Welcome to homecoming and Family weekend. President Valerie Smith, thank you so much for the invitation to be the speaker for the Thomas B. McCabe Memorial Lecture. As an alumna, I am an avid reader of every communication that you issue from the Office of the President. Your messages are not only brimming with news, they always remind us of our values. Your words remind us that, as a college, we stand for academic rigor, educational excellence, service to the community and the world, and ethical leadership. As an alumna and a fellow college president, I am grateful for your leadership.

My congratulations to McCabe scholars. Spelman alumna, Marian Wright Edelman, founder and former president of the Children’s Defense Fund, likes to say that service is the rent we pay for the privilege of being on this earth. I like to think that, when life blesses you with gifts, you have the privilege of using your gifts to bless others. It’s heartening to see the McCabe Scholars doing just that.
Happy 50th anniversary to the Black Cultural Center. You and I share a 50th anniversary and I will have more to say about that later.

My topic this morning has a long title. “Educational Equity, the New Civil Rights: the role of Colleges and Universities in Expanding Educational Excellence.” A topic with a title this long raises many questions. What do I mean by educational excellence and educational equity? Why is it so urgent that we expand excellence and equity and for whom? Why should small liberal arts colleges, like Swarthmore or Spelman, or any college or university for that matter bear responsibility for these issues? If we were to take on the responsibility of expanding educational excellence and equity to our missions, how would we measure success? Don’t we already have enough on our plates?

About a month ago, President Smith and I participated in a president’s dinner at the National Press Club. A group of about a dozen presidents and as many journalists convened for an on the record dinner conversation about the most pressing issues facing higher education today. During the evening an abundance of topics came up: enrollment fragility; changes in Title IX regulations; rules governing college athletic programs; threats to international student populations; the overall vulnerability of our fundamental business model; the impact of a looming economic downturn were just a few of the topics we discussed. To listen
to the conversation that night, you might have come away thinking that higher education is a beleaguered sector. Presidents already have an impossible task. Why would we take on yet another challenge?

The answer, I believe, is that we have no choice.

For one, demographic changes are transforming the racial make-up and cultural identity of our citizenry, the electorate, and the composition of the public sphere. Consider, for example, the historic outcomes in the United States House of Representatives, after last year’s mid-term elections. We elected more women and people of color than at any other time in our history. On the one hand, the election of those men and women is an embrace and celebration on the part of a significant number of Americans of our country’s growing diversity. The state of Georgia came close to electing an African-American woman, Stacey Abrams, as the country’s first Black woman governor. I cannot resist observing that she is an alumna of Spelman College. In the democratic presidential primaries, an admittedly crowded field, there are several women, as well as candidates who are LatinX, Asian and African American. Our political landscape churns with change and possibility.

On the other hand, shifting political landscapes notwithstanding, all types of inequalities are growing. Take, for example, college completion rates:
In 2017, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported that at four year colleges and universities, the six-year college completion rate for black students was 45.9 percent. The completion rate of LatinX students 55.0 percent.

College completion, by contrast, is 67.2 percent for white students and 71.7 percent for Asian students.

These trends repeat themselves when we look at other types of educational credentials such as certificates or two-year colleges. At two year and certificate granting institutions, Asian and white students complete at a rate of 63.2 percent and 62.0 percent, respectively. LatinX student completion rate is 45.8% and for Black students 38%. These rates include students who graduated after a transfer. They also count both full time and part time students.

Black students not only complete at a lower rate, they are the group that graduates with the most debt.

Income inequality is another trend that impacts educational excellence. Income inequality is greater now and growing more rapidly than fifty years ago. A 2013 study completed by Sean Reardon, (Reardon, “The Widening Income
Achievement Gap,” Educational Leadership May 2013, Vol. 70, Number 8 Faces of Poverty Pages 10-16) makes the point. In 1970, families in the 90th percentile of income earned five times as much as families in the 10th percentile. In 2013, top earners made 11 times what low wage families earn. Why does that matter? High income predicts access to excellent educational resources and experiences. High-income students are more likely to attend excellent high schools. Schools in higher income suburban neighborhoods, that typically have high percentages of white students, receive $53B more in public funding than schools in poor urban, typically Black and LatinX neighborhoods. We know that income is the most reliable predictor of attendance at the country’s most selective and academically highly-ranked schools. High-income students are more likely to have had experiences that build soft skills necessary for success not only in college but in the work force.

