2004 Academic Convocation

Dr. Robert M. Gates

It hardly seems possible that I have had the privilege of serving as President of Texas A&M for two years. I cannot honestly say every day has been a fun day, but they all have been interesting.

Unlike virtually all of those present, when I arrived here, I had no experience with college students since I had been one, now some forty years ago. And, I must tell you, that over the past two years, especially as I have read some of my e-mails, I have thought more than once of the passage from Shakespeare's "The Winter's Tale", where he wrote, "I would there were no age between sixteen and three and twenty; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancentry, stealing, fighting and drinking." I especially liked the part about wronging the ancentry, now that I am one.

But then I remember the amazing potential of young people. I remember, as a historian, that Holy Roman Emperor Charles V was 17 when he put Martin Luther on trial, King Richard II of England at 14 put down the Great Rebellion of 1381 with a speech, Rossini at 14 first conducted an orchestra, Alexander Hamilton at 19 was General Washington's Chief Military Aide, Pitt The Younger at 23 became British Prime Minister, and Pascal at 15 wrote his essay on conic sections. While I have not yet run into a Charles V or a Pitt the Younger here at A&M, I have met many truly extraordinary young men and women whose accomplishments at a young age are stunning to me. And interacting with our students is, I have to say, the best part of this job.

By the same token, I have learned over the past two years that Aggies - and especially our students - are blessed (as am I) with the quality of faculty and staff who are here at A&M.

The Provost's team, the Deans, the Faculty Senate and its Executive Committee, and many individual members of the faculty are all invaluable members of the team that is leading Texas A&M today. These professionals are focused, practical, efficient, caring about students, and a source of great wisdom and good counsel for me.

The staff at A&M are also vitally important members of the team that is moving the university forward. From custodians to Vice Presidents, no university has administrators and staff more dedicated to the well-being and success of its students - or more willing to devote whatever time and effort is required to help them. Moreover, in an environment of continuing change, increased demands posed by our faculty expansion and other initiatives, and dealing with problems that inevitably arise, all of our university staff — and I would single out especially those in physical plant — consistently go above and beyond the call of duty. They deserve our admiration and our thanks.

I offer these comments up front because many people deserve credit for the achievements, successes and recognitions I will describe this afternoon. Progress in great public institutions is a team achievement.
There obviously is a great deal of change under way at A&M intended to improve the quality of education here and to take us to a new level of excellence in all we do.

The four priorities

I announced early in my first year that the top four priorities during my time as President would be: to elevate the faculty; to improve undergraduate and graduate programs; to improve diversity; and to increase and enhance the physical space available for teaching and research.

Elevating the faculty

The faculty reinvestment program is going well. By next week, we will have hired more new faculty in the last 18 months than the 115 positions that were lost between 1992 and 2002. In FY 2004, we added 43 new faculty positions and, as of a week ago, we had filled 93 of the 101 new faculty positions budgeted for FY 2005 — for a total of 136 new positions filled during the first two years of the reinvestment program. Of the 93 new hires for FY 05, 34 are women and 27 are African-American, Hispanic or Asian-American. And, of course, we will have 101 new positions to fill in each of the three coming fiscal years, for a total of 447 new faculty positions. There is nothing like it going on in America today.

We are emphasizing three priorities in this expansion program. First, each college has identified one or more "signature" research programs that will place the college at the cutting edge of new fields and discoveries and, for the most part, faculty are being hired who will advance those signature research programs. We are also insisting that new faculty must teach. Because a portion of the new faculty's salaries are being paid for through increased tuition, the students must begin to see a change for the better in the classroom within two to three years - more small classes, a better student-faculty ratio, more course choices, more tenured and tenure-track faculty in freshman and sophomore classes, etc. Finally, we want to use both the reinvestment program and the replacement of retiring or departing faculty to increase the diversity of our faculty while also maintaining and enhancing its current high quality.

I might add that we also have so far hired an additional 62 new faculty to replace the 65 who have retired or moved on.

This unprecedented hiring effort imposes a huge burden on the faculty, and I want to thank them for their service on so many search committees. Their success is reflected in the quality of the faculty we are hiring away from places such as Harvard, Michigan, Northwestern, Georgia Tech, UCLA and many more — including even the younger flagship over in Austin. This endeavor will transform Texas A&M academically and shape its future for a very long time into the future.

In sum, the most ambitious faculty expansion effort in America is on track. The hiring is well under way - a little over one-quarter complete - and we have a reasonably good estimate of total costs and how to cover them. And, we are working hard to keep everyone focused on using these new hires simultaneously to improve teaching, research and diversity, as well as the overall academic excellence of A&M.
Improving Undergraduate and Graduate Education

Clearly, this goal will be best served overall through the faculty reinvestment program and expanded laboratory and classroom facilities. At the same time, there are important new initiatives for this coming year that will have a dramatic impact on undergraduate education.

