From the President

Speaking Their Minds

Wellesley continues to redefine the first year of college.

The transition from high school to college is important for students. Wellesley has taken various steps in recent years to better capture and focus the interest and enthusiasms of our first-year students. One such step has been to establish first-year seminars—small, discussion-based, interdisciplinary courses that immediately immerse students in an intellectual milieu. Introduced in 2010–11, they were so successful that we increased the number of seminars offered from 17 last year to 28 this year.

The latest initiative at Wellesley is a groundbreaking public-speaking program, newly established and endowed by a generous gift from Ann D’Espinosa Maurer ’51 and her husband, Gilbert. It is the kind of gift that enables Wellesley to be a leader in this area among our peer schools. Public-speaking programs do exist elsewhere, but none are as widespread and sustained as we intend our program to be.

I am excited about this initiative that underscores the importance of effective communication in a liberal-arts curriculum, and I think it is important for our students. It builds on what we already do. Rather than creating entirely new courses, public speaking is being incorporated into pre-existing classes. The Maurer Public Speaking Program will focus on first-year students and will be integrated into Wellesley’s already well-established writing program, which has been in place since 1983; the program also will be incorporated into our new first-year seminars. Coordinated by Professor Ann Velenchik, director of the writing program, five first-year courses will become speaking-intensive ones beginning this fall.

Not only will our students be well served by this new program, but our faculty will benefit as well. One feature of the program is to equip faculty with public-speaking training and resources—such as workshops, materials, and opportunities to connect with and learn from one another—so that they can better support our students. This program aims to educate the educators, so that public speaking is woven naturally into established courses.

Wellesley has long recognized the importance of public speaking—in fact, when the College opened its doors in 1875, students were required to take three years of elocution courses. Today, we still provide many opportunities for students to practice their public-speaking skills, in and out of the classroom. There are training opportunities in the Pforzheimer Teaching and Learning Center. We have the Tanner Conference, in which students deliver presentations on their study-abroad experiences, and the Ruhlman Conference, with its many presentations of student achievement and research in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. The Maurer Public Speaking Program helps to organize and focus our disparate efforts, starting at the beginning of a student’s education.

On public speaking, Winston Churchill is said to have given this advice: “Say what you have to say, and when you come to a sentence with a grammatical ending, sit down.” Of course, we know it’s a bit more involved than that. The Maurer Public Speaking Program will provide an excellent means to teach students the nuances of effective communication—a critical component of a liberal-arts education—and will help develop the next cohort of Wellesley women who will go forward to make a difference in their communities around the globe.

President H. Kim Bottomly

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