2001 Academic Convocation

Dr. Ray M. Bowen

Introduction:
Regent Nye, Regent Aviles, Regent Wynn, Chancellor Graves, distinguished faculty, staff, students and guests: I wish to welcome each of you on the occasion of the 2001 Convocation in celebration of our 125 years. We appreciate your being with us on this special occasion.

I also wish to give a special welcome to the approximately 170 individuals who are with us today as representatives of colleges, universities, learned societies, and professional organizations. We thank you for your participation in this event.

Later in the program, I will be introducing our keynote speaker, Dr. Harold T. Shapiro. Dr. Shapiro, you honor us by being with us today.

Our Convocation today is a celebration of our 125 years of service to the state and our nation. It is on this occasion that we celebrate the academic strength and the academic progress we have made since our opening in 1876.

Our history is that of a university that has always changed to meet the needs and demands of our state and our nation, while maintaining a respect for our history and our traditions. From our early days as an all-male military college of modest academic quality, we have evolved into a leading public university that is respected around the world.

Throughout this journey, Texas A&M has always remained focused on increasing its academic strength. After 125 years, this effort now represents a significant generational obligation, in which each generation of university academic leadership establishes long-term goals designed to enhance the educational experience of the next generation of students.

To the members of our faculty: We owe you a deep debt of gratitude for your determined efforts to make the Texas A&M academic experience always stronger.

New Faculty:
I would like to give a special greeting to the 137 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 talks about academics and the academic strength of a university, the conversation quickly becomes one about the faculty and their activities. It would be wrong not to mention, on this occasion, that we greatly appreciate the staff of the university and their efforts on behalf of our students and our academic programs.
Janis Stout:
As I express my appreciation to each of you, I want to pause to give a special thanks to Dean of Faculties Janis Stout. Dr. Stout and her husband, Professor Loren Lutes, will be retiring from A&M in a few short months. Janis, your long service as a faculty member in the department of English and your service as an Associate Dean in the College of Liberal Arts and as our Dean of Faculties are greatly appreciated. I know all of us wish you and Loren every future happiness.

Our Nation:
It was 23 days ago that our nation experienced the cowardly terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center and on the Pentagon. These attacks, whose devastation has shocked civilized people around the world, represent attacks on our democracy and our freedoms. It is in this sense that they were attacks on all of us. As we grieve for the victims and their families, we have experienced the realization that our nation will never be the same.

In our community, over 1,000 miles from the attacks, the impacts have been significant. After the initial fear that a part of our campus could be a target had passed, we began to worry about whether or not our students, our former students, or our family and friends were caught up in the tragedy.

I am proud of the efforts of our Honors Program staff, and that of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, as they quickly determined that all of our student interns were safe. We are thankful that professor of agricultural economics Oral Capps, Jr. And his wife, Debra, were able to escape the World Trade Center without harm.

We are saddened that three of our former students were lost in the attacks. Texas A&M has always been a place of great patriotism. You know our history as a military institution working in service to our nation in times of crisis.

We are all so very proud of the display of this patriotism organized by our students at the recent [Sept. 22] football game. The “Red, White and Blue Out” displayed for our nation that love of country is strong at A&M.

We are troubled by the knowledge that our students - those exceptional young men and women - will be called to serve our nation in a time of crisis. As they have done since the Spanish-American war, it appears that Aggies will again be asked to stand in harm’s way in service to our nation.

It is this sobering reality that casts a shadow upon everything we do this year.

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

Enrollment:
We have started this academic year with a total enrollment of 44,618 students, approximately 600 more than last year. Slightly more than 300 of these students are part-time students in the new Blinn TEAM program.
At our Convocation last year, I described my pleasure in the fact that our proposal for a degree in music had been sent to the [Texas Higher Education] Coordinating Board for approval. I am happy to tell you that within our 44,618 students are a robust eight majors in our new music degree program. One of these is a junior, so we should be awarding our first music degree before too many years.

