

2019

President Bergeron's 101st Commencement Address

Katherine Bergeron

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Glad to Dare

Remarks on the 100th anniversary of the first
Connecticut College Commencement, 1919-2019
May 19, 2019

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 unparalleled Class of 2019: it is an honor to be with you on this great day and a joy to be able to declare today's historic commencement exercises—the 100th anniversary of the College's first Commencement in 1919—officially open.

We mark the importance of this anniversary weekend with some special elements. The centerpiece of your program, for example, contains a spread of historic photos portraying that first commencement a century ago, in 1919, convened in the courtyard behind Blackstone and Plant. Yesterday, we held a beautiful baccalaureate service in Harkness Chapel whose participants reflected in different ways on the meaning of hope. Today, you are wearing special sky-blue stoles to signify your membership in this unique 100th-year class. And later in the ceremony, after hearing from your senior orator, we will bestow honors on a remarkable couple: Columbia University biologists Tulle Hazelrigg and Martin Chalfie, whose independent research on the understanding and use of the Green Fluorescent Protein led to a revolution in biological research and eventually to his Nobel Prize in Chemistry. And then we will experience something unique as this same couple delivers a *joint* Commencement Address—another first in the history of commencements at Connecticut College.

Still, beyond the pomp and circumstance, I think the best part of an historical occasion like this is the opportunity it affords us to reflect on, and retell, our origin story—the story of how we got started as a College and how that start shaped who we are today. Honestly, it's a great story, one I never tire of telling. I'm sure I told parts of it on your first day here, right after you moved in. It's worth adding to it now as you prepare to move out, because knowing more about those first graduates should, I think, give you even more hope for the lives that you will lead after Conn.

So let's rewind to the beginning—the beginning of the 20th century, that is—to a moment when roles and expectations for women were changing prodigiously. With women's suffrage sweeping the globe, there was a new demand for higher education here and abroad, a demand that, frankly, overwhelmed the supply in the Northeast, despite the three women's colleges in Massachusetts that had been around already for a half century. In Connecticut, there was one college for men that had begun to admit a small number of women in the late 1890s. But as the number of smart female applicants started rising, the competition for male admission slots rose with it, and soon enough (the story goes) the trustees of that fine institution felt they had no choice but to go back on their promise and *stoptaking* women. Which is exactly what happened in 1908.

As you can imagine, those women graduates were outraged. How dare they! One of them, Elizabeth Wright, was so incensed that she rallied friends in the local suffragette club to start a college of their own. They mounted a competition in Connecticut for the best site. The headmaster of a private women's high school in New London— the Williams School—championed the cause. New London citizens donated land and \$135,000 in cash. Even a local philanthropist gave a million dollars to start an endowment. And with that, the City of New London won the bid for the state's newest institution of higher education and Elizabeth Wright and her cohort succeeded in founding Connecticut's very first college for women.

How dare they! And how *glad* they were to dare. Which is the first point: Connecticut College, from its origins, was a school born in passion and born with a mission. The visionary first president, Frederick Sykes, had big dreams for the new school: he imagined a totally modern college for students who would change the world. The progressive ethos was evident in the hilltop location, which encouraged students then—as it does now—to look beyond themselves. It was also evident in the first curriculum, which, unlike the sister schools in Massachusetts, intentionally combined the traditional academic disciplines with practical training in order to produce graduates who would step confidently into the world to make a difference.

Of course, it took a few years after securing the charter in 1911 to build buildings, hire a faculty, and design courses, and so it wasn't until 1915 that the College opened its doors to the first students. And that opening is something to contemplate. There's a wonderful exhibit in Shain Library put together by our special collections librarian Ben Panciera and your very own Katie Cowherd, from the Class of 2019, which offers some insight into this impressive first class. There were 125 students on opening day, joining an equally impressive faculty of national and international distinction. The learning opportunities that lay before the new students were both giddy and empowering. They saw themselves as pioneers. As one described it, with no one ahead of them and no "restricting traditions," it was as if "we were seniors for all four years."^[1] They were looking forward and back at the same time. They organized meaningful clubs and associations. They became leaders for their class and for a fledgling student government. They were tasked by the faculty, in fact, to design both the governance structure of the new College and the policies that that structure would uphold. All this was a precursor, I believe, for the emphatic version of shared governance that we still enjoy today.

Which is the second point: Empowerment made these students successful. Of the 68 who graduated in 1919, the vast majority, 71%, pursued professional careers; 15% went on to receive graduate degrees from great institutions like Columbia, Yale, Michigan, and Cornell. They became doctors, dentists, professors, teachers, social workers, poets, journalists. Quite a few even returned to the College in later years to carry on their next chapter of leadership as trustees.

