

CONVOCATION: MEANING, VALUE, PURPOSES, & PRACTICES

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This document provides information on (a) the meaning and purposes of convocation, (b) the value and advantages of convocation, and (c) a sample of convocation practices and procedures employed at other institutions.

Meaning of Convocation

Literally defined, the term “convocation” means an assembly of persons. In the context of higher education, convocation may be operationally defined as an assembly of members of the college community who come together for any or all of the following purposes:

- (1) to *celebrate* new students’ entry into higher education,
- (2) to *officially welcome* new students to the college,
- (3) to *formally induct* new students into the college,
- (4) to build a sense of *group identity* or *community* among members of the entering class,
- (5) to *articulate the institution’s mission* and *expectations* to new students, and
- (6) to create a favorable *first impression* of the college entering students (or, at least a more favorable first impression than that created by immediately subjecting new students to the anxiety of placement testing or the mania of course registration).

Convocation also serves to recreate and reaffirm a traditional higher education ritual: the “matriculation” ceremony. Although the term *matriculation* has now become virtually synonymous with college “registration” or “enrollment,” historically, it referred to an induction ceremony that signified the incorporation of freshmen into the university’s community of learners. As the late Ernest Boyer reported in his influential book, *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*, “The term ‘matriculation’ has largely disappeared from the vocabulary of the modern American college, and with it the sense of a student’s formal installation into a learning community. The ‘matricula’ was a list or register of persons belonging to a society or order. To matriculate is to incorporate someone into a society or body of persons by insertion of his name in a register” (Boyer, 1987, p. 43).

The Case for Convocation

Convocation also implements a number of key research-based principles that have been found to foster student involvement, commitment, and retention, such as the following:

* It is a community-building *ritual* that promotes student identification with the institution and facilitates a sense of class membership. In so doing, it implements one of the key distinguishing features of “involving colleges” identified by George Kuh and his associates: “An Involving College makes a concerted effort to help newcomers feel welcome while at the same time articulating what the institution stands for” (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991, p. 258).

Convocation also meets John Gardner's defining characteristic of all bona fide first-year experience programs: "They all represent a deliberately designed attempt to provide a rite of passage in which students are supported, welcomed, celebrated, and ultimately assimilated" (Gardner, 1986, p. 266).

* It serves to make new students feel less marginalized and more *significant*—that they really belong and "*matter*" to the college (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989).

* It is a meaningful *rite of passage* that marks and memorializes a major life transition for students and the college's role in facilitating that transition (Tinto, 1993).

* It serves to "*validate*" *first-generation students* for whom the transition to college is particularly notable, because it is a life event that no other members of their immediate family have experienced (Rendon, 1994).

* It functions as an effective complement to the informal, small-group experiences that comprise new-student orientation (e.g. small-group icebreakers and other peer-bonding experiences); it augments these informal experiences with a *more formal, academic event that involves a large (whole-class) community experience*.

* It promotes meaningful involvement of students' parents and family members in the orientation process because they may be invited to this celebrative ceremony for their son or daughter, just as they are invited to graduation ceremony.

* It embodies the program-effectiveness principle of "*front loading*"—i.e., reallocation of institutional resources to the front of the college experience, where they reach students at a time when they are most impressionable and most vulnerable, and when allocated resources are most likely to have long-term impact (National Institute of Education, 1984).

* It infuses an academic flavor into new-student orientation involves by getting the college faculty involved in the orientation program, and in the process, may help unify the Divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs by getting both of these divisions involved in the planning and execution of the event. This collaboration can reduce some of the "*persistent gap*" or "*schism*" between Academic and Student Affairs (American College Personnel Association, 1994), and may serve to stimulate the formation of other productive partnerships between these two key divisions of the college. Kuh (2005) argues that, during welcome week, many colleges err in the direction of helping students to "become comfortable" in their new surroundings and to "have fun with their new acquaintances" but place too little emphasis on "academic socialization" (p. 105).

* It combines with graduation to provide meaningful and complementary "bookends" to the college experience, with both programs serving as celebrative rites of passage that represent *commencement*—a new start or beginning.

The power of convocation is supported by the research of Harvard professor, Richard Light (2001), who conducted extensive interviews with college students for the purpose of assessing the impact of different undergraduate experiences on their development. One college senior's

comments about the ideas presented to him during convocation provide a poignant illustration of the power of this event: “I remember them because those ideas were presented to all of us so soon as new students, with all of us a bit nervous, all eager to do well, all eager to meet new people. It was one thing we all had in common—we had all heard the same welcoming presentation. The main thing is that it set a tone. I think hitting us right out of the gate, when we first arrived, was critical and a good idea” (p. 205).