

ORDER OF EXERCISES

Welcome
A. Clayton Spencer
President

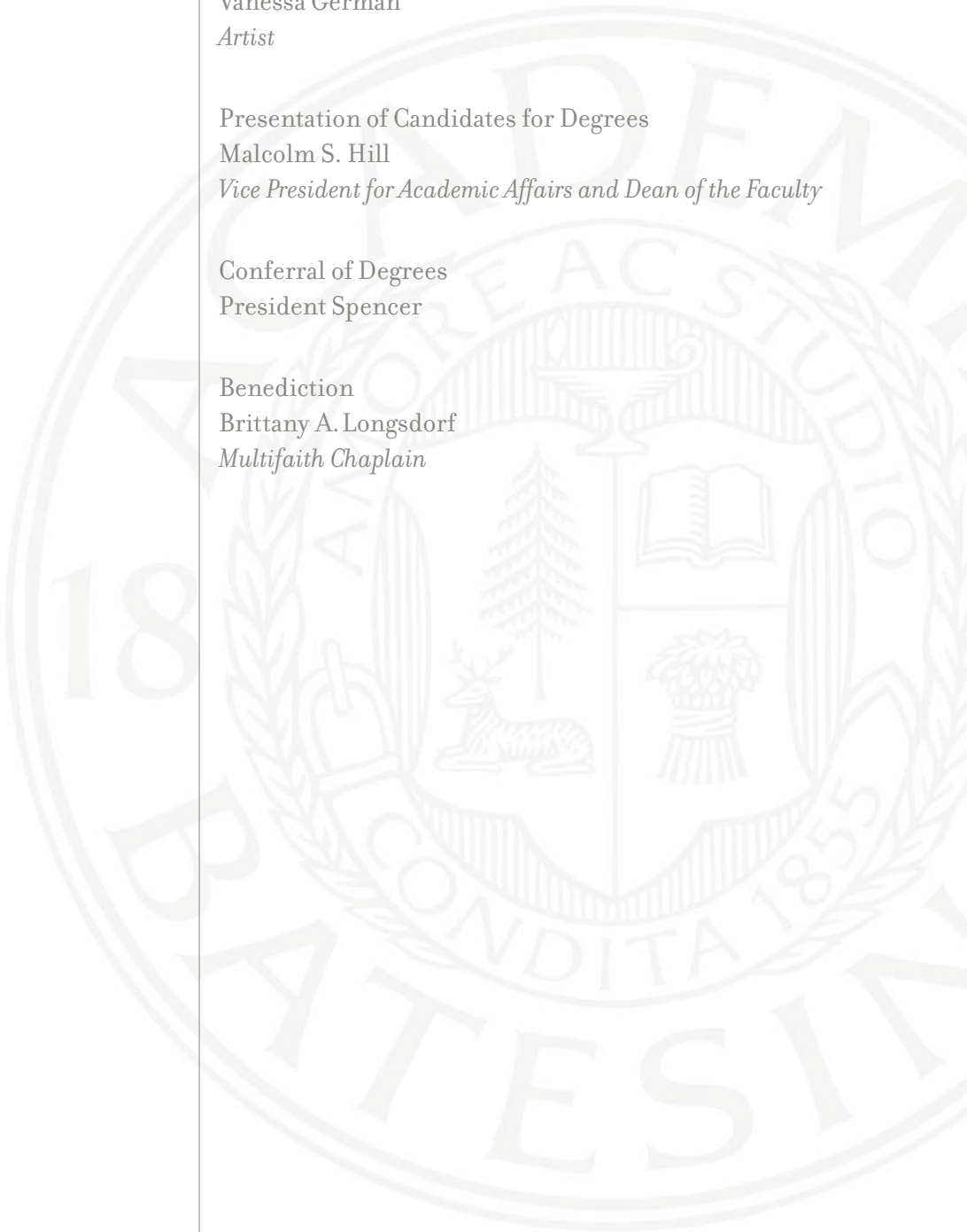
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WELCOME

A. Clayton Spencer

President

Good Morning. Good afternoon. Or Good Evening. And welcome to the one hundred and fifty-fourth commencement of Bates College.

This is the moment when we gather as a community to celebrate the accomplishments and aspirations of the Class of 2020. Commencement is a ceremony grounded in tradition – dating from Europe’s first universities in the 12th century, with students and faculty turned out in robes and hats adapted from the medieval clergy.