We want to enhance the entire undergraduate academic experience by taking best practices from some of the top universities in the country and applying them here. Our goal is to help ensure a more common academic experience for all students in the freshman year. We want to create a stronger culture of quality teaching at the freshman and sophomore level. We would like to enhance our developing learning communities, expand retention efforts - including the Aggie Access Program - with an emphasis on academic advising, offer freshman seminar courses, and provide more opportunities for freshmen to experience small class sizes. These efforts also include initiatives on academic integrity, honors programming, enhanced summer school opportunities, and more. These initiatives represent a significant undertaking that, over time, could have a major positive impact on all of our students.

Our graduate students are central to our success as a top tier research university. We want to increase our graduate student enrollment and also improve financial support for graduate students. We have helped out on the health insurance front; now we need to be more creative — and more aggressive — in looking for ways to help with tuition, living expenses and more.

Diversity

This was a major focus this past year that brought us controversy but, ultimately, success and recognition. While some individuals, offices and colleges at A&M had worked hard for years trying to recruit minority students, there had been little overall progress on diversity at A&M at the university level. Undergraduate minority enrollment had declined steadily for at least seven years. The Regents, the State Legislature and our Land-Grant Mission to serve all Texans underscored the need for A&M to do better - a lot better. And that required galvanizing the entire Aggie family. How to do that? I chose a risky path: to defy conventional wisdom and practice in higher education and devise our own strategy, combining merit-based admissions -- and the elimination of legacy -- with an unprecedented outreach program aimed at getting more first-generation college students and minorities to apply and getting those admitted to enroll. We re-allocated nearly $12 million for this purpose, including $8 million for scholarships aimed primarily at first-generation college students and students from families with incomes of $40,000 or less, as well as targeted graduate students. The rest of the money was allocated to new prospective student centers around the state, to expanding our recruiting and financial aid staff, and to strengthening student success programs to ensure that those students who enroll this fall have a high likelihood of returning in the fall of 2005 as sophomores.

In about 100 days from mid-January to April, a team of people led by the Dean of Undergraduate Programs and Associate Provost for Academic Services, Dr. Mark Weichold, and others from the Provost’s office, as well as Admissions, Financial Aid and other offices on campus devised strategies, programs and new initiatives that produced a dramatically successful outcome that has received national attention.
Based on enrollment data as of August 14th, in a class of some 6800 freshmen, so far we have 198 African-American students, a 39% increase over a year ago; 773 Hispanic students, a 26% increase; and 235 Asian-American students, an 18% increase. In the last several months, we have awarded more than 600 of the new Regents' Scholarships — renewable four year scholarships valued at $20,000 — to students who are first generation college students and whose family income is $40,000 per year or less. Among graduate students, African-American enrollment so far is up 37%, and Hispanic enrollment is up 24%.

We have reversed the seven-year trend of declining minority enrollment at the undergraduate level, but this is only the beginning of an effort that must continue. Still, I believe we have proven that we are serious about fulfilling our obligation to all of the people of Texas. And we will do our part to "close the gaps". But, retention of these first generation college students and those from lower income families must also be a priority — as must a welcoming, indeed, an embracing environment on campus.

Space

The addition of the Cox wing to the Wehner building and the opening this fall of the Chemical Engineering building are major enhancements to the campus and address a space shortage in the Mays School of Business and some of the shortage in the College of Engineering. These new buildings have a number of new classrooms equipped with the latest technology. An additional annual allocation of $12.5 million in "available university funds" (AUF) thanks to Interim Chancellor Benton Cocanougher and the Texas A&M University System, will allow us to proceed with a Life Sciences building, the largest and most expensive building ever constructed at A&M. The life sciences building will be a major addition to campus and keep us at the forefront of research and teaching in interdisciplinary subjects involving, at minimum, the Colleges of Science, Engineering, Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine.

Even with this building, though, our needs remain great. Faculty reinvestments in Engineering, Science and the Liberal Arts comprise about half the new faculty positions I mentioned. Our research productivity continues to accelerate. New large grants, such as the Integrated Ocean Drilling Program, require additional space. These space needs, essential to the quality of education for our students and to our standing as a flagship university, will be an ongoing challenge for all of us. Perhaps, with oil at $45 a barrel, there are some Aggies out there with a tax problem we can help solve.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the important role of the Association of Former Students in our efforts on all four of these priorities. From awards to faculty for teaching and research to scholarships for students, from support of new faculty orientation to support of student organizations, in these and a multitude of other ways, the Association of Former Students supports this university. Each year, millions of dollars donated by former students are given to us to support our faculty, students and staff. Day in and day out, no university is better served and helped by its former students.

