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President Bergeron's 100th Convocation Address

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Remarks by President Katherine Bergeron at the 100th Convocation of
Connecticut College
August 28, 2014

It is wonderful to see so many of you here on this gorgeous late summer afternoon and to be able to welcome you all to this very special convocation. I want to begin by inviting you all to extend your warmest greetings to the newest members of the Connecticut College community: the 23 new staff members; the 16 new faculty members, coaches, and postdoctoral fellows; and the 533 new Connecticut College students, including 2 hardworking graduate students, 2 zealous return-to-college students, 28 wise and beautiful transfer students, and 502 exuberant, talented, and idealistic members of our 100th graduating class: the mighty class of 2018! It is my duty and my honor now to declare this new year—the 100th year of academic exercises at Connecticut College—officially open.

Today is an important day in our history. Ninety-nine years ago, in the fall of 1915, a group of 151 students, 20 faculty members, and a handful of staff gathered not far from this very spot with hundreds of well wishers to mark the opening of this College's very first academic year. The picture they took in was quite different from what we see today. The only flag flying was that of the United States, since most of those newly enrolled students hailed from Connecticut. Compare that to the rows of flags you see today, representing the 110 different countries, sovereignties, and territories of the students who now make up our international community. The campus architecture was similarly reduced, amounting to just three buildings: New London Hall to my left, and the Plant and Blackstone residence halls behind me. Even the grassy hilltop on which we are now seated was missing. In its place was a rocky, uncultivated pasture, barren except for a few scrub trees.

Probably the only thing that was the same was the unparalleled vista out to the sea, a vista that called to the first students and faculty to look beyond themselves toward a very different future. It is not surprising that the generations in between have resisted building anything that would obstruct this view. It has become a signature and a symbol of the ethos of this campus: the panoramic perspective symbolizing the ever-widening horizon of possibility that is the promise of a liberal education; and the open green space reminding us of the openness and inclusivity that has defined this community from the very beginning.

That ethos is still with us. Indeed, when I look toward the new academic year, I would have to say that the same openness and the same progressive spirit can be found in two of the major projects that will occupy our collective attention in the coming months. The first (and most visible) is the 9 million dollar renovation of the Charles E. Shain Library, which is taking place right now. This transformation is breathing new life into a forty-year-old structure by opening up the building's central core. The result will be a new more modern site for research, teaching, and learning—with new technologies, enhanced academic resources, and new open areas for collaborative study.

But as we are rebuilding this critical academic resource, we are also reshaping our curriculum. And that is the second major project for the coming year, a project we call reVision. This new vision for liberal learning at Connecticut College gained significant momentum last year when students, faculty, and staff joined together to discuss what a 21st-century curriculum should entail. I know that the momentum will continue to build this year as the faculty prepares to vote on the new requirements. And, with that discussion, we will also have the opportunity to open a dialogue about the other corners of our curriculum, to ensure that the innovative programs we offer in our centers for interdisciplinary scholarship, as well as our career education programs, are fully integrated into this comprehensive reVision. So our one-hundredth year as an academic institution will be historic in yet another way. It will be a year in which we launch a new centenary curriculum: an innovative, integrative and progressive course of study created for our new moment in history.

This brings me to the last point I want to make this afternoon: it has to do with the open and inclusive environment that we must cultivate to support this curriculum—in order for true learning to happen. At the end of this ceremony, we will together recite the words of a pledge that constitutes our common observance of Connecticut College’s nearly 100-year-old honor code. In many colleges and universities, the notion of an “honor code” is restricted to a few rules about academic integrity. At Connecticut College, by contrast, the code’s reach is far more extensive, touching on every aspect of living and learning in our residential community.

Our code reminds us, for example, that we can never really separate the intellectual from the social, the academic work we wish to pursue from the lives we lead in pursuing it. It reminds us that all of our actions matter: the ways we talk to each other and listen to each other; the language we use in resolving conflicts; the efforts we make toward building openness and inclusion within our own circles and in the wider world. It reminds us that we have a collective duty to ensure the ability of all people to move freely and without intimidation in pursuit of their goals; that each member of this community has a voice. Our honor code, in short, reminds us that the core of the liberal arts is the liberating vision of a free and just society, a society founded on principles of personal integrity, mutual respect, and the embrace of difference.

The first women who stood proudly on this hill 99 years ago, looking out toward the ever-widening horizon of possibility, were both the recipients and the perpetuators of that vision. They saw that they had arrived at a place that believed not only in their right to educational attainment but also in their right to professional achievement and success. Many of them had waited some time for these doors to open. And so you can imagine the kind of commitment and zeal they brought to ensuring that this new progressive, and inclusive community would grow and thrive into the future. What they did together forms the basis of our governance systems and of the code of honor we still recite today. They were the first, you could say, to put the liberal arts into action.

We are here because of them. And it is now our collective responsibility to carry their good work forward. So, as we come together for this 100th convocation, and renew our commitment to this inclusive community of learning, we would do well to recall the words of our very first president, Frederick Sykes, who never lost sight of that original mission: “Remember,” he told that first community, “the good that counts is the good in action. Whatever you do, do it beautifully.”