Dear Members of the Westminster Community,

Armour Academic Center opened in the fall of 2009, immediately transforming the setting for teaching and learning at Westminster School. Suddenly, Westminster boasted a state-of-the-art classroom building, which enhanced the academic experience of our students and wowed campus visitors. Ten years later, our students continue to relish the spaces in this beautiful facility, and alumni, such as my two daughters, who graduated in 2006 and 2009, remark with regret that their classes were not in this building. Actually, the same is true for me, in that I taught history classes in Baxter Academic Center for 25 years, but was no longer teaching in the fall of 2009. I envy my faculty colleagues who now teach in such an inspiring setting.

Why is Armour Academic Center such an important milestone in our school’s history? First, the decision to proceed with construction was a huge risk, occurring in the midst of the financial collapse of 2008. Despite the accompanying economic turmoil, trustees remained resolute in their appreciation of the importance of this building for Westminster’s future and, together with Headmaster Graham Cole, proceeded with the bond financing necessary for construction, which today remains about 40% of our debt obligation. That bold decision made an important difference for Westminster, as an affirmation of this school’s promising future. Interest from prospective students and their families surged, and donors rallied enthusiastically to the many additional fundraising priorities which followed.

Importantly, the origins of the planning for this building extend to the 1980s, when our campus master planner and architect, Graham Gund ‘59, took on his first Westminster School commission with Werner Centennial Center. Gund’s vision for Williams Hill was remarkably inspired and comprehensive. He imagined not just a new theater, but how that new theater would best fit into a campus master plan which accounted for existing and future buildings. As he explains it, when he first became involved with discussions about a theater, (At the time, Dramat performances occurred on platforms in Pettee Gymnasium.) the concept was for a new theater to be located on Commencement Lawn, a proposal he challenged. Instead, he presented a vision for a campus master plan which included Werner Centennial Center in its current location as well as many other new facilities, such as dormitories, a dining hall, athletic facilities and a classroom building. The scope of this vision was truly breathtaking, but, thanks to extraordinary support from alumni, parents and friends of the school, here in 2019, a good part of that vision has now been accomplished, and Westminster School continues to flourish as a result.

As an alumnus, Gund appreciated our school’s defining mission, and his vision encompassed how best to foster our community ethos with the beautiful vistas from Williams Hill and Westminster’s predominantly Tudor architectural style. Through the 1990s, Westminster made steady progress on this campus master plan, including the construction of Edge House, the renovation of Memorial Hall, and the building of Sherwin Health and

“The scope of this vision was truly breathtaking, but, thanks to extraordinary support from alumni, parents and friends of the school, here in 2019, a good part of that vision has now been accomplished, and Westminster School continues to flourish as a result.”
Athletic Center, Perkin Driveway and many new playing fields. In addition to these campus improvements, trustees and Headmaster Cole considered a new academic center to be located on what was then the day student parking lot and campus greenhouse, while appreciating that the scope of this project — with respect to square footage and cost — would represent an enormously ambitious undertaking.

A construction team, including architects, construction managers and faculty, (see accompanying photograph of the plaque honoring this group) first studied the viability of renovating Baxter Academic Center. However, the very challenging circumstances that accompanied the renovation of Memorial a decade before raised caution about the impracticality of that route, especially given modern building codes. Upon deciding that building a new academic center was the much-preferred alternative for improving our academic facilities, the committee met weekly through the design, planning, value engineering and construction stages of the project. Trustee Emeritus Joe Gitterman ’55, P’86, ’86, ’90, a devoted member of this team, remained a powerful advocate for a thoughtful planning process as essential to responsible stewardship of our school’s precious resources.

Intentionally, every detail of the new academic center’s design strove to cultivate our distinguishing warm, friendly sense of community. Natural light floods spaces throughout the building, including into the lower level school store through a transparent skylight. A large, central atrium is used for assemblies and receptions. A central library offers magnificent reading rooms — used for meetings, presentations and performances — as well as group and individual student study spaces. Large, technologically equipped classrooms with flexibly arranged study desks allow teachers to configure rooms as best suits their intended lessons. Academic departments have their own offices for meetings, preparing lessons and providing extra help, supplementing the many additional informal meeting spaces that abound.

Even more, at once, the building looks to the future with its LEED certification as environmentally sustainable and honors the past with the photographs of emeritus faculty that line the east atrium wall and first floor hallway.

Armour Academic Center is a jewel atop Williams Hill, not only because of its magnificent architectural design but also because it celebrates our defining community ethos. Tellingly with respect to the quality of the design and construction, one decade later it still seems brand-new. Students and faculty interact with each other formally and informally in its common spaces, sometimes gathering in the atrium for assemblies led by our head prefect. This familiarity cultivates and sustains our core value of community, since we see each other every day on our way to and from classrooms, the library or the school store. Westminster School celebrates many important milestones in its long history, but the opening of Armour Academic Center deserves recognition among the most significant.

William V.N. Philip P’06, ’09
Headmaster