

**PRESIDENT STEVEN P. O'DAY  
AUSTIN COLLEGE**

**Opening Convocation Address  
August 23, 2021**

This is the first convocation for approximately 320 first-year and transfer students. You hail from Texas and 11 other states, and four other countries. You are diverse (almost 49 percent are students of color). Almost 26 percent of you are first generation students. As with every class at Austin College, the Class of 2025 brings varied interests and gifts. In this Class is someone who works at the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum and is one of the youngest Docents in the entire country. In this Class is a world robotics champion. In this Class is someone who is conducting Cardiothoracic research at Baylor Scott and White. The entire Class comes from different places and backgrounds. You bring different talents and experiences. You are budding scholars and artists, writers and athletes, musicians, performers, and servant leaders. You are also, clearly, committed to service! I know this because earlier today, at “First We Serve,” you packaged 45,155 meals—a new record—to help those in need in Honduras. Together, you will help make *this campus* a better place and deepen the experience for everyone.

And beyond this campus, with what you will learn here, you will go out and help sustain the planet, make our lives more beautiful, and cure disease. You will be equipped to think and solve problems that plague the world. You will work to achieve peace and justice. You are going to make *the world* a better place.

And what will you get out of your experience here?? The answer is pretty simple, yet profound. Your life will be better because you came to Austin College. Let that sink in. Your life will be better because you came here.

And now, I turn to our seniors, our beloved seniors. This is the final Opening Convocation for you, the Class of 2022! I have known since Day One that you were a special class, not just because you were the largest class to ever come to Austin College but because you were my first class as a new president. At this very ceremony, when you first arrived in August of 2018, I asked all of you to challenge yourselves to REACH during your time at Austin College. You have!! I have watched you make your mark here, no matter what the past 18 months have thrown at you. I can't wait to see what you do this year, too, and then how you go out and change the world. Make no mistake, you are going to change the world. We desperately need you to! You still have a little time left here, though, and I hope that you will spend a few minutes of it with Cece and me for the traditional Senior Toast. We will gather on the other side of this building, on the mall in front of Wynne Chapel, immediately following the recessional.

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At last year's convocation, I talked about how things were going to be different. We did not yet have a COVID vaccine, testing wasn't readily available, the pandemic was raging, and we were ALL working very hard to ensure that our students' educational opportunities could continue uninterrupted. We have persevered! Other eras have had their own challenges. Austin College has faced and overcome obstacles throughout its history, and now we, too, can say that we surmounted our hurdles. Not only have we battled a global pandemic that just won't end, we have also persevered through a paralyzing winter storm that staggered the region and the state's ability to deliver basic services. We all have our own stories, but together we have been equal to our moment in history.

And now, confident in our strength, we move boldly into the future. Each of you moves boldly into the future. For the College's part, we are forging a path for students of today to come here to grow and learn, and ultimately graduate ready for the world. We are developing new and meaningful programs in areas of study like Kinesiology. We are exploring the potential of a physician assistant program. Programs in areas like Data Science and Analytics, Communications, Health Care Administration, and Public Health continue to grow and prepare graduates to address the modern needs of society. We are recognizing the needs of this generation's students by revitalizing our summer academic offerings, deepening the sense of inclusion and diversity within our community, and enhancing the ways in which we support our students' efforts toward graduation and success.

In and beyond the classroom, we also continue to update our physical surroundings. As many of you have seen from the plastic sheeting in the Mason Athletics Complex, work continues on the renovation of the Hannah Natatorium that will not only refresh the locker room facilities but will also result in a brand-new lobby and recruiting suite. Work to create a new outdoor space on campus, a meditation garden, is in full swing on the east side of Wynne Chapel and will be completed in the next few weeks. These projects are but only two demonstrations of the amazing private philanthropy we have seen time and time again over the last four years—alumni and friends of the College who are inspired by what we do here and will do in the future.

This is exciting stuff! And students, it is for you! You are the reason we're all here! We have all come together around this remarkable thing called an Austin College education. This process begins through your coursework, and the extraordinary work of a faculty that I would proudly put up against any faculty in the country. Still, we know that learning happens everywhere on our campus. It also happens on the stage and the athletic field, in resident halls and apartments, in the mock trial courtroom and the Language House, through research and talks with mentors,

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advisors, and friends. And these things don't happen in a vacuum. We are here to learn together. We are a close community, and that makes all the difference.

This is the beginning of a new year, the 173<sup>rd</sup> year, at Austin College. For some it is a continuation, and for others it is the start of a journey. Whether you are a senior or a first year, whether you have been at Austin College for four days or 40 years, bring your "A" game. Be open to new possibilities, reach beyond the familiar, engage with those around you. Be smart, be resilient, be good to each other. It's who we are.

Have a great year! Make your mark!!