2008 Academic Convocation

Remarks by Dr. Elsa A. Murano
President, Texas A&M University

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Howdy! Thank you, Chairman Jones and members of The Texas A&M System Board of Regents, Chancellor McKinney, Dr. Vitter, Dr. Watson, Speaker Magill and members of the Faculty Senate; faculty, staff, students here and in Qatar; distinguished guests, friends and family, and especially my husband, Dr. Peter Murano (our first dude).

I appreciate your warm welcome this afternoon and for your understanding as we postponed our Academic Convocation in response to Hurricane Ike, which loomed off the coast of Texas two weeks ago. Speaking of Ike, I would also like to extend a special welcome to the more than 1,500 Sea Aggies from Texas A&M University at Galveston, who have joined us this week to continue their fall semester in Aggieland. It has been amazing to experience the Aggie Family come together to welcome the Galveston students, faculty and staff to our campus over the past several days ... to witness the Bryan-College Station community open up their homes for Sea Aggies ... to watch the Corps of Cadets—our "Keepers of the Spirit"—assist special needs evacuees at Reed Arena ... to hear about our College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences extending care to animal evacuees ... and to see our student body lend a hand wherever needed.

I am humbled to serve as the twenty-third president of this great university. And I am grateful every day to work with the outstanding people who make up the Aggie Family ... the students, faculty, staff, and former students who are in this auditorium this afternoon ... as well as those found across Texas and around the world. I have greatly appreciated the insights you have given me since I became president in January, and I will continue to seek your wise counsel as we work together to improve the lives of Texans through teaching, research and service.

Academic Convocation is more than a mere marking of the beginning of the new academic year. Our coming together this afternoon is a celebration of the central mission of Texas A&M University as a public institution of higher learning.

It is a gathering of a community of scholars drawn together by a love of teaching and learning. It is a rededication of our skills and talents to the life of discovery and scholarship.

We begin the 2008-2009 academic year with pride in the accomplishments of the past several years and confidence in our shared future. We are fortunate to be associated with Texas A&M during one of the university’s most exciting periods of growth and development.

More young people want to attend Texas A&M than ever before, and they come from more diverse backgrounds. We have more faculty than ever before, who have propelled many of our academic programs to rankings among the best in the country. We continue to be recognized by our peer
institutions for providing an excellent education at a reasonable cost. Employers continue to seek out our graduates.

All of these accomplishments come from hard work combined with intelligence, creativity and skill. I congratulate you ... our students, faculty and staff ... for these tremendous achievements.

We are doing a good job of fulfilling our mission as the state’s land-grant university to improve the lives of Texans through teaching, research and service, and we are making great progress toward our goal of becoming one of the nation’s ten best public universities by the year 2020.

But after spending the first nine months of my term as president listening to you ... and others around the state and nation who care deeply about this university ... I believe that we can succeed in fulfilling an even greater potential than we have ever imagined. It starts by striving to be recognized not as just a top 10 university, but as the very best public institution in the country. Importantly, I believe we can accomplish this goal without sacrificing the traditions, spirit and values that set us apart from other major universities.

Ladies and gentlemen, I believe that we are at a turning point in our history. This is not our first turning point, and it certainly will not be our last. The Aggie Family has always succeeded during times of transition, and I am confident that we will achieve our goals during this transition as well. In fact, we are a great university today because of the changes that took place in our past.

In our more recent history, these changes included the admission of women students and making participation in the Corps of Cadets optional instead of mandatory, under the leadership of the great James Earl Rudder in the late 1960s. It is hard to imagine today, but President Rudder’s position was not accepted by everyone. In fact, he was actually "booed" during his speeches. And if you CAN imagine booing the president of Texas A&M during a speech ... well, I ask that you keep that to yourself. Still, the fact remains that his leadership and commitment to doing the right thing helped him position our university to becoming one of only two flagships among the public universities in Texas.

In the 1970s under the leadership of Jack K. Williams, the university raised its academic standards, added numerous scholarship programs to attract the best and brightest students, and increased its faculty ranks. This effort obviously has continued and gained tremendous momentum and strength under the leadership of Robert Gates a few years ago.

