

# Agnes Scott

## *Honor Code Signing Ceremony*

Remarks by Elizabeth Kiss  
President  
August 22, 2009

### "Living Honorably"

Members of the Class of 2013—as well as our new Woodruff Scholars, transfer students and international exchange students. In a few minutes, each of you will publicly affirm the Agnes Scott Honor Pledge, stating that you accept the Honor System at Agnes Scott as your way of life. Then you will come forward and individually sign the Honor Code, and your signatures will join those of the Classes of 2012, 2011 and 2010 in Buttrick Hall.

This will be one of the most important moments—perhaps **the** most important moment—of your orientation to this college. Because at this moment you will officially join a community of honor that stretches back to the founding of this college and, in particular, to the bold decision, 103 years ago when Agnes Scott Institute became Agnes Scott College, to introduce a system of student self-government.

Last night after the wonderful Unity Dessert and identity circle exercise, one of the dads I spoke to said something I liked so much I told him immediately, in the spirit of living honorably, that I was going to steal it. He said that as soon as you step onto this campus, you can feel it. This is a place that takes women seriously and expects the women who study here to take themselves seriously. And that made him proud and happy to have his daughter coming here.

He's right. Agnes Scott College takes you seriously—your intellect, your character, your values and principles, your dreams and aspirations. And the Honor System is a crucial part of that. Keep in mind that in 1906, when Agnes Scott introduced student self-government, women in this country had no right to vote—they wouldn't get that right until 1920. Indeed, for many decades after that—well into the 1960s—women would still require their father's or husband's permission to open a bank account. For many decades after that women who had graduated top of their class in law school were hired as file clerks by law firms and excluded from serving on juries, an exclusion that the U.S. Supreme Court upheld in 1962, when Sonia Sotomayor was eight years old. So Agnes Scott's system of student self-government reflected a powerfully

counter-cultural vision of taking women seriously as citizens with full moral and civic status and autonomy.

It was Dean Nannette Hopkins, one of a string of strong, smart and visionary women who shaped the college in its early years, who proposed the establishment of a system of student government, which she regarded as a fundamental marker of college, as opposed to high school, life. As Elizabeth Curry Winn of the class of 1907, who served on the first Executive Committee, later recalled,

We felt that our freedom was greatly increased under the new regime, and there was a general feeling of rejoicing, as well as much criticism. The criticism became especially strong when the committee had to deal with infringement of the rules, and there were times when all of us would have laid down our official authority and returned to the carefree status of private students.<sup>1</sup>

Winn's words capture the gift, and at times the burden, of an honor code: it pairs freedom with responsibility and trust with the expectation of trustworthiness. From the very beginning, an Agnes Scott education was defined by a commitment to moral norms that students were not only expected to uphold but entrusted with sustaining. At Agnes Scott, you will have the freedom of unproctored and self-scheduled exams—you will be treated with trust and respect—and with this will come the responsibility to behave honorably yourself and to take action when the Honor System is violated.

Yesterday, in the parking deck, I spoke with a couple of returning students and recent graduates who reflected on the value and power of Agnes Scott's Honor System. One had just taken a summer school class at another institution and was appalled at the culture of cheating and the professor's apathy about it. "I kept saying to students—why do you guys cheat? You're throwing away your education! And they looked at me like I was from another planet. I am SO glad I'm back at Agnes!" Another, who is enrolled in graduate school, remarked how at her new school they were told not to leave anything unattended in the library, even to go to the restroom, because it was likely to be stolen. It made her realize how much she valued and appreciated Agnes Scott's environment of honor and trust.

I want to be honest with you: today, just as in 1907, accepting the Honor System as your way of life is not always easy. It can involve some painful moments and tough choices. Imagine, for instance, that your roommate is having a rough time. Maybe she's broken up with her significant other ... or her family is going through tough times ... or she's struggling in her classes. You're really worried about her. So one night she has a take-home exam and with tears in her eyes asks you to help her complete it. What do you do?

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<sup>1</sup> M. Lee Sayrs and Christine S. Cozzens, *A Full and Rich Measure: 100 Years of Educating Women at Agnes Scott College, 1889-1989* (Decatur, GA: Agnes Scott College, 1990), p. 42.

