2000 Academic Convocation

Dr. Ray M. Bowen

Regent Armstrong, Regent Aviles, Regent Allen, Regent McClure, Regent Powell, distinguished faculty, staff, students and guests: we appreciate your being with us on this special occasion.

Our purpose today is to celebrate the academic successes of this university by honoring faculty and staff who have received significant academic recognition in the past two years. Our purpose is also to continue our ongoing conversation about our academic strength and our academic future. We have this conversation just a day after our 124th birthday.

As I have always tried to do on these occasions, I wish to begin my remarks with an expression of thanks to all of you for the many contributions you make to our university.

New faculty:

I would like to give a special greeting to the ninety eight new members of our faculty. It is my pleasure and honor on this occasion to welcome you to our academic community. You come to us from a diverse collection of universities, and you bring important talent to our university and to our students. Thank you for allowing us to be a part of your careers.

Staff:

When one speaks about the academic strength of a university, we know that we are, to a large extent, speaking about the faculty. However, I know that each of you depend upon the support from our outstanding staff as we work towards our academic objectives. I encourage each of you to extend a statement of appreciation to our staff for their great service to our university and, in particular, for their commitment to our academic strength. Many of these staff are listed in our convocation program.

Let me next give you some information about some important and, hopefully, interesting activities on campus.

We have started this academic year with a total enrollment of 44,038 students, approximately 600 more than last year.

Our total new freshman enrollment is 6,632, essentially the same as last year. For the fifth year in a row, we have enrolled slightly more women freshmen than men.

We continue to struggle in our efforts to offset the negative impacts of Hopwood. This year, 2.6% of our new freshmen are African Americans. This is essentially the same percentage as during the last two years. In the fall of 1994, 4.8% of the pool of new freshmen were African Americans.
For Hispanic freshmen, the percent of this year's pool is 10%. Since last year it was 8.5%, we have made progress. We celebrate this improvement and I want to congratulate and thank our admissions staff under the leadership of Mr. Joe Estrada for their good work on our behalf.

While we celebrate this improvement, we should not forget that in the fall of 1994 the percentage was 14%. Thus, there is no reason at this point to be satisfied with the small amount of good news contained in our enrollment statistics.

Our graduate enrollment is 7,300, a good increase over the 6,861 of last year. Approximately 2,500 of these are new graduate students.

Last fall we enrolled 2,175 new transfer students. This year, we reduced the number slightly to 1,934.

Within our student body are a group of students that are especially important. They are the small group of dependents of our faculty and staff that have scholarships from the $2m endowment we committed one year ago. This fall, we have thirty six students on these scholarships, twenty of which are new students to A&M.

We have frequently spoken about our concern for the quality of the Evans library. During the past several years, the physical facility has been substantially expanded and upgraded. Next week, we will have a ribbon cutting which celebrates the end of the long renovation of the first two floors of the Evans.

We have also greatly expanded our investment in the acquisitions budget and, thus, our holdings. In academic year 92-93 the association of research libraries ranked the Evans library as the 58th best in the nation. The most recent rankings place the Evans library 34th, the second best in the big 12.

The association of research libraries has also ranked our library in the top 10 in the area of electronic resources. While progress is evident, we have yet to reach a point where we can be satisfied.

The Evans library is named in honor of Mr. Sterling C. Evans, Aggie class of ’21.

Last week, Ed Davis and I had the opportunity to visit with Mr. Evans. Mr. Evans is now 101 years old. He has lived in parts of three centuries. He asked me to tell his friends that he looks forward to seeing them at the ribbon cutting next week.

I want to congratulate the faculty senate on the successful implementation of a new core curriculum. A special recognition and thanks should be given to the core curriculum review committee, chaired by professor Paul Parrish, for their great work on behalf of the university.

At our last board of regents meeting, a historic event occurred. An event, which went almost unnoticed. The board of regents approved our new Bachelor of Arts degree in music. We anticipate a routine approval of this degree by the coordinating board.
I think it is not a stretch to speculate that we have wanted this degree for at least fifty years. I know this degree has been an intense interest of professor Werner Rose ever since he arrived at Texas A&M in 1988.

This degree will be one of the degrees offered by our new department of performance studies in the college of liberal arts. Dean Woodrow Jones, jr., department head Peter Lieuwen and the performance studies faculty have every reason to be proud of this new degree.

We again owe professor Paul Parrish a statement of appreciation for his role in causing the theater program and the music program to come together as this new department.

We continue to make important investments in our life sciences, telecommunications and other initiatives described in our most recent (1997) strategic plan.

This time last year, we talked about a constitutional change known as proposition 17. On November 2, 1999 this proposition passed in a statewide election. As a result of this passage and because of support from the board of regents and chancellor graves, we have started this year with an additional $19m available to support the academic strength of our university. While certainly not adequate to fund our full aspirations, it is a welcome addition.

