

**Convocation Address**  
**Dr. Ken Kitts ~ August 26, 2015**  
**University of North Alabama**

Students, trustees, faculty and staff colleagues, and guests, it is my honor to be here today. This is a special event, an important event, and I was flattered to be asked to bring remarks at this, my first Convocation since joining UNA as president.

Students, did you pick up on what I just said? You and I have something in common. We are both new to this campus, so this is very much of a beginning for all of us. I hope you are as I am thrilled as I am to be here.

The word convocation comes from Latin and means a “calling together.” So today we are called together to officially welcome you, the class of 2019, into the academic community that is the University of North Alabama. You are beginning one of the most exciting and inspiring experiences of your lives, and we couldn’t be happier that you have chosen to be here with us.

It is fitting at this point to extend our appreciation to your parents and family members. The success that has brought you here does not occur in a vacuum, and I hope you can find time to thank those whose love and support has been instrumental in getting you to UNA. I know they share in the joy of watching you take this big step.

Now a little bit about your new home: the University of North Alabama. For starters, you would be hard pressed to find an institution with a richer history than UNA. This year we are celebrating our 185<sup>th</sup> anniversary. 185 years! That places us in the ranks of the oldest, most historic universities in the country. Of course, we lay claim to the title of being the oldest four year university in the state of Alabama. We want you to take pride in the history that is all around you.

The first students enrolled at our predecessor institution, LaGrange College, in 1830. It was a humble beginning with just 70 students and three faculty members. Andrew Jackson was president of the United States. 1830 was the year King George IV of England died and William IV ascended to the throne. It was the year American poet Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts. We’ve been through one campus move and many name changes over the years, but the one constant theme throughout our history has been an unwavering commitment to provide an outstanding educational opportunity for our students.

This fall marks my 28<sup>th</sup> year in higher education as a faculty member or faculty-administrator. During that time I've taught a lot, worked with faculty and staff in many different settings, and – as relates to you – I've watched countless students navigate the transition from high school to college. Many students get it right. They enter college focused, they avoid distractions, and they find the proper balance between their studies and other parts of life. Those students tend to graduate on time, go on to good jobs or good opportunities in graduate or professional school, and then return to us as loyal alumni who are grateful to the institution for its role in their success.

But, unfortunately, not all students get it right. Some flounder, some make mistakes, and they leave college either disillusioned or angry or frustrated. That's an unhappy outcome, both for the student and institution. And it means that someone, some thing, some system failed somewhere along the way. After all, I'd be willing to bet that none of you are sitting here this morning with the goal of wasting your money and our time en route to dropping out of school. It could happen, but it's certainly not your goal. And I assure you it's not our goal either.

Whether you know it or not, you were screened carefully during the admissions process, and you are here today because we think you have what it takes to be successful at the University of North Alabama. Moreover, we spend a great deal of time checking ourselves -- our processes, our systems, and our people – to make sure that we are organized to give you the help you need. In fact, one of the most refreshing developments over the last three decades has been the emergence of a growing support system for students on our campuses. We are now more intentional about careful advising, early warning systems, and delivering key services such as tutoring in a more proactive manner. These are positive developments, and in my view they were long overdue.

So we can and will do our part to take you by the hand and get you through the next four years. You have our word on that. One of the things that I loved about this campus from the start is the way in which the people here care. They care about each other, they care our campus, they care about our community, and most important of all, they care about you. You'll learn to appreciate that quality as you begin to interact with this wonderful faculty. They will support you, but they will also push you and challenge you. They owe you no less. But remember that when they push you, and the going might get rough, that they are doing it because they care, and they want you to be the very best you can be.

I have a good friend who likes to say: "You can teach someone to teach, but you can't teach them to care." There is much truth in that. Caring is a value that comes from deep within the person. It's either there or it's not. Fortunately, you'll find it in abundance here at UNA.

So we'll try hard to help you succeed. But this thing has to be a partnership. And, in truth, ultimately it will come down to you. Your attitudes, your actions, and your decisions will be the key determinants of your success at UNA. And I want you to hear that message as something that is not intimidating but wonderfully empowering. It's up to you! You are here now, and no one cares what you did or didn't do in high school. You met our admissions requirement, you are enrolled, and most of you have a college transcript that is completely blank. This is the best fresh start life will ever give you – only now the stakes are higher than you've ever known them to be.

So, my call to you today is: Get it right. And get it right from the start. To do that, I ask you consider four truths about the college experience:

#1: College isn't about the next 4 years of your life, it's about the next 40. Study hard, pick the right major, have a good plan for college and beyond, and chances are that all of that will translate into career success and decades of professional fulfillment. This is the best return on investment proposition in the world. A wise investment of your time and energy now will pay dividends you can't even begin to imagine.

