

# Agnes Scott

## *Honor Code Signing Ceremony*

Remarks by Elizabeth Kiss  
President  
August 21, 2010

### "Living Honorably in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century"

Members of the Class of 2014 – 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 2013, 2012, and 2011 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, 104 years ago when Agnes Scott Institute became Agnes Scott College, to introduce a system of student self-government.

Agnes Scott College takes you seriously – your intellect, your character, your values and principles, your dreams and aspirations, and your responsibilities, as a member of this special campus community and of all the other communities – local, national, and global – to which you belong. 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 as late as 1962. 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. 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 College 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 able to leave your residence hall door unlocked and your books in the library -- you will be treated with trust and respect – and with all of these freedoms will come the responsibility to behave honorably yourself and to take action when the Honor System is violated.

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. It means being accountable for your choices – so if you didn't set aside enough time to study or to work on an assignment, you will experience the consequences and learn from them. It also means helping your Scottie sisters live honorably too. Imagine, for instance, that a student on your hall who is going through a tough time asks you to help you cheat on a take-home exam. 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 her to cheat – not good for her educational journey, 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 care for you and I want to help you. But not that way. I can help you go to Academic Advising or the Wellness Center... I can help you study for your next test. But I will not help you cheat. One bad grade is not the end of the world. But cheating is a disservice to who you are and want to become."

The Agnes Scott Honor Pledge asks all of us to develop and uphold high standards of honesty and behavior. I like that phrase "develop and uphold." 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 – all of us 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

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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.

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 that 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: "We educate women to think deeply, live honorably, and engage the intellectual and social issues of their time."

This year, we will be focusing on this theme of "Living Honorably" and exploring what it means throughout our lives at Agnes Scott and beyond. A central part of it is "not cheating, lying, and plagiarizing."

But 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.

It means treating all members of this community with civility and respect, including professors and staff members and 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 hall mate whose appearance, political views, religious convictions or cultural attitudes are different from yours and that you may even find totally loopy.

Living honorably means doing your part to uphold Agnes Scott's commitment to sustainability, recycling and composting, conserving electricity and water, and helping us as a campus be a national leader in efforts to reduce, reuse, recycle and rethink.

It means getting involved in student organizations and helping to make this college a better place through your contributions to it. And it means thinking about how, here at Agnes Scott and as you prepare for your life beyond college, you can think deeply and creatively about ways to build a better world.

Next Wednesday night right here in Gaines we will all have an amazing opportunity to hear Dr. Muhammad Yunus, who won the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize for helping to establish the concept of microfinance – giving small loans to poor people, mainly women, who had been totally ignored by traditional financial institutions. He started by lending a group of women \$27 from his own pocket. That experience led to the establishment of the Grameen Bank, which has lent \$6.38 billion to 7.4 million borrowers, 94% of them women, and inspired other efforts around the world to help people lift themselves out of poverty.

So whether you become an economist and business person, a scholar, an artist, a teacher, an activist – I hope Agnes Scott will invite and inspire you to think about how you can live honorably by putting your talents to use in building a better world, starting right here on our campus.

As I invite Honor Council Chair Danielle Patton back to the podium to administer the Honor Pledge, I welcome all of 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.