August 2017

Dear Members of the Collegiate Community,

Happy summer! I hope these last few months have been filled with family, friends, rest, and great books. The focus of this letter is to introduce our new mission statement, which we refer to as our Statement of Beliefs.

In 2013, the school prepared a detailed self-study in preparation for our decennial review by the New York State Association of Independent Schools. We recognized in preparing our self-study that an update of our Statement of Philosophy would be appropriate. Former Upper School Head Laura Hansen led the review process, working with a faculty committee for over two years. We consulted faculty, staff, students, alumni, and parents during the review and revision process.

As our process developed, those working on the draft decided that the most effective way to express our convictions and aspirations was to formulate our mission as a Statement of Beliefs. In “testing” the statement over the past year, we did not seek consensus on each word; rather we hoped that the ideas and values shared in the statement would “ring true.” I am pleased to share our Statement of Beliefs, approved by the Board of Trustees on May 17, 2017:
Statement of Beliefs

We believe that we are at our best when all members of the school community conduct themselves with respect, kindness, and integrity.

We believe that the traditions and values of this old but not old-fashioned school can inspire boys to develop their individual capacities for personal and academic excellence.

We believe that boys learn best when they are members of a diverse and just community that fosters purposeful and spirited engagement, inquiry, and collaboration in academics, athletics, and the arts.

We believe that a liberal arts education committed to diligent and discerning scholarship prepares students to be citizens who act with conscience, courage, and compassion.
Choosing the “right” 106 words was subject to extensive discussion, debate, and sometimes-agonizing contemplation. The convictions and aspirations expressed in the Statement of Beliefs reflect what many in the community have experienced—but I recognize and respect the inherent variability of how individuals experience the school. Writing, speaking, and even preaching about our beliefs are merely a start. The work of living the Statement of Beliefs requires scrupulous attention and honest reflection. More to the point, the words must lead to deeds, to concrete actions.

The Statement of Beliefs serves not only as a guide for our day-to-day efforts; it is a template to help us identify and set our priorities and the necessary planning to achieve our goals. In this introductory letter, I will consider highlighted phrases from each section to begin our conversation and reflection about the Statement.

We believe that we are at our best when all members of the school community conduct themselves with respect, kindness, and integrity.

Expectations for how we will treat one another are set forth in the first section of the Statement. Since my initial introduction to Collegiate, it was clear then as it is now that the idea of respect is fundamental to the community’s sense of self. Students consistently refer to respect as critical or foundational in defining relationships throughout the school. Most fundamentally, respect is how we demonstrate to others that we value each person’s uniqueness—and honor it. When we are at our best, we focus on the strengths of others, on their admirable traits. A community committed to respectful relationships means being generous in efforts to engage with members of the community. Respect demonstrates that we care.

In an academic community, respect also means that while there will be different points of view, civility must prevail. Disagreements should not undermine being a community of respect, particularly in instances where there are sharp differences of opinion.

Kindness is our capacity for personal generosity and friendliness. As I shared last year, kind people are “day-makers” in the lives of others, providing them moments of uplift or encouragement. In some instances, we manifest kindness by being polite with simple gestures of common courtesy. In others, we may take significant actions to assist friends or colleagues. At its root, kindness means that we actively support and affirm people—we aim to be gracious in our
interactions with others. I return to Louis Untermeyer’s poem, “A Man,” and his vivid language in describing kindness:

I thought of you,
Your gentle soul,
Your large and quiet kindness;
Ready to caution and console,
And, with an almost blindness
To what was mean and low.
Baseness you never knew:

Your sweetness was your strength, your strength a sweetness
That drew all men, and made reluctant hands
Rest long upon your shoulder

Untermeyer’s brilliant line captures kindness beautifully: “Your sweetness was your strength, your strength a sweetness.”

Finally, integrity provides the basis for being a community of trust. In his book Integrity, Professor Stephen Carter explains the conditions required for integrity: “(1) discerning what is right and what is wrong; (2) acting on what you have discerned, even at personal cost; and (3) saying openly that you are acting on your understanding of right from wrong.” Carter asserts, then, that a person of integrity must be reflective by thinking deeply about a matter, and acting on what he determines to be the ethical or moral choice given personal and community standards. Carter continues: “The life lived with integrity is a life of striving toward the good and true.” I would add that a life of integrity is one of consistency and reliability.

We face myriad choices each day that have moral dimensions and consequences: choices about friendships, decisions about how we treat others, choices about truthfulness, decisions about how we fulfill our daily obligations at school and at home, and choices about what it means to be a part of group or
team. These moments—and others—are all testing grounds for our integrity. We become trustworthy by being trustworthy—deeds matter, not simply words.

One of the more significant obstacles to achieving ethical constancy is often associated with peer relations. Peer pressure is a legitimate phenomenon and is often invoked as a reason for behavior that is disrespectful or dishonest. Seeking approval and acceptance from peers can lead to acting in ways contrary to family and school values. Joining in a group conversation that is hurtful to a classmate is wrong. There is not a student at Collegiate who is confused about what constitutes hurtful and disrespectful behavior to others, and to participate in such conversations because of the group’s pressure is a moment that requires the courage not only to step away, but to act to end such behavior. Cheating to gain an academic advantage is wrong and has no place at the school. My colleagues and I have heard the full range of rationales for academic dishonesty, and I can say with absolute certainty, there is always an alternative—always! Those alternatives are, however, not without consequences such as a potentially lower grade.

