

SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE

The Inauguration of **CRISTLE COLLINS JUDD**

11TH PRESIDENT *of* SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE

President Cristle Collins Judd Inaugural Address

October 6, 2017

Allow me to begin with thanks and acknowledgments:

To the Sarah Lawrence community—the board, alumni, faculty, staff, students, and families, who have warmly welcomed me and my family;

To the presidential search committee, who served as outstanding ambassadors for the College;

To friends from Penn, Bowdoin, Mellon, and so many walks of my life;

To Representative Engel, Mayor Spano, Deputy Mayor Underhill, and the elected officials and community representatives whose presence reminds us of our deep ties to our surrounding communities;

To my predecessors, presidents Michele Tolela Myers and Karen Lawrence;

To the Delegates and members of the Academy, especially Presidents Cassidy, Leebron, and Mills, who have all taken extraordinary steps to be here;

And to members of my family: my father and my mother-in-law; our daughters Sarah, Hannah, and Katie, who are my most discerning critics and loudest cheerleaders, and our son-in-law Rafa; and finally, and especially, to my husband Bob for his constancy and gentle good humor as my life-partner in a distinct demographic, that thing in the academy known as a Dual Career Academic Couple.

THANK YOU.

Surrounded as we are at Sarah Lawrence by wonderful writers, I am conscious that every genre, even one as infrequently encountered as the inaugural address of a college president, presupposes a certain flow and rhythm. In this case: an expectation that you will come away not only knowing me better but with confidence in my leadership, that you will be reminded of the strengths and character of the College, and that, above all, you will be inspired and confident in Sarah Lawrence's future. (And along the way, it will help if I display flashes of humor and wit in the midst of lofty erudition, and that I do so with brevity!) So here we go: an inaugural address in three parts: past, present, and future; or: a motto, a theme, and a challenge.

Part I: A Motto

I stand before you, representing our College, sporting our colors and the presidential medallion bearing its seal. That seal consists of a portrait of Sarah Lawrence, along with the year of the College's founding (1926), and the motto "Wisdom with Understanding". We don't trot out the seal or the motto very often. I suspect the stern, rather forbidding portrait of Sarah, along with the tag line—wisdom with understanding—might seem a bit old and fusty, out of step with our edgy sensibilities and the visual identity they demand. Yet the motto has lodged in my consciousness.



As I have been getting to know the Sarah Lawrence community, I have been asking those I meet for words or phrases that capture the salient features of the College and its students. The responses have provided a vivid reminder, if I needed one, that Sarah Lawrence values the arts and humanities: the request tends to provoke some resistance, or at least a slightly contrarian response to the notion of reducing the College to a single word or phrase. Nevertheless, you are probably not surprised to learn that—to date—not a single respondent has uttered the phrase "wisdom with understanding" (or at least until a few moments ago they hadn't. Mary, I'd like to thank you for providing the exception to prove the rule in your greeting....) But there *are* shared sentiments among the responses I've received: this is a place that is

innovative,
progressive,
intellectually rigorous,
self-directed,
creative,
passionate,
and bold.

These traits can be seen throughout our history—especially the emphasis on creativity and innovation—and they offer a foundation for understanding how we approach challenges and opportunities: what kind of place and community we are and, as importantly, what sort of institution we aspire to be.

There are plenty of “firsts” in Sarah Lawrence’s history. The *first* two-year college in New York, founded to honor Sarah Bates Lawrence’s commitment to women and women’s education, while simultaneously a grand experiment by Henry MacCracken, the then Vassar president frustrated by his inability to move his own college out of its hide-bound traditions. Our trajectory was also shaped by its time (1926) and by its location, as an institution implicitly intended for white Christian women whose well-to-do families had the resources to pay for the entire cost of their education.