Other developments
Apart from progress on the four major priorities, there have been a number of other significant developments during the past year.

-- Last October we opened our new branch campus in the Persian Gulf in the Country of Qatar with 29 students. The Qatar Foundation pays all expenses associated with the program. The first year has gone amazingly smoothly, and 27 of our 29 first-year students will return this fall. We have some 200 applicants from all over the Middle East for 60 freshman places this fall. Construction on our 450,000 square foot building is to begin in January, with completion in the fall of 2006.

These successes, combined with the ongoing development of two A&M/Qatar research centers funded by the Qatar Foundation and Western Oil Companies operating in Qatar, clearly have placed us in a leadership role there.

—Enrollment at our branch campus in Galveston reached an all-time peak last year with 1620 students, representing 19% growth over the past two years. The Galveston faculty once again earned the distinction in Texas of ranking just behind A&M College Station and UT in research dollars expended per fte. The most exciting development at Galveston is a new 58,000 square foot Engineering building, scheduled for completion in January.

-- Last Fall, the National Science Foundation (NSF) selected Texas A&M (and our partner, Columbia University) to be the principal operators of the new Integrated Ocean Drilling Program. We had run the program for 20 years (it was our largest externally funded research program) and when the NSF decided to re-compete the contract, we won again. This 10-year contract amounts to about $450 million.

-- In April, the Department of Homeland Security selected Texas A&M to lead a new homeland security center of excellence on agro-security. A&M will lead a consortium of some half dozen universities under this three-year $18 million contract. While significant in and of itself, this award raises the potential for long-term, even larger research efforts for DHS.

-- This Spring, for the first time, externally funded research by Texas A&M faculty, including those in the Texas A&M System agencies, crossed the $500 million mark, placing us in the top 10 universities in the U.S. in terms of such research efforts.

-- As a result of the work of a faculty-student-staff task force on academic integrity, this year we established an Honor System and Honor Council. Beginning this fall, faculty will be able to refer cases of alleged academic dishonesty to a joint Faculty-Student Honor Council for investigation and adjudication. Both faculty and student members of the Honor Council were elected last spring.

-- Based on a great deal of work in the office of the Executive Vice President and Provost, we fundamentally re-aligned the administrative structure of the university to improve efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Most importantly, we have grouped together business activities such as Reed Arena, Food Services, Graphic and Print Services, Rudder Theater and Auditorium, and others, so they can be run as self-sufficient businesses. We are looking at several other opportunities to save money, especially where we can take advantage of economies of scale in contract negotiations.
-- Based on the work and recommendations of a university-wide task force over the past year, I will create a new position, Vice President for Communications, which will be charged with coordinating and overseeing marketing, web content and connectivity, and media relations for the entire university. We need to do a much better job of telling the A&M story to the state, the nation and the world.

-- We hired two new Deans this last year: Dr. Colleen Cook, Dean of University Libraries; and Dr. Bjorn Kjerfve, Dean of the College of Geosciences. I expect both to play key roles in university leadership. We also hired three new Vice Presidents this year: Dr. James Anderson, Vice President and Associate Provost for Institutional Assessment and Diversity; Sue Redman '80, Senior Vice President and CFO; and Dr. Dean Bresciani, Vice President for Student Affairs.

-- In athletics, Bill Byrne has hired two fine new coaches for men’s and women’s basketball (Billy Gillespie and Gary Blair, respectively), and made national news when he lured LSU track coach Pat Henry to A&M as our new track and field coach. The Department of Athletics remains one of only a couple of dozen in Division 1A Athletics to be financially self-supporting. All of A&M was honored when our Athletic Department received the 2003-2004 Division 1A Athletic Directors’ Award for Excellence in Academic Support of Student Athletes. The only other recipient of the award for this period was Vanderbilt University. Finally, you need to know that Bill Byrne and I are of one mind in terms of the priorities of our athletic program: 1) maintaining the integrity of the program, 2) the academic success of our student athletes, and 3) winning. All three are important, but they are important in that specific order. Finally, a word about accountability. While many in higher education talk about accountability, we already have taken a number of steps to improve stewardship of our resources and to measure educational outcomes. We were the only major university in the state this past fiscal year to voluntarily cut our own budget (by $20.5 million) and re-allocate it to higher priority programs aimed at improving the quality of our students’ education. The most far-reaching administrative re-structuring at A&M in decades is intended to improve efficiency, cost-effectiveness and accountability. Further, we are taking steps to enhance financial controls and professionalism, to strengthen risk management, and to evaluate each and every function on campus with a view to improving efficiency and reducing costs.

We have established a new Vice Presidential position that includes responsibility for Institutional Assessment - measuring educational effectiveness and outcomes. Dr. James Anderson’s efforts will supplement ongoing university-wide assessment efforts. A commitment to assessment of the educational experience and our effectiveness is critical to our future.

