The College of Wooster
Inauguration Address

"Independent Minds, Working Together"
Grant H. Cornwell
April 26, 2008

Let me begin by expressing respect and gratitude for all who have come before me. The College of Wooster has had ten presidents before me, and I would like to recall their names as a way of honoring their service:

Willis Lord, D.D. - 1870-1873
Sylvester Fithian Scovel, D.D., LL.D. - 1883-1899
John Campbell White, LL.D. - 1915-1919
J. Garber Drushal, Ph.D., LL.D., L.H.D. - 1967-1977
Raleigh Stanton Hales, Jr., Ph.D. - 1995-2007

I know that I am on a path that has been paved with love, devotion, and lifetimes of hard work by others. I am a new steward of this great college. My duty is as much to those who have come before me as it is to the current students and faculty and the generations who will follow them.

I want to express my gratitude to the Board of Trustees who steward The College of Wooster with the generosity of their time, expertise, and resources, and especially to Jim Wilson, the Chair of the Board, and to the Honorable Solomon Oliver, the Chair of the Presidential Search Committee, for their sage counsel throughout this transition.

Thank you to the Alumni Board, to all of the alumni who have sent me greetings, good wishes, and advice, and to the citizens of the community of Wooster. My family and I cannot imagine a warmer or more generous welcome.

Thank you, especially, to the faculty. Every day I encounter a new reason to be inspired by your commitment to the mission of The College of Wooster. It is because of your unbounded devotion to your profession, to your students, and to the college that we have a deep historical reservoir of alumni accomplishments that we can boast about. Thank you, too, for your openness to change; Wooster can only remain the vibrant learning community that it is if we are constantly reshaping ourselves in response to changes in knowledge and changes in the world we are preparing our students to lead.
I also wish to acknowledge the wonderful work of the senior Cabinet and all of the College's staff. I have had the benefit of joining a team of colleagues who are outstanding in their leadership, vision, and professional expertise.

Finally, let me express my love and gratitude for my wife, Peg, my boys, Kelsey and Tosh, to my extended family, many of whom are here today, and most of all to my parents, Ellen Margaret and Grant H. Cornwell, Sr., who have passed. They are my foundation.

In my address this morning I am going to share my insights into the heart and soul of the college. I will draw upon our history in order to imagine our future. To begin, let me unpack some of the resonances of the song we heard at the beginning, "Amazing Grace". What fascinates me is that the threads of this one song, taken from both Scottish and African-American heritage, are woven into the fabric of Wooster's identity.

We can learn much about how cultures move across space and time, buffeted by the dynamics of globalization and intercultural encounters, by tracing the history of "Amazing Grace". How is it, after all, that one song can become part of the canonical repertoire of two cultural traditions - Scottish bagpipes and Gospel choir - both of which have deep roots in Wooster's heritage? "Amazing Grace" was written in the 1760s by John Newton, the captain of a slave ship, who for many years profited from the triangular trade that delivered thousands upon thousands of souls stolen from Africa and pressed into slavery for the profit of Europe and America. Lore has it that on a voyage back to England, Newton's slave ship, The Greyhound, encountered a fierce storm and almost sank. After surviving this storm he went through a dramatic religious conversion, saw his moral failings, and renounced his trade. He became active in the abolition movement in England and wrote "Amazing Grace" as an ode to his repentance.

The song's adoption as a bagpipe standard is more recent, actually, but it is interesting to reflect on the historical resonances of this song in Wooster's own Scots Presbyterian heritage. The College of Wooster was founded in 1866, at the end of the Civil War, by members of the Presbyterian Church who wanted to do "their proper part in the great work of educating those who are to mold society and give shape to all its institutions." Willis Lord, the first President of Wooster, said in his Inaugural Address:

    The College of Wooster should not only be a place of all studies; it should be a place of studies for all. Let the tree of knowledge be as accessible as God has made the tree of life. The essential test of citizenship in the commonwealth of science and letters should be character, mental and moral quality, and attainment, not condition, race, color, or sex. [1]

These were bold and visionary words in 1870. In post-Civil War America, they were a declaration of a new era. From its inception, then, Wooster has had an explicit commitment to inclusivity, to an understanding that diversity is constitutive of excellence for an institution of higher learning.