The College quickly evolved into a four-year institution, almost as quickly shed its formal relationship with Vassar, and over a longer period of time reshaped its demographic focus, to create the unique experiential, multi-disciplinary, arts-infused, and self-directed education for which it is known. The College also looked outward to its surroundings: to Yonkers, Bronxville, New York City, and beyond. Only 18 years after it opened, Sarah Lawrence first admitted men through the GI Bill, changing the official name from Sarah Lawrence College for Women to simply Sarah Lawrence College; I am delighted that one of those men, Howard Goodman of the Class of 1949, is here to celebrate with us today. The first graduate programs were added that same year, in 1949, leading to nine current graduate and professional programs, including the first and still pre-eminent program in human genetics counseling. Then in 1968, the College formally became a co-educational institution, one of the first of the women’s colleges to do so. Early on, the College’s commitment beyond undergraduate and graduate education to life-long learning was evident in the founding of the laboratory school that became the Early Childhood Center along with a robust engagement with continuing education. Those are but a few of our “firsts” and innovations. The point is abundantly clear: Sarah Lawrence has been, in its relatively short life as measured in academic years, both an imaginative newcomer and an influential change-maker in the landscape of higher education. It is a place where individuals and the College have taken principled stands, an institution willing to confront difficult issues that challenge our society as a whole.



Part II: A Theme

As I have gotten to know the history of the College, one name is unavoidable: that of John Dewey, one of the most influential figures in the progressive education movement that shaped our distinctive pedagogy. Indeed, a quick Google search for “Sarah Lawrence” and “Dewey” produced 126,000 results in 0.86 seconds. (I confess I’m not sure how many of those were from our own website!) Dewey’s landmark *Democracy and Education*, written a century ago, set the stage for Sarah Lawrence

as he framed a model of education intended to equip individuals not merely to comprehend, but to experience and to creatively shape a world characterized by rapid social, economic, political, cultural, and technological change. Dewey feared that the United States was on a path to becoming a society in which groups and communities—especially those with the greatest resources, both political and economic—would avoid contact with those who differed in outlook and practice, thus risking a vital opportunity for society to transform itself peacefully rather than violently. Though he was writing in 1916, the situation he described is eerily familiar.



In just the two months since I began as Sarah Lawrence’s president, I have faced the need for a series of communications and statements; e-mails in my inbox already number in the thousands (in case you are the rare person who doesn’t yet have it: president@sarahlawrence.edu). Think back on recent weeks: hurricanes and earthquakes, Charlottesville, an executive order unwinding DACA, newly revised guidelines for Title IX, Las Vegas, and more—all events and issues that generate not only front-page news but spark explosive debates.

This is the context in which we adopted the theme of “Democracy and Education” for a yearlong series of events, so ably launched by our panelists this morning. It is a theme that emerges from the history of this College, but that is of our time as we confront urgent and pressing questions. What are the essential elements of a “democracy”? Who gets to be a “citizen” and why? How do we learn to speak to one another across deep ideological divides? How can we best balance the ideal of free speech in the face of hate speech? And what role should education—and higher education, in particular—play? These were foundational questions for Sarah Lawrence College in 1926, and they have animated the lives of our students and graduates as they contribute to societal wellbeing and the tenets of a thriving democracy. And this theme remains core to our educational mission today. So we are convening thought leaders and we have put together a rich and varied series of events. But we will fall short if we leave it simply at convening thought leaders. This conversation must radiate beyond the campus and it must embrace diverging points of

view. One simple but tangible way you can help with that is to contribute a brief video to the web archive we are creating to answer the question, “What does Democracy and Education mean to me?” We hope many of you will do that, joining the conversation before you leave campus today and taking it with you beyond this place.

Part III: A Challenge

The form of this inauguration symbolically weaves a set of pasts—mine and Sarah Lawrence’s—together into *our* shared future. It is a special honor that my friend and former colleague Anna Weesner composed a work for the occasion, entitled “Changing the Odds.” I deliberately chose not to ask her what she meant by the title, but I suspect in part that it was a knowing wink at our shared history. I was the first woman tenured in the music department at Penn. Anna joined the department a few years after I did, and by the time I left Penn there were four tenured women in the department. In that particular instance, it would seem that we *had* changed the odds. Yet in that phrase, “Changing the Odds,” I hear our fundamental challenge.



