2006 Academic Convocation

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On Friday, September 8th, I provided a "State of the University" report at Academic Convocation. It provided a status report of where we stand in hiring 447 additional faculty, our $500 million construction program, our efforts to recruit a more diverse student body and faculty, and the status of wide-ranging initiatives to enhance undergraduate and graduate education. I also offered an update on our plans to grow enrollment, our billion-dollar capital campaign, the impact of flat tuition, and the communications initiative we will roll-out this fall. Finally, the report discussed our priorities and plans for the coming year and discussed "shared governance" with respect to both the faculty and students - including proposals for new initiatives in this area.

There was a lot to cover and so the report is fairly long. Nonetheless, I invite you to read the text below for a full report on the University’s agenda for change in 2006-2007.

"Over the past year, we broke ground-both literally and figuratively-in many places and in many ways at Texas A&M. At our academic convocation in the fall of 2002, I outlined an agenda for change during my time as president. At convocation each of the last two years, I have reported to you on progress in implementing that agenda for change as well as other developments during the preceding year, and outlined where we were headed in the new academic year. I will provide such an update again today, but I also want to take advantage of this opportunity to initiate a dialogue on governance.

First, the update.

Faculty. We set a goal of adding 447 faculty here over a five year period, perhaps the most ambitious faculty expansion program anywhere- and possibly ever in the history of our country. This past year we funded an additional 101 faculty positions, bringing the total number added so far under this initiative to 346. Three hundred thirty-three of these faculty positions were filled as of a week ago. They include some of the most promising young teachers and researchers from all over the world, as well as some of the most distinguished scholars of international renown-including our second Nobel laureate now on campus. We expect to complete the full faculty expansion plan on schedule by September 1, 2007.

We also have begun looking beyond the faculty reinvestment program and developing some ideas for a long-term program of adding 30 or so faculty each year to ensure that we continue to strengthen our research and teaching capacity, add talent in new areas, and overall continue to enhance excellence at Texas A&M.

Diversity. We have moved aggressively to increase the number of minority students who apply to Texas A&M and to persuade those admitted on personal merit actually to enroll. We have established what we believe is the first statewide network of regional prospective student centers, staffed with both admissions and financial aid advisers, to recruit students for Texas A&M. We now have one each
in Dallas, Corpus Christi, San Antonio, the Brazos Valley and McAllen as well as two in Houston. We will be adding an eighth in Laredo this fall.

The strategy is working. This fall, 1097 Hispanic freshmen have enrolled, up 9.6 percent over last year; 280 African-American freshmen have enrolled, up 9.4 percent; and 399 Asian-American freshmen have enrolled, up 24.3 percent. Compared to minority freshman enrollment in fall 2003-the last cohort of students to enroll prior to our new admissions strategy-African-American freshman enrollment will have increased in three years by some 77 percent, Hispanic freshman enrollment by about 59 percent, and Asian-American freshman enrollment by more than 71 percent.

We also have made great strides in diversity among our graduate students. Thanks to a number of new programs, as well as an enhanced graduate recruitment effort funded in part by the Association of Former Students, since 2002, graduate African-American enrollment is up 86 percent and Hispanic enrollment is up 48 percent. We expect further increases this fall. The Vice President and Associate Provost for Diversity has prepared a strategic plan that establishes accountability, tracks progress and ensures sustained engagement at all levels. The campus community has been involved in preparation of this plan and, accordingly, I know you will help us achieve its goals.

Another admissions statistic makes us proud. Each of the last three years, between 25-28 percent of our freshman class of all races have been first generation college students. As best as we can determine, only two other top tier research universities in America have a higher percentage of first generation college students than we do. Texas A&M remains fundamentally a middle-class university, with some 40 percent of the families of incoming freshmen having incomes of $80,000 or less- and almost 16 percent below $40,000. I believe all these numbers tell a powerful story about our roots and our enduring values, marking Texas A&M as a place where students from families with modest or few resources can create a world of new opportunities for themselves and their families-as they have been doing for 130 years.

We also have made progress in diversifying our faculty. More than a third of the new faculty hires have been women, and our faculty is now 21% non-white, up from 18% last year and 15% in 2002. Still, we all know there continues to be substantial room for improvement. We must work harder to attract qualified women and minorities to our faculty.

