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President Bergeron's 96th Commencement Address

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CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

Connecticut College Commencement 2014 Remarks by President Katherine Bergeron

Good morning, everyone. I am so pleased to see you all here on this beautiful morning and to be able to welcome you: members of the board of trustees, distinguished honorees and guests, faculty and staff, and most important, parents, family members, and all of you soon-to-be graduates of this remarkable institution. It is my great honor to declare the 96th Commencement ceremonies of Connecticut College now open.

Today's ceremony will unfold, according to tradition, in several parts. You will hear an address by a specially chosen member of the class of 2014. You will see the awarding of special honors to two other graduating seniors. You will observe the Connecticut College medal being presented to two very notable members of our extended College community. You will see an honorary doctor of letters conferred on today's Commencement speaker before having the privilege of hearing his address. And then, the main reason why you are all here today, you will witness the conferring of two master's degrees and 461 bachelor's degrees upon the beautiful, accomplished, talented, driven, and formidable class of 2014!

This is a great day, and a particularly meaningful one for me, because it marks my very first Commencement as president of Connecticut College. As many of you know, I arrived on this campus at the beginning of January and had my inauguration only last month. And although I took office as you seniors were entering your final semester here, I have to say I feel quite close to you as a class. You welcomed me in the warmest possible way, and it was through you that I began to understand, firsthand, the meaning of a Connecticut College education. I made it a personal goal, in fact, to meet as many of you as I could before today, and so we have had conversations in office hours and specially scheduled meetings; we have corresponded by email; we have discussed funding for special projects and debated the future of the curriculum; we have met at athletic events, art openings, and performances, at TEDx Connecticut College and even Florialia; we have enjoyed small dinners together in your own houses, or large banquets prepared by a few of you with significant culinary ambitions; we have shared a stage to welcome admitted students and their parents, and a platform to address our U.S. senator; we have greeted each other formally at meetings of the student government, and casually at Harris or Cro or places in downtown New London; we have shared the sadness of a faculty member's memorial service in Harkness Chapel, and the unbridled joy of performing *a cappella* in the same space. And through the totality of these encounters, you have allowed me to see, through your eyes, what makes this place so special. You have made me love Connecticut College as much as you do.

So what are the things that I have seen? I could, of course, describe many aspects of the excellent education we offer, but there are three qualities I want to call out that make up what I would call the Connecticut College “difference.” The first and most basic is the rare quality of community on this campus. This is a place where students and faculty and staff care deeply about each other’s wellbeing and success. Connecticut College is known for its socially responsible student body, but, from what I can see, this sense of responsibility is directed just as powerfully toward the campus community as it is toward non-profits and NGOs around the globe. And that’s important, because it creates a unique atmosphere here, a culture of generosity. A recent study we conducted showed that you students—by comparison to your counterparts at peer institutions—see the purpose of your education more as an opportunity to give back *to* the world than as a chance to get ahead *in* the world. If that is a distinguishing feature of a Connecticut College graduate, then I think we are indeed doing something right.

This generosity extends to our faculty, and affects, in turn, the nature of the learning environment. Which is the second quality I want to mention—the extent of the intellectual and artistic collaboration between faculty and students at this College. You students have had the benefit of working with a faculty that is unrivaled in its commitment to excellence in teaching and scholarship and service—which means a unique commitment to *you*. Many of you have worked in labs, done archival research, co-authored papers and book reviews, presented posters at national conferences, published articles and book chapters, and produced original creative work with faculty mentors. All of you, I think, have experienced the thrill of thinking deeply and critically—in effect, of thinking *through* a problem with an intellectual partner in order to produce a new idea. Yes, you have worked hard, but, as one of you put it to me recently, these collaborations have given you something more: a sense of endless possibility and opportunity.

The idea of being entrusted with both social and intellectual responsibility brings me to the third quality that I would like to call out: and that is the atmosphere of mutual respect and accountability that defines the ethos of this campus. Some of you might think of it in terms of our almost 100-year-old Honor Code; others might speak of our fiercely held value of “shared governance.” But no matter how you define it, this expectation has had a profound effect on your education. We have asked you to govern yourselves by being accountable both to your own actions and to the actions of fellow students. And we have asked you to share in the governing of the College, by participating in discussions on many issues, from financial planning to the future of the curriculum. At a recent meeting, a student commented that during the course of her four years here, there was never a time when the ideas she brought forward seriously were not taken seriously by members of the faculty or the administration. That is a testament to how much this College believes in your leadership.

So, why am I saying all this? Is it to make you feel even more regret at having to leave this wonderful place—this utopia you affectionately refer to as the “Conn College bubble?” No, that’s not it at all. My point is quite the opposite. It is to remind you that these special qualities that have informed your experience here as students, these qualities that account for the Connecticut College difference, now define something about *your* difference. You may be leaving this beautiful hill, but the hill is not leaving you. The lessons you have learned from this community about generosity and collaboration,

about personal accountability and leadership, will remain long after the specific content of your papers and projects have faded from memory. It is the deeper imprint of this learning, and these values, that will ensure your success, making it possible for you not only to achieve in your personal lives but also to bring that accomplishment into whatever organizations you are part of—to make a difference for your future communities as you have made a difference here.

For that, in the end, is what it means to put your liberal arts education *into action*. And this is the last point I want to make. The words of our mission statement are worth emphasizing today, because they, too, refer to what lies before you. They are not so much about the compressed interval that you have just spent on this campus, as about the expansive duration that is the rest of your life. In my inaugural address last month, I reflected on our mission when speaking about the long line of thinkers, doers, and leaders that this College has produced since its founding over a century ago: graduates who used their knowledge to make stunning contributions to their future fields; graduates who used their energy to change the world; graduates who were destined to be part of the solution. You belong to that fine lineage. And it gives me hope as I look out today to know that the great spirit of this institution will go with you into the world to bring the positive change we so desperately need. We are counting on you for that.

There is one final thing that I want you to consider as you gaze across this beautiful expanse on your last day as a student at Connecticut College. It is this: that one hundred years ago the vista that you now behold was a barren hilltop. It is only because a small group of idealistic women and men sought to address a social inequity that this College—and everything it stands for—came into being. And it is because of a series of leaders with similar conviction that the College has become the beautiful and inclusive community we now enjoy. You have been nurtured, in other words, in a place that continues to believe that all things are possible. As you step out from this place to face the challenges that lie before you, keep this belief close to your heart.

Class of 2014, we love you, we are proud of you, we know you will represent us well as you move forward in the world. Thank you for bringing your talent, your passion, and your idealism to this special place. I wish you great happiness and success in your life after Connecticut College, and I look forward to seeing you back here often and welcoming you home Thank you.

May 18, 2014