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Making the College New — and Old — Again
By Catherine McNicol Stock, Professor of History
Convocation - September 3, 2009
Connecticut College[1]

Thank you, Dean Brooks. On behalf of the faculty I would like to extend the warmest possible welcome to the class of 2013. We can hardly wait to get to know you.

This summer I spent a lot of time with a good book. I suppose many of you did too — I heard that President Obama brought seven books with him for his week on Martha's Vineyard … I found that a little intimidating.

But I'm proud to say that the book I read is one that the president didn't even considered putting on his list, though in a few years time he probably will. I am the parent of a high school senior, so I spent a lot of time this summer deeply engaged with "The Insider's Guide to the Colleges, 2010." As you know, there are a lot of these kinds of college guides on the market, so to judge their reliability, I have developed a trick of the trade: I ask how close do the writers come to correctly describing Connecticut College? I figure if they get Conn right they probably are getting the other places right too. After a quick read, I thought the "Insiders Guide" did pretty well. The list of things that the writers said make the College unique are also things that I value and that I hear my students talk about: our "beautiful campus," small classes and great professors, the great internship and study abroad opportunities, its important tradition of shared governance and an honor

[1] I would like to thank Frances Hoffmann, Jennifer Manion, and my mother, Barbara Stock, for their help with this address.

code, a cozy and cohesive community that can "come to feel like a family," and quirky traditions like Camelympics that "reinforce this unity." My favorite part, though, was the section that described our "celebrity president." "A point of particular interest at ConnColl is campus celebrity Leo Higdon, the College president who took office following the 2005-2006 school year. Young, energetic and student-friendly, the president can often be seen walking around campus. … He has earned the nickname "Big Hig" according to one student who proudly claims to have a T-shirt with this face on it."

So I guess the "Insider's Edition" got some things right about Conn. At the same time, I would argue, the book also got it all wrong. In fact every college guide gets it all wrong. The way I see it, the latest, most up-to-date, published information about Connecticut College (or any other school) is already wrong because it is already out of date. What is described here is so last year — as distant as the chilly, cloudy graduation morning last May is from our beautiful September afternoon today. In a reversal of our normal understanding of the passage of time, the spring at a College marks the end of time and the fall its rebirth and new beginnings. The "Insider's Edition" doesn't know anything about us because it doesn't know anything about you: the 500 new students, two dozen new faculty and many new staff who are here now. Furthermore, they have not stepped foot in our gorgeous new fitness center and have no idea that were holding a Michael Jackson retrospective and tribute tonight at 10 p.m. in the 1962 Room in Cro. In making a community every individual part makes a difference to the whole. We as faculty have the chance to start our community anew this fall with you — and it is a challenge and an opportunity all at once.

Still, those of you who know I am an historian also know that this neat "making the college new" thing can't be the only point I want to make today. You know that I believe that every school, community or nation must go forward with its past in mind. Understanding how we got here from there is a key element in the way I see the world and in how I teach my classes. Moreover, I also know that there is never just one, unified story of the past, never just one way of remembering what came before. For years in the American South, for example, the fact that Thomas Jefferson had fathered several African-American children with his slave Sally Hemings was carried on through oral tradition in the African-American community. This history was never told officially, never "known" publicly, never made real by whites who had the power to write the textbooks, design the monuments, and proclaim the greatness of some Americans and the ordinariness of others. Now that Sally Heming's story has been remembered — though many whites still needed DNA analysis to convince them — the mixed-race heritage of one of our greatest founding families can be seen both as a living reminder of the harsh legacy of slavery and the literal embodiment of our diverse society. This story has become part of our present reality and we must honor it by carrying it with us into the future.

It is difficult here at Connecticut College to do this — to carry our past with us into the future — because we also do not know it fully. As Paul Phillip Marthers has written in a recently completed dissertation about Connecticut College, "Conn is making its way, as it approaches its second century, with an institutional identity that is only peripherally reminiscent of the college that opened in 1915." Marthers is not saying, nor am I arguing, that we do

not know our history at all. Of course we KNOW it, at least a little piece of it. Connecticut College was founded in 1911 when Wesleyan ended their "experiment with coeducation" and kicked the women out. It remained a women's college until 1969 when the Board of Trustees agreed to admit men. Certainly we KNOW this. Indeed how could we forget it? As a matter of fact, people won't let us forget it. How many times has this happened to you? You meet a friend's parent at a graduation party or are talking to a teacher at your high school, say, and they ask you where you are going to school and you say Conn and they say, Oh, you're going to school at — or perhaps it is you work at — Connecticut College? Wasn't that a women's college, they ask? Connecticut College for Women? And how do you — how do we all — usually respond? Oh, yes, it was, but it hasn't been for a long time now. Or, Oh sure! Of course! Or, don't worry! But there've been men at Conn since 1969! And here I tend to add: You should see our terrific men's athletic teams! Our men's hockey team is really awesome!

