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President Bergeron's 102nd Convocation Address - "Only Connect": Paths to a just community

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"Only Connect": Paths to a just community

Remarks by President Bergeron

102nd Convocation

August 29, 2016

How wonderful it is to see so many of you here for this special ceremony. Convocation is an important College tradition, the formal act of gathering (literally “calling together”) the community at the start of a new academic year. And so the first thing I would ask all of you to do is to extend your most generous Camel welcome to the newest members of this community: the 30 staff members; the 15 faculty members and postdoctoral fellows; and the 495 students who have recently arrived on this hill, including 2 courageous return-to-college students, 21 wise and dynamic transfer students, and 472 compassionate, curious, and committed members of the beautiful class of 2020! It is my duty and my honor to declare this new year — the 102nd year of academic exercises at Connecticut College — officially open.

As I was thinking about this convocation, two words by E. M. Forster — that famous epigram that opens his novel *Howard’s End* — kept running through my head: “Only Connect!” It seems to me that this somewhat urgent imperative could serve as a useful theme for this ceremony and for our 102nd year as a College, a year of connections and reconnections. I’d like to begin by telling two stories that reflect on this theme and then offer some perspective on the work that I think we are being called to do in the year ahead.

The first story has to do with the importance of a road. I wrote to all of you earlier today about some of the campus renewal that took place at the College this summer. Of all the ambitious projects undertaken, the most transformative for our community is, I think, that new piece of road connecting Tansill Theater and Winthrop Hall. You have perhaps walked or driven on it by now. For those of you who are new to the campus this year, you will not have known what it looked like before. For those who are returning, you may have already forgotten. For me, the experience of crossing it for the first time was almost uncanny. While the landscape on the one hand was familiar, it also appeared completely different, as if we had created a whole new neighborhood on east central campus: a grove of cedar shingled houses nestled cozily in the trees.

New sidewalks now serve to connect the formerly isolated houses; but the central connector road, along with the lighting, clarifies their relationship to each other and to the granite buildings overlooking them to the west. Unity House, especially, has been given new prominence, with a more direct connection to the Women’s Center and the LGBTQIA Center in Burdick Hall across the street. And these, in turn, have a clear line of sight to Cro further up the hill.

The road, in short, has provided these essential student spaces with greater visibility and purpose. An engineering project whose purpose was merely to link up two roadways (“only connect!”) ended up having a much more profound effect: by bringing these buildings into a new kind of dialogue with each other and with the rest of the campus.

The second story I want to tell is related. It has to do, in a way, with the importance of a roadmap, a roadmap for positive change. At the end of July, I had the great fortune of visiting Ashesi University College in Ghana and to meet Patrick Awuah, its visionary president. I was traveling on the recommendation of several Connecticut College faculty, staff, and students who had visited the school in the fall and spring; as well as on the encouragement of at least one alumna, Suzanne Buschele, class of ‘85, who now serves as Ashesi’s provost. My purpose was to establish a new partnership with this revolutionary liberal arts institution, the first of its kind in Africa, whose mission is to educate the new ethical leaders who will transform the continent.

That experience, too, was almost uncanny. Though a world apart and almost a century younger than Connecticut College, Ashesi nonetheless seemed strangely familiar: in the forward-looking spirit of the institution itself; in the work ethic that defined its faculty, students, and staff; even in a detail of its origin story. As it happens, about a decade ago, the tribal leaders in the local village offered land so that the new college could establish itself on an idyllic hill overlooking Berekuso — just as the leadership in New London did for this College more than 100 years ago.

And, of course, there is another connection: the presence of a comprehensive honor code. It was in 2008, after a year of vigorous student debate, that the Ashesi community voted in an honor code to govern the conduct of all students. This, too, is the first of its kind in Africa, and it has had a transformative effect on the campus culture, engendering an atmosphere of ownership and accountability that is both unique and essential to the school’s mission. It has also strengthened the community, as students become responsible not only to themselves but also to each other. Perhaps most powerful is the requirement that the student body reaffirm its commitment every year, through a referendum in which each student votes whether or not to keep the code in place. A majority is needed to maintain it.

I tell this story, in part, because later in this ceremony, we will recite together the words of a pledge that represents our own roadmap, in a sense: our common observance of the College’s nearly 100-year-old honor code. It has always been one of my favorite parts of Convocation. You new students just recently signed your matriculation pledge. And in a few moments everyone — staff, faculty, and students of all classes — will renew that pledge together. This is not an empty ritual but a statement of our connection as a community bound by integrity and trust.

Our honor code is, you could say, a living example of the dictum “only connect”: it reminds us that we cannot separate our academic or professional achievements from the lives we lead in pursuing them. It reminds us that all of our actions matter: the ways we talk and the ways

we listen; the language we use in agreement or in conflict. It reminds us that each member of this community has a voice; and that we hold one another accountable so that everyone has the same opportunity to flourish. Our honor code, in short, reminds us that the core of the liberal arts is the liberating vision of a free and just society, a society grounded in humility, respect, and the genuine embrace of human difference.

This may sound impossible to achieve, and in a way it is — which is partly the point. The contract we live by is less a specific destination to be reached than an always expanding route requiring constant exploration and study.

And, on that point, let me tell one more pertinent story. Just last Monday, we were privileged to spend time with Deborah Bial, the founder and president of the Posse Foundation, here on the Connecticut College campus. She had come with two of her associates to conduct a training with the senior administration on enlarging the frame, expanding our perceptions of race, sexual and gender identity, religion, ability, and other categories in our leadership and decision making. The workshop was enlightening and humbling, showing us, above all, the importance of relationships in building a just community. All of this has implications for the nature of the work we will do in the coming months.

So, here is a final thought I want to leave with you. This semester, we are launching a new curriculum, and completing a new strategic plan. Both of these projects are motivated by a vision of a more just and equitable community. As we embark on this work, let us not forget Forster's imperative. The work of building a truly diverse and sustainable world is our collective responsibility. Let this year bring us the courage, the humility, the trust, and, yes, the love to step onto those roadways that will lead us to find each other and **ONLY CONNECT**. Thank you very much and welcome to the new academic year.