

Cultivating learners

Wheaton hosts many fascinating guest lecturers during the course of the year, and attending those events is one of the many pleasures of college life. Some visitors, however, shine just a bit brighter, even among an all-star line-up. Barbara Damrosch '64 wowed the crowd in Hindle Auditorium this semester with her knowledge of the art and science of agriculture, her passion for a return to more sustainable farming practices and her sense of humor.

I took particular delight in the lecture, because it demonstrated the creativity that can arise from an interdisciplinary approach to the world. An English major at Wheaton who went on to earn a master's in writing at Columbia, Barbara dove into horticulture, and she developed a passion for gardening and the scientific knowledge to complement it.

The key to farming lies in good soil, she said, discussing the complex mix of animal, mineral and vegetable that is required for healthy flowers, fruits and vegetables. "Garden soil is not a thing, it's a process," Barbara said. And that remark has stayed with me in the weeks since she visited campus. The same might be said of education, particularly the type of high-quality personalized learning experience that Wheaton offers students.

What makes Wheaton special is the enduring value of the liberal arts, which takes root on campus but grows and evolves along with the individual. The motto inscribed above the Madeleine Clark Wallace Library, "That they may have life and have it abundantly," references the value that the college places on lifelong learning. On campus or around the world, alumnae/i tell me regularly that their Wheaton education continues to influence their lives. Once nurtured, the love of learning continues to grow.

The use of gardening as a metaphor for education is not new at Wheaton. Former provost Hannah F. Goldberg held regular gatherings with members of the faculty to talk about the art of undergraduate teaching. Their meetings led to a variety of curricular innovations, such as an emphasis on non-Western cultures and the creation of the First Year seminars. Hannah has been quoted as saying, "The curriculum is like a garden that needs work and pruning."

The cultivation continues. Faculty members recently completed a two-year examination of the college's new Connections curriculum, and they will be making recommendations on how the program can be improved for the future. A committee of faculty and staff from across the campus is engaged in a yearlong study of the college's programs as a precursor to Wheaton's reaccreditation visit in the spring of 2009.

And just as a diversity of nutrients makes for a healthy garden, a wide variety of opportunities creates the best environment for learning. The myriad avenues that Wheaton offers for students

to explore their interests and test their talents is critical. It provides the conduit for students to grow as leaders and active citizens. First and foremost, our faculty members' commitment to teaching translates into many special opportunities for students. Wheaton's 10-to-1 student-faculty ratio ensures that every student has the chance to be mentored by outstanding professors.

In addition, the college facilitates internships and jobs arranged through the Filene Center for Work and Learning; independent and faculty-led study abroad; community service and social advocacy facilitated by the Office of Spirituality, Service and Social Responsibility; leadership on campus through student organizations; and athletic competition.

The variety of ways in which students can combine learning in the classroom and beyond encourages creative and critical thought and sharpens their ability to communicate with clarity. These opportunities also develop leadership skills and the ability to solve problems.

In a sense, we are all gardeners: faculty and staff, students, alumnae/i, parents and friends. Each of us plays a critical role in tending to the growth of our educational community. Generosity provides funding to sustain and enhance many programs. Active engagement fuels numerous unique learning opportunities—from special internship opportunities and networking options to on-campus events. Barbara's lecture on sustainable gardening not only reminded me of the cyclical, complex and ever-evolving nature of learning, but it also exemplified the rich talents of our extended college community. 