And, as I stressed at convocation last year, we need to continue working to ensure that Texas A&M remains the friendliest campus in America for every Aggie-- faculty, staff and students, and for every visitor to Aggieland -- regardless of religion, race, nationality, family income or background, or anything else. Indeed, we are proud of the partnership with Bryan-College Station in building "The Community of Respect", helping all of us who live here develop greater cultural awareness and knowledge. As we extend our reach-and the Aggie family- around the world, we must not allow the bonds that tie Aggies to one another to loosen.

Space. In late May, we broke ground on two new physics buildings, funded substantially by a generous gift from George Mitchell, '40. Two days later, we broke ground for a $95 million interdisciplinary life sciences building. In June, we broke ground just beyond the Vet school for the Texas Institute of Genomic Medicine, a new joint venture involving the university, the A&M System,
private industry and the state of Texas through the Governor’s Enterprise Fund. We are nearly finished with a $35 million general services (administration) building to house 900 staff moved away from the core of the campus to make more room for faculty and students. Further, we are proceeding with the planning and construction of two emerging technologies buildings ($50 million each) to be located on either side of and set slightly back from the Williams building—principally for the College of Engineering; a $14 million Veterinary Medicine research tower; an $8 million lab animal resource and research building; an $8 million nuclear magnetic resonance imaging building; and a number of additional renovations and conversions. We also have completed a master plan for long-term renovation or replacement of all on-campus housing.

Finally, a personal project of mine is the restoration of Military Walk from the Rudder Complex to Sbisa Dining Hall. The old oak trees are still in place to provide an arbor, and I envision a wide walk with benches and historical markers pointing out the locations of historic A&M buildings long since torn or burned down. As we build our future, we must remember our past. These roots, beginning with Military Walk itself, keep us anchored to the culture, traditions and values that make us different from all other universities.

We also have identified the resources to proceed with the complete restoration of the Y.M.C.A. building, construction of a $40 million arts and humanities building, and about two-thirds of the funds necessary to construct an $80 million headquarters for the state agriculture program, including the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

I cannot conclude this report on new space without including athletics. Thanks to the generosity of the 12th Man Foundation and many individual donors, we will soon start construction of a new indoor athletic facility, including an indoor practice field for football; a major expansion of Reed Arena to provide new practice courts for both men’s and women’s basketball, as well as new men’s and women’s locker rooms; a new track; new scoreboards in Kyle Field, at Olsen field, and in Reed Arena; and still more.

Four years ago, when I arrived at A&M, we could not identify any resources for new, modern academic facilities until perhaps 2009-2013.

Thanks to the Texas Legislature, the Board of Regents, the Texas A&M System, significant private gifts—and more than a little “pushing” on our part, we will shortly be in the middle of the most ambitious construction program in Texas A&M’s history—more than $500 million worth under way more or less simultaneously. Despite inevitable inconveniences from all the construction, the sounds you will hear on campus for the next few years will be the sounds of an amazing new future being built in Aggieland.

Enhancing graduate and undergraduate programs. Perhaps the most significant impact on improving the quality of education at A&M in the short- and long-term is the expansion of our faculty and the new facilities. The growth in faculty already has permitted the addition of 79 new courses since 2003 and 239 additional class sections. The student-faculty ratio has dropped from 22:1 in 2001 to 20:1 in the fall of 2005, and we expect it to drop again this fall.
Our major challenge with graduate programs in recent years has been our failure to keep pace with other top universities in the stipends and financial assistance required to recruit top graduate students. In a cooperative endeavor, the university administration and the colleges combined efforts and resources and, as a result, Texas A&M has made significant progress in providing better financial support for graduate students, thus making us much more competitive in the future in attracting top graduate students—an essential ingredient in attracting high-quality faculty, in our research endeavors and in improved undergraduate education.

Finally, for the coming year, our efforts will be focused in particular on implementing the recommendations of the Task Force on Improving Undergraduate education. The recommendations were so sweeping that last winter I appointed two implementation working groups to devise plans for moving ahead. The first, chaired by Vice Chancellor and Dean of Agriculture and Life Science Elsa Murano, has recommended:

- all entering freshmen at Texas A&M should have the opportunity to enroll in one small academic class during their first semester;
- all entering freshmen should have the opportunity to be part of a learning community to aid in their successful transition to university academic expectations and to enhance their connections with a diverse group of individuals;
- high-quality, value-added educational activities should be available for all students, including an academic minor in leadership development; participation in professional internship/immersion experiences; international educational experiences; rigorous academic opportunities in a strengthened honors program and, eventually, creation of an honors college; and a better integration of the in- and out-of-classroom experience;
- make inquiry/research-based learning standard in every major;
- increase access and opportunities for students on and off-campus through innovative technology-mediated instruction and distance learning technologies; and
- ensure the quality of the academic experience through high-quality advising, better use of summer school and improvements in the core curriculum.