**Vision 2020: Turning Our Vision into Reality**

Vision 2020 is the articulation of our vision to be recognized as one of the country's best public universities by the year 2020. It is the document that sets forth the principles that we aspire to.

But, as I mentioned earlier, we have reached a turning point in the life of our university. If we are serious about our commitment to achieve our vision, then we must act quickly and decisively. We must recognize that we have less than twelve years to turn our vision into reality. We must understand that we cannot afford to let this opportunity pass us by ... we must seize the moment.
Now is the time to focus on the strategies that will help us fulfill our vision. It is time to underpin our vision with a definite structure. We are doing many good things here at Texas A&M. In fact, you could say that we are drowning in a sea of good things. But we must not be content to be merely good at many things. Ladies and gentlemen, we must aspire to achieve greatness. This morning I’d like to share with you a brief overview of how we can work together to make this vision become a reality.

**Our First Issue: Academics**

In the time that I have been president, I have spent a great deal of time listening to people here on campus and elsewhere ... people who care about Texas A&M and have definite opinions on the direction we should take as we reach this turning point.

As a result, I have come to conclude that there are five issues that are most important to our university at this time. The first is the area of academic quality ... How can we position ourselves to leverage time, money and effort to ensure that our resources are allocated strategically for the maximum benefit of our academic mission?

Benjamin Franklin once said, "By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail." So, if we are to move forward in strengthening our academic programs, we need a plan. And developing such a plan is our top priority as a university.

This Academic Master Plan as we will call it, will provide specific strategies and tactics to help us fulfill the broad goals of Vision 2020. For the past few years, we have been conducting activities that have helped set the stage for achieving our vision. Hiring 450 new faculty in the last five years, for example, was a rebuilding effort. Losses in revenue in years past created a tremendous shortfall in human capacity that simply needed to be addressed in order to get us back to where we once were.

But now, if we do nothing to build on our Faculty Reinvestment initiative, we will soon find ourselves falling behind once more. We have come to a crucial turning point regarding our academic mission, and we need a framework to help us make decisions on how resources will be allocated from now on, in order to better position us for strategic growth, not just the status quo.

I have asked our new provost and executive vice president for academics, Dr. Jeffrey Vitter, to lead a university-wide effort to develop this Academic Master Plan. Dr. Vitter’s background in running large, complex institutions as a scholar and strategic planner makes him an excellent choice for this task.

He will be working with many of you—our faculty—to develop this master plan for setting priorities on how and where our resources will be used. Our goal is to take areas where we are good and make them better, and to take areas where we are great and propel them to the very top.

As part of this effort, Dr. Vitter will review our current academic goals ... many of the recommendations found in the so-called Murano Report ... to identify which areas we should give greater emphasis. And with your assistance, he will identify ways that we can attract some of the very best professors and researchers in the world ... academic superstars ... to our campus to add to our already impressive faculty ranks.
This is a major new initiative for which we’ll request legislative funding this next session by expanding something called the Competitive Knowledge Fund, which is an incentive-based fund based on research expenditures of select universities in Texas. In hiring additional superstar researchers through this fund, we will also attract the highest caliber undergraduate and graduate students from around the world. They will add significant value to our research and elevate our status among our peer institutions.

Hiring these world-class researchers will take significant resources, not only for salaries but for equipment, laboratory renovations, and graduate students. I am confident that if the Legislature chooses to make this investment through the Competitive Knowledge Fund, our state will reap benefits that are worth many times their initial investment, and these benefits will occur in a relatively short time.

Another area of focus must be basic research. Many universities, including ours, have expanded their focus in recent years on research that has commercial applications ... research that is likely to provide a significant return on investment. This is an important area and one that will continue to be important for years to come. But we must not ever abandon our quest for discovery, which can only come from investing in basic research.

If we look at the truly revolutionary discoveries that have been made through the centuries, we find that most came about as the result of fundamental experimentation. We must continue to emphasize this type of research, which we all know so often has resulted in cures for diseases ... improvements to the buildings we live and work in ... a better understanding of societal issues ... and better methods for growing and harvesting the food we eat.

