On Campus

Barnard, this is the White House Calling

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Barack Obama '83CC addresses Fortune magazine's Most Powerful Women Summit in Washington, DC, in 2010. (Jemal Countess / Getty Images)

Barnard College has nabbed some impressive Commencement speakers in recent years, including Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Meryl Streep, New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, and Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook. For the Class of 2012, Barnard lined up another inspiring keynoter: Jill Abramson, the executive editor of the *New York Times*.

Then the call came in. On a Wednesday afternoon in late February, a White House official telephoned Barnard president Debora Spar's office to inquire if the women's college would like to host the president of the United States.

"I said, 'Well yes, we certainly would,'" says Spar. "I thought Jill Abramson would understand. And, as it turned out, she was entirely gracious. She said she'd be pleased to speak another time."

President Barack Obama '83CC will address Barnard's six hundred graduating seniors on Monday, May 14, at 12:30 p.m., on Columbia's South Lawn. The ceremony, at which Obama will receive the college's highest honor, the Barnard Medal of Distinction, will be broadcast on www.barnard.edu.

According to Spar, Barnard students have taken a keen interest in the Obama administration's recent political battles over reproductive rights. These include its hard-won fight for the inclusion of mandatory contraception coverage in the Affordable Care Act but also its acquiescence to GOP pressure to restrict federal funding for abortions under the same act.

"I think Barnard women know the president is personally committed to women's empowerment," Spar says. "At the same time, he's operating in a political environment where some of the reproductive rights that women won forty years ago are suddenly under threat. For many of our students, this has prompted something of a political awakening. I'm sure the president's speech is one they won't forget."



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