Now let's unpack that conversation for a minute because we've all been there — on the receiving end of those questions and on the giving end of those awkward responses. What do they mean? Rarely do we feel they are just innocent questions — the questioners nearly always know full well that Conn was once a women's college. And we know instinctively that they aren't flattering questions either. They mean that there is something less grand and glorious, something slightly disempowered or possibly under-funded, something even potentially stigmatizing about a college that was once a college for women. Feeling these implications and embarrassed by the implied inadequacies, we rush through and brush off the first 58 years of

the College's history, quick to get to 1969 when the "real" history of Connecticut College began.

These conversations reveal a simple truth: We do know the past; we simply won't pause there long enough to understand it or to accept its meaning as part of our present reality and future potentiality. I, for one, today would like to suggest some ways in which we can correct this, adopt a new way of seeing Connecticut College, and at the very least learn how to answer those questions differently.

But before I get down to business, I'll ask your forbearance because there is a second reason why this subject — making the College new by making it old again — is so important to me. Single-sex education and the struggles over coeducation are crucial parts of my own personal and political history. I don't mean that I attended Conn when it was a women's college. But beginning when I was 6 years old, I did attend an all-girls' private school in Minneapolis, Minn., called Northrop Collegiate School. Founded in 1901 near downtown Minneapolis, Northrop had thrived for many decades until economic exigencies in the 1970s called for tough decisions. By the time I was in middle school, Northrop had set in motion the process of merging with its "brother school," the Blake School, an older, wealthier boys' school located on a leafy, athletic-fielded suburban campus 10 miles away. When I was a junior in high school in 1975, the so-called "merger" was complete and I became a member of the second graduating class of the new combined school, which by then the board of trustees had decided would simply be called Blake. Blake was and remains a good school, but in the end it bore

little resemblance to Northrop Collegiate School, the under-funded, less prestigious, but in many ways excellent school I had attended as a little girl.

Don't get me wrong. Northrop was anything but a perfect school. Chief among its flaws was a nearly complete lack of diversity. Like many other girls' schools and women's colleges, it was a school for privileged white girls. For this reason my educational experience may be so different from many of yours that it may seem like I did not just go to school in a different time but on a different planet. And in truth I did not think Northrop was a perfect school at the time I went there — not even close. In fact, from the very beginning, I — and nearly all my girlfriends — unanimously supported merging with the boys' school, understanding implicitly that separate was not equal in single-sex education and that access to the halls of power — and especially the more reliable sources of funding in those halls — was an imperative first step in creating equality. Furthermore, I wouldn't have gone to an all-women's college for anything in the world.

But, looking back today, I see that there were some things about that small girls' school from long ago — the one I was so quick at the time to dismiss — that were truly remarkable and bear remembering. At Northrop School, we wore navy uniforms that couldn't be more than one inch above the knee, knee socks, and tie oxford shoes, with no makeup, hats, purses or jewelry allowed. Such a strict dress code was not in place because anyone was actively afraid of our budding sexuality, but because distinctions in fashion would have distracted us from the school's primary mission: learning. To produce well and liberally educated girls was the most important goal to every adult at the school every day. Excellence was expected, mediocrity

rejected in all its forms. In practical terms that meant that beginning in fifth grade we all took two foreign languages; in sixth grade we participated in a full-length musical; and in high school we encountered a broad and rigorous math and science curriculum. The teachers, including the science teachers, were also all women, also all liberally educated — they were Radcliffe and Wellesley and Smith and Connecticut College women. They took us seriously as students and scholars and expected nothing less than our fullest attention, best work product and utmost respect. The teacher I remember most clearly was our seventh-grade Latin teacher, Miss Rowley. Miss Rowley was not a young woman. In fact, I thought it was possible that she had actually lived in ancient Rome. In fact she was old enough to have also taught my mother and upon occasion called me Barbara, rather than Cathy. Believe me, I did not correct her. If Miss Rowley wanted to call me Barbara, she could call me Barbara. Like many other teachers, she was unmarried and was so fully invested in our learning Latin that I was surprised one day to see her in a nearby store. It did not occur to me that she did anything other than teach one day and prepare to teach the next. One particularly memorable day she made us take out a sheet of notebook paper and write in large letters on the top: NEVER LOSE THIS. Then she proceeded to conjugate a verb and have us copy it off the board. You shouldn't by now be surprised to learn that 35 years later I still have that piece of notebook paper — and that half a dozen of my classmates do too!