Implementing our Academic Master Plan will be a major undertaking. The process will be open and transparent, and we will need your input and energy because, again, time is short for us to seize this opportunity.

Our Second Issue: Globalization

The second major issue that we must address is globalization. While we have significant areas of international expertise, overall we lag behind our peer institutions in the number of our students who study or spend time in other countries. This is one area where employers find our students unprepared compared to their counterparts from other universities, and frankly, our international impact as a university is underestimated.

We live in an era when we are all connected through cell phones, the Internet and social networking sites. Access to the world is literally just a mouse click away. I know, just the other day I received an offer for $100M from the heir to the fortune in Equatorial New Guinea—all they needed was my credit card number to pay for shipping me the $100M! The point is that, we must make sure that our students are as prepared as they can be to compete and to thrive in our global economy. We are competing economically not just with our counterparts in Texas or the United States, but with people from all over the world.
Our faculty and staff who are on the front lines in this effort do a tremendous job, as do those Aggies at our campus in Qatar and at our centers in Italy and Mexico City. Still, I am convinced that we must do more. We must find ways to create opportunities for our students and faculty to develop skills in another culture ... to collaborate with colleagues from other countries ... and to feel more at home with people of different backgrounds and life experiences.

My goal is to increase participation in these kinds of programs so that 25 percent of our students have an international experience ... preferably by studying or working in another country ... by the time they graduate.

We should seriously consider requiring that an international experience become part of the curriculum for every college, similar to the way it's being done now in the College of Architecture. In order to explore all options, I plan to establish a Task Force to investigate this opportunity, and to determine how curricula would need to be revamped, and financed ... including our core curriculum ... to accomplish this goal.

**Our Third Issue: Great Value**

The third issue we must address is that of being accessible and ensuring the Texas A&M legacy of being a great value to our students and to the citizens of Texas. We are proud of the fact that we provide an excellent education at a reasonable price, and that we have been able to keep our tuition increases relatively low. In fact, we were able to keep the tuition increase for this fall at the lowest rate in a decade—an accomplishment that was not easy and will require continued vigilance in managing our financial resources.

We continue to attract record numbers of applicants to Texas A&M. In fact, the Class of 2012 ... consisting of 8,100 students ... is the largest freshman class in our 132-year history.

Some of that is due to the fact that we remain rated as a "best value" by "U.S. News & World Report" and "Kiplinger’s" in their annual rankings. And much of that is due to the efforts of the Aggie Network, our first-rate admissions and financial aid offices, and our highly successful Prospective Student Centers.

The Class of 2012 also includes the highest number of Hispanic and African-American freshman in the University’s history—a 16 percent increase over last year. In addition, about 25 percent of the freshman class consists of first generation college students.

I am proud of the strides we’ve made in increasing the number of underrepresented students on our campus, particularly at the undergraduate level. But frankly, we’re not yet where we need or want to be.

As the state’s land grant university, our mission has always been to educate a broad cross-section of the population of Texas. As the face of our state changes, so must the face of Texas A&M.
We become stronger as a university when we embrace a diversity of ideas, cultures and backgrounds. But we also become stronger as individuals by doing so. Each and every one of us has a personal responsibility to promote and encourage diversity of all kinds across our entire campus and through the experiences we provide our students, faculty and staff, and I intend to hold us, including me, accountable for doing all we can in terms of attracting and hiring minorities to this university.

The challenge before us is significant, particularly as our state undergoes a major demographic transformation. As you know, the competition for high-achieving minority students has become intense—and not just among Texas universities. These "superstar" students are heavily recruited by other prestigious institutions across the nation. This competition directly affects the number of minority students who actually enroll at Texas A&M.

We must look for innovative ways to ensure that we can adhere to our land-grant mission of reflecting the face of Texas. And even though our student body is more diverse than ever before, much work remains to be done. We must find more ways to reach cohorts of students who previously have had little access to higher education.

One of the ways we will do this is through a new program called University Bound! This program, pending funding from the state, will partner with early high school students at select schools across the state.