#2: College is not a spectator sport. Your days of being a passive recipient of information are past. At UNA you will be encouraged, and sometimes expected, to join in everything from class discussions to collaborative research to student life activities. Everything you do here can become a great learning experience for you. So get off the bench and onto the field. You're shortchanging yourself if you don't.

#3: College is a marathon, not a sprint. Pace yourself and accept the fact that not every day, every class, and every experience will be equally wonderful. Thus it is with life as well. Savor the great days and learn to endure the bad ones with patience and poise. Remember that persistence to graduation is a victory in its own right. If you stay the course, prospective employers will know with certainty that you have the ability to take on a long-term project and see it through to its successful conclusion. That's a powerful message.

#4: College is for adults, so take ownership of your success. As new college students, you have suddenly been granted more freedom than you ever thought possible. Want to stay out late? No one will tell you not to. Want to cut class? No truancy officers here. Want to drop a class because it seems pretty hard? Again, your call. But understand that each of these actions has consequences. My wife and I have two young sons who are huge Spiderman fans. The old Web Slinger reminds us that, "With great power comes great responsibility." You are responsible for getting to class on time. You are responsible for knowing the requirements for your major. And if difficult issues arise, you will find that we are interested in working them out with you, not your mother or father. Why? Because you are an adult now. Learning to articulate a position and advocate for your own interests is an important part of the learning process. If you think we're

adamant about this, wait until you graduate and hit the work force. I assure you that your bosses there will expect you to function as an autonomous actor in the workplace.

Now, this is a lot to take in. But I speak from both personal and professional experience when I tell you that it's vitally important to get your head around the fact that college is qualitatively different from anything you've known before. And the sooner you embrace that idea, the better your chances of success.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should tell you I, Dr. Ken Kitts, your president, was not a very good student in high school. I was distracted, I was not motivated, and when it came to my studies, I mailed it in. I did just enough to get by, and I had the lousy grades to show for it. Fortunately for me, my SAT score was just high enough to offset some of that damage, and a university not unlike UNA decided to give me a chance.

I wish I could tell you what flipped the switch for me. I can't. It wasn't any one thing. It just happened the summer and fall when I made the transition to college. I wasn't happy with myself, and I knew that I had been underperforming. I also knew that my parents deserved better. They had shown me nothing but love and unconditional support, and they were helping me pay for college, so I had no excuses. And as I sat in my first college class – and it was good, and I liked it – I decided right then to become someone very different.

Much to everyone's surprise, the kid that had barely made it through high school made the Dean's List my first semester in college. And I followed it up in the spring with another Dean's List performance. Then another. As I neared graduation, I had an unbroken string of semesters for which I had received this distinction, and my grades were still going up – not a 4.0 or *summa cum laude* territory, but very good nonetheless.

Now here's the important point: this transformation went way beyond grades. The grades were just a reflection of the fact that I had learned to love learning. I loved my classes, I loved watching skilled professors practice their craft, so knowledgeable and confident. I loved having access to a great library on my campus, and I enjoyed the great discussions with my professors and peers. I learned to ask questions. I learned to do research. I learned I was smart enough and competent enough to handle a study abroad opportunity. I learned to communicate well, both with the written word and in oral presentations.

Because of my academic success, graduation turned out to be not an ending but a beginning. Good companies and government agencies wanted to talk with me about employment. I received scholarship offers to pursue a Master's degree, and I ultimately opted to do just that. Later I added a PhD, and – well,

you already know the rest of my story from that point on. But again, I go back to my entry to college as a freshman as the key turning point in my life.

My mother-in-law loves poetry and literature, and her favorite poet is Robert Frost, and her favorite poem by him is *The Road Not Taken*. It's famous. Many of you know it. Frost writes of his own decision when confronted with a fork in the road, of how he made the right decision, chose the right path in that beautiful yellow wood. He concludes by telling us that his choice, his wise choice, made all the difference. I love that line. Not some of the difference, not most of the difference – but all of the difference.

So what do you make of my testimony today? The great majority of you are in a better place than I was as a freshman. You haven't been mailing it in, your high school grades were not dismal, and hopefully you already have good study habits. If not, change direction now. Follow the poet down that less travelled path. It will require much of you but will give even more back in return. And if you're already a good student, here's a news flash: you can be even better. We need you to reach for the stars. Nothing elevates a college classroom any quicker than having students in it who are serious about the love of learning.

UNA is a better place because you are here. Our mascot at UNA is Leo III. He is majestic, strong, and the king of the jungle. His roar can be heard all across campus. Let his roar embolden you to keep the course and stay true to yourself. Remain the master of your fate, the captain of your soul. Stay confident. Stay focused.

As ambassadors of UNA, you represent this school wherever you go and whatever you do. Remember that, and make us proud! This is a great school with a great history in a great setting. Our golden age is just beginning. It's our time to roar, and now it's yours, too. Welcome to the University of North Alabama!