

2019

## President Bergeron's 105th Convocation Address - "A Better Union"

Katherine Bergeron

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

## "A Better Union"

**Remarks by President Katherine Bergeron**

**105th Convocation**

**Monday, Aug. 26 2019**

How wonderful it is to see so many of you here today for this meaningful ceremony. Rituals are important ways for us for to mark the major passages of life. A convocation like this one is a particular type of academic ritual, marking the beginning of a new year for the College. The word “convocation,” from the Latin convocare, means “to call together,” and this event certainly calls us together to reflect on our values, to acknowledge our bonds of community and, most importantly, to recognize and welcome the College’s newest members. So the first thing I ask us all to do this afternoon is to extend our warmest Camel embrace to the 17 new staff members; the 30 new faculty members; and the 529 new students who have recently arrived on this hill, including two courageous return-to-college students, 13 sharp and discerning transfer students, and 514 brilliant, creative, and energetic members of the Class of 2023! It is my duty and my honor to declare this new year—the 105th year of academic exercises at Connecticut College—officially open.

I have been waiting for this moment to tell you about a very meaningful experience that I had this summer, one that I have thought about again and again over the past several weeks. At the beginning of June, right after the culminating celebrations that mark the end of every academic year, I had the opportunity to attend another quite unique event in Texas. It was the very first Posse Plus Summit, a “once-in-a-lifetime conference” at Deloitte University for 150 students from over 50 colleges and universities around the country to honor the thirtieth anniversary of the Posse Foundation.

I should explain for those who may not know: the Posse Foundation was created in 1989 to cultivate next-generation leaders by matching cohorts of highly talented women and men of color with the best colleges and universities in the country. Connecticut College has partnered with Posse’s Chicago office for over a decade now, having graduated nearly 70 scholars since the first entering class in 2008. And this year, with the support of a generous alumnus, we are excited to be partnering with the foundation’s New York office, too, in order to bring not one but two Posse to Conn with the Class of 2024. It was, in part, because of this redoubled commitment that I wanted to attend the Texas Summit.

As it turns out, I was one of just two presidents there to listen. Happily, two impressive Connecticut College students were there with me: Alyss Humphrey and Daniel Varela, both from the Class of 2022 and both among the youngest delegates present. Their role was to explore with their colleagues the broad-ranging theme of the summit: “The State of Our Union.” A series of workshops and networking events culminated in a televised town hall in which they were asked to speak about the nation’s challenges, share some of their own experiences, and articulate their hopes for the future.

About halfway through the town hall, Alyss made a comment reflecting on the summit's theme that has resonated with me ever since. She asked: "How do we learn to see each other's humanity so that we are prepared to create a better union?" It was a question in the form of a challenge: How do we learn to see the humanity of another? Not surprisingly, I thought about this question this summer during yet another dehumanizing news cycle of taunts and tweets targeting congresswomen of color. I thought about it, too, in the shocking aftermath of mass shootings in Dayton and El Paso, hate crimes happening with such benumbing frequency that the humanity of victims can often be hard to see.

From a different perspective, though, I also thought about the question while pondering the College's new Equity and Inclusion Action Plan, approved unanimously by the Board of Trustees in May, and the ways its larger goal of full participation proposes to change the state of our union on campus and beyond. And, to tell you the truth, I even found myself thinking about it while making my way through "Hey, Kiddo," the 2018 graphic novel by Jarret Krosoczka that we asked all incoming students to read this summer. I'm going to focus the remainder of my remarks today on these last two items, and I want to start with the novel, because I think it offers, in an unusual way, not only a kind of response to Alyss's question but also an object lesson that can usefully frame the work we have before us in this new year.

Learning to see the humanity in others, you could say, is a central preoccupation of "Hey, Kiddo" and quite possibly of Krosoczka's whole oeuvre. Why else, for instance, would we find the "Lunch Lady" series, which made his reputation, so irresistible? In the title character Krosoczka has created a kind of anti-superhero, a woman serving sloppy joes by day and justice by night, as the tagline goes. With her indistinguishable presence in a cafeteria line, the lunch lady is, of course, exactly the kind of person we tend not to see. But Krosoczka gives her life, purpose, motivation—in short, humanity. His energetic drawings and story lines makes us want to see her.

