

2015

President Bergeron's 97th Commencement Address

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This is your season

Remarks to Class of 2015

By Connecticut College President Katherine Bergeron

Commencement Sunday

May 17, 2015

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, our alumni board, 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 97th 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 2015. You will see the awarding of special honors to three other graduating seniors. We will confer an honorary doctor of letters on today's Commencement speaker before having the privilege and pleasure of hearing his address. And then, the main reason why you are all here today, you will witness the conferring of 3 master's degrees and 444 bachelor's degrees upon the beautiful, accomplished, talented, formidable, and resilient class of 2015!

A year ago, after just a few months on campus, I shared with the class of 2014 my early impressions of what I think makes Connecticut College unique among our peer institutions. I spoke about the generosity of spirit and concern for others; about the shared expectation for hard work and academic excellence; and about the central role that our culture of accountability plays in shaping women and men of genuine character and conscience. I am happy to say that — after completing my first full year as president of this College — those strong, positive impressions have been more than validated.

Let me say just a word about the generosity of spirit I have experienced in you, the class of 2015. Coming into a new place is never easy, as you will remember from the first days of your first year. And you all showed such warmth and good will toward me as you welcomed a new president. I will never forget it. So before anything else, I do want to express my heartfelt thanks to all of you for that kindness.

But your generosity has been evident in far more profound ways. It's worth pointing out that, collectively, your class has given more than 30 thousand hours of service to local and international organizations during the last four years — and that is

only through programs sponsored by the College. I'm sure the count would be even higher if I were to add the hours many of you continued to give during summer and mid-semester breaks.

Just as important as your off-campus work are the significant contributions you have made right here at home. There are countless examples: from the research you have done alongside faculty, to the roles you have played in residence halls, to the expertise you have provided to many offices and programs on campus. In all these ways, you have helped advance the mission of this College.

This was particularly evident in the past year, as we worked to revise and update our general curriculum. You shared your insights and ideas in discussion groups, forums, meetings and conferences. These contributions showed much more than a generous spirit. They also revealed, in very palpable ways, your commitment to academic excellence. You were trusted partners in helping us rethink the most fundamental questions we must ask as educators: *What, how, and to what purpose* do we teach and learn as a community? The intellectual rigor and collaborative ethos you demonstrated throughout were in the highest tradition of the College.

We like to call this tradition “shared governance.” And the reason we do, I think, has to do with another truly distinguishing feature of Connecticut College: our culture of student accountability. The Honor Code that we strive to live by is both about *self-*governance and about being accountable to and for each other. It is about setting aspirational goals both individually and as a community, and then taking responsibility when, on occasion, we fail to live up to those expectations. I would argue that this Code, and the responsibility it produces, is one of the more important things you will take with you from your Connecticut College education.

Why is it so important? For a very simple reason. In taking responsibility for missteps, learning to overcome setbacks, you develop *resilience*: the capacity to spring back, to try again, to think through alternative solutions with renewed vigor and purpose. That capacity is something that will stand you in good stead in whatever you do in your lives after College.

Very soon, each of you will begin a new chapter in a new setting. I know some of you are already committed to companies, graduate schools, non-profit organizations, and start-ups. Along with the excitement of these new challenges, there will inevitably come the stress and uncertainty of the unknown. And, because of what you learned here, I truly believe you will be better equipped to deal with that uncertainty. Because of the personal resources you have developed, you know what it means to spring back from conflict — how important it is to push forward, rather than to quit, when life has taken an unexpected turn. You have actually practiced this, and have seen the benefits that come from it. And, so, for all the many reasons that I think you can go confidently into the world as a Connecticut College graduate, I would say that it is this quality that you bring with you — your resilience — that will stand you far above the rest.

And I think this may be especially true for you, the class of 2015. You are the class, after all, that arrived here in the midst of a hurricane four years ago, and so you have had been witness to a subtle example of resilience on this very campus. I'm thinking

about what happened to our beautiful arboretum. You know, back in 2011, my husband and I were living not far from here in Providence, Rhode Island, a city that experienced its own measure of devastation. At our house, the wind tore a huge, 800-pound branch from a stately old maple in our side yard. It was heartbreaking to see the next morning. But trees, as I learned, are very resilient creatures. And over the past four years — exactly the length of your time here at Conn — that old maple has regenerated itself. In fact, my husband told me that, when he stopped by the house the other day, he could honestly no longer tell that a limb had ever gone missing.

The same thing has happened here, of course. The trees on our arboretum campus, so badly damaged during your first days here, have slowly restored themselves to their former glory. To look around, you would say that nothing ever happened. But for those who know better, who saw those trees after the storm, the vision of what they have become is even more cherished and beautiful.

There is a tree at the center of the college seal affixed to the diplomas you will shortly hold. It is, of course, a symbol of your education: a symbol of growth, of promise and, yes, of resilience. Our motto, taken from the first Psalm, speaks of “a tree planted beside rivers of water, which bears its fruit in season.”

Class of 2015, this is your season. As you leave to take on new challenges, and help others meet theirs, you will grow in the esteem of your Connecticut College family, joining a long line of graduates who have gone forth from this hill — beside this river — to make their way, and to make a difference, in the world beyond.

We love you, we are proud of you, we know you will represent us well as you push forward with your lives. 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.

(Remarks as prepared by President Katherine Bergeron.)