Our total new freshman enrollment is 6,432, approximately 200 fewer than last year. For the sixth year in a row, we have enrolled slightly more women freshmen than men.

As I have reported to you in the past, we continue to struggle in our efforts to offset the negative impacts of the Hopwood decision. This year, 2.9% of our new freshmen are African-Americans. This is actually up from last year, but substantially below the pre-Hopwood number of almost 5%.

For Hispanic freshmen, the percent of this year's pool is 10%, essentially the same as last year. Interestingly, this year we experienced the largest number of Hispanic applicants in our history. As I think everyone knows, our ability to convert these applications into enrollments depends greatly upon the kinds of scholarship offers that, so far, Hopwood has taken from us.

Our admissions staff works extremely hard trying to bring a talented and diverse set of freshmen to A&M. I encourage all of you to take the opportunity to thank this staff, led by Mr. Joe Estrada and Dr. Frank Ashley, for their hard work on our behalf.

**Evans Library:**
Frequently on these occasions I speak about the progress being made as a result of our investments in the Sterling Evans library. This progress continues, but we have a great distance to go before we can become fully satisfied.

Rather than update you on this progress, I want to speak of the loss we experienced last summer with the death of Mr. Sterling Evans. Mr. Evans was a member of the class of '21 and was within a few weeks of his 102nd birthday at the time of his death.

This kind gentleman, a person who lived in parts of three centuries, devoted his life to making A&M a great university.

A few weeks before his death, [Texas A&M Foundation President] Ed Davis and I had one of our frequent visits with Mr. Evans at his home in Brackettville. As was always the case, he expressed great interest in everything happening at A&M. He took a special interest and pride in our membership in the AAU [Association of American Universities]. He fully understood the importance of this recognition.

Mr. Evans always gave me a lot of assignments. For example, he never failed to remind me of my responsibility to bring a college of law to A&M. He remained full of life and energy up to the end. I will never forget his excitement when I told him that Miss USA [Candace Krueger] is an Aggie.

We will miss him greatly.
**Other Academic**
We continue to make important investments in our life sciences, telecommunications and other initiatives as a consequence of the additional money from the Permanent University Fund which came from the passage of Proposition 17 in the fall of 1999.

This $19 million per year is supporting a long list of important academic initiatives. The Vision 2020 chair matching program continues to draw great attention from our most devoted supporters. At last count, we had received 32 one-half-million-dollar contributions which qualify for matches in this program. Given that our capacity for matching is 40, we have done especially well in a short period of time.

Proposition 17 funding is providing additional faculty, additional graduate students, support for graduate school tuition and the faculty fellowship program.

This funding will support the implementation of the proposals in the reports from the Task Force for Strengthening the Arts and Sciences, chaired by Dr. Perry Adkisson, and the Task Force for Building the Performing and Visual arts, chaired by Dr. Paul Parrish.

Our commitment, with this additional funding, has always been to make strategic investments that will materially influence the quality of our programs. We believe our obligation to the citizens of Texas is such that they do not want this extra money to simply be spent for routine or business as usual expenditures.

**Development Report:**
The A&M Foundation continues to do an outstanding job in behalf of our university. The endowment they manage on our behalf continues to grow, reaching $575 million at the end of June of this year. This endowment, combined with an endowment of approximately $246 million managed by our System, represents our endowment assets outside of those associated with the Permanent University Fund.

Planning continues for our next capital campaign. This evening, you will hear more about this campaign. At this point, I simply wish to tell you that the executive committee of volunteers is almost entirely in place, and that the campaign is moving into its initial phases.

We are concerned about the economic state of the nation. No doubt, the economic slowdown will effect the timing and progress of the campaign.

The good news is that our friends and supporters are still anxious to support the margin of excellence characteristic of a great university. We continue to hear from these individuals about their support for our aspirations, as described by the Vision 2020 project.

