

## Contacts

# 615 Degrees Awarded at Trinity College's 191st Commencement

## Philosopher and Scientist Daniel C. Dennett Delivers Commencement Address to the Class of 2017

Hartford, Connecticut, May 21, 2017 – “We must protect freedom of speech. Let people speak their minds, but then do not hesitate to criticize them for spreading falsehoods,” philosopher, writer, and cognitive scientist Daniel C. Dennett said to the 615 graduates at Trinity College's 191st Commencement on Sunday, May 21. “This is not easy advice to follow.”



Philosopher, writer, and cognitive scientist Daniel C. Dennett delivers the Commencement Address to the Trinity College Class of 2017.

During his Commencement address, Dennett spoke about the ideas of truth and transparency during a time when politicians and the media offer constant, often contradictory streams of information. “Skepticism is cheap; confidence is expensive,” he said. “This asymmetry is a major problem in the world today and it will take patience and unrelenting effort to restore confidence in sources that deserve confidence.” To counter what he referred to as “information pollution,” Dennett advised building up “islands of trust.” He said, “You should cultivate the habit of asking your best friends, ‘What are your sources?’”

Dennett concluded, “We should guard our precious credibility with zeal and should settle for knowing less than everything about everything, but knowing enough to make informed choices – the foundation of democracy.”

The co-director of Tufts University's Center for Cognitive Studies, as well as University Professor and Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy at Tufts, Dennett is well-known for his theories on the mind-body connection explaining that free will and human consciousness are based on physical processes in the brain. He has been awarded two Guggenheim Fellowships, a Fulbright Fellowship, and a fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, and he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Dubbed one of the Four Horsemen of Atheism, Dennett is also noted for his role in the New Atheist movement. Read more about Dennett [here](#).

In recognition of his distinguished career as a philosopher and a cognitive scientist and of his enormous contributions to the world of thought, Dennett was awarded an honorary doctor of humane letters degree. Honorary degrees also were presented to Trinity alumni D. David Dershaw '70, the founding director of the Breast Imaging Service at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, and LaTanya Langley '97, vice president and general counsel of BIC International Company. Dershaw received an honorary doctor of science degree in recognition of his groundbreaking contributions to the field of health care, particularly in the battle against breast cancer. Langley received an honorary doctor of laws degree in recognition of her extraordinary accomplishments in her professional endeavors in the field of law and her commitment to her Connecticut hometown of Norwalk, where she has volunteered her service with several civic and nonprofit entities.

On a picture-perfect spring day, 581 undergraduates – Trinity's largest graduating class ever – and 34 graduate students received their degrees before a crowd of thousands of students, faculty, administrators, family members, and other guests gathered on the Main Quadrangle in front of Trinity's historic Long Walk buildings. Among the undergraduates, 367 received bachelor of arts degrees and 214 were awarded bachelor of science degrees. Twenty-seven of the undergraduate degree recipients were Individualized Degree Program (IDP) students.

During his Commencement address, Dennett spoke about the ideas of truth and transparency during a time when politicians

Graduate Douglas Barrett Curtin, who was selected as the student speaker, talked about how the simple act of saying hello to someone can lead to life-changing interactions. "I said hello to a homeless man outside my internship one day. That man, Jake, ended up inspiring me to start a Food Recovery Network chapter at Trinity, which has led to more than 4,000 pounds of food being donated from Mather Dining Hall [to McKinney Shelter in Hartford]." Curtin, a double major in political science and educational studies from Wayland, Massachusetts, went on to tell his fellow graduates, "Put down your phone, put down your prejudices, and defy your predispositions of what we might assume of others because of their race, ethnicity, class, or any barriers that try to define us." An article about Curtin and his Food Recovery Network efforts was [featured recently in the \*Hartford Courant\*](#). Read his full remarks [here](#).



Class of 2017 graduate Douglas Barrett Curtin was selected as the student speaker for Trinity's Commencement.

The valedictorian and salutatorian of the Class of 2017 were also named. Phong Kim Quach, of Vietnam, had the highest grade point average among his peers and was named valedictorian. He earned his bachelor of science degree summa cum laude with dual majors in biology and chemistry, both of which were completed with honors. The salutatorian was Jessica Yetta Chotiner, of North Carolina. She earned her bachelor of science degree summa cum laude with honors in her major of biology. She also completed a minor in Italian language.

