

2018

President Bergeron's 100th Commencement Address

Katherine Bergeron

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The Good in Action

**Remarks to the Class of 2018
by President Katherine Bergeron
100th Commencement Sunday
May 20, 2018**

Madame Chair and members of the Board of Trustees past and present; distinguished honorees and guests; colleagues in the Connecticut College Alumni Association and the senior administration; faculty and staff, parents, family members, and friends; and, especially, all you soon-to-be graduates of the exceptional Class of 2018: I cannot tell you how honored I am to be with you on this historic occasion and to be able to declare the day's much-awaited event—the 100th Commencement exercises of Connecticut College—officially open.

You will note that we have added some special touches to this Commencement celebration to mark the importance of our centenary class. Last week, in anticipation of today's ceremony, we planted an elm to honor you graduates of the Class of 2018: you can see it up the hill, overlooking us on Tempel Green next to New London Hall. Yesterday, we held a special baccalaureate service to remind us of the broader roots of our community. Today, you are wearing commemorative stoles to show your connectedness as a class and to bind you to this historic day. And later in this ceremony, after hearing from our senior class orator, you will witness honors bestowed on three remarkable women: Jazmine Hughes, from the Class of 2012, who will be the youngest person in our history to receive an honorary doctorate from Connecticut College; Kathryn Klein Briger, from the Class of 1963, who will receive an honorary bachelor's degree from the College; and Pamela Zilly, from the Class of 1975, who will receive the College Medal, the highest honor given by this institution, as she completes a truly distinguished term as chair of the Connecticut College Board of Trustees.

All these are reasons that this Commencement is important for the College. But I hope you can also appreciate how special this day is for me personally. You students began your journey at Conn just as I was starting my first full year as President. And so I will always think of you, Class of 2018, as my class. The fact that you are also the 100th class has only made that connection more meaningful, because it has grounded our experience in the history of this College.

On your arrival day four years ago, in August 2014, I spent some time talking about that history, describing the character of the place, the program, and the people when this College first opened its doors. I don't know if you remember that; I suspect most of you don't. So I thought I would bring us full circle today by recalling what I said, in order to reflect on the meaning of this institution and not just how it has shaped your education over the past four years but also how, I believe, it should go on shaping the quality of your lives long after.

It's hard to fathom just how visionary it was to open a new college for women in 1915, on a piece of uncultivated farmland high above New London harbor. When that first group of students

arrived—there is no other way to say it—the school wasn't finished. Only a handful of buildings were in sight: two residence halls (Blackstone and Plant), and just one academic building (New London Hall). Beyond a makeshift dining hall and a boiler house, that was it. No trees. No grass. No sidewalks. A far cry from the lush park-like setting that we now enjoy and even take for granted.

There was one feature of that original landscape, though, that surely inspired the first inhabitants: its openness. Standing at the top of the hill, with the sea stretching toward the horizon and the great Thames River flowing to the East, the site conveyed a palpable sense of opportunity: it was a place that encouraged one to look up and look out, a place oriented not toward the past but toward the future. That was a powerful idea.

So, if the original campus was an opportunity, the first curriculum was a promise. The founders of this College believed it was their duty to address a new kind of woman working in a new century. And so the course of study they envisioned was both idealistic and pragmatic, designed to train students for intellectual and professional success. And for good reason. By the time the College opened in 1915, a war was raging in Europe and on the Atlantic. Women would eventually be needed to serve their country in new roles both here and overseas. The education of modern women was not just a nicety but a necessity, as some would say, “a matter of national consequence.” That condition led to a new, more progressive vision of the liberal arts at Connecticut College: where traditional disciplines merged with real-world opportunities to prepare students not just to make a living but to make a difference. That, too, was a powerful idea.

