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## President Ames' 69th Commencement Address

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*Connecticut College*

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

Oakes Ames  
Baccalaureate Address  
May 22, 1987

Good afternoon! And a special welcome to parents, relatives, and friends of the Class of 1987.

Members of the graduating class, a quick calculation shows that you have attended over one thousand three hundred course meetings during the last four years. Now there are only two lectures left - and no one is going to test you on them! Many professors use their final lecture or two to wrap-up the course, to talk about those big ideas we called in college "the big broad trends." In a wild moment I asked myself if the Baccalaureate address was supposed to be like that, only on a grander scale, wrapping up all thirty-two courses. You'll be glad to know that idea didn't work out.

Still, you probably have been thinking back these last days over your college experience, and so perhaps it does make some sense to reflect together for a few moments about your education and where it may lead you.

In the first place, these Connecticut College years have been just a beginning. The B.A. degree certifies that you have learned how to learn; may you always be involved in that adventure.

What were some of the other purposes of your undergraduate education? To broaden your world-view; to develop your powers of reasoning and expression; to get a glimpse of what it means to master a subject, and to sense the excitement of intellectual discovery. But there should be even more to a liberal education. We hope that what you've learned here, outside the classroom as well as inside it, will lead you to contribute, each according to your own special talents, to improving your society - to making the world a better place for others to live in. We hope it is this kind of accomplishment that will bring you your most deeply satisfying rewards.

The College describes its mission as being "to prepare men and women for a lifetime of learning and contributions to a changing society." The statement ends by saying that the College is to promote "awareness and understanding of local, regional, national

and international communities, and encourage involvement in them." Those words "community" and involvement" are the key ones. Many of you have become involved in the governance and daily work outside the classroom of this college community, and have contributed to its welfare. That should be a fine preparation for doing work that will make a difference in the communities of which you will be a part tomorrow.

Kenneth Grahame, the author of The Wind in the Willows, wrote: "As a rule, indeed, grown-up people are fairly correct on matters of fact; it is in the higher gift of imagination that they are so sadly to seek."

What happened to us? Our education should have given wings to that gift of imagination! We hope yours has. We hope that through your study of literature, art, history, philosophy, psychology, language, and other subjects, and through learning from each other (which has been part of your college education), you are better able to imagine what it is like to be in another person's place - that you are better able to understand otherness. Where the College's mission statement talks about awareness and understanding, this is part of what it means. And out of awareness and understanding will come the wish to be involved. I have met many alumni of the College whose lives exemplify this ideal.

Along with imagination, there is another quality we all need lots of, and that is curiosity. I hope yours is even more alive today than when you were freshmen. There are few habits of mind more valuable than being able to ask good questions. I wouldn't recommend doing this your first week at work, but it's very useful to ask: "Why are we doing the job this way? What if we did it a new way instead? Why not do it differently? Why? What if? Why not? - good questions; ask them often.

The habit of curiosity will equip you to cope with a future we can't predict very well, except to say that there will be change! I remember vividly something my maternal grandfather said to me when I was about twelve. He loved the works of Jules Verne, and was showing me Verne's book, From the Earth to the Moon. We were looking at illustrations of the vehicle for the trip; it was a projectile that would be fired from a gigantic cannon. My grandfather's statement was that I would live to see men walking on the moon. Amazing!

The growth of technology in the last half of this century has been swifter and more remarkable than anything even Jules Verne could have imagined. It is bringing beneficial change to just about every aspect of our lives. One of the brightest hopes for a peaceful future is the way communications technology is able to draw people of the world closer together.

When we are critical of technology, on the other hand, we point to the problems it leads to. I think the reasons for these problems, and the solutions to them, lie not so much in the realm of technology, as they do in the realm of human behaviour. Nuclear and space technologies are being used by the superpowers to conduct the arms race. But at the root of it all is mistrust between us and the Soviets. Certain technologies, such as those related to detecting nuclear test explosions, will be part of the solution to the arms race. But in the end we and the Soviets must solve the problem, not with super-lasers and mirrors in space, but with breakthroughs in communication and diplomacy and in learning to live together on this earth without threatening each other.

In addition to technological development, then, we must strive at least as hard for a parallel growth along political, economic, and social lines: we need a new wisdom which is generous in its spirit and global in its scope. It must be generous because if there is a problem as serious as that of nuclear weapons it is the tragedy of poverty and hunger. Perhaps your generation will be more successful than any have been so far in working out ways for the poor everywhere to know a higher standard of living.