Statistics for income growth in Black and LatinX communities, according to a 2017 Forbes.com analysis, predict that income in Black and LatinX communities will decline in the next twenty to thirty years as will net worth, even as those populations grow. Stagnant income and wealth will continue to pose barriers to these communities as they seek educational advancement.

The convergence of lagging college completion, and tightening economic circumstances comes at a distinctly inopportune time. Our country’s work force needs are changing, radically. Those without college degrees will find high wage,
high skill jobs foreclosed. High skill jobs will depend increasingly on the skills of a good liberal arts education: possession of an agile, growth mind-set that can embrace life-long learning; comfort with complexity; an ability for critical analysis; the capacity to engage in cross cultural exploration; the ability to solve problems, work on teams, collaborate, and the capacity for creative invention. Imagination, the ability to envision what is not there and move with confidence towards the envisioned goal will be as important a skill as knowing how to code.

When I attended Swarthmore, it was permissible not to know what you wanted to be or what career you wanted to choose. Education as a pathway to the world of ideas, knowledge, exploration of the new and different and, most importantly, of yourself were paramount. Most college presidents still champion all of those reasons for attending college. A rising tide of public opinion, however, questions the value of a high priced liberal arts college education. They insist that the cost severely burdens families and the debt, that often accompanies a college education, cripples graduates financially. The public and our politicians continue to raise their voices to demand that undergraduate colleges justify the considerable cost, time and debt invested in going to a four year liberal arts college.

After spending four years at an outstanding liberal arts college that educates Black women to become global leaders, I want to make sure that the education our women receives does, in fact, deliver more than the contemplation of ideas and a
journey of self-discovery. When I look at the state of Black America, 50 years after the Civil Rights Movement, and 50 years after my graduation from college, I want more, because, at every turn, inequities are mounting:

- Infant and maternal mortality rates for Black women and children outpace the general population
- Since 1970, our population of young Black and Hispanic men has been decimated as the prison population has risen by 300%
- For virtually every major illness from heart disease to cancer high blood pressure, you name it, there are crippling health disparities in in our community.

Fifty years ago, I believed that Brown vs. Board of Education would desegregate k-12 schools and remove racial barriers from all of our nation’s colleges and universities. I believed that the Civil Rights Movement would purchase a ticket to a high-speed train that would accelerate in the direction of declining inequities. I believed that Civil Rights would take us on a journey to a new national identity, a brave new world of equity and plenty. Not once did I believe that economic decline, mass incarceration, health inequities and education’s failure to ensure social mobility would be stops on the journey.
Coming to the full realization of how these past fifty years has undermined the many successes of the Civil Rights era, I have come to appreciate that the college I now serve, Spelman College, is a singular exception, a counter narrative to a national story. Spelman College ranking six this year in US News and World Report for social mobility, still, according to the National Science Foundation, produces more Black women who complete PhDs in STEM fields than any other college or university in the country. Getting to know the fierce Spelman faculty, who now rank #22 in the country for undergraduate teaching, I have come to understand that Spelman provides what Bettina Love defines as, “Abolitionist Education.” Abolitionist education believes in the ability of education to lift students beyond their expectation. Abolitionist education takes joy in the excitement of learning and love of the student. Abolitionist education inspires faculty innovation and imagination in teachers who are looking for ways to lift. Abolitionist educators motivate themselves by what motivated Martin Luther King, Jr., over fifty years ago, when he wrote a Letter from a Birmingham Jail and that is the “Fierce urgency of now.”

Why is this Abolitionist Education so important now? The truth is, we are more divided now, than ever, and the stakes have never been higher. Technological change stalks us at every turn. High tech leaders, from Bill Gates to
Yuval Noah Harari, the author of *21 lessons for the 21st Century* and *Homo Sapiens*, to Stanford business lecturer, Tony Seba, to even one of our democratic candidates Andrew Yang tell us that we are on the cusp of a major technological revolution. Whatever has come before—the internet, social media—will seem to be modest ripples in the face of the volcanic disruptions to come. We are told that artificial Intelligence, machine learning, quantum computing, advances of bio-technology will eliminate, in the next 20-30 years, 80 million unskilled jobs. Tele-commuting, tele-immigration and robotics will eliminate some white collar jobs as well. Yang was quoted in the New York Times as stating “All you need is self-driving cars to destabilize society…. And we’re about to do the same thing to retail workers, call center workers, fast-food workers, insurance companies, accounting firms.”