You feel compassion and want to be a good friend. But you also want to be an honest student who doesn't cheat. And frankly, you think it's a lousy idea for your roommate to cheat—not good for her education, not good for her character, not good for her self-respect. Joining a community of honor means swallowing hard in that painful situation and saying, "You know, I love and care for you and I want to help you and I will help you. But not that way. I can go with you to academic advising or the Wellness Center ... I can help you study for your next test. One bad grade is not the end of the world. But cheating is a disservice to who you are and want to become."

One of my favorite phrases from the Agnes Scott Honor Pledge is this: **As a member of the student body of Agnes Scott College, I consider myself bound by honor to develop and uphold high standards of honesty and behavior.** Notice that it says you are bound by honor to develop high standards of honesty and behavior. Honor is not an on/off switch, not something you're either born with or not. It's something you work on all your life. All of us are a work in progress; all of us can work—need to work—on developing and upholding high standards.

The ultimate gift of an Honor System is the difference it makes to who you become and what, in turn, you can be in the world. It's why when someone says she is a graduate of Agnes Scott prospective employers take notice because they know she takes herself seriously as a woman of substance—that she is smart, she is confident and she has a strong moral compass.

Agnes Scott's commitment to honor and integrity was reaffirmed and deepened in 2002 with the drafting of our new mission statement, which you will hear quoted a lot on this campus: "Agnes Scott educates women to think deeply, live honorably and engage the intellectual and social challenges of their time."

So what does it mean to live honorably? It means much more, at Agnes Scott, than just "not cheating, lying and plagiarizing," although that is a very important and central part of it. It also means important everyday things like not stealing food from the fridge on your hall or "borrowing" laundry detergent with the vague intention of returning it one of these days. But it means even more than that.

In Agnes Scott's new strategic plan, *Engaging a Wider World*, we affirmed the goal of living honorably and committed to **becoming a living laboratory of a campus-wide commitment to justice, courage, integrity, respect and responsibility through policies and practices designed to model these values.**

Just as Dean Hopkins set out a bold and ambitious vision of honor and self-government for the 20th century, we have set out a bold and ambitious vision of an entire campus community striving to live up to our 21st-century moral responsibilities. And we have identified some very tangible ways of doing so.

They include treating all members of our community with civility and respect, including the hardworking people we too easily take for granted, who clean the showers on your hall or serve the delicious food in Evans, people who have amazing life stories and much to teach you if you get to know them. It means treating folks with civility and respect even if, especially if, they push you beyond your comfort zone—such as your hallmate whose political views or cultural attitudes you think are totally loopy.

Agnes Scott has also made some strong and specific commitments to living honorably as an institution. We have established a living-wage target for full-time staff and, even in the midst of an economic recession, made the necessary budget choices to ensure that we continue to make progress toward that target every year. We have also made a very strong commitment to environmental stewardship, becoming a charter signatory of the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment, which commits us to taking aggressive steps with the goal of becoming, as soon as possible, a climate-neutral institution, a campus that does not contribute to global warming.

Last year, we implemented single-stream recycling and diverted many tons of waste from landfills. We started purchasing all post-consumer recycled printer paper and recycling all our printer cartridges. This year, we are adding Georgia's first campus-wide composting effort. Yes, you will discover, composting is cool—and an important way of living honorably. In Atlanta, where water is a scarce resource and electricity is generated by coal-fired plants that are one of the biggest contributors to global warming, living honorably also means conserving water and turning off lights, computers and printers.

So just as you are being asked to develop and uphold high standards, so too the college is engaged in a process of discerning what it means to live honorably, what choices we need to make as an institution to continue to live up to our highest responsibilities. You have an important role to play in that process—whether as a member of Honor Court or Judicial Board, as an Environmental Resident, Office of Intercultural Affairs Ambassador, or member of the Living Wage campaign.

So, as you state the Honor Pledge and accept our Honor System as your way of life, I welcome you to the Agnes Scott community, a community whose commitment to living honorably each of you will help to define and uphold in the years to come.