

commencement
1941

Opening Remarks of the President

There are assembled here in regular adjourned session the College Board of Trustees and the College faculty for the purpose of carrying through in public the last official decisions leading to the award of the bachelor of arts degree to the members of the sixth graduating class. The members of the class have presented themselves for this purpose. To this meeting we welcome parents, friends, and members of the College and town community to share with us a common pride in the achievements of the graduating group.

The periodic certification of our students for graduate and professional work and for other purposes is one of the regular College functions. The bachelor's degree is this certificate. Those awarded it have survived a process of selection and an extended period of instruction. The instruction has included general education. It has stressed concentrated training in one of the important areas of human achievement. We certify these graduates as being useful workers in one of these major fields.

It would be a mistake to assume that this certificate is the principal aim or adequate measure of our labors together during the past four years. The College provides not only instruction; it also offers its students, for a time at least, a criticized way of living. As a result, habits, attitudes, and values are altered.

Under the institution's influence young women develop in different ways and at different rates. They begin and end at widely different points.

This day-to-day activity leaves a residue we can later recognize as growth or enrichment. But no measuring stick yet devised can assess the development exactly. In order to escape artificiality we are bound, therefore, to define our certificate-degree in narrow measurable terms and have it stand as a symbol for the more general growth.

Equally artificial would be the attempt to determine our own part in the maturing process of which we have been witness. Within the four-year span just ending many other agencies and institutions than those at work on this hilltop have contributed in important ways to the education of these students whom we like to think of as peculiarly ours. And before they came to us they were subject to long years of schooling, the fundamental influences of home and family, and the subtle impress of the general environment. Honestly estimated then we are only one of many factors in their education. For their virtues we must share the praise and for their faults we gladly share the blame.

Nor does the process of education end here. For the graduates about to leave us the scene will change. Learning of some sort will continue. If there has been something stored up for the future, it is not primarily the precarious capital of remembered facts but skill in learning and doing and a continuing desire to learn.

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To the communities to which these graduates go we recommend them. Their presence will represent a modest increase of youthful energy, serious purpose, and reasonable competence in fields where more and more skilled hands, trained minds, sensitive imaginations and stout hearts are needed.

We shall follow them with interest and affection. We shall be proud of their accomplishments and disappointed at their failures--their real failures. For accidents of fortune we shall have, I hope, understanding and patience.

We do not build our hopes for them in terms of popular success or public achievement.

Our expectations will continue to be in line with the values that in our life together we have agreed upon as enduring. They are: useful--more often than not unobtrusive--work, acceptance of responsibility, facing changing realities with humor and good sense--above all, the maintenance of integrity. These as well as the natural sentiments of friendship are the continuing and sustaining bonds between us in the difficult days ahead.

"The Trustees and faculty of Bennington College wish formally to record their sense of deep personal loss, and that of the community, in the tragic death of the College physician, Dr. Elizabeth McCullough.

"Dr. McCullough's work was well known to members of the Board, not only because of the close association of the McCullough family with the Trustees over the years of the College's existence, but also through the activities and reports of the Trustee Health Committee. The Board accordingly came to value very highly the unusual skill, efficiency and devotion of Dr. McCullough's services.

"Even those who were closest to her were not fully aware of the quiet personal ministrations which accompanied her professional services. These have been revealed in many individual expressions of deep gratitude and keen personal loss received during the last few months. They have borne fresh witness to the fact that Dr. McCullough united to an unusual degree the high humane tradition of the village general practitioner with the specialized gifts of modern scientific skill."

It was an appropriate and happy thought of her many student friends to create a memorial for her in terms of her own characteristic activity and interest--a gift of money for the support of the health center serving the population of our neighboring village of Shaftsbury.