While I am talking about our development efforts, I want to again tell you about a special scholarship program undertaken by the A&M foundation.
We are in the third year of the foundation’s scholarship program, the Foundation Excellence Award. As I think you know, this is a scholarship program which is targeted toward minority and other historically underrepresented students. In the wake of the Hopwood decision, it is a program that only the independent A&M Foundation can operate.

We currently have 345 students receiving foundation excellence awards; 104 new awards were made this year. The development effort required to raise this money is enormous, and we owe our foundation a great debt of gratitude for taking on a task from which we are prohibited.

**Legislative Session:**
I suspect that many of you are well versed on the budget problem that now confronts the university. During the past few weeks, I have discussed before many groups the difficult budget we received from the last session of the Legislature.

Interestingly, our 3% per year General Revenue increase turns out to be slightly more than our average annual increase in General Revenue for the past decade. These average increases, which were 2.6% per year, do not keep up with inflation.

It is no surprise that we are now depending more on student tuition and fees, and we are using more of the Permanent University Fund to support items which historically have been funded by General Revenue. If we had not been able to raise the University Assigned Tuition significantly from 1995 through 1999, our budget problem would have surfaced much earlier.

I would like to speak a few minutes about some of the broader, more long-term, implications of the current budget problem.

I do need to stress that our difficult budget did not arise because others got too much or because our legislators failed to work hard on our behalf. It arose because the Legislature had very little money to distribute at a time which the demands across the state were great.

Unfortunately, in this stressful budget environment, it became convenient for some to adopt the misperception that the Permanent University Fund can replace any shortfall in our state appropriation.

In a real sense, we are at a crossroads. One road involves a decision to protect the initiatives which, we think, will assist our efforts to fulfill our Vision 2020 goals. The other road involves a decision to terminate these initiatives in order to reallocate the money for other expenses. No one I know believes the second choice is the correct one.

If we protect our Vision 2020 initiatives, we must have other revenue or we must make cuts in services and activities of sufficient magnitude to cover our current and future deficit.

Regrettably, as with the University Assigned Tuition increases just mentioned, the only source of additional revenue at this time is our students.
During the next several weeks, we will continue the ongoing campus discussions that are intended to inform and educate the university community about our future options.

At some point, in the next few months, I will present to the Board of Regents a proposal to create a fee which will allow us to continue along the path we have planned.

As many of you know, we are not the only university in Texas contemplating a fee increase to offset a difficult budget.

It will be our responsibility to provide to the Board of Regents and others, unambiguous and persuasive information in support of this fee.

It will also be our responsibility to establish that we do not have activities within the university that could be eliminated and, thus, reduce the need for a new fee.

No one likes to contemplate the elimination of activities. However, we owe it to the state, to our students and to our community to consider every alternative.

The A&M budget is complex and highly restrictive in the way money can be reallocated. Because of this, not every category of activity on campus would release money to the academic budget, even if it were eliminated. It is, therefore, inevitable, when budget issues are discussed, that there will be a certain element of confusion surrounding the discussion. I ask the community to bear with us as we work through our campus budget discussions.

**Vision 2020:**
Texas A&M University is a special place for all Texans. You do not need to dig deeply into Texas history to learn that higher education for its citizens was a priority for the people of Texas in our early days as a Republic. Before we joined the union in 1845, as the 28th state, our congress made commitments which created the Texas A&M of today. It was during our time as a Republic that the President of the Republic of Texas, Mirabeau B. Lamar, addressed the Congress of Texas about the need to establish an institution of higher education.

The response of the Fourth Congress of the Republic of Texas was, in 1839, the donation of 50 leagues of land (221,420 acres) for the establishment and endowment of two colleges or universities.

The uniqueness and importance of this university and the University of Texas at Austin have their roots in decisions made by the Forth Congress of the Republic of Texas for our citizens 160 years ago.

The events which led to the creation of this university 125 years ago and the subsequent creation of the University of Texas, is a history known to many of us.