These are very ambitious goals and our challenge this year is to begin implementing them to the extent resources permit.

The second implementation working group was chaired by Dean of the Mays Business School Jerry Strawser and focused on a long-term problem at Texas A&M—the "access to majors" problem: the difficulty too many students have in getting admitted into a major of their choice.

Obviously, we have no intention of diluting or reducing the academic rigor or high standards of our existing programs. So, the challenge facing the Strawser Working Group was how to help students who are in good academic standing (2.0 GPR or better) find and graduate in a degree program that is stimulating and useful in preparing for life after college.

The short-term recommendation was to require every college to have at least one degree program which a student could enter and subsequently graduate with a 2.0 GPR. This recommendation is being implemented and such a program is now offered in eight of the nine undergraduate colleges.
The longer-term recommendation was to develop a "University Studies" degree. A student could enter the program with a 2.0 and graduate with a 2.0. Many believe, however, that an academically rigorous, flexible interdisciplinary degree program such as this also has the potential to attract many students with much higher GPRs, especially those uncertain what career path they wish to pursue. The Faculty Senate has been hard at work on this proposal since late spring, and I deeply appreciate their efforts. This degree program is the last major initiative among our four priorities, and it has the total support of the Deans, the Provost and me. Its approval and implementation are my highest priorities for this year.

While I’ve inundated you with detail, I hope you will see that Texas A&M is moving fast (at least for a university) on multiple fronts. Let me mention just a few other items you might find of interest.

Enrollment. Beginning this fall, we are expanding the undergraduate student body over a period of five years by 2,500, a mix of first time in college freshmen and transfer students (principally from community colleges). As a result, this fall we have the largest freshman class in Texas A&M’s history—about 7,800, including the Blinn Team. We also intend to expand the graduate program by 1,000 students. We’ve made a great start in this area this fall - we have almost 8,400 graduate students this fall, up by more than 350 over last year. If our professional veterinary medicine students are included total graduate student enrollment is just shy of 9,000, or almost 20% of our total student body. This growth ultimately will result in a student body of about 48,500 which, in today’s terms, would make us the third or fourth largest university in the nation on one campus. We are doing this principally as a demonstration of good faith to the state that we will do what we can to help alleviate the capacity crunch facing higher education in Texas—as long as it does not compromise the quality of the education here.

The One Spirit/One Vision Capital Campaign. With the wonderful leadership of the Texas A&M Foundation, we reached our goal of $1 billion in the summer of 2005, 18 months early. We likely will conclude the campaign in December at about $1.4 billion, an extraordinary testimony to the loyalty and generosity of our former students and friends of the university.

Flat-rate tuition. As many of you know, in the fall of 2005, Texas A&M moved to flat-rate tuition: full time students pay for 15 hours of classes regardless whether they are taking 12, 20 or more hours. The economics of taking at least 15 hours each semester are compelling for a student—not only saving on tuition, but graduating one or two semesters earlier. Many students (or their parents) have paid attention to the economics. When compared to fall 2004, before the new policy went into effect, our students this fall have registered for nearly 60,000 additional semester credit hours. The average course load has increased from 13.6 semester credit hours in fall 2004 to 14.2 SCH this fall for full-time undergraduates. Flat-rate tuition also is responsive to the legislature’s growing concern to move students through our universities in closer to four years rather than five or even six years to make room for the growing number of new high school graduates seeking access to college.

Communications. We will be rolling out our new communications campaign this fall to explain to the nation and the world what makes Texas A&M unique among great universities. A central aspect of the communications program will be highlighting our core values. On the basis of a great deal of work with deans, faculty, students, staff and former students, we have focused on six core values: 1)
Excellence; 2) Integrity; 3) Loyalty; 4) Leadership; 5) Selfless Service; and 6) Respect. Different parts of the university will be able to expand on each of these core values in ways appropriate to their mission. For example, academic departments and the colleges might expand on them as follows: 1) Excellence - in the pursuit of new knowledge through cutting-edge research and excellence in teaching our students; 2) Integrity - the fundamental basis for intellectual growth and scholarship -- and, indeed, the foundation of everything we do; 3) Leadership - in discovery and innovation; 4) Selfless Service - to one’s discipline, profession and university -- and to the state through applied research; 5) Loyalty - to one’s colleagues, to the university, and to the highest ethical standards; and 6) Respect - for one’s colleagues and students, and for diverse points of view.

