

# Convocation Address

## What Matters in College?

Michael J. Ruiz

Winner of the 2004 Board of Governors Award for Excellence in Teaching

August 14, 2004

University of North Carolina at Asheville

Chancellor Mullen, members from our Administration, faculty colleagues, students, family, and friends.

The title of my talk “What Matters in College?” comes from a book by Alexander Astin that I heard about from a literature professor, Dr. Merritt Moseley. Now why would a physicist want to talk to a literature professor? If I were teaching in a big school, I would be focusing on research and talking to astronomers, physicists, mathematicians, engineers, and occasionally a chemist. But here at UNCA, faculty from very different departments are always talking to each other. In fact many courses you will be taking are planned by groups of faculty.

The Astin book has much in it. I am going to pull out three of my favorites, which are at the top of the list for what matters in college. I encountered the first when I was at a computer technology conference years ago. The speaker was talking about what matters in any endeavor of learning. What is most important? Environment, genes, role models? The experts all agreed on what is at the top of the list. This applies to learning anything – French, reading, throwing a ball. Do you know what it is? Anybody?

Yes, practice. The experts refer to this most important ingredient as TIME ON TASK. If you want to learn how to read, you need to spend time with words. If you want to learn how to throw a ball, you need to get a ball in your hand and start throwing.

Now, you will be in class about 15 hours each week. What will you do with the rest of your time? What about time on task? I asked 60 students in a survey how many hours should one spend outside of class reading and doing assignments for every hour in class. The average came out to 1 hour and 36 minutes. When you add this to the class time, you get the equivalent of a 40-hour work week. Going to college is a full-time job.

But many UNCA students go beyond this and get involved in student organizations, sports, service learning, our undergraduate research program, and more. Here is just a small sampling. One day after class, Paula Tomlin excitedly came up to tell me that she was going to incorporate our physics in a special creative multimedia project. During my office hours one day, Caroline Mann enthusiastically shared with me her questionnaire for a research study in psychology. Micki Logue from my quantum mechanics class was a

double major in both physics and math. She was on the UNCA track team and was awarded one of the 58 national NCAA graduate scholarships.

I get to know many students active in organizations and athletics. In fact, half the men's basketball team took astronomy the last two semesters. I often encountered them in the weight room. One day, Coach Biedenbach came up to me and said "the team is going to do a few laps, do you want to join us." Isn't this a cool community?

The next thing that matters in college is "access to the teacher." Let me show you how UNCA excels here by comparing UNCA to the university my son and eldest daughter attended. You have to understand that faculty have two types of sons and daughters. One type doesn't mind attending a school where mom or dad works; the other wants to go to a school that is at least 100 miles away. Although my son and daughter were in the "get-out-of-town" group, UNCA still managed a close second place.

So I am off to college X and show up at convocation. The chancellor is giving a nice speech. He is not as smooth as our Chancellor Mullen, but not bad. Then he brags about how accessible the faculty are. He says "knock on doors."

I turn to my wife and ask, "What faculty? If they are so available, why aren't some here? Do you see any faculty?" We look up front and see 15 individuals. She replies "I think there is a faculty member at the far left." "How do you know this?" I ask. She says, "Well, he's wearing a robe?" A token faculty member!!!

Two years into my daughter's university experience, she finally realized that the promises of much faculty involvement with students were exaggerated, unfounded, and illusionary. So she called her mother one night and said "Mom, I should have gone to UNCA." Note that she called mom and didn't admit this directly to dad. Well, that is one mistake you all did not make.

In contrast, last year after UNCA's convocation I was walking back to my office with Professor Joe Daugherty of our computer science department when a gentlemen approached us. He introduced himself as a math professor from another school. You see, his son came to UNCA since his son didn't want to go to school where dad teaches. The dad said thank you. Joe and I looked at each other puzzled. We didn't do anything. Why is he thanking us? Then the math professor said, "Thank you for being here."

UNCA's fine faculty are here today, which is a true symbol of accessibility. In fact, the faculty line up and you parade through – some (like me last year) get carried away and snap photos – students thinking – "Okay, okay – I get the picture, we are welcome. Put the camera away. You are worse than my dad." This is over-the-top. Yes, UNCA is over-the-top.

Faculty, staff, and students are helping you move into the dorms. The move-in is sponsored by the Alumni Association and organized by Steve Honeycutt, our University Budget Officer from Financial Affairs. Just this morning, I saw faculty from history, mass communications, art, health and fitness, our university lawyer, the associate vice chancellor for student affairs, the assistant vice chancellor for students affairs, the associate vice

chancellor of finance, the director of our college for seniors, and many students I recognized from my classes last semester. And I didn't see everyone as I was working with the move-in and this was only Mills Hall. UNCA demonstrates by its actions that it cares about you.

My son did take a couple of courses at UNCA. Hey, it was summer – I don't teach in the summer – so it was okay. Dr. Dwight Mullen, a political scientist, gave the students the syllabus, his regular office hours, etc., then added – if you ever walk by my office and see me - you are welcome. I will stop whatever I am doing and help you. My son said that he had never heard of anything close to that at his college. What was that? That was an example of one UNCA teacher communicating to his students that they are his top priority.

The third in the list of the big three is “you – each other – your peers.” I learned how vital peers can be when I went to graduate school. The teachers were not as good as the teachers I was used to from going to a small liberal arts university like UNCA.

The reason is simple. Big schools specialize in training Ph.D.s. Therefore research must come first, teaching second. On the other hand, UNCA specializes in training undergraduates. So, reverse that: teaching first, research second.

In graduate school I had to rely on my fellow students at times for survival. We couldn't understand some teachers. They skipped twenty math steps and didn't prepare carefully for class. When I mentioned this to a friend who had gone to a big school as an undergraduate, he was amused. He replied, “You didn't learn anything from your teachers in college, did you? We taught each other.” What kind of a comment is that?

I did learn from teachers in college – a college like UNCA. So YOU have the best of both worlds at UNCA – dedicated teachers who prepare for class AND each other.

To summarize, the three things that matter in college are “time on task,” “your teachers,” and “your peers.” Why not make a commitment right now that within the first two weeks of class, you will combine all three of these in a single action? You get together with a fellow classmate or two and visit one of your teachers during office hours. Don't be afraid. All that we expect from you is this: 1)that you go to class, 2)that you read the materials and give the assignments your best try, and 3)after you have done the first two, you are honest and tell us where you are having difficulties. It's that simple If you have no difficulties, go anyway, and discuss the material. Ten minutes of time spent with your peers in the presence of the “coach” is worth so much.

I cannot overstress the importance of discussing class work with your peers. That is how you master material – by explaining it to others and engaging in conversation. If you are commuting and don't see your peers as much as you would like, use your family. When my son took his second UNCA course: psychology with our Dr. Tracy Brown, Dr. Brown was so captivating that my son would come home and give us a mini-lecture at dinner.

He would explain a fascinating principle of psychology and then give an example – at times from Dr. Brown's personal experience. Wow! That happened to Dr. Brown? And

that's the principle of psychology it demonstrates? Awesome! When you do this, you make the material your own.

Well, my time is up. But tomorrow I will be addressing incoming students in Lipinsky and we will continue at that time with Part II. I will give you concrete tips on how to keep on track and succeed in college and beyond.

Welcome to UNCA, one of the finest undergraduate institutions on the planet!