

Trinity College

Joanne Berger-Sweeney

Convocation, August 30, 2018

Good afternoon and welcome! Welcome back to all of those members of the community who have returned to this beautiful campus to begin another year. And welcome to our newest members of the Trinity family: new staff, new faculty, and, most especially on this day, the members of the great Class of 2022 and the family members who've come to launch you on this extraordinary journey. For many of you, we won't be together again in this setting, in this place, until you graduate in four years. Imagine that!

You are joining this community at an exciting time in the college's history. In five short years, we'll celebrate Trinity's 200th birthday, and these next few years promise tremendous progress toward our vision for the future. But don't worry, you won't have to wait five years to realize the benefits: the work we're doing to implement the college's new strategic plan is already making a difference in the experiences you'll have. You will be more global, more connected to Hartford, and a part of a more sustainable and inclusive community.

Think about this: next year's Convocation and Matriculation will mark 50 years since the college became coed. In 1969, Alyson Adler became the first woman to sign the Matriculation register as a first-year student at Trinity College. And today with a class that is about 50 percent women, I'm sure you can't even imagine Trinity as an all-male institution. Next year, we will commemorate that symbolic act and the 50th anniversary of coeducation. Adler's signing of our historic and treasured Matriculation book marked the beginning of sweeping change at Trinity (and at so many other colleges that went coed around the same time). You are the beneficiaries of that change, and you have the responsibility to continue to move this community forward.

For me, this year is an interesting one, too. I'm starting my fifth year as president of Trinity—last year's graduates came in at the start of my presidency, so in a way I felt that I graduated with them ... except I get to stay and begin anew with you. Now aren't I lucky? You have heard from Angel Pérez that you are a spectacular, diverse class that is raring to go. I can't wait to see how you (our new students, staff, and faculty) change us.

Let me tell you—students and families—this journey will be amazing. I say this not only because of what I know about Trinity and the experiences you'll have here but also as a parent who is fully immersed in the world of higher education; my daughter is beginning her senior year and my son has just begun his college career, both at liberal arts institutions.

My children are two different people, in fact, they are as different as night and day, but I see so clearly the ways that college—especially a liberal arts education—has transformed my daughter. And that personal transformation and growth, more than any other outcome or measurable data point, fills me with gratitude as a parent and inspires me every day as president of Trinity.

I see in my college senior daughter a set of skills and a perspective that give her an ability to see the world differently than she did before, to understand problems and frame issues with complexity and sophistication. Her education has made her more insightful—her curiosity and creativity have blossomed—and has provided her with the tools to pursue her passions, whether independently or in collaboration with others. She is a physics major who studied abroad in Germany last semester, and through her experiences, she has learned what it means to be a member of a diverse and inclusive community.

Trinity is a diverse and inclusive community, indeed a community that is probably more diverse than almost any you've been a part of previously. We intentionally bring together people from varied backgrounds and cultures, with a wide variety of beliefs and perspectives. Why do we do this? Because we know—just as every scientific study that I read suggests—that different perspectives allow us to be more creative, to find better solutions, and to live more satisfied lives. Let me repeat that. Every scientific study that I read suggests that people with different perspectives, from different cultures, create teams that find better solutions to our complex societal problems. I hope that you say to yourself right about now, “I want to be a part of THAT!”

Undoubtedly, when you bring a diverse community together, there are challenges to be truly inclusive. Sometimes, community members make mistakes and say things that don't represent our community values. Unfortunately, that happened this summer. And, as is increasingly the case, an eruption in social media ensures that many know when an individual misbehaves. But here and now,

I reaffirm our values as a diverse, inclusive community committed to treating one another with respect. Our words matter. Words can lift up a community or tear it down. Hateful, hurtful speech has no place here, nor does racism, sexism, or any behavior or expression that hinders the ability of all members of this community to thrive and to fully claim Trinity as their own. I value free speech, but there are consequences for speech that harms individuals or espouses hate, and we hold individuals accountable for their actions.

In today's world, equipping students with the skills and understanding to navigate these complex issues is incredibly valuable. And because you have made the important decision to come to Trinity—to come to this place, at this time—your education will be enriched by the real-world relevance of studying in a diverse, culturally rich, innovation-and-tech-happy capital city. Trinity has always been in Hartford. We also are *of* Hartford, deeply, and I encourage you to embrace the city, be an active citizen, and take advantage of all the opportunities it provides. One note about your role as a citizen: vote. For many of you, this November's election will be your first opportunity to exercise that particular privilege of citizenship. Don't squander it.

I saw some great advice for new college students (which is also good for new college students' parents to hear!) in a recent piece in *The New York Times* by Frank Bruni. Students are not customers, and this education we provide is not a product. In his column, Bruni quotes a University of North Carolina administrator who said the wisest students “move into a peer relationship with the institution rather than a consumer relationship with it.” They take on leadership roles. They serve as research assistants. They seek out mentors and become mentors themselves.

Bruni also cited recent research from Gallup and Strada Education Network—an enormous study of 70,000 college graduates that looked for connections between how people spent their time in college and how fulfilled they are in the future. The takeaways: those who built deep relationships with mentors, who engaged in long-term academic projects, and who were involved in some campus organization were the most fulfilled later in life. They took an active, assertive approach and seized the opportunities that college provided.

So, my advice to you: worry less, learn more. Connect, create, and commit to your education.

And look around: we are all here to help you thrive at Trinity. When you enter our college, you join a community of learners—faculty, staff, students, and alumni who are here to support you. I'm going to introduce you to one important piece of this great support system right now.

The Bantam Network is at the heart of our community and at the start of your Trinity journey. There are 10 nests, each unique and equipped with a multitude of resources to help you transition to college. Your nest is organized by groups of first-year seminars. Each one has a dean, a staff member, and a faculty member associated with it. You will live in neighboring residence halls with people in your nest, and while this is intended to help you in your first year at Trinity, know that your nest is an identity you can claim throughout your time here. Your nest is a kind of home you can always come back to, to seek support and to find and create community.

Just before Convocation, you were handed an envelope to be opened during the ceremony. You may now open those envelopes and discover your nest. [pause for this]

Welcome to Trinity, and welcome home!