

2007 AAUW North Carolina Convention: Keynote – April 21, 2007

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Honoring Our Legacy. Embracing Our Future.

As AAUW observes its 125th anniversary this year, branches and members throughout the country have celebrated in style, with commemorative events from parties and plays to teas and tributes, proclamations and speeches, quilt displays and reenactments. At the national office, AAUW marked the event with a museum exhibit at the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. Media coverage of the anniversary has been exceptional. AAUW and its branches have been featured in more than 50 newspapers and magazines across the country, with a total estimated readership of more than 2.6 million people.

So, as you can imagine, the story of our founding mothers has traveled far and wide during this anniversary year. As members, we know that AAUW's history is a proud one. We know that Marion Talbot and her colleagues in Boston banded together with the lofty goal of opening the doors of higher education to other women.

What you might not realize, however, is that these 17 founding mothers were not simply a bunch of well-heeled women with an interesting new idea. They were revolutionaries who not only defied convention by going to college but who also had the nerve to believe that they could put their degrees to use. They could have locked themselves away in their safe, comfortable homes but no--they were fighters. They strategized, organized, and improvised and sought out collaborators and allies wherever they could.

We know many things about these 17 founding women, but we don't know exactly what they imagined for the future of the organization they were bringing to life. But they had the courage to believe that through **personal involvement** they held the keys to a better future for women by utilizing their college degrees.

Think about AAUW as you know it to be today, its myriad programs and activities, issues and projects. Look around you at this convention here today, and think about AAUW membership nationwide. Now imagine the scene at Marion Talbot's home on Nov. 28, 1881. Revolutionary thinkers that they were, could those women even begin to imagine what we have become?

With the long view of history behind us, we now know some of the results of that first meeting.

Many of us in this room are longtime members of AAUW, and many of us have participated in some of AAUW's historic advocacy efforts. None of us here were present at Marion Talbot's revolutionary meeting in 1881, and none of us were

around to witness our history unfolding in the early years of our association when, in 1888 the first AAUW fellowship was awarded for graduate study at the University of Michigan.

If you had been a member—around the turn of the previous century, when we were still known as the Association of Collegiate Alumnae—you probably would have worked to promote child labor laws, compulsory public education, the establishment of juvenile courts, the abolition of child labor, and funding for public schools and libraries. Perhaps you would have picketed outside the White House with other women—the first political protesters to stand vigil in that location—to protest the fact that women were not allowed to vote. No doubt you would have celebrated with them when the 19th Amendment passed and women finally got the vote in 1920. There was no locking the doors in the lives of these women—their activism became the key to the future of women through **advocacy**.

Perhaps you would have joined that burgeoning and vital new organization known as AAUW in the 1920s or 1930s. If so, you would probably recall the 1926 landmark study by the Committee on the Economic and Legal Status of Women, AAUW's first shot over the bow in the fight for equal pay. The committee called for a reclassification of the U.S. Civil Service and a repeal of salary restrictions in the Women's Bureau. And, of course, you would remember the economic and social programs targeted to provide relief during the difficult years of the Great Depression, and our ardent support of efforts to legalize the dispensation of contraceptive information. Your efforts would have been a key to the future of AAUW working toward **equity**.

If you had been a member during the Second World War, you probably would have contributed to the Refugee Aid Fund we established to assist university women fleeing European dictatorships. You might have been on the front lines with AAUW members who were calling for the establishment of women's units in the armed services, with equal pay and rank for women. Later, you may have been one of AAUW's influential advocates for the United Nations. Along with other AAUW members, perhaps you would have been instrumental in the passage of the Marshall Plan, and you and your branch certainly helped gather the more than 9,700 pounds of school supplies that AAUW donated to war-torn nations. You would have been part of AAUW unlocking doors to helping women and children in other parts of the world.

If you had become a member in the 1950s, you no doubt would remember AAUW's "Communist Threat Statement," which analyzed the Communist threat to freedom and democracy while warning of the risk of losing liberties by the same means adopted to defend them. You might also recall our support of the first federal legislative proposal for pay equity in 1955, a year when a woman working full-time, year-round made about 65 cents for every dollar earned by a man. It was in 1958 that the Educational Foundation was created as a new

nonprofit corporation for the purpose of raising funds for fellowship programs. This would be the key that opened the door to **lifelong learning** for women.

For women who became AAUW members in the 1960s, it was a time of great civic upheaval. We remember first-hand the fight for passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. We remember, too, the riots that erupted in Washington, D.C., Chicago, and elsewhere around the country in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, as well as AAUW's subsequent campaign entitled Action for a Unified Society.

The 60's were only the beginning of the doors opening in the realm of **public policy**. Many of us here joined AAUW in the 1970s, when the fight for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment became our top priority. We vowed to hold national meetings only in states that had ratified the amendment, and delegates at those meetings also voted to support reproductive rights, withdrawal from the Vietnam War, abolition of the death penalty, the admission of China to the United Nations, and improved conditions for migrant farm workers. In 1973, we were instrumental in the passage of Title IX, the law co-authored by AAUW member Rep. Patsy Mink that prohibits sex discrimination in schools receiving federal funds. Thirty-five years later, Title IX remains one of the most transformative civil rights laws in the nation. We have only to look at our daughters and granddaughters for proof that girls thrive when given fair opportunities to do so. We had found the key through **public policy**.

