2003 Academic Convocation

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George Bernard Shaw, introducing a speaker, told him that he had 15 minutes to speak. The speaker responded, "how can i possibly tell them what i know in 15 minutes?" Shaw answered, "i advise you to speak very slowly."

To describe succinctly the current state of a great institution in the midst of profound change is a challenge, so i cannot take Shaw’s advice and speak "very slowly".

Jacques Barzun, in his book from dawn to decadence, writes “institutional self-reform is rare; the conscience is willing, but the culture is tough.” As an intellectual, i suspect Barzun would add that this is especially true of a university. Still, we here at Texas A&M are doing just that: undertaking self-reform as the means to higher quality education for our students, to even greater national and global stature and impact of our research, to draw on both to enhance our service to all. Teaching, research and service are the chartered missions of Texas A&M. All of the changes underway here are intended to enable us to accomplish those missions with a higher degree of excellence.

The German poet Goethe, after the Battle of Valmy in 1792 where French revolutionary troops stopped the Prussians and saved the revolution, wrote to the soldiers, "from this place and this time forth commences a new era in world history and you can all say that you were present at its birth." A new era has begun at Texas A&M, and you can all say you were present at its birth.

The past year has seen significant change in the governance of the university. The executive vice president and provost - the chief academic officer - has become the chief operating officer of the entire university, bringing together under his auspices both academic and administrative affairs. This ensures that academic needs will inform all administrative decisions and that academic priorities will provide the framework for all decision-making.

The deans of our 10 colleges have assumed a leadership role in decision-making. Four councils have been established to provide analysis, alternative courses of action, and recommendations for decision by the provost and the president. The councils on finance, research, and education are each chaired by deans; the council on the built environment - space - is chaired by the vice provost. Each council has nine members, including three deans, several faculty, and two or three administrators. These councils, over the course of the last year, have assumed a central role in the governance of Texas A&M.
There is an old line that a committee is a cul-de-sac down which ideas are lured and then quietly strangled. Quite the contrary has happened with the councils. Their substantive contributions and practical ideas have become indispensable to governance and to progress on the ambitious agenda the university has undertaken.

Finally, the faculty senate, through its executive committee, has played a major role both in providing counsel on the many initiatives underway and in proposing members of the faculty to participate in all our endeavors. The provost and I, as well as the deans, consult nearly daily with the speaker of the faculty senate.

The result of these changes in governance has been a degree of close collaboration and teamwork among deans, faculty and administrators this past year that is rare in higher education, especially given the far-reaching changes upon which we are embarked.

What are the changes and what is our strategy? Vision 2020 offers Texas A&M a broad path forward. It establishes the goal of this university being a top ten public university by the year 2020. But, let’s be clear. The changes we are making and the measures we are taking are not to chase rankings or recognition but to build a culture of excellence in all we do - teaching, research and service — and to accomplish all with integrity. If we build a culture of excellence and integrity in carrying out our mission, then recognition, rankings, and the fulfillment of vision 2020 goals will follow of their own accord.

Last year, I announced four priorities that would be the focus of our efforts for the next several years in building a culture of excellence.

First, to elevate the faculty. Most significantly, we have adopted a plan that will add 447 new positions to the A&M faculty over the next five years. The present plan allots 112 positions to the college of engineering, 70 to science, 64 to liberal arts, 46 to agriculture, 37 to veterinary medicine, 34 to business, 32 to education, 23 to geosciences, 18 to architecture, 8 to the bush school and 3 to the libraries.

These positions have been allocated based on teaching needs and on each college’s assessment of its needs to support signature programs and to position us at the cutting edge of research in the future. The colleges provided their individual analysis of need in these areas and the final allocations were made through a collaborative process involving the deans and the provost’s team.

It is hard to exaggerate the implications for decades to come of this investment in new faculty for Texas A&M. Essentially, in the time between matriculation of a freshman this fall and his or her
graduation, we will expand our tenured/tenure track faculty by some 25%. This will affect student/faculty ratios, class sizes, the number of tenured/tenure track faculty teaching lower division classes, access to majors, mentoring and advising, and more. The quality of education as well as our research agenda will be strengthened immensely.

