



**President Mary Pope M. Hutson '83**

Keynote Address to the International Coalition of Girls' Schools  
Conference, June 26, 2024

Thank you to ICGS, my fellow alumnae, the Sweet Briar College team in the room, and a particular shout-out to Oldfields leaders who saved their girls' school!

Good morning to all of you, my new friends and colleagues across the country and around the world, and let me say how wonderful it has been to be with you for these three days and particularly today – as I share with you some thoughts and experiences that I hope will propel you forward. I will try to keep my story succinct and filled with pearls of passion for you to carry forward.



You see... we actually have a lot in common, from what I have learned from meeting you, because I have been in your shoes between domestic and international schools and also because Sweet Briar College has enrolled so many of your talented girls from your institutions in the last 125 years. We are linked throughout the generations and we will continue to be inextricably woven together through a legacy of women that have led, are leading and who will continue to provide the leadership for the nation and the world throughout places in America, and also, as we speak, in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Nepal, England and France and Singapore, just to name a few.

Many colleges, universities and independent schools tout the value of leadership, and among our cohort, we know the intrinsic value of women's leadership. It seems prudent to pause and ask, will the leadership of the past really help inform what is needed for the leadership for the future?

When asked to come and speak with you, I thought it might be somewhat inspiring to hear about a recent experience that would address and affirm for those of you today who might be buoyed by story relevant to what lies ahead and embodies the phrase "eternal vigilance." As I sat down to imagine what might engage you in our imperative, I thought first about how an "urgent call to action" real-life example might inform our collective. Purpose, place, passion and perpetuity – those are words that resonate with me, and I hope with you as well.

Before I get ahead of myself, let me tell you a story that starts, for me, much earlier. You will be shocked to know that I grew up in a boys' boarding school. My father was a head of school and he and my mother gave their lives to his schools and the lives of thousands of young people. What a blessing. I was a campus rat... or so they called us – children loose on a 650-acre campus in western North Carolina the first time, with only faculty sons that were my age and we all roamed the campus in a pack playing all the sports in the fields and in the gym during the year. And in the summers, loose all over, particularly in the dorms, playing pool in the basements and carefree, owning the campus, scaling buckeye trees in the center of campus, and out on the lakes building Huckleberry Finn rafts out of timber we had assembled. I kept up with the boys because I was a decent athlete, but my outfit on this baseball field told the story that would clearly indicate that I



was destined to go to a women's college. The second campus we lived on was atop a mountain an hour from Chattanooga, Tennessee, where my father had been asked to come and transition it from being a military school – Sewanee Military Academy – to becoming a co-ed boarding and day school in 1971. It was adjacent to the University of the South, where he had graduated from, sitting in the middle of a 10,000-acre campus or "domain" as they call it. Once again, running loose throughout the campus' spelunking, exploring the caves of Tennessee, and fishing the lakes – and also seeking a life of purpose with Brownies and then Girl Scouts. Then, at age 16, we moved back to Christ School where my father became head of school – yes, at that boys' school – Christ School in Arden, North Carolina, so I actually went to Asheville Country Day School, which was co-ed for my last two years of high school – but I was always a campus kid.

One might wonder as I stand before you...what does a girl growing up on high school campuses, in places very similar to where many of you work, what can she possibly absorb in these environments over a 16-year-period of time during the most impressionable years of my life? Some of you might say "survival of the fittest" – but I



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think you know what I am getting at when I say that I know the environments, whether you are working in a rural setting or an urban setting, and it is definitely an unforgettable experience. Now we begin to connect the dots of single-sex education in today's society, when now, more than ever, the world needs more women influencers. After living most of my life on a boys' boarding school campus and knowing single-sex education, it is not surprising that I would have ended up graduating from and now leading a women's college. It is truly amazing that life is full circle.

No wonder I chose a women's college once I found this hidden gem in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. I immediately connected to the campus. As we were entering the long driveway to Sweet Briar College through a canopy of 100-year-old oaks in 1979, which are old growth sanctuaries, I am reminded of the women from the 1950s describing the entrance as "seduction lane."