If ever there was a need for the “fierce urgency of now,” it is today, right now.

Where is our national will? In the past, when it comes to education, we have exhibited will of steel. Spelman College was born out of the will of Baptist missionaries, two white women, from Salem Massachusetts, teachers who were determined to come to Atlanta to start a school for recently freed Black women. They called it the Atlanta Female Baptist Seminary. Their school that started in a
cellar of a black church, Friendship Baptist Church, supported by the Black pastor, Father Quarles. The seminary eventually was named for an abolitionist family, Laura Spelman Rockefeller, the spouse of the school’s benefactor, John D. Rockefeller. One of Alice Walker’s characters in The Color Purple attends the school in 1924 and, in her letters, refers to it as “astonishing.” Marshalling their will women and men, black and white citizens created an astonishing college for Black women that continues to astonish 138 years later.

Another act of will came after World War II. After the veterans received news of a new benefit, a G.I. Bill that paid their way through college. Much to the surprise of those who authored the G.I. Bill, millions of Americans took advantage of the opportunity to go to college. Millions of Americans were catapulted from blue collar working class to solidly multi-generational middle class.

In my lifetime, when I was ten years old, in 1957, what was then Soviet Union launched a self-piloted satellite that orbited the earth, Sputnik. Public outrage and political indignation ran high. Our mortal cold war enemy had outpaced us. This country’s response was immediate. A republican president launched a new agency, NASA. Other federal agencies found money for math and science education and local school districts ploughed money into k-12 education. Pubic university funding was a top priority for state budgets. Education was bi-
partisan. A democratic president upped the ante and stated his intent to put a man of the moon. Education was a public good.

Swarthmore marshalled its will 50 years ago. This year was the 50th reunion of my class, class of 1969. When the freshman class showed up on campus in the fall of 1965, there were about twenty black students. Swarthmore’s total student population was 900. Our arrival pushed the Black population to just over 2% of the total student population. Our arrival was a disruption. We disrupted what was then a higher education norm, the practice of elite colleges of accepting only one or two black students at a time. By the time we graduated, the college was questioning deeply the kind of place it intended to become.

Here we are 50 years later, Swarthmore College, is a radically different educational institution today than it was fifty years ago. This year we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Black Cultural Center. There was no Black Cultural Center, when I attended. Now, diversity reigns. Diversity is the norm in the student body, the faculty, staff and administrative leadership, in the Board of Managers. Diversity reigns and enriches the values and principles of excellence, service and ethical leadership. We recognize and celebrate Black excellence this year at
Swarthmore as fundamental to Swarthmore’s identity and, more importantly, its claim to academic excellence.

Here is the challenge that I put before us now. I challenge us to marshal the will to play a role in achieving educational excellence in the k-12 environment that bridges into our schools. I challenge colleges and universities, large and small, public and private to take an active role in disrupting the trends that are hamstringing the prospects every day right now of students in many of our k-12 schools in our communities. I challenge not only our institutions but our students who are motivated to serve to take responsibility for the students who are coming after them.

Here are three ideas that I would like to propose as possibilities for instigating change

1. Student led literacy program in k-12 schools
2. Math proficiency program led by college students in k-12 schools
3. An embrace of teaching across the spectrum of education on the part of colleges and universities.
1. Literacy Programs

We know that many colleges and universities value service. At Spelman, we typically evaluate service in terms of how many hours our students serve and what it accomplishes for their educational experience. But, we asked ourselves, what if we were to evaluate that service in terms of what our public school children accomplish? When I first came to Spelman, I invited to dinner all of the principals from the schools in our neighborhood. We were very proud at Spelman of all the programs we offered in Atlanta public schools to teach music, chess, STEM tutoring etc. That evening, we went around the room and asked the principals, “How can we best serve your students?” To our surprise, the local principals, to a one—elementary, middle school and high school, said, “teach our students to read.”