"Hey, Kiddo" is a bit different. For one thing, it's not a comic strip but an autobiography, telling the story of the artist's own childhood and coming of age, a story of missing parents and attentive grandparents, complicated families and loving teachers—all the circumstances, both good and bad, that shape a young life. There are no superheroes in this narrative, no sharply drawn action figures. Instead, we have just a boy and his extended family, presented in sepia tones and soft focus, in panels without borders. "I wanted this to feel like a memory," Krosoczka writes in the afterword, "I wanted the reader to feel immediately present with the protagonist." Again, his story enables the reader to connect with the main character, but this time that character is deeply personal. In that sense, the novel could be read almost as a self-help exercise, where the act of telling your own story helps others see and help themselves.

But the novel does more than that. For as readers we begin to find ourselves caring not only about Jarrett but about all the other figures in the story, figures we might otherwise be inclined to reduce to a label: unwed mother, addict, alcoholic. The fuzzy artwork smooths their hard edges, so it becomes impossible, for example, to see the chain-smoking, hard-drinking, tough-talking grandparents as anything but pure. Even more affecting, perhaps, are the real-life artifacts reproduced among the artwork—faded portraits from a photo booth, immaculately hand-written letters on notebook paper—a collision of images that compel us to see Jarrett's heroin-addicted

mother, too, in a new light: not as a mere character, or a statistic, but as a person. In the end, the greatest value offered by this quirky graphic and autobiographic novel is not in the quality of its pictures or plot but in the special condition they produce: they make us feel empathy. How do we learn to see each other's humanity to create a better union? This is how.

And it is this imaginative lesson that I want you to keep close, Class of 2023, as you embark on your education here at this special place. My charge to you is essentially the same as Krosoczka's: keep learning new ways to see. This is the only way, in fact, that we will be able to advance one of the most important goals we have as a community: the goal of full participation. Our faculty, our staff, and our students have committed to fostering the kind of learning environment that will allow all people to thrive, to reach their full potential, and to contribute to the flourishing of others. That is how we will form a better union.

There is one project, in fact, we will launch this year in support of this commitment. It is a long-awaited project of our strategic plan, a project whose advancement this year is made possible through the support of another generous alumnus. We call it, simply, The Dialogue Project. In brief, it combines workshops, interactive classes, and events supported by faculty and staff on- and off-campus to help students become self-aware, to become comfortable with the uncomfortable, to seek out contradiction, to embrace difference, to listen carefully and openly in the pursuit of common ground—all critical life skills that inform the best kind of leaders. The very first course we are offering, in fact, is a first-year seminar on intergroup dialogue, co-taught by Dean [of Institutional Equity and Inclusion] John McKnight and Professor [of Psychology] Audrey Zakriskie, so, Class of 2023, this project really begins with you. I think of it not only as a new kind of education in diplomacy for our divided times, but also, most basically, as a profound first step toward answering the charge, and the challenge, of learning new ways to see.

And that, my friends, is really the thought I want to leave with you today as you begin your education here at Connecticut College. What must you do to begin answering the challenge? Just four things: look closely; listen deeply; think imaginatively; live honorably. There are exceptional faculty at this College who will help you expand your conceptual frameworks for understanding the world. There are unique centers for research, teaching, and advising and Pathways that ask you to be curious and imaginative in your engagements on campus, in the local community, and around the globe. There is a residential environment where you will develop that understanding by living with and learning from people who are different from yourselves. And, very importantly, there is a nearly 100-year-old honor code that will serve as a personal compass and guide along the way.

Later in this program we will recite together the words of a pledge that represents our common observance of that code. It is a simple but beautiful part of the Convocation ceremony at this College. You new students recently signed the Matriculation Pledge. And in a few moments, everyone—staff, faculty, and students of all classes—will renew that pledge together. This is not an empty ritual but an affirmation of our long history as a community bound by integrity and trust, a community that has committed itself again and again to forming a better union.

Which brings me to a final point, about that history. This academic year marks another important milestone, with the 50th anniversary of co-education at Connecticut College. It was 50 years ago,

in 1969, that the Board of Trustees took the courageous decision to change both the name and the mission of Connecticut College for Women, and open the community to men. I often think about how difficult that decision must have been, to alter the identity of an institution after 50 successful years, although what people often say is that Connecticut College did it with more conviction than most. And I can only think it was because they knew it would ultimately form a better union. So let's hold that history and that conviction in our hearts as we begin this new year together. And let me say once again, and with renewed hope in our common purpose, welcome to this extraordinary community and welcome to your education.

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*(Remarks as prepared by Katherine Bergeron.)*