In this regard, I concur with Aristotle’s view that virtue is developed like other skills and habits: “Men become builders by building houses and harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, we become just by the practice of just actions, self-controlled by exercising self-control, and courageous by performing acts of courage.” Resisting joining a group that is cruel to a classmate and the lure of cheating requires us to be morally courageous; it means that we must be prepared, as the West Point Cadet prayer says, “. . . to choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong.” We are all fallible, yet when mistakes happen most people admit to knowing the right thing but fail to act on that knowledge. Perhaps we avoid doing the right thing because to do so might be, as Carter noted, “personally costly.” The test of our integrity is that we are capable of doing the right thing when it is not easy, when the circumstances are difficult, and when the consequences could be personally costly—loss of friends or a poor grade.

Failure to act with integrity, regardless of the pressures, is not only personally damaging. Such choices undermine our sense of community by eroding trust. To be a community of trust we must count on each other to do the right thing, to act with integrity. Trust is the glue that holds our community together. Scholar Francis Fukuyama explains: “Trust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms on the part of members of the community.”
We believe that the **traditions and values** of this old but not old-fashioned school can inspire boys to develop their individual capacities for personal and academic excellence.

The school's history is omnipresent but not stifling. As many have observed, we are proud and respectful of our history but we “wear it lightly.” Ritual events from convocations to moving-up ceremonies to Friday night basketball games are bonds that transcend any given year or even decade. Broader values associated with the centrality of the intellectual life of students, expectations of faculty, and collaboration among students link generations of students and faculty.

We are an academically serious and engaged school with ambitious and committed students and passionate, dedicated, and curious teachers. There is, though, an air of “relaxed intensity” in the school in which humor and wide-ranging conversation are often the order of the day. Supportive partnerships between students and faculty as well as meaningful and appropriate collaboration among students characterize the school’s culture when we are at our best. In that regard, students recognize that the vigorous pursuit of their goals does not need to come at the expense of their deep and consequential relationships with classmates. Their eager pursuit of excellence extends beyond the classroom to the varied activities they participate in ranging from student publications to drama to athletics to debate to science Olympiad. Their care and concern for their school is palpable and inspiring.

We believe that boys learn best when they are members of a **diverse and just community** that fosters purposeful and spirited engagement, inquiry, and collaboration in academics, athletics, and the arts.

A goal of the school, upon its founding, was to serve children regardless of their means. That commitment has been a constant. New York City draws individuals from across the nation and world who seek its myriad opportunities, and the school aims to enroll students who represent the broadest possible cross-section of backgrounds from throughout the metropolitan area. We aim to be an inclusive community. To that end, we shall continue to be determined in our efforts to seek students of promise from the widest range of backgrounds: racial, ethnic, geographic, and socio-economic. Our striving for excellence requires that we are a diverse, inclusive, and just community. In our commitment
to being a just community, we shall seek to be fair in how we treat each other and, in particular, in providing access to, and concrete support, for the school’s programs.

We believe that a liberal arts education committed to diligent and discerning scholarship prepares students to be citizens who act with conscience, courage, and compassion.

In my time at the school, the norm for student engagement in classes, at all levels, is of energetic and passionate involvement. It is evident to me—and to my colleagues—that the boys care deeply about their academic responsibilities. They are eager to learn, to know, and to understand. There are, of course, moments where their concerns about the assessment of their work—as opposed to the process—are at the forefront, but even with that, classrooms here, when we are at our best, sparkle with joyous intensity and passion. Students are motivated to work hard by not only their curiosity and ambition but by their teachers whose passion engages them in their classes.

A benefit of their hard work is that the boys become discerning students. Their opinions emanate from their knowledge, understanding, and mastery of the material. Their insights are often the result of connecting ideas from different disciplines. We hope that boys will also gain insight about how they learn and, as a result, become more effective and efficient in their scholarship.

The Statement of Beliefs in its entirety represents inspiring and important principles but I understand that all of us will sometimes fall short of living up to them. With that noted, these beliefs ought to be at the center of what we do every single day. Our actions breathe life into the Beliefs and convert them from mere words into concrete actions. May the following quote from Emerson be a succinct reminder: “What we are speaks louder than what we say.”

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Last summer I wrote about democracy and politics, attempting to provide some context for the election. I have returned to the books I summarized in that letter many times over the last year. As James Kloppenberg wrote: “In a democracy, provisional truths emerge from the process of free inquiry, from the
verification of truth claims in experience, and from democratic deliberation understood as the means of provisionally resolving remaining disputes. The English verb ‘deliberate’ derives from the Latin deliberare, meaning to weigh well, to consider; that activity lies at the heart of a democratic culture.” Independent of party or policy, may our representatives in Washington be guided by our nation’s bedrock shared principles.

It seems out of place to babble on about the Red Sox or Jordan Spieth but to say that in those stories are lessons about leadership and resilience. My team, the Red Sox, seems to be suffering from an absence of leadership owing to the retirement of David Ortiz. Watching 23-year-old Jordan Spieth at the Open Championship overcome his uncharacteristic poor play in the opening holes of the last round was an extraordinary lesson in resilience and focus.

We will communicate regularly during the fall on the status of 301 Freedom Place South. The site is humming with activity, with over 200 tradespeople on the site every day. Our goal remains unchanged: faculty and staff set up from January 8 to 10, orientations on January 11, and the first day of classes on January 12. We will work closely with the PA to assist us in providing accurate and timely information through email and our website. My colleagues and I will do our best to anticipate and respond to the full range of needs of the community in the coming year.

Have a wonderful August!

Warmest regards,

Lee M. Levison

Enclosures:
2016-17 Calendar
Bios of New Faculty/Staff
Welcome to Collegiate Connect
Collegiate Connect Login Instructions
Parents’ Association Safety Patrol Letter
Safety Patrol Instructions
PA Bookmark
PA Important Dates List/Bargains for Boys Flyer
A Parent’s Guide, Community of Concern