With that mandate, we identified a literacy expert and she in turn put out a call for our students to undergo the rigorous training necessary to teach reading. Over a 100 Spelman students responded. Based on their performance on the training and continued interest, we deployed 100 of them to the local schools for after school tutorials. We learned a great deal. We learned that teaching students how to teach reading is hard work for the learners and hard work for students who are doing the teaching. In addition to teaching skills, the task requires consistency, persistence and, most importantly, deep caring for the
students you are teaching. We learned that showing up consistently and mentoring was as important as the reading. When the Spelman students read aloud they learned the joy of reading and telling stories. After two years, we received the results from the reading specialist who serves the middle schools in which our students taught. In the classes in which our students served in the 5th, 6th and 7th grades, reading scores improved from 10% to 21%. Students were the abolitionists.

2. Teaching Middle School and High School Math Proficiency

Buoyed by the promising outcomes of our literacy program, Spelman is planning an intervention to enhance math proficiency. One of the great failures of our k-12 system is that students very often do not receive the foundational math courses in middle school that enable them to take advanced math courses in high school that will prepare them either for college level studies in math or for the STEM fields that want to study.

To tackle that problem, we looked around the country to see what is working. Spelman is in the process of adopting a math program Math Corps, inaugurated by Wayne State University. We believe that, if something works, replicate it. Over the past nineteen years, Math Corps has received excellent results and the
program has been replicated in several other colleges across the country. Math Corps’ model is deceptively simple. It begins with a group of math professors at the math corps college who provide rigorous training in math and the teaching of math to their college students. During a six week summer program, college students provide math instruction to a corps of high school students in the afternoons. In the mornings, high school students teach a corps of middle school students. After the summer program is over, math instruction continues on Saturdays. Participation can continue from year to year. Begun in Detroit public schools in 1991, the program has sustained spectacular results in terms of student success in math assessments, ACT scores, high school graduation rates, college attendance and student and parental approval. We plan to bring the program to Spelman and to the middle schools and high school in our schools in our West Side neighborhood. Our leader is a long time teacher in the math corps program, who is now a Spelman faculty member.

3. Education across the Entire Spectrum

During our conversation at the National Press Club, President Smith made one of the most important observations of the evening. She observed that higher
education could take place along an entire spectrum of ages. I agree. If we, as colleges and universities want to disrupt the inequities of income and education, we have to be present along that continuum. In addition to asserting the presence of our students in k-12, colleges and universities, we believe that we need to play a more aggressive role in the education of the non-traditional student. For many years, Spelman has had a program for non-traditional students but we naively expect these students with families and jobs to be able to attend the same schedule of classes, available to our traditional students. Our non-traditional students sometimes take years to complete a degree. We asked ourselves, what do we need to do differently to support as opposed to thwart their success. An examination of our online programs, alumnae mentoring network and the use of local not-for-profits as potential child-care providers is currently underway.

**Creating a mind-set for success**

The scholar Carol Dweck has written a great deal about cultivating a growth mind-set, a nimbleness and agility of mind that allows us to pivot and move as circumstances demand. Institutions can have growth mind-sets and what I love about the college I attended and the college I now serve is their devotion to a growth mind-set, even as they are stalwart in defense of their longstanding values, mission and purpose.
What I love, too, is the fact that both Spelman and Swarthmore are communities whose faculty are dedicated to the success of each and every student. Theologian Howard Thurman referring to our sibling college, Morehouse, once wrote, *Over the heads of her students, Morehouse holds a crown that she challenges them to grow tall enough to wear.*

Faculty, like those at Spelman and Swarthmore, who approach their students with radical hopefulness, holding a crown over their heads, create a thriving learning environment.

How do we measure success? We will know that we are succeeding when more high performing, high need students fill the seats of our best colleges and universities and complete degrees. We will know we are succeeding when philanthropists are competing to invest in them and support them. We know they are succeeding when they master the skills and competencies of thinking critically, solving problems, working collaboratively, and speaking the language of technology fluently. We know we are succeeding when those same students not only graduate and go to professional schools and graduate school but are making their way into the rooms where it happens. We know we are succeeding when those students enter the research laboratories where the fundamental work of
knowledge creation takes place and the knowledge that is created is shaped by the very fact that they are in the room. We know we are succeeding, when they enter the courts all the way up to the Supreme Court, when their start-ups issue IPOs; when they pass down their wealth from one generation to the next; when they stand in the front of a classroom as the possibility their students need to see. We know we are succeeding when we look out and see a sea of crowns moving with sturdy confidence through the world.