

President Fels' Remarks at Commencement, June 28, 1958

This commencement ceremony is a fitting occasion to reaffirm the ideals of this College.

Bennington seeks to liberate and develop the individual student-- to strengthen the natural endowment of each in rich variety and direct her skills and talents toward constructive social purposes. Bennington seeks to train the imagination and sensibility, the moral and emotional aspects of personality as well as the intellectual.

It seeks to develop free citizens dedicated to civilized values, capable of energetic and constructive membership in modern society by sponsoring in its students active and responsible participation in their own education and the practice of the liberties and responsibilities of a democratic community.

The award of the degree certifies that these students have successfully met the standards of quality in work and in citizenship set by the College. The extent of their accomplishment in our other aims cannot be formally certified, but the degree does express our confidence in them as persons who will represent this College with credit.

At Bennington, the award of the degree means at least one other thing. Education here is a reciprocal affair. It is such that we can say in all seriousness that we who are charged with instruction and educational policy have received as well as given, learned from these students as well as taught them. The conferring of the degree is thus an acknowledgment of the contribution to us and to our practices which these students have made in the years they have been here.

We who have worked with them shall continue to follow them with interest and affection as they go to do their part in other communities. To these communities we confidently recommend them.

At this ceremony the graduates will be admitted, as their diplomas read, to the "rights and privileges" of their respective degrees.

I have often wondered just what are the rights and privileges of bachelors and masters of arts. Is this a meaningless verbal formula or a mere vestigial remnant of ancient academic practice? Or are there actual rights and privileges which a graduate enjoys.

The rights and privileges of a graduate are, of course, real in the academic world. She is entitled to pass on to higher liberal or professional studies and she is entitled to teach. Ironically she may be invited, without further preparation, to teach in college but may not be able, because of state certification requirements, to teach in elementary and secondary schools. Fortunately this anomaly is rapidly being corrected.

In the world beyond academe, the rights and privileges are not so nearly absolute. They are expressed as a preference for the liberal graduate by reason of the qualities of mind and character she possesses.

Every right carries with it a duty, every privilege a responsibility. The duties and responsibilities of graduates stem from the purpose and nature of a liberal education. There is the duty to truth: to suspend judgment in the face of the strange or unknown; to seek information; to use reason. There is the responsibility to beauty; to shun the ugly and the shoddy; to seek, support and create whatever is lovely. There is the duty to man: to liberate him in mind and body so that he may fulfill himself.

It is not the tradition at Bennington for the President to deliver Commencement addresses. Rather it is the tradition to reaffirm the principles on which Bennington was founded. I will therefore suppress my natural instinct, which had almost carried me away, and proceed with my pleasant duty reciting a creed that was written by another, but to which I gladly adhere: