

(Start on Slide 1)

Thank you, Laurie Ann, for that reading, and for that beautiful testament to the students and to the spirit of this university.

And good morning to all of you. Welcome back to campus! I always look forward to the start of a new academic year – a time of year alive with the buzz of faculty and staff, students – new and returning – and the traditions and rituals that bring us together as a university community.

What we do here at A&M San Antonio is so important. But as we sit here this morning, I ask you to join me in thinking particularly about “The How:” ***How*** we embrace our institutional Mission, ***how each day*** we live our mission and specifically, ***how*** we serve students facing poverty, ***how*** we

provide quality and accessible education and, now more than ever, *how* we address concerns for their safety and well-being.

Today's date – August 20 – is not an unusual one for the start of an academic year. But it is a notable date in our nation's history, because of two significant events--separated by 22 years, but tied together by a shared anniversary. I want to reflect on these two moments from our collective past because they have a striking relationship to current events that deeply impact our campus community and, I believe, provide perspective about our role and our responsibilities to the communities that we serve as a public Hispanic-Serving Institution.

55 years ago, today – on August 20, 1964 – President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act, which many historians suggest was the cornerstone for his administration's "War on Poverty" and the "Great Society" agenda. LBJ's

agenda focused on four goals: ending poverty, reducing crime, eliminating racial inequality and protecting the environment.

Clearly, it was an ambitious agenda, one that aimed to make the largest social reforms in modern history. Dozens of programs were launched as a result, many of which impacted South Bexar County and remain important today as the foundation of many contemporary domestic social policies.

But these policies require our continued attention. As we all in this room know, equity is rarely a naturally occurring condition and the work of achieving it is never finished. Today I want to reaffirm our campus commitment to an ambitious agenda of our own. I am asking that we focus in, that we “**double down,**” on the Bexar County communities that we serve, and on the perennial issues that we know impact the lives of our future

students and their families in the 7 school districts within our sphere of influence. **(Slide 2)**

It is well known that eliminating the “education desert” in South Bexar County was a key motivator for the establishment of A&M-San Antonio. Here in Bexar County, the late Senator Madla and so many other community leaders, have been trying to address the very same challenges that LBJ’s administration so ambitiously took on – and our campus is an integral part of that effort.

Many of you in this room have likely heard me say that to build excellence, we must “leverage our geography” and this couldn’t be more relevant than within our neighboring South Bexar County – where the stark realities of income segregation plague districts with low property values and low household income.

(Slide 3) According to the 2013-2017 American Community

Survey, the median household income in Texas is approximately \$57,000.

Yet, 6 of the 7 South Bexar County ISDs that we serve have household incomes significantly below this median, ranging from approximately \$50,000 down to just \$29,000. **(Slide 4)**

And the families of our A&M-San Antonio students reflect this income disparity clearly. In 2018-19, among our own student body, **46%** of students came from families whose Adjusted Gross Income was less than \$30,000 – and of those students who completed a FAFSA-- which was 87% of the student body – **65%** had their **entire** tuition covered through some form of financial aid. *Simply put: our students have tremendous financial need.*

So as you embark on this academic year, please do not underestimate “the how” – **how** we *collectively* serve our

students, especially those with financial constraints that make their educational journeys even more arduous. And don't underestimate how *you*, in your sphere of influence as the faculty and staff members with whom our students interact on a daily basis, shape their experience at A&M-San Antonio. **(Slide 5)**

Across the university, we have continuously refined our practices supporting all aspects of the student experience including advising, academic success coaches, faculty mentoring, student engagement, learning communities, student leadership and much more. We know that all of these are critical components to scaffold student success and provide the highest quality educational experience. And our practices in these areas must be continually subject to evaluation and improvement to best serve our students, which is why we have university-wide

committees focused on student academic success, and why we are refining our data governance methodologies to more ably track and assess persistence, retention and time to degree.

We in higher education know all about the “zip code effect” -- that there is a strong correlation between socioeconomic status and student success. Like LBJ and the architects of the “Great Society” agenda did 55 years ago, we understand the impact that poverty has on opportunity, and we have an obligation to make a difference where we can. **(Slide 6)**

While our students and their families continue to face enormous financial challenges, they also face the realities of living in a violent world – which brings me to another anniversary of sorts, though a far more somber one. 33 years ago, today – on August 20, 1986 – a mass shooting in a postal facility in Edmond, Oklahoma resulted in 14 fatalities and 6 injuries. Those of you

who can recall that time may remember how truly shocking that news was. And now, just a few decades later, such news is commonplace – and in some recent cases, has hit very close to home. In November 2017, a mass shooting in nearby Sutherland Springs resulted in 26 fatalities. And just 17 days ago, yet another mass shooting, this time in El Paso, with 22 lives lost. Members of our campus community have been affected by both of these tragedies. In remembrance of those who were lost here at home in Texas, at the conclusion of tomorrow’s Freshman Convocation there will be a moment of reflection at a recently planted tree in the Healing Garden behind the Patriots’ Casa, near the 9/11 Survivor Tree. I invite you all to join us in that moment of reflection.

Even as we mourn those victims, I also do not want to shy away from a harsh reality – that the El Paso shooting was allegedly

fueled by hate, and the rhetoric the shooter posted on social media targeted Hispanics specifically. *Please know that our students are sensitive to this reality and some are anxious, hurting or fearful.*

The facts of this individual's act of horrific violence and his alleged motivations will play out in the courts; yet, we cannot stand by and ignore the rising trend of hate speech and its proliferation on social media threads and out in our communities. We must be adamant that, whether targeting Hispanics or any specific group, such vitriolic rhetoric is unwelcome here.