It is worth emphasizing, though, our success in the most important aspect of accountability: while maintaining high academic standards, Texas A&M a few months ago was recognized as having the highest graduation rates among all public universities in Texas.

Obviously, in a university the size of Texas A&M, there have been many other initiatives for improvement and important achievements this last year in every college and administrative division. I think, however, I have captured most of those that have implications for the university as a whole.

The agenda for the coming year
As we gain momentum, we must not let up on either the pressure or the pace. We will continue this year to work on the four priority areas and the other tasks under way, but there are a number of new initiatives we will be pursuing:

-- At the top of the list will be the multi-faceted effort I described earlier to enhance the undergraduate, and especially the freshman, experience.

-- As part of this effort, we will name a task force to make recommendations on whether to expand our Honors Program or to create a separate Honors College, such exist at most top universities.

-- The Corps of Cadets has developed, with the help of the Mays School of Business, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and the Bush School, an eight-credit-hour academic curriculum on Leadership Development. It has been approved by the Faculty Senate. I would like to see us expand this effort and develop an Interdisciplinary Academic Program for the entire university in Leadership Development, perhaps first as a minor, and then as a degree program. I cannot think of a more appropriate academic program for this university, which is uniquely positioned to combine a quality academic program with hands-on experience in student leadership development. There is only one education at Texas A&M, and it encompasses the student’s experience in the classroom and outside of it. And they reinforce one another here better than anywhere else in the nation.

-- We will be re-examining summer school to see how we can increase enrollment and make the session more useful to students in completing degree requirements.

-- This year, we will begin to replace the Student Information Management System (the computer system that supports everything from registration and enrollment to grades and more), which is nearly 20 years old. This is a huge undertaking costing some $30-40 million, and we will start only when we are comfortable with how best to proceed, particularly with respect to avoiding the cost overruns that have plagued other universities in implementing such large programs.

-- We will be exploring alternative tuition plans. Options include charging fixed-rate tuition based on a certain minimum number of semester credit hours, charging variable tuition rates based on a variety of factors (time of day, summer school, etc.), guaranteeing tuition rates to entering freshmen for a four-year period, and others. Last year, I appointed an on-going 15-member Tuition Policy Advisory Committee - including seven students, the President of the Federation of Texas A&M University Mothers’ Clubs and the President of the Association of Former Students - to explore these options.

-- We need to keep working on the One Spirit One Vision Campaign, which already has raised nearly $820 million toward our $1 billion goal. A successful capital campaign is critical to every effort on campus to move A&M forward academically, to improve the quality of life for students, and to achieve our goals in athletics. We appreciate and applaud the work of the Texas A&M Foundation for its commitment to this great university and its success in this campaign.

-- Finally, the Legislature will meet in January, and the agenda will include the state budget for the next biennium. We will take our story to the Legislators in an effort to secure additional assistance for our faculty reinvestment effort and other university needs. The last Legislature was very helpful to
higher education in Texas and, specifically, to our faculty reinvestment program. We look forward to building upon our partnership with Legislators in a mutual effort to move Texas A&M forward.

All in all, it has been quite a year. We have made a lot of progress, perhaps underscored by the improvement in our US News ranking, advancing us from 27 th among public universities to 22 nd — after declining the previous two years. However, we have only just started down the road to improve the quality of education at Texas A&M and to move all aspects of the university to a new level of excellence. The challenge this next year will be to keep making progress on all of the initiatives already launched, and to tackle the next set of actions on the agenda. Above all, we cannot relax. A closing thought. Abigail Adams once wrote her husband John: "It is not in the still calm of life, or the repose of a pacific station that great characters are formed. The habits of a vigorous mind are formed in contending with difficulties. Great necessities call out great virtues. When a mind is raised, and animated by scenes that engage the heart, then those qualities which would otherwise lay dormant, wake into life Â½."

Texas A&M is in the midst of a period of sweeping change, perhaps unlike anything in the last 40 years. No corner of the university is unaffected. What we do, together, during this brief period of years will shape the course of this university for a generation or more. We are well-launched toward our goals, but we are still far from shore. Much work remains to be done. Even so, to paraphrase Abigail Adams, I believe minds are being raised and "animated by scenes that engage the heart", waking into life qualities here that "otherwise would lay dormant."

Together, we are making history at Texas A&M in a way that, for most, comes along only once in a career. Cherish the challenge. Embrace the boldness. Grasp the opportunity. And enjoy the ride. Because, I venture to say, you will not experience anything quite like this again.

And, on some distant day, when you are in "the still calm of life", you will remember with pride that moment in your career when you helped an excellent university become a truly great university -- to the benefit of Texas, the United States, and the entire world.