Academic counselors placed at these schools will help students walk through the process of applying to college and will develop summer programs to transition students from high school to college life at Texas A&M.

Another way we will reach out to students is through a new interactive recruitment campaign and state-of-the-art tour bus that will travel to major urban areas and remote rural areas of Texas. It is called "Do You Wonder?" and it will let young people know about the benefits of a college degree, how to apply for college, and how to obtain financial aid. This is a fun and creative way of increasing the pool of prospective students from all backgrounds to Texas A&M. I invite you to browse through some elements of this campaign on our website.

While I am pleased to report that we have a record 9,100 graduate students on our campus this fall, the question of accessibility applies to this student population as well. Having more and higher-quality students at the graduate level is critical to our teaching and research mission. A highly ranked graduate school increases the value of every Texas A&M degree, and provides experiences that four-year universities simply can’t offer.

But this is also an important issue for our state's economic future. If we want to attract high-tech industries to Texas, we must be able to offer a highly educated workforce. We are lagging behind other states in this effort. For example, out of 48 Texas students who competed in the National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowship Program, 32 of these students left the state in pursuit of a graduate degree.
The economic growth of the state depends on students completing their doctorates in Texas universities—and then building, maintaining, and growing successful businesses and research programs in the State of Texas.

To combat this problem, we will request funds from the Legislature for a program we call 'Keeping Texas Scholars in Texas.' This money would be used to provide incentive funds for "superstar" students who graduate from a Texas college or university to continue their graduate education here at Texas A&M.

And to leverage this funding request from the state, we are also unveiling several initiatives that address the affordability of a college education. Despite our efforts to keep tuition increases as low as possible, many of our students find it difficult to pay for college without mounting significant amounts of debt in the form of student loans. This afternoon I am pleased to announce the formation of a new program that will cover the tuition costs for all incoming freshmen who come from families that have a household income of less than sixty thousand dollars, as long as they maintain a two-point-five grade point average. Today, we are prepared to offer these scholarships retroactively to our freshmen in the Class of 2012, which will provide much-needed relief to our middle-income students and their families now and into the future.

But that's not all I intend to do in this area. I also believe we should help middle-class families closer to home ... including our own faculty. I will be putting together a task force to explore ways that we can significantly enhance our existing scholarship program for children of faculty and staff, to include possible tuition waivers for them. I am hopeful that we can implement a greater level of financial assistance for the Aggie Family as early as next fall.

Finally, we will soon be calling on perhaps our greatest partner in ensuring the great value of obtaining a degree from Texas A&M—our former students who generously support many areas of our university through philanthropy. The Texas A&M Foundation's presentation earlier is a tangible symbol of many generous Aggies who are choosing the future of Texas A&M over their own personal investment returns.

I am pleased that the A&M Foundation will be working with me on a new philanthropic initiative to enhance fellowships for graduate students, scholarships for a variety of programs available for undergraduates, and special support for international experiences.

**Our Fourth Issue: Infrastructure/Facilities**

The fourth issue we must address is our campus infrastructure and facilities. More than eight hundred million dollars’ worth of new construction is either under way or in the planning stages right now. This is a record amount of construction at Texas A&M, and we believe it is a record in all of American higher education.

One example is the Memorial Student Center Renovation project that was started last year. The MSC is the living room of our campus, but it was built for far fewer students than we have today. The fact that students voted to increase their fees to support this project ... even though many of them will be
gone by the time the project is completed ... underscores the great need that exists and my sense of urgency to get this project underway. We will engage former students and other partners to assist in the MSC project and leverage the commitment already being paid by our students.

If the campus living room needs a facelift, you can imagine that we must address other parts of our campus. One priority is the development of new graduate student housing to replace our existing University Apartments complex north of campus. As we begin this much-needed project, we are committing to our tenants to keep these units affordable and at below market rates.

In addition, we are in the process of assessing the condition of the more than five hundred existing buildings on campus. We must bring our older buildings up to date in terms of safety and energy efficiency. We must make sure that our classrooms and laboratories can continue to meet the needs of our students and faculty.

