

5-20-2007

89th Connecticut College Commencement Class Speaker's Address

Sara Skinner
Connecticut College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/studcommence>

Recommended Citation

Skinner, Sara, "89th Connecticut College Commencement Class Speaker's Address" (2007). *Student Commencement Speeches*. Paper 4.
<http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/studcommence/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College Relations at Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Commencement Speeches by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. For more information, please contact bpancier@conncoll.edu.

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

CLASS SPEAKER'S ADDRESS

Sara Skinner, Class of 2007



Delivered May 20, 2007. Content herein as submitted.

Congratulations! We made it. We're going to graduate. Let me just say that it has been a privilege to spend these last four years living and learning with all of you.

In preparing myself for entering the professional world, I have come to realize what a great advantage I have in seeking employment after receiving a Connecticut College education. Yet in realizing this one particular privilege I have, I need to recognize my other privileges I have that may affect how I am received in the world. I am White. I am upper-class. I am heterosexual. Because of societal norms and structures that value and encourage these identities, I live a privileged life.

I want to talk about this word, "privilege," about what it means to me, for us as graduates, and for the various communities in which we are about to engage. Recently I attended the first annual Keywords Conference, a conference sponsored by the new Center for the Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity, where faculty, staff, and students unpacked various politicized terms, one of which was "privilege." We discussed its definition and the way we see privilege manifested in our college community. We discussed white privilege, male privilege, class privilege, heterosexual privilege, age privilege, and educational privilege. Through our daylong examination of privilege, we all decided that despite, or perhaps because of, our varied experiences at Connecticut College, each of us graduating from this college leaves with a certain amount of privilege. A bachelor's degree from an institution as esteemed as Connecticut College opens many doors for us in our professional lives. Yet like those of us with white privilege like myself, it is now important for all of us as we go beyond this campus and into the world to take a step beyond the acknowledgment of our power. For in realizing our own power and privilege, we must also recognize that there are those who remain disempowered and those who are without privilege.

Privileged people tend to become defensive when discussing privilege. Out of guilt, well-intended frustration, and sometimes indignation we often react to these conversations by saying, "Well what can I do? I was born this way." And in a way, we have a point. We can't change our skin color. We can't change our sex. We can't change our citizenship. And after today, we can't change our educational background. And we don't need to. We can, however, undermine a structure that creates hierarchies of social relations. As we leave this privileged setting to begin our professional lives, we must aim not to encourage privilege but to eliminate it, for in the end privilege always necessitates inequality. This aim seems lofty but it is not impossible, for we have all seen numerous Connecticut College community members make strides in creating spaces to encourage equality on campus and in other communities.

When Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, groups of Connecticut College students traveled to New Orleans for a few weeks to provide relief to those ignored by the federal government. Jake Coffey, a member of this graduating class, traveled to New Orleans for the first time in the spring of his junior year after obtaining a grant to work

on a documentary film project. During the summer he began working for a community-initiated organization called Common Ground, which "provides short-term relief for hurricane survivors in the Gulf Coast region and long-term support in rebuilding communities affected in the New Orleans area." At the end of his summer in New Orleans, Jake decided not to return to school in the fall. When asked by a student why he decided to forego a semester of his senior year, Jake replied, "I'll just say that I felt accountable." Why should Jake feel accountable to the survivors of Hurricane Katrina? After all, most of those affected by the storm were Black and poor and the government did not appear to feel accountable to them. Jake is a white guy from Tennessee who attends a prestigious college. He could have just donated to the Red Cross and instead he acknowledged his privileged position and chose to chip away at it by giving up a semester of college and contributing to a community in pain and in need.

We do not have to leave school to undermine privilege. Joanna McClintick, also a member of the 2007 graduating class, reminds us of this. Joanna recognized the disparity between her privileged status as a Connecticut College student and the poverty in the New London community. In the spring of her senior year while many seniors were wrapping up their time at college, Joanna initiated a school organization called Spokespeople. Spokespeople aims to address the growing crisis in global warming by encouraging bicycling and teaching bike repair and maintenance. Beyond loaning bikes to students, faculty, and staff on campus, the organization's goal is to set up a program in New London high schools where interested students can apprentice at the college bike shop to learn and teach their friends about sustainability. Although the organization is still in its beginning stages, Spokespeople is one way to create stronger links between our college and the New London community.

Many professors at Connecticut College find ways to eliminate privilege in the classroom, but two professors have recently provided structures for the community to voice concerns about equality at Connecticut College and beyond. In 2005, David Kim, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, became the Inaugural Director of the Center for the Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity, the college's newest interdisciplinary center. The center serves as the campus hub for dialogue on race and ethnicity at our school and in our broader communities. This semester, Jen Manion, Visiting Professor of History, initiated the Connecticut College's first LGBTQ Resource Center, which provides a safe organizing space for queer students on campus. Both Centers sponsor dialogues and actions that encourage an unfettered examination of privilege in our lives and on a large scale.

We associate the phrase "giving up" with a sense of loss. If each one of us graduating today works to give up his or her privilege, we could realize that what we are giving up are our advantages over people who never had that privilege to begin with. We could then recognize that by giving up our individual privilege we in turn gain equality.

And what we gain is more than we could ever lose.

Thank you for giving me the privilege to speak with you.