Another point that, looking back on it, I realize was a unique and lasting gift to us: Until the schools merged when I was 16, every administrator any of us had ever met was also a woman.

Outside the classroom, Northrop gave its students both the freedom to explore and express themselves and a firm grounding in a densely peopled community: We did not have interscholastic sports — this was something really important and really great that we gained with the merger — but we were required to be active girls nevertheless, to learn to play together all kinds of games and sports (we couldn't graduate from fourth grade if we hadn't learned to ride a unicycle — I never did quite figure the reasons for this out, but I am still very good at it) and to participate in school-wide games and a once-a-year sort of school Olympics as part of either the "blue" or the "white" team. These kinds of things promoted physical skills of course but, in the way they were structured, they also reinforced the bonds of community and of all kinds of close female friendships. The most casual freedoms took place at recess — when, once we had been dismissed and had pulled our snow pants on under our uniform skirts, we shouted and ran out to "the field," the cherished bit of green space in an urban campus. Each winter the maintenance men (the only men in the school whom I can recall) flooded the grass on the field and put up the warming house and made a skating rink for us. We didn't play hockey; instead each year the sixth-graders were required to teach the kindergarteners how to skate. In the spring when the grass came back, we played hours and hours of softball, kickball, dodge ball and anything else we could think of. We gloried in our physical selves and our intense and meaningful friendships with each other, and no one told us that physical play wasn't lady-like or that caring deeply about each other was inappropriate. In fact I don't really remember anyone telling us anything at all.

For all its imperfections, we loved our school and we knew that it was a good school, perhaps even a great one. Imagine our surprise then at the controversy that developed when the board of directors announced their decision to merge our school with the boys' school nearby. Many parents of the male students reacted as though their sons going to school with US (the girls) was the worst thing — the most horrifying thing — they could imagine. They fought the plan every way possible: withdrawing students, threatening administrators, withholding donations, contacting the press, meddling with the schools' governance. Worse yet was their and their sons' reaction when the board decided that the high school, grades 9-12, would be located at our school — at the girls' school — at what was by then already just being called the "Northrop campus" of the Blake School. One memorable day brought about a protest march — hundreds of boys locked arm and arm, marching up and down the halls and shouting, "Hell, no, we won't go!" The reality that men and boys we knew and liked — some of them our brothers and cousins — thought that going to school with us was demeaning and embarrassing stunned and saddened us. We knew Northrop was a wonderful school and we knew it would soon — very soon — be in danger of being forgotten, nearly as though it had never existed at all. On the last first day of school, the year before the merger would be complete, we all — every girl, every faculty member, every person on the staff — gathered on the front steps and took an all-school photograph, recording for future generations the fact of us — showing that we had been there, all together, at that time.

Northrop Collegiate School existed, of course, and so did Connecticut College for Women. But for schools to have existed they also need to be

remembered and their legacies need to be known and honored, made part of each school's present reality and future potentiality. A new work on the College, a dissertation recently completed by Paul Philip Marthers, explores what he calls the "organizational saga" — the original mission and guiding principles of the founders of Connecticut College. In doing so he fills in a great deal of the blanks in the quick story we all know. After Wesleyan dismissed women in 1906, Elizabeth Noyes, other members of the Hartford Women's Club and a New London high school teacher joined forces to reestablish a college for women in the state. When the people of New London raised $134,000 and a local shipping magnate, Morton Plant, gave a $1 million gift of seed money, they chose New London as its permanent location. Not surprisingly, the College's first mission centered on the importance of educating women. Unlike some of the other Seven Sisters, though, Connecticut College would not educate its students just so they would be able to engage in lofty conversations with their future husbands. In the Progressive era of the early 20th century, educating women meant educating them for the world of work. Gertrude Noyes, one of the college's first deans, wrote later that:

> From the beginning, it had been assumed this college would be "of a different kind." By this time, Vassar, Elmira, Oberlin and other early colleges had shown that women had the intellectual and physical stamina to carry college programs as demanding as those of the men's colleges. … Now the second step was to prove that women could qualify for the professions on a par with men. The new college invited women with such ambitions and promised them advice, preparation and support.

