2009 Academic Convocation

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Howdy! Dear colleagues, dear colleagues . . . I use that term liberally. My title is interim president. When I was told on June 15th that I would serve in that capacity, I immediately turned to the dictionary to define the word interim. What does that word mean? You will find the word typically is defined as in between. That raises certain metaphors. Interim: “in between.”

In between what? The devil and the deep blue sea? A rock and a hard place?

One hundred and eight days! I do count the days. I’m not sure if that’s a long time or a short time, but the days have passed rapidly. I determined on day one that interim did not mean to just keep the lights on, the grass mowed, and the trash picked up.

No, as one who was already first, familiar with Texas A&M; second, knowledgeable about and supportive of Vision 2020; and third, keenly aware of the inherent strengths of this great institution, I knew it was essential not only to press on with key initiatives such as our Academic Master Plan, but also to find other gaps that had to be bridged if we are to become even greater over time. After all, Vision 2020 was launched twelve years ago this month and we now have only ten more years to go to achieve its ambitious goals.

In formulating what to say today, I thought and read a bit. In particular, I read just a couple of days ago the speech delivered on September 24th by Drew Faust, Harvard’s president. In her remarks, she spent a lot of time and a lot of space just talking about finances.

Just like Dr. [Eddie Joe] Davis [president of the Texas A&M Foundation] said, every university has gone through a substantial reduction of their endowment funds—Harvard perhaps more than most—and so her speech was devoted mostly to talking about how they were going to save the university because of the lack of funding from their endowment income.

Fortunately, I can come to you today and paint a much rosier picture about Texas A&M.

Texas A&M: Always Resilient

In particular, Texas A&M has, over its lifetime, demonstrated extraordinary resiliency. It’s human nature to see one’s current situation as the way things always have been and will be. But it’s worth thinking about the past a bit as we look ahead to the future.
Recruitment of the very best students to Texas A&M is a very serious business for us. We have many people who work hard to make certain that the best and brightest students of Texas and our nation know about Texas A&M and choose it to come to for their higher education. In fact, this year we had about 26,000 applications for the 9,000 spots in our freshman class. That shows you the unique educational experience here.

But at least I don’t have the problem encountered by Thomas Sanford Guthrie, our first president, as he was told of a student being attacked by a pack of wolves on the steps of the dining hall one day. That, at least, has passed.

Our very existence as a university has not always been secure. Resources were scarce when Texas A&M opened its doors in 1876. After all, Texas was still recovering from the Civil War and there was much to do besides build universities.

There was considerable debate about whether the State of Texas actually needed two colleges. Why two, as the constitution dictated? For many years, members of the Legislature fought to implement two very dismal possibilities: either to make Texas A&M part of the University of Texas, or to convert the campus into a lunatic asylum. Some may argue we’ve already done that, but we won’t go there.

Many things have changed, but many have not. College campuses have always been the topic of interest to many politicians, especially flagship campuses like our own, or perhaps the University of Illinois-Urbana/Champaign that you’ve read about recently.

Texas A&M’s president once let an internal dispute between faculty members grow into a statewide scandal that led to his forced resignation . . . and the dismissal of the entire faculty of the university.

Back then, the faculty met to approve cadets for promotion up the military ranks. This was basically a very ordinary, routine rubber-stamp event. But in one case it did not turn out that way. For reasons we’ve lost to history, the faculty voted not to promote John Crisp to senior captain of Company A, equivalent today to our Corps Commander’s position. This reflected dissonance among the committee, not the actual credentials of Mr. Crisp. Ultimately, the Board of Directors—what we now call the Board of Regents—demanded the resignation of the president, and fired the entire faculty. Think about that!

Similarly, the third president, James Reid Cole, was ousted when the Board of Directors—in a surprise move—abolished his position. Think about that! In its place though, the board established the position of chairman of the faculty, to be elected by the faculty. Now that, I think, is true shared governance.

Later on, the Legislature gave us a lot of money one session to make up for many, many years of neglect and shortfalls in appropriations. This prompted criticism across the entire state that Texas A&M had gotten too big for its britches, too powerful, and was in fact running the state.

One state legislator even introduced a bill to—quote—appropriate all money now or hereafter in the treasury not otherwise appropriated, to Texas A&M—end quote. Unfortunately, he was just joking.
Texas A&M: Stronger Than Ever

But here we are in 2009, a strong, resilient, great institution. We’ve met some challenges before—and many more I could have told you about. Historically, when we’ve been down, we’ve always risen and become even better.

