaffirmed that “the faculty’s active role in virtually all aspects of college governance has served Wellesley well. A shared governance model ensures deep faculty engagement in the life of the college, which is essential for the kind of education we aspire to provide and the kind of academic community we aspire to be.” The 2015 Commission considered it imperative that these conversations continue and deepen.

5. Diversity and Educational Excellence

The commission wholeheartedly embraced diversity, broadly defined, as a key factor in Wellesley’s future – as a point of pride and strength and a real asset on which the college can build. This was among the strongest and most consistent points of convergence in the commission through the year, second only to its emphasis on the quality of student learning. In the minds of most commission members, the diversity goal was a corollary of the emphasis on excellence. One member described the connection in words that others endorsed: “Diversity and mutual respect are the driving principles behind excellence. There is no excellence without diversity.”

Commission members did begin to thrash out more concretely what they meant when they claimed diversity as “a special strength” of the college and discussed specific challenges in the areas of admission, faculty and staff recruitment, academic experiences and achievements of students from a range of backgrounds, the quality of discourse about differences of viewpoint, and the climate of the college.

As sensitive as these subjects were to discuss, the commission waded into them with uncommon candor and made significant headway in sorting out some key issues. Based on this experience, the commission became convinced that similarly respectful and candid conversations among other groups on campus will be valuable, indeed, necessary as Wellesley lives into the possibility of making its diversity a special strength.

6. Wellesley’s Voice in the World

Because Wellesley’s admission picture has been strong in recent years, the commission explored only briefly issues of student recruitment and retention, while recognizing that the college can ill afford to take its success for granted. Members predict that it will be harder for the college to attract the students we want a decade from now, assuming a generation that will be dramatically different. Some members of the commission argued that the college should take a bolder stance now as a “voice for women in the world,” not only to widen its impact, but also to enhance its appeal to prospective applicants in a more challenging competitive environment.

This argument reopened the question of how we can cast our decision to remain a women’s college as a source of institutional strength. How do we make the most sense of Wellesley’s tradition as a women’s college and extend that into the future in a way that resonates with upcoming generations of bright and ambitious young women? Some members of the commission argued forcefully that Wellesley will have to be more explicit about educating women for leadership as part of the effort to

make a persuasive case for attending a women's college in the twenty-first century. Others wondered if education for leadership fits within the core liberal arts mission.

It was in this connection that some commission members felt Wellesley needs to articulate more powerfully and publicly what we are about: how leadership, and diversity, and service to others, and "living a life of honor" actually figure into our educational goals and what it is we are (or could be) doing to teach these habits of mind and heart.

Beyond these questions about whether (and, more concretely, how) Wellesley is, in fact, educating its students to "make a difference in the world," the commission discussed opportunities for the college itself to become an advocate for women and their advancement, in the U.S and abroad. This was the arena in which members were most sharply divided (with the trustees, senior administrators, and students mostly favoring a more active role for the college and the faculty and staff generally opposed). Several aspirations colored the conversations.

Proponents see in today's alumnae body as unique a resource as it will ever be, if the delayed effects of coeducation in the 1970s produce new cohorts of women leaders from elite universities. Is there a window of opportunity that may soon close? Wellesley is known informally as an incubator of women leaders in every sphere. Is it time to assemble this story more diligently and to solidify the claim that we do produce more than our share of women leaders across many fields?

Also, those who argue for increased outreach now believe that Wellesley could be building more strategically on its international profile, and its particular history in parts of the world, notably East Asia, especially China. The college has alumnae and faculty who are eager to broker relationships for Wellesley in many parts of the world, but we lack criteria by which to judge which, if any, of these international partnerships we ought to pursue.

Other members of the commission viewed these opportunities as a diversion, feeling that we need to do what we do best, not dissipate our energy and resources and dilute our educational excellence. From this perspective, it is challenge enough to say we want to provide an innovative and integrated educational experience for women, extending from the classroom, to the campus, to the world, and assuring not just competence for our graduates but leadership in the sciences, the humanities, the arts, and the social sciences. If we do this work well, they said, then it will be through our graduates' contributions in the world that the college will have its impact as an institution.

In the end, the commission agreed to disagree on these questions and recommended a separate, more conventional, strategic planning process to study and clarify the range of possible external roles and goals for the college, and to specify principles and criteria for selecting among them.

V. THE ROAD AHEAD

At its last two meetings, in April and May 2006, the commission discussed its aspirations for the process going forward. Everyone was hopeful that we would be able to continue and carry outward into wider circles the honest, appreciative, and probing conversations about the college's future that the 2015 Commission found so meaningful. I will lead that process as far as I am able in this transitional year. Some of the discussion will have to await the new president.

The commission spent the bulk of its time reflecting on the characteristics members hoped would define Wellesley College, most particularly the college's academic distinctiveness, in the years immediately ahead, a case for what Wellesley *could* be, with effort and determination. At its final meeting, a member expressed the hope that Wellesley could be "questioning who we are and where we are going as a regular feature of this institution, so that, over time, the process of inquiring becomes who we are."

Another said, "our students are changing, the world is changing, there ought to be some sort of group in the college whose job it is to anticipate what's coming." The 2015 Commission concluded that Wellesley has the resources and the capacity to become a flexible learning organization, oriented toward the future, building on core strengths, learning from differences, rich in knowledge, and insight, and the creative energy that constructive mutual engagement can ignite and fuel.

If there is a single outcome the commission most hopes to see come out of its efforts, it is a continuation of the depth of engagement members enjoyed throughout the year. A diverse and far-flung group became progressively more cohesive; we developed growing respect and, finally, affection for one another while exercising our stewardship responsibilities for a college we deeply value. That process convinced us all that Wellesley would benefit from establishing stronger permanent mechanisms designed to ensure that the college sustains the habit of anchoring its deliberations and decisions in conversations and contexts that are broad, searching, collegial, and far-reaching. We ask for your help in making that hope a reality.

2015 COMMISSION

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Over the course of the year, the 2015 Commission benefited from the expertise and perspectives of the following individuals:
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Margaret Wheatley, *president and co-founder, Berkana Institute*

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