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### Early Pomp and Circumstance

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For an increasing number of college administrators, hosting an opening convocation ceremony is not just tradition for tradition's sake; many believe the ritual can improve student retention.

The University of Vermont, for example, introduced a [new convocation ceremony](#) two years ago as part of a comprehensive effort to boost first-year retention and graduation rates. The revamped ceremony stands in stark contrast to the fairly modest and sparsely attended event of years past.

Instead of being held mid-week after courses have started, Vermont's convocation now occurs the night before classes begin. Also, the event is now mandatory for incoming students, or as mandatory as an event can be without punishment for lack of attendance. Instead of just hearing from the president, incoming students now hear an address from an author whose book the class was assigned to read over the summer. (This year, students heard from Tracey Kidder, author of [Mountains Beyond Mountains](#), and took part in a question and answer session with him.) Finally, incorporating the new convocation with an existing tradition, students process down the streets of Burlington to the university's green overlooking Lake Champlain, where they take part in a candlelit ceremony at twilight.

"I think it's important for our students to see the faculty in regalia and go through all that's involved with this rite of passage," said Dani Comey, associate director of student life at Vermont. "They've joined a new community that has expectations of them. Our challenge is to get them to stop and reflect as to why they're really here. We do these things with an eye toward retention, yes. But, it's more about community building. When students feel a sense of belonging at a place, they're less likely to leave."

As Vermont only has one year's worth of retention data to show since the advent of the new convocation – the retention of first-year students remained at 86 percent the year after it was introduced – officials there believe the immediate impact of the ceremony is largely intangible but argue that it, in addition to other first-year experience programs, will help boost their figures in the future.

Bryce Jones, Vermont junior and Student Government Association president, recalled the experience of attending his convocation, the first to be overhauled by the university, with excitement.

"It was a very welcoming event," said Jones, a student from Idaho. "It was great to see all of my classmates for the first time. I remember thinking when I arrived here, 'Did I make the right decision coming to Vermont?' And Vermont seemed to respond at that event, or at least make the first steps toward responding to me. I walked away feeling good about this place."

Jennifer R. Keup, director of the [National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition](#), at the University of South Carolina, said she has seen a number of institutions dust off their convocation ceremonies with an eye toward improving retention.

"There are tools that go in and out of vogue in higher education, and this one went out of vogue," Keup said. "But it's come back, with a more renewed focus on academics. You're seeing the resurgence of these ritual-like convocations to complement more casual student events. Now, instead of having the dean get up and say, 'Look to your left and your right. One of the three of you won't be there at graduation,' you'll see more people say, 'We're making a commitment to have all of you at graduation.' This interest in retention is bringing back an event, for all its trappings and ritual, that looks a lot like graduation. Participation in ritual is meaningful, and institutions who are doing this aren't doing so in a keeping-up-with-the-Joneses kind of way."

Institutions with convocations are typically either small liberal arts colleges or other highly selective four-year universities, Keup said, musing that their lengthy institutional history likely inclines them to have such traditions.

Still, new brands of these opening ceremonies are popping up at institutions of all sorts all over the country. The changes to the ceremony are both large and small. This year, for example, Carnegie Mellon University gave each freshman at its convocation a specially designed lapel pin to wear with the institution's name inscribed on it. Also, last year, Pace University, in New York, adopted a common reading selection for incoming students, and the book's author spoke for the convocation.

Philander Smith College, a private historically black institution in Arkansas, introduced a convocation ceremony four years ago at the behest of Walter M. Kimbrough, then its new president. Among other new traditions, students receive medallions with their class year. Kimbrough said this emphasizes to his students in a very material way that they are expected to graduate in four years, an expectation in keeping with the institution's goal of improving its retention and graduation rates.

Students there hear from the president and another [high-profile speaker](#), but Philander Smith's convocation also focuses more on its students and the institution's focus on social justice. [This year's convocation](#) paid tribute to a community member who intervened in a domestic violence dispute while he was working at a fast food restaurant. The 23-year-old was shot several times while defending a woman who was being beaten by her husband. For his heroic actions, the college bestowed upon him its first annual award honoring someone who "epitomizes the fight for justice." Kimbrough noted that he rarely sees a young black man being recognized as a hero and that he thought the event sent a powerful message to his incoming students.



Photo: Dan Pierce, Philander Smith College

Nigel Haskett (center) receives the first Ozell Sutton (left) medal of justice at Philander Smith College's convocation last week as Walter Kimbrough (right), president, looks on.

"Traditions can be good, if they have meaning," Kimbrough said. "And I think ours has meaning, and helps generate more of a community on our campus."

Still, there can be too much pomp and circumstance. Officials at the State University of New York at Stony Brook recently overhauled its convocation ceremony because students said it was too long and boring.

Heather Robinson, director of student orientation and family programs at Stony Brook, said the program was shortened from an hour to 30 minutes. In addition, more contemporary elements were added to entertain students during the processional. For example, a disc jockey and the university's marching band now perform at the event. Last year, the institution had 3,800 of its 4,000 incoming students attend the refurbished event.

"Being a fairly young institution, any type of tradition is important," Robinson said. "Yes, it's ritual. But, even if it's just psychological, it helps our students get excited about being here. It helps them envision graduation and know that, in four years, they will have accomplished a lot. Also, as an institution, it shows our commitment to our students. What you're seeing a lot of orientation staffs do is find ways to make events like this more useful and meaningful. You can't do the same things every year. You need to find ways to stay current and maintain tradition."

— **David Moltz**

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