I would have never thought – fast forward from 1979 to 2015 – what was about to happen.

Nine years ago in 2015, three days before Spring Break, the administration announced that Sweet Briar needed to close for four reasons: too far out in the country, 20 minutes from a Starbucks, Sweet Briar couldn't raise money, and that no one wanted to go to a women's college. Emails went out to alumnae – none of us knowing anything about the challenges the college was facing, and frankly perplexed with the narrative. There were wild stories that the campus was to become Disney or that an international investor was going to create a spa to other similar wild notions. No matter where we all were in the world, we were shocked into what felt like a death in the family. A visceral feeling of loss!





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That day of the announcement, the work began to save our women's college. Latte challenges, urgent calls to action hatched what was a home-baked, three-pronged approach: legal, communications and outreach campaign, and fundraising, of all sorts – but first we had to welcome the students back from Spring Break.

Eleven days after later after thousands of calls, emails and social media organizing started, 800 alumnae, all who wanted to support the current students, faculty and staff – who were now suspended in limbo – we lined the entrance of the campus dressed in our school colors, pink and green, holding homemade



posterboard signs saying, "we will save Sweet Briar!" Keep in mind that the alumnae who were there were judges, lawyers, surgeons, businesswomen, mothers, teachers and alumnae of every type of career. As we stood there with smiles showing them the lessons we learned of leadership at Sweet Briar, we would walk to Monument Hill together – a long-held tradition to recommit our passion for the place with the founder and her family. Statements were given and promises to fight for our college, everything it stood for, and for many of us gathered on that day, we reconnected with some of our oldest friends in the new imperative to save what we all know matters for women's colleges and girls' schools – the empowering experience that transforms communities, families and society!

For many of us, it was also the sisterhood that set the college apart; for others, it was the common thread of empowering leaders on the campus, ripe for activation.

As we left the campus tearfully that day, we had nothing, but yet we had everything... each other and our common bond to women's education. We started a 90-day campaign.

An amazing group of seven alumnae had already started to organize a new non-profit called Saving Sweet Briar, Inc. We had no legal standing, only the county (because of our status as a major employer), the faculty and staff and the students and their parents – they were the only ones with standing – but we had a voice. And oh, do we all know so well in this room that the voice does carry. Our fundraising team met every Monday night at 6pm on Free Conference Call America and we were fortunate to have some alumnae that knew how to get all kinds of information since they might have been involved in intelligence gathering, and the outreach and communications team blitzed the country. We all had our jobs, families and lives, but in the long run, we were fighting against all odds to save something that we knew mattered more than anything: women's education.

We raised money with abandon by asking willing students for lists of donors from the Alumnae Magazines that were in the library, making cold calls from professional fundraisers – all different alumnae in all different careers – updated weekly with the new story of progress and a new list of people to call throughout the alumnae base. Ten million dollars became 15, which became 20, and finally reached 21 million dollars in gifts and pledges, when we heard that we won the case in the Supreme Court of Virginia, during the last case of the “season” and what did the justices say to our college attorneys? They said, “Why are you trying so hard to close this college? There are all these alumnae who believe in the education of women and are willing to run it, raise the dollars to keep it going, and actually, your founder gave the land and the money as a charitable gift of land so you cannot summarily just close the school.” That day was the day of reckoning on June 22, 2015, when Sweet Briar College lawyers and the administration knew they would lose the fight. Then, the attorney general swooped in to create a settlement agreement and transfer leadership to a new board and a new acting president that would unfold just ten days later. We had to turn 12 million dollars of the 21 million we raised into cash very quickly and the





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attorney general released 15.4 million dollars of our endowment so that we could operate for one fiscal year. Everyone was skeptical – except our alumnae. Thirty-four alumnae also came back to work in different areas of the College.

