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101st Convocation 2015 Address - What Makes Conn Different: Minding the Gap and Making Connections

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Jefferson Singer, Dean of the College

President Bergeron, trustees, the faculty, staff, alumni, and students, let me express my gratitude for the opportunity to speak to you all today on this special occasion.

I would like to leave you today with some insight into what is distinctive about a Connecticut College education. In other words, what it means to be a Camel. The subtitle of my talk is “minding the gap and making connections.” If any of you have had the chance to take the underground rail in London, the “tube,” as they call it, you will recall the incessant repetition of the announcement to “mind the gap.” In context of my remarks today, minding the gap means seeing a space that needs to be filled - a problem that has not yet been solved – a question. And the solution to this dilemma of a missing element emerges when creative individuals make connections that bring unexpected linkages together in novel ways. Ever since 1911, when the founders of Connecticut College linked up with the residents of New London to address a gap in the state for educating women, this institution has prided itself on that creative spirit of progressive problem-solving.

The phrase, “Minding the gap” can be thought of as a cautionary warning – “Look out!” – “Danger!” For Connecticut College students, faculty, and staff, however, minding the gap means a willingness to accept uncertainty – to enter in a questioning space and not shy away from it. But even more - Camels Embrace the Gap – they see it as space of possibilities. At the heart of being a Camel is a certain spirit of “playfulness” in all that we do and accomplish (who else living on a water-inundated coastline would call their sports teams “Camels”?). To play is to explore alternative worlds – a gap can be a playground for the imagination (once again it is no coincidence that a Conn alum, Chris Gifford, is a co-creator of *Dora the Explorer!*). And when it comes to generating original solutions, play can be a serious business.

For these reasons, when we sought to revise our curriculum in response to the demands of the changing workplace and an emerging global society, our faculty, staff, and students worked together to come up with an innovative set of reforms that emphasizes integrative learning and connections among academics, community engagement, and career preparation. The heart of this new Connections Curriculum is to encourage all of our students to access their creativity and look for questions that stir their passions – to bring their imagination to gaps in our current body of knowledge and social structures – and then look for integrative responses. Through our first year seminars, new ConnCourses, collaborative team advising, we are already beginning this process of expanding our educational possibilities and resources in the interest of putting the liberal arts in action.

As you, the Class of 2019, prepare to embark on this work of finding your questions – of identifying the gaps that will be come your personal playgrounds of imaginative inquiry, I want to take you on a brief journey backward across 50 years of Camels who have preceded you and who exemplify the spirit of creative connection-makers that defines this College. I have chosen each of these individuals for their unique capacities to bring

imaginative solutions to challenging problems. So buckle your seat belt and get ready for a ride on a vehicle we can call the Camel Connector. And please mind the gaps!

Ellen Vitetta, Class of '64 - Co-discover of Interleukin-4 – a key immune cell that plays a role in both asthma responses and certain forms of cancer; she saw links in immunology and cancer that had never been uncovered before. A professor at the UT Southwestern Medical Center, in 2004 her student, Linda Buck, received the Nobel Prize in Medicine.

Shelley Taylor, Class of '68, Prof. of Psychology at UCLA, one of the founders of the field of health psychology, she connected advances in social and clinical psychology to applications in health promotion, disease prevention, and treatment adherence. She was the author of the first textbook in the field, and is listed by the American Psychological Association as one of the 10 most influential living psychologists.

David Barber, Class of '88 and current trustee, is President of Blue Hill, a working farm and restaurant. The 138-acre farm in Great Barrington, Massachusetts has been in the Barber family for three generations. A pioneer in the farm-to-table movement and innovative food production techniques, he is a leading advocate for sustainability in our ecologically-threatened planet.

Tim Armstrong, Class of '93, is current CEO of AOL, formerly head of Google North America. Seeing the gaping need for effective search engines in the midst of our information revolution, he founded the Google sales advertising office in New York City in the year 2000 as a one-person office in Starbucks – now the office employs 4000 people. He recently pulled off the sale of AOL to Verizon and was heralded by Forbes magazine as a business genius, albeit a controversial one.

Christof Putzel, Class of 2002, Correspondent for America Tonight, Al Jazeera Television, nominated multiple times for Emmys for his reporting. While a student at Conn and member of the Holleran Center for Public Policy and Community Action, completed a film on the street children of Nairobi, Kenya, winning both an Emmy and Academy Award for best student documentary. Through his film-making and his reporting, he has highlighted the unheard voices of undocumented immigrants, children afflicted with AIDS, and refugees in the Middle East.

