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Welcome to the College of Saint Benedict. This is kind of a weird moment. Here I am, dressed up like Grimace from McDonalds, and you haven't even been to class yet. You don't even really know who I am.

I am Christi Siver, a girl born in San Antonio Texas, went to school in Portland, Oregon, Washington, DC, and Seattle, Washington. I competed in competitive debate for eight years and coached debate for over 10 years. I love the Seattle Seahawks and cats. By chance and by drive, I became a college professor and ended up in the middle of Minnesota.

I am honored to have received the Sister Mary Grell Award. I truly believe I have the best job in the world and, as this award testifies, I'm pretty good at it. I want to share a little bit of my journey with you today in hopes that it might help you as you navigate the unfamiliar world of college.

One of the most defining aspects of who I am is my history as a debater. When I was a first year student in high school, I wanted to be an actor and join the cast of Saturday Night Live. Imagine my distress to learn that I actually wasn't all that funny. But, my theatre teacher suggested I try debate, and I jumped in to my first debate tournament with no instruction. Now I can cringe at some of the arguments I made back then, but it was almost immediately obvious that debate was an activity that helped me find my voice.

Something you should know about debaters is that we are ridiculously structured. So, I have three main points I want to persuade you of today. First, find and appreciate good mentors – they come in all forms, colors, and sizes. Second, fly your nerd-flag rather than trying to hide it. And three, when you succeed, embrace it rather than diminishing it.

First, find and appreciate good mentors. From my junior high English teacher to my colleague Kay Wolsborn who hired me in the political science department, I have been blessed with excellent mentors. Three of the most influential mentors in my life were my favorite professors in college. Mine Eder, a professor of international relations, had a passion for political economy that often resulted in bursts of exuberation during class discussions. She once was discussing monetary policy, something that might put most normal people to sleep, but then worked herself up to a crescendo discussing the Triffin Paradox. Paula Lytle, one of my comparative politics professors, introduced me to the conflict in Bosnia and the complexity of the region, which planted a seed that I've now had the privilege of cultivating through two trips to the region. Finally, Chiu Mi Lai patiently guided me through learning Chinese and coming to a greater appreciation of the language and culture. She also supported me through writing my honors thesis, during which I had numerous setbacks and challenges. I hope someday all of you will remember your female professors so fondly.

I also have the privilege of working with the Womens Debate Institute, a national debate camp for high school women. Girls come from all over the country to develop their debate skills and become part of a supportive community of women in a male-dominated activity. Many of the girls come from Boston, Chicago, Detroit, and the Bay Area, and have few resources. But, they find their voice, and their strength, in debate. Despite their economic challenges, lack of understanding from parents and friends, and lack of experience, these girls are excited to participate in debate and learn from other women who share their passion. The dirty little secret is that all of us, including the older women for whom competing in debate is little more than a distant memory, enjoy coming to the WDI and feeding off the energy and support of this growing community. Learn to seek out new communities and gain multiple sources of support.

Second, fly your nerd-flag. In my Introduction to International Relations courses, I often see young women who I suspect have something to say, but hold back. When I ask them why they are reluctant to speak, they express a fear of being wrong. I have to tell you, your male colleagues often do not share this reluctance. College is a place to take risks and to continue to find your voice. I think my experiences in debate helped me confront this reluctance because once your time comes to speak, you have no choice but to get up and do your best with what you understand. While I don't necessarily encourage you to dominate all class discussions or shout down your colleagues, remember that your perspective has value and should be a part of any discussion. Don't be afraid to be the smartest person in the room!

Now I'm going to address something that I have recently been more conscious about, owning your success. This last year, in December, I was notified that I had been nominated for the Grell award. I was a bit surprised, and flattered, since I thought someone would have to be teaching for many years to earn such an honor. I was flustered with grading and planning, but my friend, Sheila, and my colleagues helped me assemble the needed information to compete for the award. Honestly, I was pleased with the file and the kind things that people had said about me, but I did not expect to win. So, when I found out I won, I was pretty surprised.

Here's where I want to be a little critical of myself, and in general about how women accept praise for their accomplishments. I work really hard to be a good teacher. I think a lot about what I assign, how I structure classes, and how I evaluate students. I put a lot of time in grading, caring more about constructive feedback than simply assigning a letter grade. But in accepting the numerous congratulations from friends and colleagues, I played down my success. I said I was shocked, when really, I shouldn't have been. I know I was in excellent company with the other nominees for the

award. But I participated in the effort to make the argument that I should win it. I was uncomfortable in receiving this award in a way that a male professor might not have been.

And, lucky for me, the award coincided pretty closely with the Seattle Seahawks winning the Super Bowl. And Russell Wilson, the unlikely young quarter back – considered too small by scouts and taken late in the draft, recounted his father’s words to him as he pursued his passion for football. He said “Why not me?” So, I pretty much adopted that as my mantra.

I know for many of you this is an emotional time, when your parents have told you how much they love you and how special you are, and probably all of your high school teachers thought you were angels. But, whether in FYS, Intro to Bio, or Intro to IR (there are still openings in my class!) you are going to run into a problem. Don’t let obstacles or challenges derail you from your goals. Let setbacks be opportunities for learning rather than discouragement.

I’ll finish this speech and then go on to teach three more classes today. Rather than slacking off because my awesomeness has been recognized, I plan to continue to live up to this new awesomeness standard. Don’t be afraid to struggle, plant that nerd flag without fear and without knowledge that your answer is right before you say it and don’t be afraid to say you’re awesome when you are. (And tell your roommate, little sister, and lab partner the same.) And when that hand is outstretched to you, with guidance or support, whether from professor, staff or friend, accept and embrace it because that amazing mentor that changes your life might be on the other side.

At the end of the day, I have a neat plaque (You can come see it in my office). But, a friend shared a quote with me that better captures what motivates me every day - "I hope that my achievements in life shall be these - that I will have fought for what was right and fair, that I will

have risked for that which mattered, and that I will have given help to those who were in need and that I will have left the earth a better place for what I've done and who I've been."

Be on time for class, read the syllabus, participate in class discussions, and have a great first year at the College of Saint Benedict.