

President's Commencement Speech 2026

Brian Pellinen



I have the honor of being the first to address you after you have received your Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. You will forever carry this story and be a part of Montserrat, these people and this moment. This graduation is – all graduations are – unique to you as a group, to our entire college community, and to our moment in time.

This morning, you have heard from incredible people – giving great speeches, and giving us all – graduates or not – amazing words to help enrich our lives. You all witnessed a giant moment in this college's history when we recognized six faculty members who very literally helped shape this college into the one we love.

So with all of that what is left to do – what is my job with this charge? I see two tasks. The first is to help give you a touchstone – a thing that when you see it and when you hear it – you are brought back to this inspirational day to give you a crystal clear moment of happiness and inspiration. Many of us know too well that the opposite is often easier – we think of the moments something went wrong or we did something we shouldn't have and we dwell on those. Today needs to be the antidote – this is the thing that you go back to to remind yourself of your strength, your commitment, your talent.

The second job I have is to ask you to do something for the future of our world and our college.

How do we make a mark together that will forever link us to this moment. If you've been in my studio at all in the last few years you will know that I like to think about mycelium – that root-like network that can connect entire forests together – both with nutrients and in communication. You can see this system if you turn over an old pile of dead leaves or if you do some shallow digging below a tree thin white hyphae – these roots are part of a larger mycelium system. I'm sure that there are a few of you here who are racing ahead and are asking yourself is Brian asking us to think about Montserrat as a fungus? Maybe – but let's not dwell on that right now. Instead let us think about the network. Let's look at that here – (Brian asks people to stand - parents, family, friends, faculty and staff, people the graduates have inspired...) The network is the living organism. This is perhaps one of the most valuable things about the college choice you made years ago – you are not only connected to the hundreds of people in the room but the thousand outside of it who have also shared a Montserrat experience.

Mushrooms are NOT the organism – they are the fruit of a mycelium network. Montserrat is the mushroom that is born (and constantly reborn) when the conditions of the network are right. When we help you, when you help us, when other alumni look out for each other, when we all stay connected. When we do the organism remains strong, remains beautiful and transformative and it gives all of us something to be proud of.

And this leads me to my second task – to make an ask of you.

Thank you for sharing your visions, for giving us moments of wonder and disbelief, and for helping us – as artists and designers do – see the world through the eyes of others. As we confront the future, we can't see it in the same way people have been seeing in the past. You can and do show us another way.

Bring Montserrat out into the world. I implore you in a world that is so divided, a world that has so much hate and anger and suspicion of others – bring your kindness, bring that acceptance and belonging that we tried to practice here, bring that creative joy and that spark. Bring that boundless curiosity, bring that constant exploring, bring that serious critique of ideas. And bring the skills about living with care and humanity and generosity – bring all of that to the bigger world.

And I ask you to do this not just because you are all capable of doing or that we need more kindness and compassion – we certainly do.

I ask you to do this because it is one of the most important things you can do with your training. Our society needs people who are willing to stand up and share ideas – YOU can do that – you have done that. You have been preparing for that your entire time here. Our society needs people who can make us see things not in an overprocessed, over AI-generated world – in a human world. If you want to be human/humane/real – you have the skill and I will say responsibility to show another way. Only 1% of our nation will have earned a BFA. Something that is easy for us to overlook because we are surrounded by creative idea makers at this college, most people in the broader world do NOT know how to see the world in new ways or think about new ideas. Not how you all do. So one by one by one – our compassionate Montserrat mycelium network can help decompose and recycle the debris, the toxins and break them down into nutrients that can feed and rebuild a forest. Full of life, full of beauty, full of diversity – and of wonder.

This college community, this Montserrat will always be a place to support you, to welcome you back to celebrate your success and to sometimes help you get unstuck. You will always have access to the Career Design Studio, you will have five free classes, you will have access to our alumni events and artist residencies and conferences and alumni trips that we'll be building in the years ahead – moments to come back and re-charge to take on the bigger projects in the world again. Like the campus mushroom itself (I love the idea of Hardie as one of those red ones with white dots that so many of you draw!), you will produce the fruit of your networks – your art projects, design projects, animations, illustrations, photographs. Your creations and constant creativity may not always be as rigorous and robust as you've practiced them here, but that is part of the process too. Just make a promise today that you will never stop entirely!

At some point you will be home or at a restaurant and you will see a meal with wild mushrooms. And when you do I really really hope you'll remember this moment– you hear our name, see the people, and you'll be filled with happiness, a feeling of success, and you'll know the love that we all have for you.

Class of 2026, my friends, from the bottom of my heart - Congratulations!