And here, I feel compelled to pause briefly to express profound gratitude for the odds I encountered. My mother didn’t go to college but my father *did*, the first in his family to do so. Because dad was a college graduate (and perhaps because his education was interrupted by service in World War II and completed on the GI Bill), there was simply an expectation that I would go to college. (And I would like to thank my father for this. I would also note as an aside that both he and Howard Goodman were born before this college was founded!) I was extraordinarily fortunate that in our family, education was sought after and celebrated, so much so that when I graduated from college my grandmother gave me a prized possession: my great-grandmother’s high school diploma. It hangs in our study in the president’s house, having been framed and hanging on a wall of four generations of the women in my family since 1896. It was not a straight line from my undergraduate education at Rice University to today, but it was a direct path in the sense that I am quite certain I would not be here but for that deeply formative experience. (So, I am especially honored that David Leebron, the president of Rice University, my alma mater and my father’s, has made a special trip from Houston just to join us today.)



But along with that gratitude must come sober *recognition*: recognition that the path to college was readily available and open to me as a white middle class woman, despite various challenges I encountered along the way, and that generous financial aid and scholarships made my education possible. And, simultaneously and sadly, recognition of how many impediments stand in the way of higher education for so many today. It is in this sense that I hear in the phrase “Changing the Odds” a broader reference to our theme of “Democracy and Education” and a challenge: Are we prepared to do what it will take to change the odds? To change the odds for students through the education we provide? To find a way to provide unfettered access to that education? To change the odds in our surrounding communities through engagement and partnership marked by reciprocity and the co-creation of knowledge? To change the odds in higher education for those we serve and how we serve them?

Sarah Lawrence doesn’t stand on ceremony, but we do, and we *must*, stand for significance. I described earlier some of the College’s characteristics and innovations over its history. These have positioned us for continued innovation as we look toward our second century. Our singularly dedicated faculty and staff care deeply about our mission and embody the creativity and innovation at its core. With our distinctive undergraduate and graduate programs, we are poised to create a more integrated model of education as we explore not just the individual strengths of our various programs, but also the unique intersections they offer to provide liberal arts *and* advanced and professional training. And we have opportunities through our longstanding commitment to various forms of continuing education to explore new collaborations and non-traditional formats that support life-long learning to benefit a diverse student body.



These observations about Sarah Lawrence’s opportunities bring me back to my point of departure: that motto “Wisdom with Understanding.” We should hear this not merely as a quaint reminder of Sarah Lawrence’s past, but as a motto for *our* time. “Wisdom *with* understanding” points to the essence of a Sarah Lawrence education: discovering which questions to ask and how to follow them relentlessly, digging deep to pursue a possibility, bringing all of one’s creative energies to bear.... But it also signals *a way of proceeding—with understanding*—that reminds us of the necessity for empathy, for generosity and grace when encountering competing views, for an inclusivity, that is itself deeply and openly inclusive. For only then can we learn to speak to one another across deep ideological divides and to create a society that *can* transform itself peacefully rather than violently. This is a tall order for a college campus to model, but one to which we must aspire.

I am deeply honored to serve as the eleventh President of Sarah Lawrence College and I am humbled and excited by the opportunities before us. A final observation: as Sarah Lawrence has long known, music and the arts have the generative power to shape and reshape ideas, to reframe the imagination, to unsettle, to celebrate, but also to insist. With that in mind, I have asked the Cosmopolitan Brass Quintet to reprise Anna Weesner's "Changing the Odds" as I lead the procession out from this inauguration. And we leave with this charge:

Through
Wisdom with Understanding

let us engage
Democracy and Education

so that together we **will**
Change the Odds.