But the College's early mission had a second part: it was also committed to continue the tradition of outreach and connectedness to the community. Connecticut College women were not supposed to stay in their protected

campus on the hill, indeed it looked out onto the city and the Sound to daily remind them of the outside world they were meant to engage and to serve. As Marthers puts it, "The idea that launched Connecticut College came from the non-commercial, idealistic, social justice tradition of righting past wrongs and providing options for underserved, underdog elements of society."

So what do we make of this? Is this the stuff of historical artifact as Marthers suggests or does it touch upon our present reality? Let's keep it in mind and revisit our college guide, "The Insider's Guide." What again was that list of things they said made the College unique and that so many of us enjoy? Might they have anything to do with the College's original mission? I think you will see now that nearly all of them do.

So come on then, let's start from the top: our "stunningly beautiful campus." Do you think campus is beautiful? Like the view from the Green? Wish you were out there right about now? Architectural historians, like my colleague Abigail Van Slyck, have told us for years that women's colleges were built like gardens, with beautiful plantings and in some cases arboretums. Furthermore, their buildings faced inward around a large green space to create and foster community. Amherst doesn't look this way. Williams doesn't look this way. We look this way.

What's next? "Quality of internship and study abroad programs." It is not hard to see the way our innovative internship programs carry forward the College's initial emphasis on preparing its students for work. And study abroad? In a paper written by a senior in my globalization seminar last year,

I learned that women's colleges pioneered the concept of study abroad — Smith College in Paris was among the very first — and they have been available to Conn students for decades, all the while many elite men's institutions resisted it, even until the 1990s.

OK, what's next? "Important tradition of shared governance and the honor code." Once again, if we think about this in a new way, we see that the structures of community and character building so important to girls' schools and women's colleges remain hallmarks here. Last but not least? "A cozy and cohesive community that can 'come to feel like a family' and quirky traditions like Camelympics that 'reinforce this unity.'" I think you get my point. Even without discussing in detail the unique aspects of our curriculum that derive from our women's college heritage — the education program, the human development department and children's program, outstanding dance, theater and art, a wide variety of foreign languages, service learning, community engagement — it is safe to say that every one of us in this room can link something they value about the College to its women's college past.

Before I finish, I would also like to suggest some ways in which we can use this new understanding of our past and present to guide us and challenge us in the future. Marthers tells us that none of the most recent five mission statements of the College has mentioned anything about women's college heritage or its founding mission. What would it mean if we wrote our next mission statement with the heritage of our past firmly in mind? What new kinds of thinking might that provoke — if we didn't just try to be like a men's college that got a late start but proclaimed proudly, as Gertrude Noyes

did, that we are a "college of a different kind" — a fully coeducational college that has nevertheless retained many invaluable aspects of its single-sex past? If we did that, we might take on some new projects: provision of day care for faculty and staff on campus, increased leadership opportunities for women faculty and staff, flexible hours and tenure clocks for men and women faculty, better funding and status for both the Women's Center and the LBGTQ center, renewed and re-imagined connections with the city of New London.

But the most important and broadest consequence of embracing our past would be to link educational excellence with what Marther calls "the non-commercial, idealistic, social justice tradition of righting past wrongs and providing options for the underserved members of our society." This means insisting to the admission office that we continue to bring in Dean Noyes's "students with ambition" — but now to bring these kinds of students, men and women of course, from all racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds as well. And when these students arrive, it means that the faculty would demand from them what Miss Rowley and her peers demanded of their students: nothing but their best work, their fullest attention, and their utmost respect for the learning process. Linking academic work with a commitment to exploring the intellectual capacities of all members of the human family was a radical notion in 1911. In many parts of the United States and around the world, it remains a radical notion today. That makes it even more important that "a different kind of college" carry it forward.

So — everyone — as we begin this year anew, I have a challenge for you:

Next time someone says to you, Oh, you're at Connecticut College, or, Oh, you work at Connecticut College, wasn't that a women's college? Try this on for size — try saying: Yes, it was, that's one of the coolest things about it. It's one of the things about Conn that makes it really great.

Thank you very much.