

# Freshman Convocation Ceremony Speech

*Class of 2021*

## BE A DEGREE OF CHANGE

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Welcome, everyone, to The University of New Mexico, home of the Lobos. It is an honor to speak to you, the Class of 2021, as well as your families and guests today. As you have probably experienced, The University of New Mexico campus is very much like a small city. We live, learn, work, play, debate and discover on this campus. We offer a challenging and dynamic environment, in which we value respect, the free exchange of ideas, and unfettered opportunity. We are a diverse community that has been said to both celebrate and protest every holiday at the same time. We are a culture of contrast, of ideas, of purpose and of passion.

Many people - some of you included - come to New Mexico because of the climate. We enjoy 310 days of sunshine each year, and our diverse landscape boasts six of the seven life-zones found in the world, from the deeply forested mountains to the vast Chihuahuan desert. Much like our beautiful state, this campus is a place of varying climates. Things can heat up very quickly, and just as easily get downright chilly. There are epiphanous sunsets that leave you awed, and monsoon rains that leave you running for cover. Yes, I am being allegorical. This is the natural ebb and flow of our environment as a college campus. But, as we all know, we also have agency with respect to our campus climate. So, the question becomes: as a community, how do we maintain an environment in which we can all adapt, grow, and thrive?

We have agency. After all, that's why we are here, isn't it? To find solutions to the issues that inconvenience us, that plague us, that threaten our world. To discover things that improve and save lives, to add to our current body of knowledge, to create and construct that which brings joy and wonder. To ask "why?" ...and "why not?". To forge friendships and make memories that will last a lifetime.

Back to the environmental allegory. If the population of a green and lush rainforest (our campus) allows the invasion of choking weeds (intolerance, hate, disrespect) to proliferate in numbers it can't sustain, what is the hope for survival, let alone a thriving environment for all life? The best course of action is to prevent the weeds early on, and to not allow the seeds to take root. There will always be weeds, from the vexing to the noxious. It is when we ignore the problem that it becomes bigger than we can manage. It weakens us, makes us vulnerable and slows our growth. These are the risks of inaction.

## **COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS**

Every day on this campus offers an opportunity for courageous conversation – saying hello to a stranger, asking someone about their experiences or culture, questioning your professors, standing up for what you believe in through community involvement. As a campus - as Lobos - we are all connected and can affect each other with our actions... or inactions. The first step we can all take is to be aware of our climate, and its influence on our community. The next step is to recognize our agency in being a part of that climate. Only then can we apply our awareness to having and encouraging courageous conversations. Why, you may ask, is having a conversation in any way courageous? First, let me emphasize the word “conversation” ...there is an implied exchange of dialogue. The conversations I am referencing are courageous because we will listen to things we may find offensive and abhorrent. They are courageous because we will not run away from them. They are courageous because we will stop and consider. They are courageous because we will speak with clarity, as well as conviction. And they are courageous because new understanding may lead to new ways of thinking. We may not change our minds, but we will open minds and our hearts.

## **DEGREES OF CHANGE**

Many of you may have heard of the butterfly effect (I’m not just talking about the movie with Ashton Kutcher). Over 50 years ago, MIT meteorology professor Edward Lorenz suggested that the flap of a butterfly’s wings might ultimately cause a tornado. The basic concept is that one small change can influence a big change later. For you as students beginning your college career, it can mean getting up fifteen minutes earlier, taking a class outside of your comfort zone, studying abroad or simply trying a new type of cuisine.

We are all capable of making the degrees of change necessary to make our campus climate one in which we can all thrive. Even a small change in thinking can make a big difference. Our actions, and even our omissions, are like raindrops. Alone they may seem inconsequential, but together they can nourish the land or wash it all away in torrential downpour.

I want to start a conversation today with your class...the class of 2021. I challenge all of us to make a degree of change, no matter how quiet or how loud, because together we can share a voice that is as diverse in range as our campus.

So, I’m going to ask you to get out your cell phones that you haven’t been looking at or thinking about checking at all during this ceremony, and take a minute to tweet, post, or snap the degree of change to which you will commit. I’m going to start it off: .@UNM UNMPres will champion all Lobo perspectives by starting respectful courageous conversations and finding new ways to listen #UNMdegree.

## **EACH OF US DEFINES ALL OF US**

What each of us does, how we speak, what we teach and study, and how we treat one another affects the culture and climate of this campus, and defines who we are as an institution. You are a part of shaping this campus. Your legacy will be almost immediate, even if it’s as subtle as that first raindrop. Your UNM degree will be not only the one you earn over the next four years, but the extent to which you apply your agency.

I would like to leave you with the words of the 13th century Persian poet, Rumi, to reflect upon when you begin your courageous conversations:

“Raise your words, not your voice. It is rain that grows flowers, not thunder.”

Thank you, class of 2021, and welcome to your University!

**Go Lobos!**