We’ve always retained those qualities that make Texas A&M so special even while we’ve moved on to greater prestige and excellence in our education, research and service activities.

So we have much to reflect on today in terms of our success. Look at our enrollment:

- Again, we had a record number of applications.
- Twentieth-class-day numbers: 48,885 students—a record for us. In total, we have 51,090 students attending the three campuses of Texas A&M University.
- We also have records at our campuses in Galveston (1,780) and Qatar (421).
- Our freshman class is the largest ever, at 8,104. But now, interestingly enough, this year we have two more females than males in our freshman class. That is a first. It wasn’t that way in the 1960s when I was here, I can assure you!
- Our graduate enrollment is up.
- Our Hispanic enrollment is up.
- Our African-American enrollment up.
- All of these are records for our university. About one quarter of our entering freshmen are first-generation college students, just as I was coming here in 1967 as a freshman.

We are known. We are recognized, certainly within Texas, within the nation and of course, across the world.

As you might expect, rankings are somewhat arbitrary. Every organization doing rankings has its own way of doing them. The criteria even change from year to year, so it’s very difficult to make sense of them. But a few of them are worth noting.

We’re tied, for example, for first place by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, looking, in their case, at “education, not reputation” as their criterion for measuring success. In our case, our core curriculum was the principal reason we were classified in the top seven schools in the nation.

We are of course, once again, ranked in the top five by the biennial Washington Monthly, which looks at “what colleges do for the country.” That is, what they give back to the nation. With the service mentality here it is not surprising that Texas A&M continues to be at the top of the charts for this particular poll.

Other things are more interesting and more subtle, perhaps. We have striven hard here to increase the diversity of our student population and our faculty. One of our great challenges here of course, is to increase the numbers of—or I should say, the small number—of minority faculty in many of our fields. But we’re doing something about it.
The publication *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* has looked very favorably on us. We are once again ranked fifth in the nation for doctoral degrees awarded to Hispanics in 2007-2008. We are tied with the University of Florida (47 each).

We are ranked 22nd in the nation by *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* for doctoral degrees awarded to African-Americans in 2007-2008. We are tied with University of California, Berkeley, and Clark Atlanta University, at 27 each.

We are literally growing faculty to serve our diverse student population. Now, they may not stay here, and that’s right and proper many times. But the point is, the pool of available faculty from those groups who have been previously underrepresented is growing larger each year because, in part, of what we do here at Texas A&M.

I won’t get into *U.S. News & World Report*, but we do rank well there. The issue is what it really means to us.

**Progress toward Vision 2020**

I’ve known of Vision 2020 since its very beginning. I wasn’t here, of course, in the late 1990s on the faculty or administration, but I was an interested former student looking on from a distance and learning about Vision 2020. I was really encouraged about the great challenges but also the great potential that document represented.

I had some interesting experiences in my graduate studies at Rice University in Houston. I often walked across the Rice campus and passed by Lovett Hall, the first building built on that campus.

On the cornerstone of Lovett Hall is a very interesting inscription in classical Greek. As a physicist, I do understand the Greek alphabet, and recognized it as a quotation from Demosthenes, and over time I was able to puzzle out what it meant: “Rather would I discover the cause of one fact than to become king of the Persians.”

Now if you know your history, Demosthenes lived at a time when being king of the Persians meant you ruled the world. Now think about that—weighing one new fact against ruling the world.

That we know, colleagues, is how we describe ourselves and why we do what we do here at this university. Why we labor, both to learn and also to teach others. Vision 2020 captures that spirit for me, and I’m so glad we have that in front of us a vision, a set of goals for our future.

Vision 2020 is our effort, begun more than ten years ago, to propel Texas A&M to be among the very top public universities in the nation by the year 2020.

