2010 Ellen Browning Scripps Distinguished Alumni Award
Melissa Winter ‘85

“You don’t realize how lucky you are with a Bishop’s education until you leave it,” says Melissa Winter ‘85. “I’m grateful to the teachers for setting me on this path.”

And quite a path it has been. As Michelle Obama’s first hire on the Obama presidential campaign, Melissa has served the First Lady in several different capacities. She currently serves as First Lady Michelle Obama’s Deputy Chief of Staff.

In her years at Bishop’s Melissa, a proud Purple, played basketball, softball, and field hockey, and began to build a base for her path toward the public sector. She remembers courses in American history and government with Dr. Melinda Hennessey and Mrs. Judy Haxo, as well as an art history trip to Europe with Dr. Otto Mower – they opened her eyes. “In Dr. Hennessey’s class, the ongoing assignment was that we had to read the front page of the newspaper every day. She made it your responsibility to know what was going on in the world around you. And because of Dr. Mower and that trip, I went to college with a love of art and a love of language.”

Melissa majored in art history and minored in French at Skidmore College. The summer of her sophomore year, her brother Richard Winter ‘84 planned to do an internship in Washington, DC. At the last minute, Richard received another job offer and turned down his internship to pursue the new opportunity. Melissa stepped in to fill his internship position with the U.S. House of Representatives. “It was the most fun summer. It sparked something in me. Probably if I had done that earlier in my college career, my guess is that I would have been a political science major.” Melissa returned the following summer to work in the same internship and then moved to Washington upon graduation.

Working at the front desk of Rep. Norman Mineta, (D) California, Melissa eventually became his executive assistant. She accompanied Rep. Mineta when he left Congress in 1995 to join the technology company of Lockheed Martin. After one year, she left the company to return to Capitol Hill.

“I came to Washington because I wanted to do something in the public sector, a public service job.”
Melissa worked for one year for Rep. Anna Eshoo, (D) California, and then became the executive assistant for Sen. Joe Lieberman, (D) Connecticut, with whom she stayed for nearly a decade. In early 2007, a friend informed Melissa of a job opportunity in Chicago. Her friend was working for then Illinois senator, Barack Obama. She told Melissa that she thought the senator was going to run for president and that his wife would need a chief of staff. Melissa replied that she had no interest in moving to Chicago and that she loved her job. Her friend persisted, however, and flew Melissa out to Chicago to meet with Michelle Obama. It was an indelible meeting, after which Melissa promptly left her job in Washington and moved to Chicago. The rest is history.

As Mrs. Obama’s Deputy Chief of Staff, Melissa focuses on the operation and administration of Mrs. Obama’s office, while the chief of staff focuses on policy and strategy. She also travels with Mrs. Obama whenever she goes out of the country. In addition to opportunities for travel, she loves observing how the world views this first family. “The president and his family are beloved around the world.” She also enjoys spending time with the Obama children. “They are the most charming, wonderful little girls.”

In her free time, Melissa enjoys reading food magazines and doing crossword puzzles. She loves her life in Washington and lives very much in the present. “I’m really happy doing what I’m doing and I may not want to leave it. I have to do what’s best for me and also what’s best for Mrs. Obama.”

One of Melissa’s favorite aspects of her years at Bishop’s is “the incredible nurturing quality. I think it’s easy while you’re growing up there to take for granted the campus, where it’s located, and what it has to offer. It takes some distance to realize how much the community seeped into you and how it prepared you for your next step.”