Tiana Davis Hercules, Class of 2004, native of New London, founding partner of her own law firm, and program director for the City of Hartford. Hercules's innovative programming delivers comprehensive education, employment and economic stability services to Hartford residents, linking law, public policy, and youth development.

Now let's look at our faculty:

I will call attention to one distinguished faculty member from our history, not a graduate, but a professor of botany here for nearly 40 years,

Richard Goodwin was one of the original Founders of the Nature Conservancy in 1951, a world-wide environmental organization, and negotiated its first purchase of land in California - 3000 virgin forest acres, using \$10 from his Connecticut College students as the first part of the \$100,000 payment. Goodwin-Niering Center for the Environment at Conn is named after him and his colleague, William Niering. Prof. Goodwin is widely recognized for being a seminal figure in the conversion of private land into environmental trusts.

Now let's zoom in on current faculty who are also Camel grads:

David Dorfman, MFA in Dance from Conn, Prof. of Dance and founder of the David Dorfman Dance company. Since 1987, David Dorfman Dance (DDD) has created radically innovative performances that highlight how dance can connect to social justice. The company models "kinetic diplomacy" reaching audiences in venues ranging from Lincoln Center to senior homes to football fields, orphanages, and community centers. Most recently, the company conducted a series of reconciliation performances that brought Armenians and Turks together in the throes of the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide. Talk about creative gap-filling – who would ever think that joyful dance could step in and be such a powerful vehicle of healing?

Michael Reder, Class of '86 – head of our nationally recognized Center for Teaching and Learning, partners with faculty and staff from all the different disciplines at the College to share strategies for the best possible classroom and advising practices. He has repeatedly helped our faculty find links between their outstanding scholarship and first-rate teaching.

Ross Morin, Class of 2005 – Prof. in Film Studies – has won awards for his documentaries as well as short horror films. He is currently using film to explore gender roles and masculinity – helping us bridge the gaps in our understanding of the changing role of men in society.

And let's consider some of our extraordinary staff that are also Camels:

Libby Friedman, Class of '80, Assistant director of our interdisciplinary Center for Arts and Technology, and one of its founding members, has been a driving force behind its nationally recognized innovative conferences that show surprising connections between artistic creativity and emerging technology.

Glen Dryer, MA 1988, Director of our Arboretum, oversees one of the nation's most impressive land holdings by a liberal arts college – over 800 acres of extraordinary woods, ponds, meadows, and bird sanctuaries, demonstrating how there can be a seamless continuity between a campus and the natural environment. He fills this gap with creative land management everyday.

Finally let's talk about some recent students –

Ellie Nan Storck '15 and Marina Sachs '15, two winners of a Davis Projects for Peace grant, worked with Native American children in South Dakota by helping them develop an independent TEDx youth group on the Cheyenne River Reservation, the first one in the nation for native American youth.

So what connects all of these Camels – they have embraced the gap and made connections. They saw linkages that were not previously there and made the intellectual, artistic, and practical leaps to fill those spaces in our society. This is what President Bergeron has meant by the progressive spirit of Connecticut College – its quiet engine of ingenuity that has purred along these 100 years.

So, how do you, our new Class of 2019 take up this challenge? It starts by considering this simple query – “What is your question?”

What gaps do you see? What puzzles you? What do you look at and say, “Does it have to be this way?” “Why can’t it be done better?” or “How could I make a difference?” Find a question that stirs your passions and then use this place as your playground of ideas – what Prof. Jaffe calls your “floralia of the mind.” Sample broadly from our curriculum, look for how courses can make links among subjects – test out what you are learning in community work, in summer internships, in language study abroad. Come back and reflect on what you have learned from your engagement in the world– tie the threads together in a senior integrative project – an individual study or honors thesis. Work closely with your peers, with your faculty mentors and staff advisors – with the Academic Resource Center and the Career Center, with the Office of Volunteers for Community Service, with your athletic coaches and co-curricular clubs - squeeze this place for every resource that you can, and then continue to ask more questions as you forge forward on whatever post-graduate path you choose. Bring to those future investigations the creative problem-solving skills that you will acquire here, and that will distinguish you as a graduate of this College. Be a playful Camel all your life!

So starting today –mind your gaps, ask your questions, and make your connections in the classroom and outside it. You are here because we saw your potential, now start the journey of fulfilling it, and, like the distinguished roster of alumni and students I have described, become a Camel – a connector and creator. Good luck to all of you in the great Class of 2019!