In short, at a time when most public universities are retrenching, Texas A&M will manifest its confidence in our future with this investment. While others are hitting the brakes, we will hit the accelerator. How will we pay for this investment? First, by carefully evaluating the way we spend the resources we already have and re-allocating money to this priority. Thanks to the actions of the state legislature, our annual budget was cut by just $1.4 Million from last year’s state revenue base of about $210 million. But, on our own, this year we reallocated $20.5 Million to cover the first year of faculty reinvestment and to meet other needs. Looking forward, we will continue to evaluate the way we do business and the way we spend money to find additional resources for our faculty expansion program.

We also will need to make use of the authority the legislature gave the board of regents to set tuition. We kept the increase this year to a very small amount, at least compared to most other universities. Still, at a time when, nationwide, state resources for higher education are declining, in some cases precipitously, to maintain and improve the quality of education here - and concomitantly the value of an A&M degree, we must turn to parents and students. We will do everything we can to keep future tuition increases as small as possible - including through the internal reallocations I have just mentioned. Regardless, A&M will remain a terrific educational bargain.

Hiring additional faculty is critically important to our future, but so is keeping the faculty we have. This is a challenge when the pay of our more senior faculty, our full professors, lags that at other universities, including here in Texas. On average, our full professors are paid some $11,000 less than their peers at the university of Texas . To address this problem, this year we are using nearly $5 million of the money we reallocated to bring the pay of selected full professors and some associate and assistant professors toward parity with their peers. We will continue to work at this as resources are available.

The faculty reinvestment program and dealing with pay parity are the two principal initiatives we have undertaken to elevate our faculty - and to improve the quality of education here.

There is always a question in a great research university whether teaching is valued. Texas A&M’s association of former students each year recognizes dozens of faculty for their teaching skills, with stipends of up to $4000.
We believe that it is important for the university itself to provide special recognition to our best teachers. And so, this past year, we established two a presidential professorships for teaching excellence. Each college nominates two faculty members, student government nominates one, and the center for teaching excellence nominates one. These 22 nominees are then reviewed by the faculty senate and four are sent to the president, who chooses two. The stipend for each is, after taxes, $25,000. We believe these two awards are the largest ongoing awards for teaching excellence in the united states - and probably in the world. Each of the two other final nominees received $10,000. And all 22 of the nominees were honored this fall at a dinner at the president ' s house.

There have been other, more symbolic initiatives to recognize and honor the faculty, including at commencement. A number of these are modest gestures, but collectively they are intended to underscore recognition at Texas A&M of the central importance of faculty.

A second priority is improving undergraduate and graduate programs. The single most important way we can do this is, in fact, the initiative to expand the faculty. More faculty who are both teachers and researchers will have a transforming impact on both undergraduate and graduate education.

At the undergraduate level, we are also examining either a major expansion of our honors programs or creating an honors college. In addition, we are looking into ways better to link the unique extracurricular "other education" and student leadership development programs at A&M to formal leadership education. The corps of cadets has pioneered several courses this year in collaboration with the colleges of business and agriculture and the bush school. We want to expand these programs and make them more widely available, perhaps even developing leadership education and development as a minor.

Graduate students are critical to any great university. Our 8000-plus graduate students are tomorrow's researchers for industry, founders of start-up companies, new managers, and faculty members for educational institutions all over the world. We will spend more than $3 million this year to help defray the increased cost of health insurance for our graduate students, but we badly need more assistantships and larger stipends for them. This is an important opportunity for the university's capital campaign.

A third priority is greater diversity at Texas A&M. In a state where minorities soon will be a majority and where women are half the population, it is simply unacceptable for Texas A&M's student body to be 85% white and for our faculty to be 85% white and 82% male. Our faculty reinvestment program offers an extraordinary opportunity to address the lack of diversity in our faculty. While minority graduate student enrollment is up 14% from last year and up 25% over last 5 years, we can and must
do even better. Among other things, we will be exploring with the deans’ new ideas for recruiting more graduate students from our sister universities in the Texas A&M system.

At the undergraduate level, expanding the number of minority students who apply to A&M is important, but what is critical is persuading a higher percentage of the minority students who apply, meet our standards and are admitted, actually to enroll here. We will focus this year especially on this latter challenge. As several of our regents made quite clear last week, it is unacceptable that the number of freshman African-American students at A&M actually declined slightly this fall and the increase in freshman Hispanic students was only 2%.

We are looking forward to the arrival on campus next month of Dr. James Anderson, our new vice president and associate provost for institutional assessment and diversity, to help us improve our performance in all three areas - faculty, graduate students and undergraduates.