Yet our celebration on this day is distinctly contemporary – a virtual affair – brought to us by the aptly named “novel” coronavirus. As always, we gather today as the Bates community. Yet, rather than squeezing ourselves into chairs lined up row upon row on the Historic Quad, we come together from our individual homes and stopping places across the United States and around the globe.

Seniors, let’s be honest. This is not the ceremony that you dreamed of for four years at Bates. Just as these recent weeks and months were not the senior spring you held out in your minds as the payoff for all of those papers, exams, and thesis emergencies; for the early rising and grueling regimens you endured to get in shape, or stay in shape, for athletics; for the hours you spent preparing for performances in music, theater, dance, or for exhibitions in painting, photography, or ceramics. This ceremony will not—and cannot—give you that glorious feeling of assembling in one cherished space for a final celebration with friends, of stopping on the path to introduce your family to a professor who has meant so much to you, or of sharing a quiet moment with one of your best friends in the place that brought you together.

I know that you are deeply disappointed at not being on campus together on this momentous day, and all of us share the disappointment of not having you here. At the same time, it is important that we take a moment to recognize and celebrate you as you complete your four years at Bates. As I tell graduates every year,

this ceremony invites us to dream with you about what you will do and who you will become. You are an extraordinarily accomplished class that has been tempered in a particular and distinctive way.

Let’s start with the basics. The Bates Class of 2020 represents a remarkable assemblage of talent, achievement, and service. 464 seniors will receive degrees today, and you hail from 37 states, 47 countries, and the District of Columbia. Twelve percent of you are the first in your family to graduate from college.

You have knit this campus and community together over the past four years through a vast range of service and leadership: as RCs and JAs, club presidents, members of student government, OIE Fellows, Multifaith Fellows, Bonner Leaders, Community Outreach Fellows, Admission Fellows, Purposeful Work Fellows, and more.

Two thirds of you completed off-campus study. 117 of you are double majors. 32 of you received departmental honors for year-long theses. Almost 30 percent of you have participated in a varsity sport while at Bates, many of you winning All-NESCAC and All-America honors. Seven of you have won Fulbright fellowships.

All this you have achieved while also giving back. You have taken 248 community-engaged learning courses, spending thousands of hours learning from and contributing to our off-campus communities of Lewiston and Auburn.

But there is more. The peculiar circumstances that have defined your last semester at Bates ensure that the Class of 2020 will hold a special place in the college’s history. You, the seniors graduating today, have endured a singular experience – one which we would never have chosen for you, but which I hope and expect has brought moments of joy amidst the frustrations, and an arc of learning and growth amidst the ceaseless uncertainty of these times.

Noted poet and playwright Derek Walcott once wrote in a very different context, “Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole.” Over time, you, the Class of 2020, will become the vase reassembled.

You will never take for granted the learning that happens in the presence of a brilliant and charismatic teacher, who tunes in to your frequency – taking in your questions, helping you unearth your talents, and working with you to develop expertise and confidence in a new field of knowledge, and thereby in yourself. You will never take for granted the easy camaraderie of dinners in Commons, the great food and the endless conversations. You will never take for granted the friends you make only when you are young, as the world opens up and you venture forth to explore it together.

More important still, I hope that as a result of having your world turned upside down this spring, you will understand certain things sooner and better than the typical senior graduating from college. I hope that you will realize that hard problems do not admit of glib or easy answers; that sound decisions are based on the conscious integration of evidence, values, and empathetic imagination; that unequal access to resources and opportunities magnifies the suffering of some groups over others. Most fundamental, I hope that you will never assume that the world can be a stable or fair place unless you get up every day and fight for truth, justice, and our shared humanity.

College is about acquiring knowledge – knowledge about subject matter and disciplinary tools, and knowledge about yourself – your interests, strengths, and values. College also teaches you about the natural world and the social world and helps you to figure out how you will move through both. All students come to college to learn these things.

But you, the Class of 2020, have been given the opportunity to acquire a different and special kind of knowledge, above and beyond a typical college curriculum. J.K. Rowling, one of the defining minds of our time, puts it this way: “The knowledge that you have emerged wiser and stronger from setbacks means that you are, ever after, secure in your ability to survive. You will never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity. Such knowledge is a true gift, for all that it is painfully won, and it has been worth more than any qualification I have ever earned.”

Our ceremony today is all about recognizing the qualifications you have earned. You will be granted—in a few minutes—a document certifying that you have met all of the requirements of the Bates degree. This is a huge accomplishment, and we are so very proud of each and every one of you.