Professor Vogel once told me that his grandmother, Dora Schwartz, was a graduate of Connecticut College's inaugural class, so for quite some time I had been planning to say something about her in today's ceremony. But as he looked into his family history, he discovered that she was actually in the Class of 1920, not 1919, so I have to choose someone else.

Fortunately, there is another person I want to talk about, someone you have all encountered before, in fact, if only by name. Her name was Esther Batchelder, or "Batch," as she was often

called. If you think back to your own first days at Conn, during Orientation, you may recall a series of fun evening events that were named for her—"Batch Blasts"—to memorialize her energetic and fun-loving spirit. She displayed that buoyant spirit as president of the Student Government; as secretary of the first-year class; as a gleeful participant in glee club; and as a vital contributor to the school's intramural hockey, soccer, and basketball teams. She also made sure to carry that same spirit *back* to the College during her 39-year tenure on the Connecticut College Board of Trustees. And there's actually one more reason to single out Esther Batchelder: she would have been 122 years old today, May 19. By happy coincidence, this Commencement falls on her birthday!

So, what did she do with her life after college? Or perhaps I should ask: what *didn't* she do? From Conn, she went to Columbia to pursue a Ph.D. in Chemistry, specializing in food with a social justice bent, conducting research on the importance of vitamin A for dietary health among the poor. During the Depression, she crossed the country and back to accept professorships at the University of Washington, University of Arizona, and University of Rhode Island, before moving out of academia altogether and into government. In 1942 she began working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's research arm, where she later directed the division of food and human nutrition. After the Second World War, she traveled to Germany and Japan on international aid missions. In 1954, at the age of 57, she was honored by the USDA for "institutional leadership in directing comprehensive research in food and nutrition and applying that research to improved national and international utilizations." That was but a segue to her next chapter. Two years later, she went on to direct the division of Housing and Shelter for the USDA until her retirement in 1965.

But that wasn't the end, either. As I learned from the wonderful exhibit in Shain, retirement simply meant more opportunity. Following her years in Washington, Batch moved to Rome to study Roman and Etruscan archeology. Then she learned Spanish and lived in Puerto Rico for a time. And finally, she landed in London to pursue a final round of research—this time on the Allied efforts to prevent malnutrition during the War—through a study of the recently declassified papers of Winston Churchill. Batch died in London in 1987, at the age of 90.

What a life! You might even say, what a blast! Because I think I'm beginning to understand the real meaning of a "Batch Blast". This graduate of the inaugural class was an indomitable spirit, someone whose audacious energy was focused on lifting the lives of others through lifelong interest in and commitment to food, one of the most basic human needs. In a way, we could look to her life path as inspiration for, or even a prototype of, what our new integrative pathway on food might look like: with research in chemistry opening onto to vital questions of public health, government administration and policy; international affairs; and social justice. Batch was a pioneer of the liberal arts in action.

So, what's the point of talking about the life of a graduate of times gone by? The point, of course, is to draw a line to the present, and to the lives that you, too, will lead after Conn. Because the pioneering spirit that guided Esther Batchelder at Connecticut College is still, I daresay, alive and well today. It's the spirit of a school still uninhibited by tradition and open to the future; it's the spirit of a place that still enjoins its students to look up, and look out, to the

world beyond. It's the spirit, in short, of an education committed every day to putting liberal arts into action, and I want you to hold that spirit close as you prepare to leave this beautiful place.

One of Esther Batchelder's classmates wrote some lines of poetry for the graduates of 1919 as they prepared to leave their new College 100 years ago. It is a verse written in the sentimental style of the period but it closes with a stanza that captures the feeling of what it must have been like to arrive, as first-years, at a college that was not yet finished; of what it must have been like, as sophomores, to face the fear and uncertainty of a country entering into World War; of what it must have been like, as seniors, to experience the armistice and then to wonder what they were now supposed to do, how they should take the privilege of their education into the world to make a better one. This is how it goes:

*True pioneers we found on every trail
But fearlessly began the heights to scale
And steadfast marched through sloughs of deep despair
Willing and unafraid, nay, glad to dare!*

Glad to dare! That is the hope I hold out for all of you, Class of 2019. And this is my final point: I hope that, like the founders of this College, you will be both willing and unafraid to use the gifts that you have been given: willing to keep pushing forward when the odds seem stacked against you and unafraid to keep speaking your truth when no one else will. And in doing this, I want you, nay, I dare you, like Batch who came before you, to have a blast!

Class of 2019, we love you, we are proud of you, we know you will go forth into the world with the same intrepid spirit as those first pioneers. Thank you for bringing your talent, your passion, and your indomitable energy 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.

[1] Juline Warner Comstock, "Half A Century," *Connecticut College Alumnae News*, August 1969.