

**Remarks by President-elect Meredith Woo
Sweet Briar College | February 6, 2017**

Thank you, Teresa, for your kind introduction, and for stewarding the process that has led us to this auspicious point.

I am aware that the Sweet Briar community is no ordinary community, and the presidency of this college, no ordinary presidency. When I first spoke with President Phillip Stone, I asked him what led him to take on one of the toughest assignments in American higher education – in July 2015 when the lights had dimmed in the halls of this venerable, esteemed college. He said, “I am a Virginian, Meredith, and Sweet Briar is an important Virginian landmark. As a Virginian, I felt the responsibility to help. I also care deeply about the liberal arts.”

Out of those exigencies came relentless work around the clock, on campus and on the road. He has exemplified what the best presidential leadership looks like. He has also been guiding me through the complexities of running this college, putting the college and me in the best place possible for success. I have big shoes to fill, and I am most honored and humbled to be Phillip Stone’s successor.

I am not innocent of the great challenges ahead. But I have accepted your invitation to lead Sweet Briar because I believe that the fundamentals are strong here, and after the hard work of the last eighteen months, Sweet Briar is well poised for a bright future. With your help, I am ready to roll up my sleeves. Together we will ensure that Sweet Briar is what it was always meant to be, a women’s college of great consequence, for this nation and beyond.

The search committee was extraordinary: focused, determined – and as the process moved forward, also open and warm. Teresa and I spent countless hours on the phone as she explained with forthright candor the challenges and opportunities ahead – and all the things I need to know, from the finances of the college to the shades of pink acceptable and not so acceptable.

As for the Sweet Briar students gathered here, I am extremely eager to get to know you – in the classroom, in the dining hall, in walks back and forth to your dorms. I am acutely aware that the world you face after graduation is one that is more complex than the one I faced, decades ago. I was socialized in college to imagine a world of large organizations and businesses, where I could conceivably see my life and career unfold over a long period of time, in one organization. The world ahead of you is more fragmented, more competitive, more transitory, faster-paced, more global. You will need to be nimble, adaptable, quick-on-your feet. As more information than anyone my age ever imagined piles up on you, and as more news (and even fake news) floods your world, you will need to be level-headed and discerning. You will need to know who you are, and think for yourself.

The hallmark of Sweet Briar is an excellent liberal arts education – intense, hands-on, personalized, in small classes and in the intimacy of a lovely campus. To my mind, there is

no better preparation for your future in the 21st century than a liberal arts education, and particularly in a college like Sweet Briar that is focused on the development of a whole person – a whole woman, with the complex set of roles and responsibility this implies.

Sweet Briar House and my office will always be open to you. I look forward to our conversations and to learning from you.

The faculty at Sweet Briar is acclaimed in national rankings for their attentiveness and accessibility to students. You are the core of Sweet Briar's strength and resilience, and from afar I have deeply admired your commitment and professionalism, and your perseverance in the face of adversity. In the coming days I look forward to putting our heads together. We will endeavor to anticipate and articulate the shape of the world in which our students will come to excel, the issues they must grapple with, and the habits of mind that will be required of them; and on that basis, we will work to innovate a liberal arts curriculum that is relevant, exciting, hopefully a shining example to the nation.

In the end, however, none of the above is possible without a dedicated staff that supports the college enterprise – the men and women in admissions, finance, communications, athletics, student life, alumnae relations, development, in the president's office, and helping to run academic departments. Sweet Briar education is also one predicated on the safety and health of students, and I understand the staff is superlative in those areas as well. It is really quite remarkable how beautiful and well maintained the campus buildings are. I look forward to being good partners with you – as I will, with so many supporters at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts across Highway 29, with neighbors in Amherst County, and in the commonwealth.

The alumnae of Sweet Briar have written – perhaps unwittingly – an important chapter in the history of American higher education. In times of crisis, you asked: How could a college that left such an indelible imprint on our lives not continue and flourish, to give the next generation of young women their chance at the same transformative experience that we enjoyed? In coming together to support the College and remaining involved right down to this minute, you may have redefined the role of stakeholders in American colleges. You exemplify the best virtues of Sweet Briar women – principled, passionate and humane. I know you will stay involved and continue to serve as great role models for our students. I know you will stay involved, to render your expertise and experience. I know you will stay involved, so you can be an integral part of knowledge-making and knowledge-sharing at Sweet Briar, and thus enrich our common intellectual enterprise.

Sweet Briar may be a close-knit community, but it is not a closed community. Among you today are students from distant lands, as I was when I first arrived on the shores of this country as a foreign student, holding onto my F-1 student visa with white knuckles. After I finished graduate school, my F-1 gave way to an H-1 professional's visa, when I began teaching. Then I got married, had children, put down roots – I became an "immigrant," and then a citizen. It seemed to me then, as it does today, that the genius of this country is its recognition that the best way to protect our values and way of life is by opening ourselves to the world, rather than closing ourselves off.

I hope to make a new and even bigger effort at Sweet Briar to embrace the world, and together make our democratic principles more inclusive and more resilient. Thomas Jefferson, our one-time neighbor who built his summer home at a stone's throw from here, said it best: "He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine, as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me."

Sweet Briar has much to offer the world at large, much to learn from that world, and much to share. I am full of hope and excitement as I think about our future together. Thank you for welcoming me with open arms, and I look forward to our exciting journey together.