The president of the graduate student council early last year told me that diversity at A&M had become a four letter word. It obviously has become a very divisive issue at other universities. We cannot let that happen here; it would be contrary to everything we hold dear about the Aggie family. Diversity at A&M is not about quotas or lowering standards. It is about the opportunity to learn from people of different economic, geographic, cultural and other backgrounds. It is about changing the perception among too many minority families that their children are not wanted here. A&M was established to serve all Texans. We want all who meet our academic standards to feel - and to be - welcome here. This is not only the right thing to do, it is completely consistent with our land grant heritage and with our traditions. It is completely in keeping with the "Aggie miracle" -- first-generation college students coming here and graduating with the skills and character to make successful lives. Taking this challenge seriously and meeting it successfully is, today, as important for Texas A&M’s future strength and success as was admitting women in the 1960s.

The fourth priority is space. We don’t have enough of it and too much of what we have is dilapidated and antiquated. This is especially true of our laboratories. We will be helped by the opening of the new cox addition to the Wehner building and by the completion of the chemical engineering building next year. Beyond these, a new life sciences building is our highest priority, but there are other needs as well.

Our bonding authority to finance new buildings essentially has been exhausted through 2013 as a result of the explosion of building during the 1970s and 1980s. We must develop new methods of funding classroom and laboratory buildings. We are in discussions with the Texas A&M foundation about using private giving as a source of funds for academic buildings. This has not been the practice here in the past, but our needs are dire and will become only more so as we add new faculty.
In addition to the initiatives I have described in connection with our four top priorities, the past year has seen a number of other changes and successes that will play a major part in our future. The opening of our branch campus in Qatar in the Persian Gulf last month is an extraordinary development full of potential for Texas A&M and our global reach, but also for the Middle East as a whole. Through our four engineering programs and a leadership role in Qatar’s education city we have the opportunity to make a historic difference.

Just yesterday, a contract establishing the new ocean drilling research program was signed with the national science foundation. For 20 years, this has been A&M’s largest research endeavor and, continuing our long partnership with Columbia University, we will lead the new program as well. A program that year by year is changing our understanding of the history of the planet.

I would like to mention one other new initiative, and that is the creation of an honor system and honor council. The result of a combined faculty-student-administration task force, the honor system and council represent an effort to make the Aggie code of honor a living, vibrant, central part of the culture here at A&M. It is consistent with Texas A&M’s entire history and culture for us to take a leadership role among American universities in striving to inculcate in our faculty, students and staff the importance of integrity in all we do - in academics, in athletics, and in our daily lives.

Forty years ago, Earl Rudder began a process of dramatic change here at A&M that has propelled it from a small at-risk college of six or seven thousand young men to a world class university, fifth largest in the United States. A&M managed to make that transition - involving revolutionary change - while preserving its unique traditions and spirit and culture - a culture grounded in patriotism, religious faith (however expressed), loyalty to one another and to the university, love of family, a hard work ethic, character and integrity.

Our faculty reinvestment initiative, our new campus in Qatar, our expanding national leadership role in research exemplified by the new ocean drilling program, the other initiatives I have described this afternoon, our billion dollar capital campaign - two thirds complete, and many more initiatives and changes that have been undertaken in the last year will transform Texas A&M University over the next several years. Still, we will -- we must -- preserve our unique traditions and spirit and culture.

It is said that a ship that is adrift makes no waves. Make no mistake about it: Texas A&M is going to make plenty of waves in the time ahead. Our course is set and we are just getting up a full head of steam. We recognize that there will be obstacles and problems as we move forward; there will be controversies; there will be questions for which we do not have immediate answers. But without obstacles, problems, controversies and unanswered questions, this wouldn’t be any fun at all.
During the presidential search process a year ago last spring, I told you that if you wanted the status quo, you had the wrong person. I told you I would be an agent of change. Well, today, change is afoot in every corner of the university, from the corps of cadets to the faculty to the administration to athletics. All with the purpose of creating a culture of excellence.

What, then, is the state of the university? It is in a state of dramatic change, of aspiration, of hope, of building and re-building.

President Harry Truman once said "every great achievement is the story of a flaming heart." Let the word go out from this place today that the hearts of aggies are aflame, and our great achievement will be a university that in all its parts is worthy of our heritage and our mission. A university with a culture of excellence and integrity -- and a spirit -- others can only aspire to emulate.