On behalf of the Board of Trustees, awards were presented for faculty, staff, and student excellence. The Trustee Award for Faculty Excellence went to [Sarah A. Raskin](#), Charles A. Dana Research Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience, for her devotion to teaching and her accomplishments as a researcher. Raskin, who has engaged students for nearly 25 years, is a prolific researcher and recognized scholar who has devoted most of her career to the improvement of life for people with brain injuries.

[John Rose](#), John Rose College Organist-and-Directorship Distinguished Chair of Chapel Music and adjunct professor of music, ex officio, was awarded the Trustee Award for Staff Excellence for his contributions to enriching the lives of Trinity students and the Greater Hartford community. Rose has overseen Chapel music for 40 years and has served as director of The Chapel Singers. He also is a performer, with 16 recordings and countless shows throughout the world. [Rose will retire in December 2017](#).



The Trinity College Class of 2017 valedictorian, Phong Kim Quach, walks across the Luther-Roosevelt stone during Commencement. Behind him is salutatorian Jessica Yetta Chotiner.

Hispanic studies and urban studies. Her academic work led to opportunities to study in China, Brazil, and South Africa. She was the President's Fellow for international studies and was elected into The Phi Beta Kappa Society. Valenzuela also dedicated her leadership abilities to several organizations, including La Voz Latina, The Charleston House of Interfaith Cooperation, and Praxis.

The Trustee Award for Student Excellence went to graduates Dung Anh Dam and Elizabeth Valenzuela. Dam, of Vietnam, is a Holland Scholar who earned his bachelor of science degree magna cum laude with majors in economics and mathematics and a minor in Chinese language. Dam, who received several academic prizes in economics and mathematics and served as a teaching assistant, was elected to Pi Mu Epsilon, a national honorary mathematics society. He also was a head resident in the residence halls, a trainer for Trinity's bystander intervention program, a member of the Honor Council, and vice president of the International House. Valenzuela, a Posse Scholar from New York, earned her bachelor of arts degree summa cum laude with majors in international studies and political science and minors in

Several faculty members were honored for their dedication to the academic life of Trinity. [Sarah Bilston](#), associate professor of English, was presented with the Thomas Church Brownell Prize for Teaching Excellence, given to a senior faculty member who consistently performs exemplary work. The Dean Arthur H. Hughes Award for Achievement in Teaching, given to a faculty member who has taught for fewer than nine years, was awarded to [Katherine L. Bergren](#), assistant professor of English, and to [Abigail Fisher Williamson](#), assistant professor of political science and public policy and law. The Charles A. Dana Research Professorship Award was presented to [Kent D. Dunlap](#), professor of biology, and The Charles A. Dana Research Associate Professorship Awards were presented to [Christopher Hager](#), associate professor of English, and [Sara Kippur](#), associate professor of language and culture studies.

As she concluded the ceremony with her [charge to the graduating class](#), Trinity College President [Joanne Berger-Sweeney](#) sang a few lines of the song "Seasons of Love," from the Broadway musical "Rent," as she asked the graduates to reflect on how they "measure a year."

"How many minutes did you spend learning? How many did you spend helping? How many minutes did you spend growing?" Berger-Sweeney said. "I hope you can see how much good you've done for Trinity, and how much better we are for your having been here. Let that knowledge propel you no matter what paths you forge. This education you've received isn't just for you, after all. It's for everyone. College is a *public* good – an opportunity provided to individuals so that all of society can advance."

Berger-Sweeney told the graduates, "Your education is not only good for you, it is for the good of society. My charge to you, in turn, is not only to use your good Trinity education, but to go out and show the world what it means to do – and to be – *Trinity good*."

*Download the full Commencement program [here](#).*

*To watch a recording of the ceremony online, click [here](#).*

*To watch a video featuring five members of the Class of 2017 as they reflect on their time at Trinity and their futures after they graduate, click [here](#).*

300 Summit Street, Hartford CT 06106 | Tel. 860.297.2000