Remarks by Michela English ’71
2013 Distinguished Alumna Award Luncheon
Cosmos Club, Washington, D.C.
May 8, 2014

Thank you so much for this honor, and I want to thank all of you for coming to share the moment with me. I also want to thank Jo Ellen for her service to the College. Being a college president these days is one of the most difficult jobs around. Jo Ellen has done a terrific job at Sweet Briar, and we wish her all the best at the Carnegie Museums.

I grew up in Suffolk, Virginia, and graduated from Suffolk High School. Suffolk was then a town of about 10,000 people and Suffolk High School had about 500 students, counting the eighth grade. I was part of the first generation in my family to go to college. My parents were both children of immigrant families who had come to the United States in search of opportunity. My father joined a very young company, Planters Peanuts, right after high school and worked there for 46 years before retiring as President and CEO. I was an only child and to say that my parents doted on me would be a dramatic understatement!

There was no question about whether I would go to college. I applied to three colleges, William & Mary (close to home), Duke (because my father loved basketball) and Sweet Briar (because Esther Holland, class of 1943, had insisted that I visit). I was accepted at Sweet Briar, accepted and invited to join the honors program at William & Mary and waitlisted at Duke. When my parents and I visited Sweet Briar, we were greeted by Nancy Baldwin. Once we experienced both the beauty of the campus and the warmth of Nancy’s personality, there was no further consideration of the other choices.

I found Sweet Briar to be both stimulating and challenging. I had been fourth in my high school class of 93 students, and I was used to getting A’s and B’s. Professor Ralph Aiken gave me an F on my first English paper at Sweet Briar, and I got a mid-term (C-) academic warning in art history. Finally, by the second semester of senior year, I earned a spot on the dean’s list. (I later had a very similar experience in my first year at the Yale Management School. I seem to have a pattern of rocky starts.) At Sweet Briar, I was active in student government, serving on the Judicial Board and as a volunteer tutor through the Challenge program.

The four years my class was at Sweet Briar, 1967-1971, were full of turmoil — in both the world around us and on campus. We experienced Vietnam and Kent State and the associated student protests on campuses across the country. We went from wearing heels and dresses into Lynchburg to wearing jeans and work shirts from the Army surplus store. We pushed the administration to remove the social rules from the honor code, so that it focused exclusively on lying, cheating and stealing. We boycotted final exams, and I managed to get a picture of myself (in wire-rimmed glasses and with frizzy hair) in the alumnae magazine wearing a “strike” T-shirt with a fist on the back. My relationship with my older, conservative, Catholic parents was so strained at one point that they told me not to store anything at the College over the summer, because they might not pay to send me back for my senior year. President Anne Gary Pannell, who had served with
distinction for many years, was so exhausted by dealing with the strife on campus that she decided to retire when our class graduated.

But today we are enjoying a nice lunch at the beautiful Cosmos Club, and I have just received a wonderful honor from this very special College. I’m not sure any of us thought there was the slightest chance of that back in 1971.

These days all of us are reading about the challenging times facing higher education institutions. Costs have risen, the number of applicants has declined, and many students are arriving at college with inadequate preparation and less family financial and emotional support than was true in the past. Small, four-year liberal arts colleges are having a particularly difficult time managing their finances, as they are forced to compete by adding amenities, and the associated costs, while discounting tuition through generous financial aid offers. Sweet Briar is not immune from these trends and is once again involved in a proactive strategic planning process to ensure that it remains relevant, true to its mission and financially viable. While I do not have a crystal ball that shows what Sweet Briar will look like in the future, I can say with clarity what it has meant to me.

As I mentioned earlier, I was very close to my parents. From them, I received a strong set of values about doing my best, working hard, not giving up when things get tough, being respectful of others, and serving the community. My Sweet Briar experience both as a student and later as a Board member built on that foundation in several meaningful ways:

First, the liberal arts curriculum promoted interdisciplinary critical thinking skills and provided me with a broad awareness of the political, economic and cultural forces at work in the world.

Second, the small size, residential campus and highly engaged faculty created an environment where I was expected to achieve and contribute, and I couldn’t “hide.”

Third, the deep personal relationships forged with other students (who are still among my very best friends), with the faculty (people like Dr. Milan Hapala, who I followed around for several years, taking every course he offered), and later with colleagues on the board (like Sara Lycett, Joanne Patton, Gregg Petersmeyer and Betsy Muhlenfeld) left me with a sense of trust in and optimism about people and an appreciation for the value of teamwork that has carried through everything I’ve done since.

Fourth, participating actively in student government and in volunteer work helped me get comfortable in leadership roles and gave me the confidence to embrace change. (Unlike my father, who worked at one company for 46 years, I have now already had 7 jobs over the past 33 years and I may not be done yet!)

Finally, being in college in the midst of the activism of the 60s, even at a relatively conservative place like Sweet Briar, instilled in me a sense of the importance of social justice and civic involvement. I wanted to make the world a
better place then, and I still do. That has been a driver of most of the professional and volunteer activities in which I’ve been involved throughout my career.

I’m sure many of you who went to Sweet Briar can say similar things about the role the College has played in shaping your own personal development and values. It is a very special place, and we are all lucky to be a part of the Sweet Briar family.

Thank you.