We rebuilt and repositioned our Alumnae Association as an alliance of working groups who were activated: clubs, classes, development, young alumnae support, admissions ambassadors, communications and marketing and Sweet Work Weeks – all of these alumnae working groups became operational extension teams for our alumnae relations and development office, actually mobilizing the 12,000-plus living alumnae. The calls to action went out across America and globally to rebuild and strengthen Sweet Briar. Our Sweet Work Weeks crew of over 100 alumnae each summer come to campus and enjoy working in offices, painting dorm rooms and gardening across our core 27-acre area of our National Register Historic District, in the middle of our 2,847-acre campus. Who has an alumna group in this audience who love their school that much?

It is true that when you almost lose something that you dearly love, you will endeavor that much more to save it and strive to take it from strength to strength because it does matter. Women's leadership matters.

Since then, we have graduated eight classes of Sweet Briar women, who are doing amazing things in their communities and society, we have raised 163 million dollars – as of today, largely unrestricted dollars – from our alumnae, who have given selflessly to stabilize and strengthen Sweet Briar and reposition the College to double down on our areas of comparative advantage.

In 2017, we repositioned the College to set us apart and focus on our areas of comparative advantage. We created a new, one-of-a-kind Women's Leadership Core Curriculum of ten courses that every woman must take, replacing general education, our 20-year ABET accredited Center for Engineering (the only one in the nation that is solely for women), our Center for Creativity, Design and the Arts, and our Center for Sustainability, which has a 26,000-square-foot greenhouse, a 22-hive apiary, and our 18 acres of vineyards, where almost half of the students are engaged in what I describe as our stewardship ethos. And lastly, the 100-year-old distinguished equestrian program with 4 teams, recreational riding on our 22 miles of trails, and the instruction for anyone who wants to take a riding lesson.





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With 22 majors and a strong liberal arts base, you might ask what others have asked me: "Why would anyone want to try and close Sweet Briar?"

Everyone also asks me, "What happened?" as if it was a single event. It was not a single event; it was steeped in the lack of leadership and those

that surround the leader. What do I mean by that? Let me come back to that because this relates to all of us in this room today.



We know one thing for sure is that the levers of vulnerability that exist in educational institutions and nonprofits today are littered with a myriad of issues. I need not enumerate all of them, but of course, in education, it starts with students and money. What resonated with all of us of the three reasons to close the school was the one on the relevance theme. Why would anyone say that single-sex education is outdated and no longer relevant? Each one of you here today is proving that wrong.

Girls' schools and colleges contain a space where girls and women have the ultimate experience to find their voice, test the waters and even swim beyond the reef and do it safely.

Today, all schools are dealing with tremendous challenges and these challenges are not unique to girls' schools or women's colleges:

- The pandemic and its lasting impacts
- The rise in social-emotional stressors, anxiety and depression
- Identity
- The enrollment cliff
- The value of private education and public education



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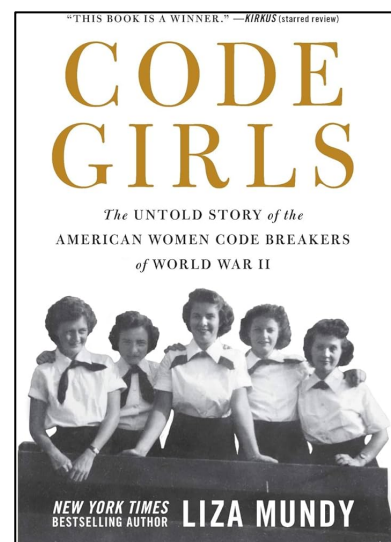
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For those of us here today, though we know it is usually the business model starting with the students and money, and then move quickly into the profile and the reputation that is derived in large part from the alumnae body and their accomplishments, to the distinguished faculty and staff, the facilities, the programs and curriculum and, of course, the "leadership."

I wake up every morning with a fire in my eyes, knowing that it takes eternal vigilance to keep a college running and that is the same for girls' schools. This is what we tell administrators from institutions in distress who have reached out to us for advice on how we prevailed, but I tell them that our journey is far from finished.