Still, when I reflect on the beginnings of this institution, what stands out most for me—even more than the transformed landscape or the transformational curriculum—are the people who made up the community 99 years ago. Those first students had a unique perspective on their education. Joining forces with the faculty, they saw themselves as pioneers, looking to the future to build a better institution of higher learning. Unburdened by the past, they were thinkers, doers, and leaders, with the imagination, the creativity, and the courage of their convictions. In the words of the first president, Frederick Sykes, the task took “all we had of brain and hand and heart.” And while the work was exhilarating, there must also have been pain at times. Which means these women also learned resilience: they learned to push ahead in the face of hardship; they learned to have both the audacity and the tenacity to persevere. That was perhaps the most powerful idea of all. As I told you back on your first day in August 2014: this College is here today not despite of those challenges but because of them.

I think you may now understand why I tried to explain all this to you on your arrival day, why I thought you should know and care about the Connecticut College of 99 years ago. It is because that vibrant, idealistic College is still with us. You have experienced it firsthand. This landscape still calls out and inspires us to look beyond ourselves. Our curriculum is still known for its unique blend of idealism and pragmatism. Our students and faculty are still infused with a sense of civic duty and social justice. And our community is still defined by a distinctive capacity for hard work, indeed, by the sense that this great educational project remains unfinished, a work in progress, a task that continues to call on us to use all we have of “brain and hand and heart” to create a better version of higher learning not just for ourselves but for future generations.

I invited each of you in this centenary class to answer that call. And you did. Over the past four years, you advanced our educational mission in some truly meaningful ways. For example:

- You devoted nearly 50,000 hours of service to partners within our community.
- You worked with students in the City of New London to advance college attainment levels, and with middle-school girls in the region to encourage future careers in STEM.
- You advocated for menstrual equity and LGBT rights, for racial justice on campus and in the public schools; you walked to end homelessness and worked to reduce the effects of gender-based violence.
- You helped to advance the College's national standing in sustainability and to grow our endowment through Peggotty investments.
- You took your passions to countries around the world to understand the illicit transnational antiquities trade, the effects of NGOs in Barcelona, street theater in Senegal, and food consumption in Vietnam.
- You did research on sustainable agriculture and genetically modified organisms; on protein kinases and antibiotic resistance; on bioluminescence and complex polycyclic ring systems; you built multi-legged robots, developed avatars, and taught microcomputers to think and act like autonomous agents.
- You moved countless audiences, as well, by mounting deeply thoughtful exhibitions and performances, by speaking truth to power in writing and film, by awakening sensibilities on the mainstage, by eclipsing your best efforts each year in Eclipse, and by dancing your way to the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

In short, you seized the opportunity to think and do and lead, or as Sykes had put it, to use all you had of “brain and hand and heart,” in order to put your liberal arts education into action. And, as you did this, you participated in the revitalization of education on this campus.

Of course, you also witnessed the renovation of the Charles E. Shain Library as first-years and the opening of the Walter Commons for Global Study and Engagement as seniors. And you helped us craft a new strategic plan and a master plan that will strengthen our programs and facilities for generations to come. But most critically, to me, you joined forces with our faculty to create a whole new way of thinking about higher learning through the development of Connections, our reinvention of the liberal arts for the 21st century. In this work, you have left a legacy as lasting as that of the first students who helped to build this College. Class of 2018, you truly answered the call, and for that I will always be grateful.

So I have just one more thing to ask of you as you prepare to leave this place. And it is this: Never stop answering that call. Never stop putting your liberal arts education into action. I was at

an event a week or so ago celebrating the newest novel of Blanche McCrary Boyd, our Weller Professor of English. And Blanche made a comment that is pertinent to this discussion. She talked about the importance of striving to make something that matters. And that reminds me of one last thing I said to you on your first days on this campus, something the first president, Frederick Sykes, had said to his students a century ago, as they were starting their education. “Remember,” he said to them, anticipating our mission statement today, “the good that counts is the good in action.” And he went on to implore: “Whatever you do, do it beautifully.”

Class of 2018, we love you, we are proud of you, we know you will do it beautifully as you go out into the world as the thinkers, doers, and leaders you have become. Thank you for bringing your talent, your passion, and your conviction 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.

(Remarks as prepared by President Katherine Bergeron.)