The Permanent University Fund, which originated with the decision of the Congress of the Republic of Texas in 1839, is an important reason that today, citizens of Texas can celebrate the academic strength of this university and of the University of Texas.
It is an important reason why today Texas has two nationally prominent public universities.

Given its critical role in our past, I think it is useful to ask whether or not the Permanent University Fund is sufficient to continue the positive evolution of this university.

The Permanent University Fund is divided into a two-thirds share for the University of Texas System and a one-third share for the A&M System. Today, with the growth of the higher education enterprise and the creation of large complex systems, the two-thirds share no longer flows to The University of Texas at Austin and the one-third share no longer flows to Texas A&M University.

The portion that flows to the A&M System is divided among eight System organizations. The result, after the one third reaches the System, is that our campus now receives approximately 70% of the one-third System share.

This 70%, which equals approximately $91 million per year, sounds like a lot of money but it is no longer sufficient to fund A&M at or near the same level as our peers.

As we know from the benchmarking that was done during and subsequent to the Vision 2020 project, our current funding is substantially below that of our peers. The good funding we enjoyed in the past, which propelled us to where we are today, is no longer present.

An objective look at the funding of our national peers leads to the unavoidable conclusion is that the Permanent University Fund is no longer sufficient to continue our positive evolution into the future.

In spite of this reality, we continue to hear that the Permanent University Fund causes our funding to be competitive with that of the best public universities in the nation. This misperception must be overcome before policy makers will feel the need to take actions necessary to guarantee that A&M in this century will continue the positive academic evolution that began here 125 years ago.

It is time for state policy makes to conduct a thorough benchmarking of all of Texas public higher education institutions against their national peers. If this were done, one could then engage in an informed discussion with our state policy makers about how to fund the excellence at this university that the people of Texas have grown to expect.

Our state and the higher education enterprise within Texas are facing a number of financial pressures. There are legitimate aspirations among the other universities in the state. There are historical inequities within higher education that must be corrected.

Access to higher education is a major need throughout Texas. The demographic facts about Texas that we all know so well demand attention, and our state must provide greater educational opportunity.

There is another social contract our state has with its people:

- The citizens of Texas in the 21st century expect this university to be among the best in the nation;
The citizens of Texas in the 21st century expect this university to offer graduate and professional programs which are among the best in the world; they do not want to see young Texans sent out of Texas to receive these kinds of quality programs; the citizens of Texas in the 21st century expect this university to conduct the research and create the knowledge necessary to fuel the economic development of our state; and they expect this University to provide the talent, among our graduates, more precisely, among a diverse set of graduates, to satisfy the demands of a sophisticated, complex and expanding global business environment.

The challenge before our state is how to successfully pursue the dual objectives of access and excellence. We all know of states where this dual responsibility is managed successfully. I am confident that Texas, if it tries, can meet this challenge.

I wish to end my comments on a note of optimism. It is no accident that we have enjoyed good funding for most of our 125 years. This fact reflects the wishes of the people of Texas. I am confident that ways will be found to protect and enhance our quality for many, many years.

Our job, as I stressed during our 1997 Convocation, is to remember that we are making academic decisions today that will materially affect the kind of university we will be 20 years from now. Every decision, every action needs to be directed towards making A&M an even greater university for the next generation of Texans.

If we do our part to control our own destiny, then others will join in the effort.

**Closure:**
It is always a great honor to appear before you at these convocations. I wish again to express my admiration for the contributions you make to Texas A&M.

The countless hours you devote to your jobs, whether in your teaching, your scholarship, your advising, your service or any one of the thousands of other things we ask of you, is greatly appreciated.

Great universities, especially those with the long history of traditions and values of character and integrity that define A&M, are precious - indeed rare - commodities in our society. Each of us has an awesome duty to fulfill our responsibilities as the caretakers of this truly unique university.

Thank you.