Yet as the metaphor of the vase suggests, the Class of 2020 promises to emerge as a distinctive and memorable class, tied to each other – and to Bates – by bonds that owe their strength to overcoming breakage and separation. By the very form it takes, today’s virtual ceremony recognizes not only the many achievements that we can see and count, but also the deepened perspective and early wisdom that will be your special gifts from this most unwelcome of times.

The quad before me may be empty, but in my mind’s eye, I see your faces – the Bates Class of 2020. I imagine you out there in your homes, surrounded by loved ones—some of you, I hope, turned out in caps and gowns. Wherever you may be, whatever you may be wearing, I send you, from the entire Bates community, our most sincere and joyous congratulations!

SENIOR ADDRESS

Alexandria Onuoha

Welcome faculty, staff, family, and of course the class of 2020! This is not how we imagined our commencement, but we made it, we are here. I want all of us to remain optimistic despite the uncertainty and devastation. It's okay to feel these emotions. But we have done important work throughout our four years that we must celebrate. We are iconic; our story is iconic.

In her memoir, *Becoming*, Michelle Obama reminds us of the power of stories. She states "Even when it's not pretty or perfect. Even when it's more real than you want it to be. Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own." Today, I share a story of a powerful woman with you and what can be learned.

She has a warm caramel skin tone that glistens in the sun, and she speaks with conviction, like a pastor giving a sermon. Her laugh is warm and hearty. The last of twelve children, she came from the beautiful island of Jamaica to the United States looking for ways to expand her dreams. She started community college to pursue business management. Surprisingly, she had a beautiful baby girl before she finished. Over time, she became interested in cosmetics, and for 15 years she managed one of the largest beauty supply stores in Cambridge, Massachusetts. When she was let go, it was tough for both her and her daughter.

She never lost faith. She kept providing for her daughter, going back to school, getting a certificate in medical administration, working part-time. She never stopped when an obstacle confronted her. After gaining a medical administration certificate, she struggled until she went back to what she knows best and where she thrives, working in sales, making everyone she interacts with feel special because of her spirit and smile.

That powerful woman is my single mother, Vinette Gayle. She instilled in me the values of consistency, activism, initiative, and warmth. I got to exercise

these values here at Bates College, during my four years, and I also got to witness my lovely class embody these values. This is why Bates has become my second home.

Growing up and attending a high school with mostly Black and Latinx students, I learned both to value my identity and dislike what was expected of me as a black woman. Like my mother, I wanted to challenge stereotypes. While the college process was unfamiliar, I knew that I wanted rigorous academics and to build relationships across difference. Most importantly, I wanted an institution that was going to provide me the tools to be a leader who makes positive change. When I visited, I knew that Bates was the place.

Move in day quickly approached. As I was walking in the serene grassy area of the quad, my mother hugged me for a long time, and she asked "You sure about this?" She asked that question because she was not sure if I was going to fit in or be comfortable at a predominantly white institution. But she underestimated her own parenting.

When, as a Black woman, there were spaces where I felt cold and discouraged, like my mother, I kept faith. I began to highlight black women in academic, performative, and social spaces. Through the support of the Psychology Department at Bates, I was able to use research as a form of activism for marginalized groups. Because I lingered around supportive faculty and staff, I changed a cold narrative. Changing a narrative from cold to warm is what we as class are currently doing because we are consistent, active, and warm.

Consistency, whenever I entered the Academic Resource Commons, I always stopped at the desk to clock in for my shift. Immediately, I saw many of you working diligently. The cups of chai, the deep sighs, and the intense look on faces created an atmosphere of scholarship and thinking.

Activism and initiative, The seniors who were a part of The Black Student Union created the first Social Justice Theme house, a more inclusive space. Women of Color and other affinity groups have run events and programs even during this peculiar time to ensure that all identities are welcome. The laughs and smiles when a project or an event has been successful is one of the most impactful interactions I got to witness.

Warmth, Dean Reese with his big smile, the pep in his step, is so warm and welcoming to all of us. Like him, the students of color on this campus create warmth by showing up and showing out! Throughout these four years I felt the most warmth being around you all, learning about your life experiences and what led you to Bates.

On March 13th when we received an email that we had to leave, I was in the library and saw faces drop and turn cold. I saw groups of friends tearfully hug and embrace one another, it was upsetting. Nevertheless, once we all got settled, our story quickly changed from something cold to warm. Students organized events virtually, offered support for academics, and hosted zoom calls to celebrate thesis completions. Even when we are far and wide from one another, our class will forever be connected. Of course we were upset, angry, frustrated, but we were also loving.