We have invested this new money in ways we see as supporting our goals under Vision 2020. As I indicated last year, part would be to continue the chair matching program. I will say more about this program in a moment. Other uses are:

- Strategic initiatives (Vision 2020): approx. $7m per year
- New faculty: approx. $4.3m per year
- Support for graduate students: approx. $2.9m per year
- Faculty excellence awards: approx. $1m per year

We have also spent a small amount in support of our Galveston branch.

As you would expect, we have a long list of competing uses for this money. We believe we have committed to investments which will have a long term positive impact on our academic strength.

In order to add focus and accountability to our Vision 2020 goals, we have created a group called the Vision 2020 advisory council. The purpose of this council is to monitor our academic activities and to give advice on how we are addressing the twelve imperatives which define our aspirations. This group consists of faculty, students and former students. They have met twice during the last academic year and will be meeting again at the end of this week.

Next, I would like to speak about some of our development activities:
Endowed chairs and professorships: in 1963 the first endowed faculty position was created at A&M by a gift of $650,000 by the Robert A. Welch foundation. In 1997 we had 89 committed chair positions. Last year, largely through the bright matching program, I reported to you a total of 122.

Last year, when I described for you the benefits of proposition 17, I explained my plan to continue the chair matching program at a level of $4m per year for five years, beginning with the 1999 academic year. This $4m is sufficient to create eight matches. At this time, approximately 12 months after the first year’s money was available, we have 15 committed matches. Thus, we are almost one year ahead of our ability to provide the matches. This is a kind of deficit spending all of us should celebrate. If we are successful with this program, and I know we will be, we will have gone from our 89 chairs in 1997 to approximately 160 by academic year 2003.

These chairs, combined with the existing approximately 150 endowed professorships, give us significant opportunity to honor our faculty for their teaching and their scholarship.

Foundation excellence awards: we are in the second year of the foundation’s new scholarship program, the foundation excellence award. This is a scholarship program which is targeted towards minority and other disadvantaged students. In the wake of Hopwood, it is a program that only the independent A&M foundation could operate.

Last year, we had 145 students receiving support from the new foundation excellence awards. I am pleased to report that these students did extremely well. I am also pleased to report that because of the hard work of the foundation’s staff this fall there are another 135 recipients of this important scholarship.

Campaign planning: planning is now underway for Texas A&M’s second comprehensive development campaign. A faculty, staff and student committee, the campaign planning committee, has been meeting monthly during the past year to plan the initial activities.

We are at the stage in our planning where we are now attempting to evaluate the ability of the university and the A&M foundation to be successful with a campaign. While there is much work to do before an official start, everything we hear from the A&M community is that the Vision 2020 report, our strategic planning and our relationship with our A&M community put us in a good position to be successful.

We hope that during this year, we will be able to share more of our plans with a larger group of faculty and staff.

Planning has already begun for the next legislative session. A session which begins on January 9, 2001. Last Thursday, we presented our legislative budget request to the staff of the legislative budget board. Some of my discussion with the LBB was reported in the local papers. It is too early at this stage to speculate about where higher education will be in the priorities of the legislature. As is so often the case, there are a number of issues which could divert their attention.
In closing, I wish to tell you that I continue to hear praise for the bold steps we have taken to declare, through the Vision 2020 project, our commitment to dramatically improve the quality of this already fine public university. This praise comes from all sectors of the state and nation.

There are few universities that have conducted, in the public, such a frank assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. I think there is something about the public, no nonsense, way we conduct our affairs that both surprises and pleases the people of our state.

In the simplest of terms, we have declared to the state and nation that we know of our responsibility to constantly improve.

We know of our obligation to our students, past, present and future, to make our university better.

We know of our obligation to create the knowledge that will make our state and nation a better place for all of its people.

It will not be easy to achieve our Vision 2020 goals. It will take the focused support from many elements outside of the university faculty and administration. The legislature, the people that pay our tuition and the people that support our development programs will all need to participate.

They will not participate unless they share the confidence we have in our ability to be great. Each of you, as you teach your classes, advise your students, pursue your scholarship and make decisions on the academic quality of your discipline play a critical role in our ability to bring support for our academic aspirations.

As faculty you must renew and strengthen your commitments to your teaching and scholarship.

As faculty you must press the administrative leadership of this university to keep its academic priorities as its top priorities.

As the administration, we must convince our board of regents and our state leadership to fulfill their roles in bringing the assets to us necessary to achieve our goals.

Our foundation must move aggressively into its next comprehensive campaign.

We are making decisions today which will determine whether or not, in 2020, our university will look at our efforts as significant or simply another plan not supported by reality.

Just as the university in 1965 changed itself through the aspirations study and did it again in the early 1980s through the target 2000 project, we must marshal all of our resources and our determination in order to achieve our next, more difficult, Vision 2020 goals.

I wish again to express my admiration for the contributions you make to the university. Because of your efforts, we continue to receive greater and greater recognition for our academic programs and our students.
Collectively, we have a tremendous responsibility to continue our evolution as a great university. As we have proven in the past, no goal is too great for our university and its faculty to confront. I have no doubt that in the year 2020 and later, the university family will look back on this time and thank you for making their university greater. I thank you for everything you do.