Our new wisdom must be global, because more than ever you and I are citizens not only of the United States, but of the world. Because nations are becoming more interdependent, our security and prosperity as Americans is increasingly linked to the welfare of developing countries. In these circumstances, traditional notions of how to protect our interests may work the wrong way. Obviously the United States must have a strong defense system, but those of you who have studied economics can figure out how excessive American defense spending can lead, through the laws of economic cause and

effect, to the weakening of the democracies of some of our third-world neighbors in Latin America.

Another global issue is the protection of the environment. The College's strength in ecological studies and the research being done by some of our faculty make this a matter of special interest to us. Their work and similar research by scientists around the world gives growing evidence of the far-reaching and harmful consequences of human activity that upsets ecological balances. These are outcomes that will take a long time to correct, and some of them may be irreversible.

Our new wisdom, then, must result in stronger environmental policies in this country and we must take the leadership in working out new, global policies with the other nations of the world.

I think that underlying all these issues there is a challenge to us to make our democratic system work better. We must all become more involved as citizens. Watching the evening news and voting regularly simply isn't enough any more. The democratic process needs fewer spectators and more players. In addition we must discover ways of encouraging our most able people to enter public life. I hope many of you will choose careers in public service.

It is not surprising that we wonder about how to become more involved. The world's problems seem too huge or too far away for our efforts to make any difference. I mentioned the problem of world hunger; what can one person do about it? The Plowshares Institute, an organization in Simsbury, Connecticut, that conducts traveling seminars to third-world countries, urges its members to "think globally and act locally." You may not see how to help the poor of Bihar in Eastern India, but consider the State of Connecticut. It has the highest per capita income in the United States, and yet two of its cities, Bridgeport and New Haven, are among the very poorest in the nation. If you decide to live and work here in the State, that is a problem you can get involved in.

Elie Wiesel, author and most recent winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, has spoken of the immorality of indifference to evil. That statement rings very true, but we have to choose. Since you can't individually be responsive to every situation in which wrongs need

to be set right or problems solved, you must each pick at least one issue and try to make a difference in that area. For some of you there will be possibilities in your daily work, for others in volunteer involvement.

Your liberal education has prepared you, better than could any other kind, for informed activism. This is very different from mindless advocacy of causes, which can be a real threat to our democratic way of life. Informed activism by all citizens is the ideal in our society, but with your education at Connecticut College has come the responsibility to take the lead wherever you can. Go out and do so with energy and hope, with perseverance and imagination. May your rewards be many!

Oakes Ames  
Commencement 1987  
Statement to the Seniors

New members of the Alumni Association of Connecticut College. I have just a few words before you go. In 1916, the first president of the College, Dr. Frederick Henry Sykes, wrote in a message to the students: "Remember that the good that counts is good in action. Whatever you do, do it beautifully..."

I very recently saw the results of work done beautifully when I went to this year's Senior Art Show. And just a few weeks ago we celebrated work well done in the annual Honors and Awards ceremony. You have reached high levels of achievement in many different ways: in laboratory projects, papers, and honors essays; on the playing fields or the river, in your work as housefellows, or as members of student government, to name just a few. The best that each of you has done will serve as a standard for you to reach toward and exceed in the future.

What is it that helps us to do a job beautifully? Skill and love of the work, of course, but I think of other factors as well.

The quality of commitment is one, commitment to the group of which you are a part and to its goals. It might be a public agency, a private firm, an educational institution, or an arts organization in which you are a volunteer.

Your desire to do your best may be a state of mind which says, "I'm not doing this just for myself, I'm doing it for other people."

To excel you must be willing to take risks, to test yourself by pushing beyond the comfortable day-by-day routine of the job. A sense of adventure can make a big difference.

To do a task beautifully you can't be too easily satisfied. You have to learn to be your own severest critic.

And of course, there is perseverance - not giving in too soon. Let me give you a dramatic example. Albert Einstein wrote these words about his eleven-year effort to develop the general theory of relativity: "In the light of knowledge attained, the happy achievement seems almost a matter of course, and any intelligent

student can grasp it without too much trouble. But the years of anxious searching in the dark, with their intense longing, their alternations of confidence and exhaustion, and the final emergence into the light - only those who have experienced it can understand it."

I think, though, that we all understand something of what Einstein was writing about. You have been challenged and sometimes felt that your professors were expecting you to accomplish more than was possible. And you have set your own high standards. You succeeded and learned that you were capable of new levels of achievement.

We hope that as you leave Connecticut College today, and on into the future, you will recall those teachers and mentors who helped you raise your sights, and that whatever you do, you will always try to do it beautifully.

Good luck.