Like Michelle Obama states "Even when it's not pretty or perfect. Your story is what you have, what you will always have.." Our story as a class is not perfect but it's real. For students who have been waiting for this moment to be celebrated, especially for students of color, for first generation students, for international students, it's more than a walk, it's a moment of victory. We may not have been able to walk across the stage and then hug our families, but we do get to walk with a Bates degree and a holistic perspective on academics and on life. We get to walk towards the next chapter of our lives as writers of our own story. We shape situations, situations don't shape us.

Class of 2020 we are the story writers. Our story is emotional, it's real, it's beautiful. We have shown strength and resilience in the face of this unprecedented situation --and the most vulnerable members of our class and those family members who have been deeply impacted, who are also a part of our story.

Anytime I doubt myself, I remember my Jamaican mother telling me "stay strong, and walk like you got some sense". So, I encourage you all when you walk into the next chapter of your life, stay strong, and walk like you got some sense, because your story is your power. Like the lyrical J. Cole would say, "to appreciate the sun, you gotta know what rain feels like". If your story has some rain in it, own it, and use it to make others feel the sun.

Thank you class of 2020.

See you very soon.

COMMENCEMENT GREETING

Vanessa German

Artist

Congratulations, you did it. I bet that there were times when you wanted to give up. I bet that there were times when you wanted to throw it all away, to get rid of your friends, to go to a place where nobody ever knew your name, that you wanted to just throw in the towel, but here you are, you did it. Congratulations to you, class of 2020, class of clear vision, class of clarity of purpose and site. Congratulations to you. I am Vanessa German. I'm an artist. My installation, Miracles and Glory Abound was at the Bates College Museum of Art this year. So first, thank you. Thank you Bates community, thank you to everyone that I met when I was on campus, to the faculty that invited me to your classes and to all of the wonderful students that I met, who shared stories with me, you shared your art with me, you asked me great questions. Some of you danced with me on stage.

I thank you for that. I am so happy and excited for you that you have made it through your hard times, that you made friends, that you got to eat incredible things and that you got to know so much more of yourself. And in congratulations and celebration of your accomplishment, I have written you a poem. To the class of 2020 at Bates College. So, the first thing I want to tell you is the truth. You are perfect, you are perfect and you are right where you are meant to be in these strange and wilding days. An opportunity is making itself golden and alive inside of you, it is a rare time and you are a rare human being and you must decide who you will be and how you will go forth for the world. It is a light and eager, we are waiting for you. We are waiting for your dreams and your ideas for the restless, energetic spirit that is rising up within you. We are waiting for you.

And you, through these years of your college experience, you have come to know your places of power. You know your places of strength and you know your small places too. You know of the power that resides within you on the inside of the inside of the inside when you are in the click and the groove of the thing that is your thing. You know what right feels like, when you are right inside of it. So from this point forward, offer to no one the lie of your smallness, you get to rise to the occasion of who you are and you are whole. So stand in the truth of this truth and move towards the future that is calling your own name with the sound of your own voice. Turn your face towards that song and embrace the truth of who you are for long game.

Bet on your self. Even if you need to take a leap of faith and it makes your leg shake, it is better to go forth quaking in your own name than it is to claim someone else's hand of playing it safe because the truth is there is no real safety. You will have to become a wing of your own design, you will have to become a wing of your own design and it will be scary sometimes to move forward in that flight. It will be scary and it will be lonely and sometimes it might feel downright dangerous to believe in yourself as ferociously as it will take for you to become who you truly are. It might feel dangerous sometimes to move forward with the vision that it takes to make the art, to architect the building, to power the bridge, to calculate the math, to teach the teaching, to sit to be taught, to love the love, to climb the ridge of your own fear, to crack the ceiling, to crest onto the other side and to see what resides in the light that shines within you.

You get to decide who you are, where you're going to go, what you are going to do and what song you will sing when you get there. And you know your places of power. You know your places of strength and you know your small places too. You know the way that you have crafted a muscle of your mind and leaped into ideas and identities, abroad geographies, burgeoning

technologies and all philosophies of war. You have written the papers, you have done the tasks. You have laid your hand inside of the hand of your friend of other students. You have been places, you have been changed. You have gone to war with yourself, with your teachers, with some of your friends, you've gone to bat and taken a stand for what you believe in, you flaked out and you have sometimes been silent when you should have been loud. And that is something that you will have to live with. You have been changed and you will continue to change. And all of these experiences are available as ingredients within you for you to form the whole human who you are becoming.