To accomplish this, we will approach the Legislature with a request for ninety-five million dollars to update older buildings on our campus ... the beginnings of an initiative that we expect will cover several legislative sessions. Ninety-five million dollars is a lot of money, but every penny is needed on our campus. World-class faculty and world-class students deserve world-class facilities. It doesn’t matter if we’re talking about a brand new building such as the Interdisciplinary Life Sciences Building, or if we’re talking about a historic structure such as the Animal Industries Building ... our classrooms, laboratories and offices must help us fulfill our teaching and research mission through state-of-the-art technology in an accessible and productive learning environment. I am committed to this and ask for your help and patience as we catalogue all that is needed to be done in anticipation of funding becoming available.

**Our Fifth Issue: Enlightened Governance**

Finally, we must do all we can to promote what I call enlightened governance, one of the basic tenets of Vision 2020. Since being named president in January, I have discussed this concept with many of you as well as with the Chancellor and Board of Regents. I have learned that enlightened governance has been the subject of much confusion. To me, it is a very simple concept that means having everyone in the campus community engaged and involved.

Currently, the leaders of our councils ... such as those on climate and diversity, and our newly formed Staff Council ... provide me with their advice and recommendations on a variety of issues. But I have found that too often, that is the end of the matter. Members of these councils often don’t have access to the "big picture" ... the issues and priorities that shape Texas A&M and how decisions are made regarding their recommendations.

To bridge this gap and to connect the councils together, I am forming a Council of Councils, which will enable us to address issues and find solutions in a cohesive, well-coordinated effort. This Council on Councils will have upward communication by being privy to the larger issues that my executive team and I deal with, and will also help us communicate information about important issues throughout the campus community.
Conclusion

These are the five areas of critical importance that I believe we must direct our focus. Success in these areas will help us reach the next level of growth and development ... and will help make us the very best public university in the United States. But beyond our quest for national rankings, we must address these issues because it’s what our fellow Texans expect of us. It is what we expect of each other, and it’s the right thing to do.

These five areas can be easily remembered, because the acronym for them is something we all cherish ... the acronym is A-G-G-I-E ... Aggie. I invite you to remember academics, globalization, great value, infrastructure, and enlightened governance.

These five areas present us with a lot of work to do over the next twelve years ... and those of you who are faculty members will play the most important role as we move forward. You have heard me say many times that faculty are the very foundation of any university. In fact, faculty were here at the Agricultural & Mechanical College of Texas before the first student stepped on the campus.

Students graduate and leave, and administrators come and go. But we hope that our faculty members will stay at Texas A&M for decades. We hope that you will be with us in twelve years, when we celebrate our success at the end of the Vision 2020 process.

This afternoon, I would like to ask you to think about what your own situation will be like twelve years from now. If you are now an assistant or associate professor, think about the great contributions you will make to your discipline by the year 2020. If you are a full professor, think about how you will look back in the year 2020, reflecting on the role you played in moving Texas A&M to even greater heights.

We are now at a turning point when we must fully embrace the broad goals of Vision 2020. I am optimistic that by fulfilling this vision, we can reach our destination of being one of the country’s top public universities by the year 2020. I am also optimistic that each of you wants Texas A&M to move forward and not get left behind, just as Texas A&M has moved forward so many times in the past.

I would like to leave you today with an excerpt from a letter I received from a parent of one of our Sea Aggies who has endured a great deal in the aftermath of Hurricane Ike.

"So many people rose to the occasion, even if it was not their department, and were willing to help ... Knowing that such a caring group of people will be interacting with my child over the next few years is quite comforting ... Positive attitudes, as well as sympathy towards (my child's) plight, exuded from everyone ... Thank you for everything you are doing to make this crazy Galveston to College Station transition go as smoothly as possible ... Do know that your efforts are recognized and you are appreciated more than you can imagine."

As Aggies, we respond to the call of duty. By working together ... and by believing in each other ... I am optimistic that we will get to number one. And I am confident that Texas A&M will remain the university that we all hold so dear.
Thank you for entrusting me with this profound responsibility. I look forward to the years ahead as your president.

God bless you, and Gig ‘Em!