If you became an AAUW member in the 1980s, you took pride in the establishment of the Legal Advocacy Fund to support women and men in higher education who seek judicial redress for sex discrimination. You may have worked with other members to use AAUW's first congressional voting record, holding members of Congress accountable for their votes on priority issues important to women. Of course, you remember the vote to extend membership to men holding college degrees, as well as our 100th anniversary celebration. At that age, we were 190,000 members and 1,935 branches strong.

If you joined us in the 1990s or after the turn of the most recent century, it won't take much to jog your memory: *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, the Family and Medical Leave Act, the AAUW Voter Education Campaign, the 1995 launch of our first website, the Sister-to-Sister Summit, the 21st-Century Recognition Program, the first National Conference for College Women Student Leaders, *Hostile Hallways*, Title IX revisited, *Tech Savvy*, the "Because Equity Is Still an Issue" campaign, the creation of the Leadership and Training Institute, and the expansion of membership to include graduates holding an associate's or equivalent degree.

Could Marion Talbot and our other founding leaders have imagined that all these accomplishments would follow from that one gathering in 1881? Not likely. But while those women could not have envisioned the many projects and campaigns

we have pursued through the years, they would certainly recognize the spirit of those pursuits.

As we honor our past and look forward to our future, we must consider where we stand today. What is our place in today's world? Are our ideas still relevant? What still needs to be accomplished?

Perhaps, as some people believe, our work is done.

Some people say there's no need to continue to promote higher education for women. After all, women have outnumbered men in postsecondary enrollment for more than a decade, and more women than men stay in school and complete their degrees.

Some people say that we've gone too far, that our focus on education for girls and women has resulted in a "boy crisis." They say that we are heaping privilege on our daughters while neglecting our sons.

Some people say that women's entry into high-ranking government and corporate positions shows that equity is no longer an issue. We've had two women become secretary of state. We have a woman speaker of the House. Another woman is running for president, and still others are running Fortune 500 companies or taking on prominent roles in the media.

Some people argue that the wage gap between men and women is a figment of our imagination. Any disparities that do exist, they claim, are the result of women's free will, our "lifestyle choices," rather than employers' discrimination against women.

Some people even say there's no reason to continue Title IX, since the law is both outdated and unnecessary. As columnist John Tierney wrote in the *New York Times*, women don't need sports as much as men do, and no one goes to women's sporting events anyway. In fact, "both sexes," he says, "would still rather watch men play."

Some people would probably prefer we go back to our safe homes, lock the doors and throw away the keys...well, they don't know AAUW!

Every day, newspapers, newscasts, and websites around the country continue to report stories about issues of inequity. You won't always find them on the front pages—which is itself part of the problem—but these stories are still out there because equity is, in fact, still an issue in the everyday lives of women and girls in the United States and abroad. Look carefully, and these are some of the stories you'll find:

- *The Washington Post* reports that the U.S. Department of Labor “has repeatedly found that women earn about 75 cents for every dollar that men earn for the same work.”
- *USA Today*, citing a recent study by the American Psychological Association, reports that the proliferation of sexualized images of girls in the media and in advertising have been found to be harmful to girls’ emotional and physical health.
- The *New York Times*, in an article about the National Assessment of Educational Progress, reports that reading scores for 12th graders in the United States have declined since 1992 and that less than one-quarter of all 12th graders are performing at or above the “proficient” level in math.
- *Newsday*, reporting on a World Economic Forum study on the global gender gap, notes that the United States ranks 17th out of 58 countries in the study because of its failure to have paid childbirth leave, its wage inequalities in the private sector, and the lack of child care.
- Only 7 of the 37 law clerks for the Supreme Court in the 2006–07 term are women, the first time that number has been in the single digits since 1994, even though almost 50 percent of recent law school graduates are women.
- Women earn 48 percent of undergraduate math degrees but represent only 8 percent of tenured or tenure-track math professors.
- Currently, four states have laws or regulations that allow pharmacists to refuse to fill contraception prescriptions because of their personal beliefs. Only five states—California, Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, and Nevada—explicitly require pharmacists or pharmacies to ensure that valid contraception prescriptions are filled.
- Thursday’s Supreme Court decision underlines how quickly a woman’s right to reproductive choice can be eroded.
- There are only 10 female CEOs leading Fortune 500 companies.

And on and on. Is equity still an issue? We believe the facts are irrefutable.

Just as our founding mothers gathered together in Boston to imagine a better future for women, so must we begin to imagine a new future for the organization they created to further that goal. As Catherine the Great said,

“A great wind is blowing, and that gives you either imagination or a headache.”

Let's hope it's giving you imagination! Because I'm going to ask you now to harness your years of experience, to draw on the bounty of your education, and especially to unleash your creativity as we work together to imagine a new AAUW.

