President Alison Byerly’s Commencement Address 2023

Good morning! It is an honor and a privilege to welcome faculty, staff, trustees, family, friends, distinguished guests, and members of the Carleton *Class of 2023* to today’s Commencement ceremony. Greetings as well to those watching the livestream across the country and around the world.

It is wonderful to look out and see you all here, on a Bald Spot that is lush and green, not covered with snow like it was until… what seems like about fifteen minutes ago. We had to wait a long time for spring and summer this year, but they were worth the wait.

In looking at the setting behind me as well, I’d like to note one addition this year. Behind me on the stage we traditionally display flags of all of the countries represented in the Class of 2023. We have now added flags of the sovereign indigenous nations of this year’s graduates. This is a small part of Carleton’s broader and ongoing effort to acknowledge and strengthen our relationships with Indigenous nations and people, including the Dakota Oyate (oy-yah-tay), or nation. Carleton stands on the homelands of the Wahpekute and Mdewakanton* bands of the Dakota Nation. We honor with gratitude the people who have stewarded this land through the generations and their ongoing contributions to the region. We also acknowledge the ongoing injustices that we have committed against the Dakota Nation, and we wish to interrupt this legacy, beginning with acts of healing and honest storytelling about this place.

In recent years, Carleton has worked to grow sustainable, reciprocal relationships with neighboring Native nations, and created campus programming, like the Elder in Residence program now in its second year, to foster deeper understanding of Indigenous knowledge and traditions and support for Indigenous people throughout our community.
Class of 2023, you have not simply completed your degree requirements, you have achieved tremendous success during a period of extraordinary change. You began with a typical college experience, but before that first year was done, you saw your education interrupted and transformed by Covid. You had to adapt to online learning, conduct many student activities remotely, and work hard to maintain your energy and your focus. As a community, we relied more heavily on each other than ever before, and I think the last few years have reinforced for all of us how profoundly social the act of learning truly is. Learning is not simply about being presented with information. It is about asking questions, sharing problems, and being part of a community in which your ideas are heard and matter.

As I have gotten to know many of you over the last two years, one of the things I most appreciate about the Class of 2023 is the passion with which you seized the opportunity to make the most of your time at Carleton in spite of those challenges. You not only succeeded in the classroom, I know from the many poster sessions and comps presentations I attended this year that you maintained the high level of intellectual curiosity, hard work, and creative thinking necessary to complete substantial independent research in every discipline offered at Carleton.

When student organizations that had been virtual or dormant for a period began to re-engage, there was a need for leadership that you stepped forward to fill. When athletic teams that were unable to compete in 20 and 21 resumed competition, you worked hard to help those teams return with renewed energy and strong seasons. When music and theater groups that had relied on virtual gatherings or had to perform in masks were able to take the stage together, you produced extraordinary performances. When you saw issues here on campus or in the nation that you felt needed to be confronted, you were not afraid to call those out and work towards positive change, and you can see that impact in steps the College has taken in the areas of inclusion, diversity, and equity, in the recent decision on divestment, and elsewhere.
Graduating from college is always an important achievement, but I believe the Class of 2023 has the right to feel especially proud.

The spot where we are sitting and standing today is a special one, in many ways the epicenter of life at Carleton. It has been known as the Bald Spot since early in the 20th century, and has been the scene of countless games, concerts – and even teach-ins in 1970 when students were on strike from regular classes and instead attended “Bald Spot U.” Commencement has been held here regularly since 1950, the first year that we outgrew Skinner Chapel.

Over the course of your time at Carleton, you have seen many events take place here. Frisbee tosses. The student activities fair. A picnic, lawn games, and trivia night during Family Weekend. You may have skated or played broomball on the rink on a cold winter night, or you might have spread out a blanket to bask in the sun on a warm spring day. Generations of Carleton students have done the same.

More recently, the Bald Spot has gained some recognition for a different reason. Two years ago, the College completed a five-year transition to a geothermal heat pump system that allowed us to convert all of our campus energy usage from steam to geothermal energy. This system is anchored by 134 geothermal bores dug deep into the Bald Spot, 520 feet below us. Already, the new system has reduced the college’s energy consumption by 46%. It has been lauded and recognized by national environmental organizations, and we are serving as a model for other colleges and universities.

To me, these geothermal wells make the Bald Spot a perfect image for Carleton: a pleasant, unassuming, somewhat quirky place that has enormous reserves of energy and power hidden beneath the surface.

As a Carleton graduate, you too have tremendous power and potential ready to be tapped. Whatever your major, and whatever your plans, you do not yet know all the
uses you will make of your Carleton education. In talking with Carleton alumni across the country, I have been struck by how many of them describe a realization, ten, twenty, forty years after graduation, that their lives have been impacted in often unexpected ways by what they learned here.

These alumni share an abiding affection for the faculty mentors who often continued to be friends and advisors for decades, as well as a deep commitment to Carleton and to the friendships they formed here. In just a few days, nearly 2,000 of them will descend on the campus. After a period of less travel and personal connection, they are eager for Reunion, and excited to reconnect with friends and with the College.

As all of you make the transition from student to alumni, I hope that you will carry with you the knowledge that Carleton is a continuing resource in your life. Your professors and staff mentors are happy to hear from you and to continue to offer advice; Carleton alumni across the country and across the world are eager to meet and support you; the alumni association, members of the administration, and I hope that you stay in touch, and that you will, in the manner of true Carls, continue to hold us to high standards and share what you think about the College’s development in the years and decades to come.

When you return here 5, 10, 20, or 50 years from now, and celebrate with your classmates under a tent on the Bald Spot, I hope that you will look back on Carleton as the hidden power that made your life, whatever you choose it to be, possible, and as a source of energy from which you can always draw strength.

Wherever life takes you, I hope that you will remember: Carleton is not just your school for four years; it is your home for a lifetime. You will always be welcome here, and I hope that you will come back often.

Congratulations and best wishes to all of you. Thank you.