That's the task at hand now. The task at hand is to be your whole self, to be your whole self as fearlessly as you can. And you know your power, what's on the inside of the inside of the inside. You know that there is a power that resides within you that is specific to these days and to the strange and wilding ways around us. So find the eye of this storm and see what you need to see. Take your time, trust your instincts, follow your strangeness and know the line of courage that resides right next to your heartbeat. Follow that line of courage, be creative. This is what the future is asking of you. The future wants you to become who you really are, to be bold and rare and weird and contemplative and a wild dancer, a laughter out loud, the future wants you to be unafraid of stillness and hard work. The future is eager for the shine of your envision, for the heat of your hands at the task. The future is asking you to be vulnerable, the future knows that you are strong.

So the future wants your open heart and your heart pounding fears unmasked. If you are afraid, say so, when you are joyful, say so. Neither the now or the past or the future need your pretending those old masks can stay where they were, the future wants your face unfiltered. The future wants your tears, it wants your man tears, your trans tears, your non-binary, human, brilliant, genius, exhausted, woman tears taking a nap because rest is human. So dance, applaud yourself,

clap at the end of the movie, become someone who is emotionally available with your wild, brilliant intellect, hold your friend's hands. Stand up and be an earthling who refuses to co-sign systems and setups that diminish and divide us as human beings because this is what we have. The longest continually running truth of all time is that we are all here together. So the future then belongs to justice. The future belongs to justice. The future belongs to justice and the truth that we're all here together.

We, 99 to 99.9% genetically identical earth link siblings, gravity bound, oxygen breathing beings of carbon, star shine and dust. Mostly we are water and we are ideas waiting to leap. So the future then belongs to human beings who can hold justice at the center of their truth. And you all, you graduates of now, you are rare, promising human beings. You are the bridge generation. You are bridging a past of fastness and desperate injustice to a future that is so eager for your open heart, your brilliance, your capacity to be emotionally available, courageous, vulnerable and a rocket ship of perseverance. At the same time, you know your strong places. And you know your small places too. Do not offer yourself the lie of your small places. No, rise to the occasion of your own life.

You, the graduates of now, you get to decide where you are going to go, what you are going to do and what songs you are going to sing when you get there. The future belongs to you. The future belongs to justice. Who are you going to be? Thank you. I love you. I wish you well. I wish you peace and I wish you and I send you forth with a light inside of you shining brighter and brighter with every single step that you take into a clarity of purpose and truth and vision. Be strange, enjoy your joy, find stillness for yourself to hear the sound of the future calling your own name with the sound of your own voice. Thank you.

B E N E D I C T I O N

Brittany A. Longsdorf

Multifaith Chaplain

Sacred Source,

We spend a final moment now celebrating the class of 2020 and asking a blessing on each graduate as they turn towards a life lived away from this place. May each one breathe deeply and savor the ordinary and extraordinary days and nights spent at Bates College.

The early morning hours of pink dawn, sojourning towards an inventive cereal combination and an 8 a.m. you reluctantly signed up for just to bask in the knowledge of a beloved professor.

Mid-morning hours spent in chattering classrooms, finding purpose in an on-campus job as a tutor or fellow or lab assistant.

Noontime lunches in the wilds of Commons, scouting out a table with dear friends or digging into a discussion in a club meeting.

Sundrenched afternoons lounging in a hammock on Alumni Walk, volunteering with joyful children in the community, or sweating it out on the field during practice.

The four p.m. blue-green twilight of a winter evening, where early dinners with friends become two hour long banquets full of raucous laughter.

Pilgrimaging through a lamp-speckled quad at night to the library, ready to engage texts through quiet, transformative interior learning.

Each of these moments are not mundane but sacred. They are the fibers that weave together who you are and who you will continue to become. You are spread across the world now, a beautiful Bobcat diaspora, but this place now lives in your bones just as your essence still rustles the leaves of stalwart maples and oaks lining each sidewalk you trod.

Envision the face of each family member, faculty, staff, and fellow student who journeyed with you through your Bates days and nights. As your locus changes, feel our collective blessing...

May your mornings still be full of wonder, curiosity, and purpose

May your mid-days be full of laughter and connection

May your afternoons be full of determination and revitalization

May your evenings be full of sweet slowness and mystery.

May your nights be full of transformation, wisdom, and rest.

May It Be So