To secure recognition as the best in teaching, in research and in service. This recognition is not important to inflate our egos, but rather to ensure that we bring Texas A&M the very best students, the best faculty, the best staff—and retain them.
I know it can be difficult for those of us who are living in the middle of it to step back for an objective assessment. It can be helpful to think of Vision 2020 as a relay race. We have had many major successes over the past years since we started Vision 2020:

- AAU membership. 62 of the top universities—public and private—in the country.
- Research expenditures. We rank third among universities without a medical school.
- We have the most diverse student body and faculty in our history. It’s not where it needs to be; don’t get me wrong. But we’ve made considerable progress.
- Nobel Laureate Dr. David Lee, 1996 Nobel Prize Winner in Physics, will come to us from Cornell in November. We now have three Nobel Laureates on our faculty—with Dudley Herschbach and Bruce McCarl. We mourn the passing of another Nobel Laureate, Dr. Norman Borlaug, last month.
- Addition of the Performance Studies program.
- Addition of the Hispanic Studies program.
- Addition of the new position of vice president for diversity.
- Addition of the University Studies degree.
- Addition of the Confucius Institute and Arabic language programs.
- Completion of the $1.5 billion “One Spirit, One Vision” campaign. That shows how much we are valued by our alumni, our students and corporations.
- Addition of a new center in Costa Rica.
- And most notably, the support of the most active and supportive body of former students of any university.

These are assets that are extraordinary to this university. If we think of Vision 2020 as a relay race, then the first leg took place when President Ray Bowen and Jon Hagler—a former student and businessman who has supported Texas A&M—first proposed Vision 2020 and put it into motion.

The second leg took place during the administration of Dr. Robert Gates. During this time, we had two major areas of focus: a faculty reinvestment program to hire nearly 450 new faculty and the program to begin significant new construction and renovation of existing buildings on campus.

We are now running in the third leg of this long race, begun under President Murano. Let me bring you up to date on a few key accomplishments of this third leg:

- New construction is completed. We just opened our Interdisciplinary Life Sciences Building. We will formally open the Texas A&M Institute for Preclinical Studies and the Mitchell Physics buildings this year.
- Ground was broken for the new Agriculture Headquarters Building. Renovation has begun on the MSC. The Mexico City Center moved to a new facility. And I can promise you that the renovation of Military Walk will be complete next spring, well in advance of your procession for next year’s Academic Convocation.
- We are beginning to reap the benefits of Faculty Reinvestment. A few examples:
Dr. Lin Shao, assistant professor of nuclear engineering, was awarded a Faculty Early Career Development Award from the National Science Foundation. He joined our faculty in 2006.

Dr. Saskia Mioduszewski, assistant professor of physics, received the Geppert Award from the American Physical Society in 2009. He joined our faculty in 2005.


We also have a record number of NSF CAREER award winners among our faculty.

I have asked Interim Provost Watson to provide us all with a thorough assessment of where we are in our path toward reaching our Vision 2020 goals. After that is done, we may choose to convene a group to do a “mid-term” review of Vision 2020 and to recommend appropriate tweaks based on our progress to date and the changing environment in which Texas A&M exists.

**Academic Master Plan**

Over a year ago, many, many of you worked together to develop what we call the Academic Master Plan. This plan was and is intended to provide roadmaps in three key areas that move the university forward in its path to achieving Vision 2020.

This plan has now reached a level of maturity that allows us to begin implementation. As we speak, we are actually rolling this plan out and making it reality.

Thus, our major focus for the third leg of the relay race is this Academic Master Plan. We cannot afford to drop the baton after coming so far. But it is critical for all of us to recognize that our Academic Master Plan is not complete, nor is it perfect.

I have asked the interim provost to put in place the necessary organization to continually monitor, assess, and modify or extend the plan to keep it relevant to its original purpose of being our roadmap to achieving Vision 2020. Moreover, I have also asked the interim provost to map the Master Plan onto Vision 2020 so that we can determine where there are gaps.

The master plan, as you know, has three components—teaching and learning, research, and engagement. We are already making progress.

We are developing teaching and learning innovation incentives to support faculty with innovative ideas in study abroad or being engaged in service learning courses—we should name some in spring for pilot programs. We are already attracting truly world-class scholars to the university.

Nobel Laureate David Lee is the first example that I have already mentioned. Dr. Lee will begin teaching here next month and will also be moving his research program to Texas A&M over the next several months. He’s not coming here to be window dressing for the university; he’s coming here to be a serious teacher and scholar. He’s moving his laboratory here to A&M to continue his world class research. Let me tell you why this is so important to me personally.
When I left here to go to Rice in 1970 I immediately realized that something there was different, something there was very special. Through a small endowment, given to them by a former student, they were able to bring a Nobel-Prize-winner in physics to Rice each year. Over the four years I was there working on my doctorate, I was able to meet four Nobel Laureates—more than meet them. Oh, they came to give a talk to the general public and talks to the faculty, but they also gave an hour to each student. An hour to me personally, hearing about my research, giving me advice, listening to my problems, responding to those problems.