There are many other exciting things happening at A&M. Our faculty continue to win extraordinary awards and grants. Our campuses in Galveston and Qatar are thriving-Galveston received a new training ship (USNS Sirius) last year (its first mission was to go to New Orleans to help with hurricane relief) as well as funding for a new science building, and we will dedicate the extraordinary new engineering building at Education City in Qatar in March 2007. Our staff are revitalizing various service units, and at the same time finding new ways to save millions of dollars-savings passed directly to students in lower tuition increases than at several other Texas universities.

Like many of our seniors, I did not graduate from Texas A&M at the end of my fourth year. In fact, I hope and plan to remain for three more years. Together, we already have accomplished much. But, there is still more to do. Together, we will make further progress in creating a culture of excellence. I stress the word "together" because the progress we are making is the result of an extraordinary team of people pulling together: the faculty, our students, the Provost and his staff, deans and their staffs, the vice presidents and their staffs. I get a lot of attention as the conductor of this terrific orchestra, but we all know the music really is made by our many talented faculty, administrators and staff, along with our students. Long after my time here has passed, remarkable faculty, administrators, and staff will remain, committed to those goals we set in 2002 -- and to the collective effort truly to create a culture of excellence here. It is this essential continuity in a great university that brings me to my final subject -- governance.

It is a fact of life in institutions that leaders come and go. Sometimes when they leave, there is regret among the professionals and staff who remain. More often, the celebrations begin before the departing executive’s taillights are out of sight. Some leaders arrive with ambitious agendas and seek to impose them by fait -- unilaterally and from above. They usually provoke either paralyzing opposition and internal warfare, or see the reversal of every action immediately after their departure. We can all think of specific examples of both at other universities over the last year or two.

What, then, is the formula for successful leadership in public institutions, above all a great university? I believe it begins with a leader’s recognition that his or her time in office is finite and that the institution and those who carry out its mission endure. They were there long before the leader arrived, and will be there long after he or she departs. Whether at CIA or at a university, the professionals outlast both good and bad leaders.

I have long believed that the secret to successful leadership of public institutions -- especially in leading change -- is the involvement in decision-making of those who carry out the institution’s
mission: involvement in setting the agenda, involvement in shaping options, involvement in decisions, and involvement in implementation.

To this end, over the past four years, we have bolstered some longstanding collaborative structures and created new ones to strengthen shared governance at Texas A&M. We have tried new approaches to engagement and to openness.

Perhaps the most significant organizational innovation was the creation of four councils focused on Research, Education, Finance and Space - or as we call it - the Built Environment. Each has 10 members - three deans, three faculty, three administrators and one student. Three of the councils are chaired by deans, and the Council on the Built Environment is chaired by the Vice Provost. Virtually every major initiative of the past four years in these areas has either originated in or been examined by one or another of the councils. Other universities, in search of better governance, are showing keen interest in our councils and how we use them. Further, the Council of Deans has assumed a critical role as a partner with the President and Provost in their decision-making process for the university as a whole.

Another example. Because the Faculty Senate is the principal -- and only elected -- means of faculty involvement in governance, I meet weekly with the Speaker of the Senate, the Speaker attends my weekly Executive Council meeting, and the Provost and I meet as needed or desirable with the Faculty Senate Executive Committee. I give a report to the full Faculty Senate at least once a semester and have an open forum for questions. For the past four years, every search committee, task force and other university level committee has had at least one faculty representative and normally several -- with the Faculty Senate Executive Committee recommending the faculty representatives. In this regard, I believe that no dean, vice president, provost or president at Texas A&M should be chosen without significant faculty participation and input.

Continuing, the provost meets regularly with members of the Council of Principal Investigators, the Distinguished Professors and the Executive Committee of the Association of Department Heads. I meet with every faculty member who asks to see me and, as in the case of the Research Foundation and parking, I pay attention to faculty e-mails as well. And, I periodically send out my own e-mails to inform faculty about key issues.

