



Threshold Remarks—Opening Convocation, August 26, 2022

Students, families, and friends, welcome to North Park University! This is the day we have all been waiting for, dreaming of, and planning for. This is the day the Lord has made, and we rejoice in your arrival at North Park University.

Please join me in a prayer of thanksgiving. Lord, we come to you on this significant day. We come to you in the name of Jesus and in the power of your Holy Spirit. We thank you for the safe arrival of these outstanding students, with gladness in our hearts and high hopes for this remarkable year, we give you thanks and we commit our students now and their precious lives to you—in the name of Jesus we pray, amen.

I offer my deepest congratulations to each of you on the hard work and accomplishments that have brought you to this important day in your life—the first day of your collegiate experience at North Park University. Your achievements have earned you a place in this outstanding class. A class of over 600 new students from 30 countries and 30 states, from five continents and two U.S. territories. 429 from the state of Illinois, 281 from right here in the city of Chicago, 11 part of CRUX, 26 affiliated with the Evangelical Covenant Church, and nearly 200 will compete as Viking student athletes. We are delighted to welcome you.

Many months and years of preparation have gone into your college decision-making process, and we want to affirm that you have made an excellent choice. Today, you become a North Parker and we in the campus community stand ready to do everything we can to help you to grow and develop, in your faith, your friendships, and your successful academic experience.

To the parents, family members, and supportive friends—this is also a very important milestone in your lives. You are making a significant investment and you are trusting us with that which is most precious to you. We understand and respect that, and we thank you.

Students, the exceptional educational experience in which you are about to engage, an experience that will be led by our brilliant faculty promises to be a life-changing and intellectually transformational experience. The members of the North Park University faculty, here today to celebrate and consecrate this next significant chapter in your lives, will offer you the inspiration, instruction, motivation, encouragement, challenge, support, and guidance that will help you succeed.

At North Park we are committed to the deep value of a liberal arts education, the value of the broad base of knowledge, experience, and engagement that comes from the individualized attention that you receive here. Small classes make a big difference, and the deep investment made by our faculty and supportive staff in your persistence and success, mean you will have every opportunity and encouragement to succeed.

Living and learning in the multifaceted and stimulating environment with North Park faculty will have the most significant and lasting impact on your life in the coming years. Throughout the history of our school, students and alumni recall their time with their beloved faculty members as truly the richest of their North Park experience. I'd like to share a few examples from alumni and students who were sitting in your seat not so long ago. From a recent graduate, "Professor Hawkinson brought history to life for me...and he pushed me to be my best. He taught me not what to think—but how to think— and he insisted I step outside of my own experience to learn from and engage with my neighbor."

A 2004 graduate told me recently about her experience during her junior year taking psychobiology with an exam looming. She studied and studied and was very invested in doing well in this class but when she took the exam, she bombed. When she went to Professor Katie Cook to lament her effort in tears— she felt free and safe enough to pour out her anguish— “I studied so hard for this test, why did I do so poorly?” Professor Cook said to her student, “Melissa, every question you got wrong, you had circled the correct answer to begin with, erased it and chose something else. Trust your instincts!”

And finally, a brand-new graduate from our School of Education began her studies at another institution in the school of pharmacy but realized that her dreams and natural gifts better aligned with becoming a classroom teacher, an elementary teacher to be exact. She transferred to North Park, found a home in the School of Education, proceeded to excel in the classroom, got a job as a resident assistant, was a frontline peer counselor, and volunteered as a neighborhood tutor. As her graduation approached and the job search was on, she asked if I might provide her with a letter of recommendation as she pursued a job as a second-grade teacher. We met to discuss her interests, but the conversation was really all about how her amazing professors in the School of Education had prepared her to teach and serve in every circumstance. “My professors are amazing! They invested in me, they believed in me, they encouraged me, they met with me and mostly they helped prepare me to be the teacher I know I can be. They taught me to meet my students where they are and because of that, I think I am ready.” On May 10, just 4 days before her graduation from North Park, Maria got the call that she had landed her dream job, teaching second grade in Highland Park, Illinois, this fall. And then July 4th shooting happened in Highland Park. I texted Maria shortly thereafter. I said, “Maria, your assignment just changed in a way you could not have expected. But remember, you are ready. You may be the first person that parents entrust their child to since the tragedy they have all endured. You are compassionate, intuitive, and prepared to support and teach your students. You will create a family in your classroom, and it will be a sanctuary for your kids.

Don’t miss a minute with this faculty. Go to every class. Learn how to think, trust your instincts, and you will be ready. The value of the North Park degree will change the trajectory of your life and the lives of generations of your family.

Today, we’ll hear from Provost Michael Carr, and Dr. Nnenna Okore, professor of art here at North Park, about our readiness to provide you with a rich academic experience and our commitment to help you successfully “cross the threshold.” And we are especially delighted for Dr. Okore because her precious daughter is sitting among you today as a first-year student here at North Park. Welcome Jae, we are very glad you are here.

Along with our faculty, you will be supported by our outstanding staff, and you can look forward to making extraordinary lifelong friends during your college years, friends who will be with you throughout all the joys and challenges of your life’s journey. Our Student Government President and North Park junior Labrine Efstathiou is here today to encourage your engagement in the full student experience that awaits you.

Look around at your new classmates and friends. These are the friends with whom you will study, grow, develop, and succeed. These are the friends and classmates with whom you will cross the Commencement stage and receive your diploma upon completing your studies, the friends that will be a part of your life from this day forward. The years that you are about to spend at North Park will be some of the most wonderful, the most challenging, and the most memorable of your lives. That is all waiting for you. But on

this very day, you might also feel a little scared, nervous, and anxious about what's next. That's okay, everyone around you is feeling that too.

But, if I can share one small piece of advice on this day, it would simply be this, say yes, yes to an opportunity to try something new, say yes to attending the Threshold events this weekend and to a game of spike ball on the campus green, yes, to the prospect of joining the Gospel Choir, to running for the Student Government Association or joining any one of our cultural clubs. Say yes to a Catalyst 606 opportunity, or yes to a service project through University Ministries. Say yes to getting help from the Writing Center and yes to a fitness class in Helwig. Say yes to cheering on the Vikings every chance you get, yes to campus chapel on Wednesday mornings. And say yes to every time the food trucks show up at North Park!

Now, having said all of this, you don't have to say yes to everything the first week, but say yes to something you have never tried before. That is a part of your North Park experience too - This is your campus. Make it your home. And remember that we are here to walk alongside you every step of the way. That is our promise, and you have our word on it. We promise to bless you, speak life into you, and empower you to move forward and to succeed in your journey. We promise to affirm who you are – a beloved child of God, made in the image of God, fearfully and wonderfully made. You are loved, called, accepted, and North Park will help you to become equipped to mark and change the world in a way that is unique to you and you alone. Your years at North Park will help you to discover your calling and prepare you for a life of significance, service, and success.

We promise to pray for you and to support you in every way we can. And we look forward to the many contributions you will make to this community in the months and years ahead. On behalf of our entire campus family, welcome to North Park University!