I was blown away. It profoundly impacted me. It had to. It had a lot to do with shaping me today. Texas A&M can have that same effect on students, on faculty. One on one is invaluable. I look forward to having it happen here by bringing more people such as David Lee to our campus.

Among other things, we are developing a task force to oversee the completion and renovation of our three bio-safety level 3 laboratories and to recommend investments in additional BSL-3 facilities. As an added benefit, our researchers have already received more than $20 million in research funding from federal stimulus funds, with $20 million added to existing grants here at Texas A&M.

We will begin development of a portal for teaching faculty to share best innovations—CTE is leading in this development—as well as a portal to better connect communities (corporations and pre-K through 12) with willing experts from our faculty.

The Academic Master Plan addresses strategic big issues to position us for the homestretch to 2020. We will all work together to also strengthen our liberal arts and education colleges to ensure that Texas A&M offers its students the very best choices of majors and careers along with the nation’s best faculty to guide them.

We do owe a debt of gratitude to the previous president, Elsa Murano, and former Provost Jeff Vitter for conceiving and guiding the development of the Academic Master Plan.

As interim president, my focus has been to marshal the resources needed. We are on the right track. Consider the commitments we’ve already made.

We will be adding $58 million over the next five years ($11 million in the base budget for the Academic Master Plan each year for five years, with about $2 million to support Center for Teaching Excellence and Instructional Technology Services).

This is a huge commitment. Most of the funds will go directly back to colleges.

We plan to hire an additional seven or eight world-class scholars in the next five years, with colleges working to bring more junior faculty as well as postdoctoral fellows and graduate students that complement these truly exceptional individuals.

**Next Steps**
I am confident that we are on the right track in moving Texas A&M to the next level of excellence and prestige. As in the past, this does not mean discarding the values and traditions that make Texas A&M special.

We must stay focused as we enter the home stretch to 2020. Among our next steps are the following.

- Establishing a Task Force on the Graduate Student Experience, which parallels the one done in the past for undergraduate students. This will not look simply at the issue of education. It will look also at the life they have in the community. Many of these students have families; they have to deal with living conditions, child care—a host of things that undergraduate students do not have to deal with.
- Establishing a Task Force on Enrollment. We need to understand the proper balance between freshman, upper classmen, international students and graduate students over the entire university.
- Establishing a Task Force on Athletics. During the formulation of Vision 2020, Athletics was considered seriously, but never added into the program as a major imperative. That may or not have been right. We’re going back to look at that again and make sure we understand how Athletics plays into the entire fabric of Texas A&M, especially how our student athletes integrate into our student body.
- Establishing a Task Force on Faculty Performance Evaluations.
- Establishing a Task Force on Texas A&M Programs in the Arts. We want to be a “whole” university. We cannot without looking into how the Arts play into the education for all of our students.
- Establishing a Task Force on a Texas A&M Law Program.

A great challenge for the Aggie Network lies before us. We know how good we are. Others often do not. So a big part of our job is telling the story of Texas A&M.

Our achievement of the primary goal of Vision 2020—to be counted among the top ten public universities in the nation—is not about our ranking in *U.S. News & World Report*. Rather, it is about what others know of us and think about us.

I ask that you join with me in working with your colleagues, your departments, your colleges, my office, our system, and the myriad external communities of which you are a part to tell them that it’s time for Texas A&M!

I chose the relay metaphor for a reason. Our men’s and women’s track teams have both won national championships in the past year. When I asked head coach Pat Henry how he inspires his student-athletes, he said he tells them this: “Everybody, have a great day on the same day.” That is good advice for us all. Let’s work together as a team to all have a great day every day.

We’re engaged in important work—transforming our land-grant mission to meet the needs of the 21st century. Demonstrating how we can transform society in ways that will improve the lives of people across the state, nation and the world, just as the original Morrill Act did more than one hundred years ago.
I am confident that we will lead the way in showing others what it means to be a land-grant university of this century—as well as a Tier 1 public research university—not for the past and present, but for the future. So that we will transform this already great university into an even greater one. So that we will reach our goals for Vision 2020. So that we will win this long race.

Thank you for all that you have done to make possible our tremendous achievements to date. Everything that you contribute day in and day out on our behalf makes me proud to be an Aggie and honored to serve as your interim president.