In short, I believe there has not been a single decision in four years that has not been informed, influenced and shaped by faculty views.

The results speak for themselves. During a period of dramatic changes at Texas A&M, a remarkably tranquil and productive partnership between faculty and senior administrators has emerged on a basis of mutual respect and open communication.

I have tried to take the same approach with our students. For the first time ever, the President of the Student Body attends the University President’s weekly Executive Council meeting, where every kind of issue, including the most sensitive, is openly discussed.
Students also have been appointed to every search committee, task force and other university level committee. Indeed, of the 15 members of the Tuition Policy Advisory Committee, seven are students. I go before the Student Senate and Graduate Student Council at least once a semester for an open forum - no holds barred. Students at Texas A&M have a significant voice - and influence - in every decision I have made that even remotely affects them.

So, is everything just "duky" in terms of governance at Texas A&M? The answer is, of course, no. There are four areas that I think need attention:

First, even at the university level, there is always room for improvement and we must look for areas in need of further work. For example, I think there clearly is a need for better information flow between the vice presidents and the faculty, and we should work together to find appropriate mechanisms to make that happen.

Second, there is a need to institutionalize some of the innovations recently established, such as the councils; ensuring faculty representation on all search committees and other university-level committees and task forces; establishing the Faculty Senate as the vehicle for providing nominees from the faculty for such committees; making standard a report by the president to the Faculty Senate at least once a semester; and more.

I know the Faculty Senate discussed such matters at its retreat on August 24th. I propose that the Provost and I meet with the Faculty Senate Executive Committee in the near future to discuss establishing a joint faculty-administration task force to examine opportunities for the Faculty Senate to institutionalize as much as possible our current approach to shared governance and to make recommendations to the Faculty Senate and to me on how to do that. I propose further that the Provost and Speaker of the Faculty Senate co-chair this task force. I also believe such an endeavor should address how to institutionalize the role of students in governance, specifically their representation on committees, searches and task forces.

Third, speaking bluntly, shared governance is uneven at the college and departmental level. In some colleges, for example, the faculty were deeply involved three years ago in helping determine the "signature" research programs tied to the faculty reinvestment program and in the college’s allocation of its new positions. In other colleges, however, the faculty was hardly consulted at all. Just as at the university level, I believe that faculty - or faculty representatives - should be involved in all decisions of consequence at the college and departmental level. In fact, just as the Speaker of the Faculty Senate is a member of my Executive Council, why shouldn’t the Faculty Senate Caucus Leader in each college serve on the college Executive Committee or its equivalent? And why should students not be represented as appropriate in college and department deliberations as well? Engaging the faculty (and students), communicating openly about issues and options under discussion, and seeking faculty input will no more inhibit effective decision-making by deans and department heads than similar efforts at the university level have inhibited mine. Indeed, I believe decisions resulting from such a process will be better, have broader faculty support, and improve both morale and relationships. I urge the Council of Deans and the new department heads' organization to address this challenge.
Fourth, and finally, there is an organizational gap in shared governance at Texas A&M. University staff currently have no means to make their collective voice heard on university issues, including those that affect them directly. I believe the time has come to create an organization where representatives of our extraordinary staff can discuss issues of concern to them and also serve as a source of counsel and collaboration for the President, the Executive Vice President and Provost, the vice presidents and deans. Accordingly, this fall I will appoint a task force to examine how this might be done and to make recommendations.

Some may say that, with these measures, I am complicating management, slowing decision-making, and turning over to the faculty too much authority. Or, to put it crassly, some might say I am putting “the inmates” in charge. To that, I say “baloney”! (Actually, that’s not what I really say, but it’s what I have to say here.)

Giving those responsible for carrying out the mission of this university an assured opportunity and assured venues to offer advice and to influence decisions on the management and direction of this institution is just plain common sense - at the department, college and university level. Department heads, deans and the president and provost must, and will, continue to make the final decisions. But those decisions will be better, and be better understood and supported, if transparency, discussion and debate, communication, and collaboration precede them.

Shared governance based on those principles -- transparency, open communication and discussion, and mutual respect -- establishes the healthy and open environment necessary for creating a culture of excellence in all we do and for our further enduring improvement as a university.

And, if shared governance is properly practiced, as a departing president’s taillights fade from view, campus celebrations may be delayed just a few minutes as a gesture of respect from those faculty and staff who have devoted their lives to a great university. Thank you.