What does the AAUW of tomorrow look like? Imagine, if you will, a time in the not-too-distant future, perhaps a few years from today. The possibilities are limitless...

- Imagine an AAUW that is 200,000 members strong—and growing! Our newly revitalized organization is recognized throughout the nation as the preeminent source for cutting-edge ideas and insight on all issues pertaining to women and girls.
- Imagine an AAUW whose diverse and vibrant membership reflects the diversity of the world around us. The dynamic new perspectives and programs these members contribute have led us into uncharted territory, but the excitement and leadership opportunities we've built along the way have been tremendous.
- Imagine a multigenerational AAUW. Imagine receiving a phone call from your daughter, saying, "Hey Mom, let's drive to our next AAUW meeting together." Imagine similar phone calls from your granddaughter and her friends or from that young neighbor next door.
- Imagine an AAUW that has enthusiastically pursued and graciously maintained deep and lasting partnerships with many other like-minded organizations. Now imagine—or simply remember—a crisis that threatens the well-being of women throughout the country. In a flash, AAUW and its partners mobilize members and resources to speak out, educate, inform, and bring about change. Together, we are a mighty army, and we are unstoppable!
- Imagine an AAUW whose vibrant online community engages and connects women across the country. These members check in every day to network, organize, chat, and get the latest information on issues of importance in their lives.
- Imagine an AAUW that reaches out to young women. Recent graduates count on us to provide up-to-date information on pay equity, workplace issues, career counseling, and graduate scholarships. They sign up for our professional career mentoring program in droves! Later, they become mentors themselves.
- Imagine an AAUW that reaches out to mothers. AAUW helps make these women's complex lives easier, by promoting high-quality and affordable child

care, paid sick leave, work-life balance initiatives, Social Security credits for stay-at-home parents, and mother-to-mother networking opportunities.

- Imagine an AAUW whose groundbreaking research reports on issues affecting women's lives are read and discussed around the country. Our reputation for exceptional scholarship and integrity, known throughout the government and the media, encourages leaders to seek us out for comment on all issues pertaining to women. The secret to our success is our highly developed network of members nationwide, who provide key insights into the lives and needs of the women they serve through local program initiatives.
- Imagine an AAUW whose national convention attracts thousands of attendees each year. Always festive, thoughtful, exciting, and intellectually rigorous, these exhilarating events have enhanced AAUW's reputation as the ultimate source for innovative ideas about women's lives. In recent years, both Oprah and Katie Couric have asked to be our featured speakers.

These are just a few of the possible futures that AAUW members may choose to embrace. As we consider specific options in the months ahead, keep in mind that we'll need patience and good will, as well as a willingness to see the larger view. What future do you imagine?

Do we believe we are powerful and have the potential to continue to change our world? Like those 17 forward-thinking women in Boston, I believe that we are and that we do.

We've been doing a lot of imagining here today, but as the essayist, journalist, and award-winning author Barbara Grizzuti Harrison reminds us,

"Fantasies are more than substitutes for unpleasant reality; they are also dress rehearsals, plans. All acts performed in the world begin in the imagination."

So there's one last point I'd like to make about imagining. Marion Talbot and our other founding mothers were revolutionary thinkers, activists with their hearts in the right places. To combat the unpleasant realities of their day, they imagined many worthy projects for their fledgling organization, some of which came to fruition and others that failed. That's correct—they didn't get everything quite right.

For example, they imagined that if women could get an education, it would change the world, and women would finally achieve equity. That isn't quite the way it happened. Education has gotten us part of the way, but true economic security and equality of opportunity are still just out of reach. We have made great strides since 1881, but we still have work to do.

Perhaps you are thinking, "What can I do to help?"

You've come to the right place! For starters, you can help move AAUW toward a more viable future by supporting the proposed bylaws changes and amendments that we'll be voting on at the convention in June.

These proposals, which are designed to streamline our organizational structure, will help us implement other changes more quickly and efficiently. They also provide for a smooth transition among boards and programs as we move through this transformative time, and they allow for enhanced member participation and voting between conventions.

You can research the proposed structural changes for yourself by visiting the Strategic Process section of the AAUW webpage. Then, become an advocate for the vote to reenergize and refocus AAUW. Most important of all, attend the convention in June and vote on the proposals!

These are the vital first steps. Once the structural changes are in place, we can begin to make the AAUW we've been imagining a reality.

Like those 17 women in Boston, we can't foresee the future. We can't know which of our endeavors will succeed or fail. But we must not let fear of failure become a failure of the imagination. We must dare to dream big dreams and invent our own future. As Oprah Winfrey says, "We can't become what we need to be by remaining what we are."

We've all heard the saying that "a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step." Now is the time for us to begin to take the steps that will lead us toward the vital AAUW that is within our imaginations. Like those women in Boston, we are at a critical point of action. We are on the edge between one era and the start of the next. Together, let us use our imaginations to find our way to a new beginning for this historic organization.

Like the 17 young women who dared to unlock the doors of their homes and of their lives, to start an organization with the goal of opening the doors of higher education to other women, you have an opportunity to continue the legacy of AAUW. You hold the keys to AAUW's future.

Thank you.