I share with others that vigilance means continually monitoring key factors that can indicate success or danger, such as tuition discounting, student retention, endowment spending, and engagement with alums. Vigilance also takes foresight: leaders can't wait until their institution is in the midst of a crisis to make necessary – and often difficult – changes. And vigilance requires awareness: a college or a secondary school won't succeed by attempting to be all things to all people; determine what makes your place distinctive and emphasize this in every step of your journey and that is your focus on girls. Now we really are in this together and I do mean each and every one of us in this room.

The relevance of the education of girls and women in this country has never been more important than it is today to tackle the challenges. This is our century and this is our moment. Others have tried to claim the moment and the turning point for women but the efforts have been incremental and bumpy. But I know I don't speak out of turn when I say that the relevance of an education for women is exclusive by nature and was started as we all know back in the 1800s; yet it took women 100 years to earn the right to vote and unfortunately, for many others, it took years longer for that to truly happen. I know we all have these examples for schools in this room where women were instrumental in all inflection points in our history and in the world and we can all point







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to them. Women making history shouldn't be a standalone month; it should be a given that it is happening every day. In science, aerospace, community building, business and throughout government in the United States and worldwide women are occupying and leading. We saw it at Sweet Briar during the World War effort of the 1940s when President Meta Glass welcomed representatives (all men, of course) coming to Sweet Briar and women's colleges of the south because the department of the Navy that recruited women were uniquely well-educated in math and the sciences, so they would be excellent codebreakers during the war –and they were. If you want to read a fascinating account of this, read about our alumna that went on to manage the group of codebreakers, which Liza Mundy writes about in "Code Girls."

I have seen leaders like Wangaari Mathai in Kenya lead the greenbelt movement fighting deforestation, Margaret Thatcher, Sandra Day O'Connor, and Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who I have known during my career – we all have our women leaders that we have seen in action – advance our society, but how long will it really take us to achieve pay equity, promotions in career advancement and leadership in the majority of our governments? We know that the attendance for college-age women is higher than for men – are we going to have to wait until women are a majority of educated matriculants from college, or will that even turn the tide, so to speak?



No matter how we slice it, there is a national and international gap of women in leadership. For many of you in this audience, globally, you have been in that environment for most of your adult. How do we reach other parts of the world including the Middle East and other underdeveloped nations in earnest to build the wave of women leaders across the globe?

So, let's talk about what we are going to do about it. What does success look like in 10 years? It all starts with education. Where the majority of policy makers are women, pay equity exists in most circles of the developed and underdeveloped world and leadership by and for women is not an anomaly.



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I believe the parity that I have just talked about can be accomplished by unleashing not just the alumnae network of Sweet Briar College who saved a college, but all women's college alumnae bases and girls' schools across the globe to create a movement that is led by an enhanced network of leaders like you. ICGS has created this amazing event once a year to reinvigorate our commitment to girls and their leadership journey. Now, we all go back onto our campuses strengthening our institutions but with the long view in mind. I would propose five things to carry us forward:

1. We must help young women start with where they are to build their brand of leadership. Leadership cannot just be instructed, it has to be practiced. We are all committed to helping them be architects of their own leadership construct and roll it up together.
2. We must think how we can strengthen other efforts through this network, so we can come back again next year and bring success stories.
3. As change agents for this network, let's build it with intention. It is up to all of us to reach out and lift each other up, not compete.
4. Enhance and partner for greater collaborative outcomes to tell our stories to policy makers and other influencers.
5. Reinforce to your girls that their network now will be the longest relationship they will ever have and that it is more important to be courageous than perfect.

Girls and women own this century and I know through focusing on and promoting the value proposition of women as empowered change agents who strengthen their families, their communities and our societies is a movement worthy of all of our investments.

We feel that we did not just save a college - we propelled the conversation and the imperative that leadership by and for all girls and women matters and is changing the world for the better. I hope you will join the work of Sweet Briar and the other 29 women's colleges in America in this imperative!

Thank you to ICGS for this amazing conference and thank you for all that you are doing to build women's leadership and the network for future generations.

Onward and upward!