

*Women and Gender Studies Commencement  
Remarks  
May 15, 2009*

It's a truly a privilege to be here today.

Though I have only been a part of the Brandeis community for 2 years, I have had the good fortune to know some of you – and to see for myself what remarkable human beings, students, activists, and scholars you are. I have no doubt that during your time on this campus, Brandeis and in particular, the Women and Gender Studies Program - have enriched you – and that you have enriched Brandeis and this wonderful program. Thank you for that – and congratulations.

And welcome and congratulations to the families and friends of the graduates. This is undoubtedly a proud moment for you....

Graduating from college is when you suddenly lose the road map that guided you from kindergarten to graduation day. Suddenly you're not sure what will happen "tomorrow" ... or next year. That is both a wondrous and terrifying realization... and it's probably one that is hitting you right about now.

So the big question is: what will guide you as move forward...?

I'd like to make a suggestion: look for role models.

In my own experience, I found it helpful to look around and find those people who were doing work that I admired, and whose life choices fit with my own priorities.

In college, I admired greatly a professor who was a wonderful mentor to me. It was only when I reached graduate school that I realized he was one of the most prolific and important scholars in political behavior research. At the time, I admired his kind nature and the patient wisdom he offered me as I tackled the monstrosity that was my honors thesis. Now I have come to admire his humility as well.

While working in the Senate after college, I admittedly encountered *some* people who I knew were not the right role models for me, despite their many successes. But I did work with *many* Senators, staffers and advocates whose visions I found inspiring and worth ethic admirable. I met people who brought such passion to their work, that I found myself hoping that someday I would have the same sense of purpose in my own profession.

And finally, when I was in graduate school, I found and then lost a great role model; a person whose mind, life choices, and actions I found inspiring.

Judy Gruber was a professor of Political Science at Berkeley. She happened to be a dear old friend of my college advisor... who I just mentioned... but was also assigned by the department to be my first year advisor. When we first met, I found her a bit intimidating. She was *very* smart, critical, and straightforward. These characteristics were seen more

acutely in the classroom. When I took courses with her, my papers would have detailed, sometimes slightly stinging remarks that drove right to the heart of what needed to be fixed in my writing and argument. She would preface her summary remarks with statements like “I fear you may find this harsh and discouraging, but ....” She would then launch into a full assault. Judy made people sweat, work harder, and ultimately grow.

As no-nonsense as she was, Judy was also incredibly warm and generous. She opened every class by updating us on her older son’s exciting 7<sup>th</sup> grade soccer season... or by telling about her younger son’s drama club performance that was the night before. She told us stories of old friends, family vacations, her overbearing parents, mishaps from her early days of professorhood, and her efforts to push the university administration toward a better family leave policy.

And through this, Judy Gruber became more than just a brilliant person and tough critic to me. She became a person.

She was both a tough mind and a warm heart.

And to me, this was invaluable. To see a professor who, as I saw it, balanced work and family, criticism and kindness, scholarship with teaching with committee work with political action was what I needed as I made my way through the trials and travails of doctoral work.

Sadly, Judy died from a brain tumor in the spring of 2005. Her death made the scholarly and personal guidance she offered to my peers and me all the more precious. To this day, many of my friends and I - who are new professors - will discuss “what Judy would say” about a problem with our own research, or how to appropriately advise a graduate student or an honors thesis writer. In that way, she remains a great mentor to me still.

You too will find your role models and mentors along the way. You will find people whose character, career paths, and charisma inspire you. Pay attention to them. Learn from them. You don’t need to emulate these people or sit at their knee, but take note of what it is about them you admire and let that guide you later in life.

*Also keep in mind that like it or not, you will be roles models to others.*

And for the women in the room, this role is even more important because of your potential impact on other women and girls.

Social science confirms what many of us think is true: having female role models for girls and young women can be critical to their own professional development and aspirations.

In education, having female professors – particularly in traditionally underrepresented disciplines such as math and geology – can positively impact female students’ decisions to study that discipline.

When making decisions about what careers to pursue, researchers have shown that female role models are particularly important for women who want to pursue nontraditional careers.

And from my own discipline, political science, we know that there is a role model effect when women are elected to public office.

When female political candidates for high-profile offices are visible through the media, girls report increased anticipated political involvement. This is because these female candidates generate conversation in the home that engages young girls – it draws them into the political world in a way that unfortunately does not usually happen – and it allows them to think about their own future role as politically engaged citizens.

This phenomenon is not limited to the American case. Where there are more female members of parliament, adolescent girls *and* grown women are more likely to discuss politics with others and express intention to participate in politics.

In this way, visible female candidates draw female citizens more deeply into the democratic process.

Why does this matter?

It matters because women are drastically underrepresented in our democratic institutions here in the US. Though we vote in greater numbers than do men, women rarely exceed 30% of a state legislative body, make up only 17% of Congress, and have only recently become more visible political players on the national scene in positions such as Speaker of the House, and high level cabinet positions. And only very recently have we seen both of the major political parties seriously consider female candidates for the presidential tickets.

The reality is that women have lower levels of political ambition than do men. Some of this is due to the continual struggle that women face in balancing professional and familial expectations; this makes running for office more challenging for women than men, it also means that fewer women make it to the highest tier of their professions – and these tiers are where political parties go shopping for potential candidates.

In a recent book, political scientists Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox, found that much of this gender gap in ambition is due to the psychological obstacles that are erected in the minds of women. Women consistently say that they are less qualified to run for office than men who have equivalent or lesser qualification. Women are also less likely to be encouraged to run for office by their family, friends, spouses, and party activists than are men.

And if you think these findings are based on an older generation of women who were raised in a different time, and thus reflect “old patterns” -- Lawless and Fox found that the gender gap in ambition is largest among respondents under the age of forty.

So what does this all mean for you, sitting here today... about to graduate and move on into the real world?

There are two points I want to drive home:

First, look around you as you move forward to new experiences and learn from the men and women around you whom you admire. Listen to their stories, reflect on their decisions, talk to them about your own challenges and choices. Your path will be your own... and it should be... but don't underestimate your own need for inspiration, and the value of having a good example as you work toward your own goals.

Second, know that you are being watched. Young people – some of whom you may never meet – will be looking to you to find inspiration. And for the female graduates, your power as a role model is magnified by the fact that you are women and can have a disproportionate effect on the perceptions that young women have of *their own* futures.

Maybe you'll run for political office – maybe the next Nancy Pelosi, Hillary Clinton, or Olympia Snowe is sitting in this room. Or maybe you'll become a federal judge, a social activist, an educator, an artist, an engineer... regardless of what you pursue, you leave this great university and magnificent program prepared to carve your own path.

And you also know, that the path you carve for yourself will undoubtedly ripple out and affect the lives of others.

Thank you – and congratulations on your tremendous achievements!!!