Whether in El Paso, Dayton or Gilroy, the world in which our students live is increasingly susceptible to mass shootings in public spaces. I believe that makes it even more important that here on this campus, an environment over which we have some

amount of control, we are deliberate in our efforts to make students feel both welcome and safe.

I anticipate that when our primarily Hispanic student population enters our classrooms this fall – or a student event, store, restaurant or workplace – they might do so with trepidation.

Some might express concerns based on their ethnicity or other facets of their identities that exist across our diverse communities. Some will experience that anxiety in silence.

(Slide 7)

I urge you all to be sensitive to that anxiety. I ask you to remain aware and ready to engage in conversations that may be difficult or emotionally charged, or influenced by divisive and derisive political rhetoric.

We must rise even higher to learn from and show up for each other. I **challenge** you to actively model habits of vigorous but

respectful discussion, and to ensure that everyone has space for their individual voice and an open, listening ear for diverse views—especially when they differ from your own.

I *challenge* you to help equip students with the critical thinking skills that will ensure they can distinguish evidentiary facts from alternative facts and recognize bias and misinformation for what they are.

Students often tell me that they feel they belong here, or that they're happy here and they're challenged here – and to me, there is no greater evidence of the impact that we are making.

Please know and believe that what you're doing influences their environment and *it is working*. You are making a difference in their lives.

I ask you to join me in continuing to strive for culturally-sensitive approaches that help our students feel respected, included and safe.

The thoughtful and deliberate introduction of equitable practices in our community requires all of us to also embrace cultural competence and continuous learning in our daily lives. That need underlies my, and our campus's continued commitment to the President's Commission on Equity, which will be introducing new efforts to enhance equity-mindedness. You received a listing of PCOE's upcoming fall events in your program today; I encourage you to attend and to become an active part of our campus efforts to ensure equity and inclusion for all.

I need not remind you, we live in a complicated world, where the rules of global order are being rewritten, sometimes via a

Tweet. As faculty and staff, we have one of the most important responsibilities in our society – and that is to impart a liberal education as we prepare students for a tidal wave of technological and global change. We are indeed fortunate in our capacities to embrace academic freedom, to embody free speech and to share these valued tenets of education with a capable body of students who are eager to advance their lives here at Texas A&M-SA. So while there are serious and sobering challenges before all of us – combating social and economic disparities, facing the seemingly constant threat of violence – I hope we can all be inspired by our students and the difference that we can make in their lives as we embark on this new academic year before us.

Before we move from history to the future—I want to pause in my remarks for a few moments to look back at one of our big 10

year anniversary events, as captured by our Communication students at Univision, which will bring us to a much lighter note.

(Slide 8 – video plays)

(Advance to Slide 9)

What a wonderful day that was for A&M-San Antonio! And what a great 10 years it has been, with so much change-- and much of that change within the last three years, since we welcomed our first freshman class. I'd like to ask all employees who were here prior to September 2016 to please rise. You are the keepers of our institutional knowledge; you will help ensure others understand our history. I am confident that today, August 20, Senator Frank Madla is smiling down upon us. **(Slide 10)**

We will continue to celebrate our tenth anniversary year for the next few months, culminating in a special celebration during Lights of Esperanza, at which time we will also commemorate

the Regents' December 3rd 1999, approval of the A&M Kingsville System Center that would later become A&M-San Antonio.

So we will continue to celebrate our past but more importantly today, I want to assure you that we are no longer a fledgling university on the south side. We have established the foundation for a great university that is focused on its students and focused on academic excellence. **(Slide 11)**

As you have likely heard, the formation of an Athletics program is underway, now that the Legislature, the student body and the Regents have all provided their approvals. Early next week, I will announce appointments to an Athletics Implementation Task Force, including a Faculty Athletics Representative, that will help guide the implementation plan. In October, we will initiate our application into the NAIA and the Red River

Conference to begin competitive play in Fall 2020. This semester, through Rec Sports, we will also launch an exciting new E-Sports program. **(Slide 12)**

This academic year we will continue advancing our campus master plan with the finalization of programming and planning for Athletics with on-campus practice fields and competitive play space that will support both the campus and the broader community. **(Slide 13)** We are also developing a combination Recreation Center and student union; a research park facility; new housing; and providing the new home for the Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service, as well as building a facility for use by the Texas Department of Emergency Management. Finally, at the August Regents meeting our next academic building was added to the capital plan and received PUF allocations. **(Slide 14)**

I also want to share an update with you about a previously announced project. Last academic year, I often spoke about the Mission Village project, which was intended for development on the land along the 410 Frontage Road, near the tower. Well, we have paused on that particular project because we are actively exploring potential partnerships with a new developer who has the surrounding property under contract. It made more sense to work together than to develop it alone. The other development project that you may recall my announcing, and that we have paused on, is an on-campus lab school. We have instead turned our attention to partnerships with the South Bexar County districts, to include off-campus lab schools in those 7 districts that we have primarily served.

The ongoing development of facilities is critical to continued campus growth. Although we received support from the 86th

legislature with an increase in formula funding and new institutional enhancement dollars, we must continue to grow. Our longer term support for transition funding from the state will dwindle rapidly and our best approach is to improve the persistence, and retention of existing students, along with increasing our enrollment of new students. **(Slide 15)**

As you might have noticed, JagX is underway and tomorrow our Class of 2023 – our largest freshman class to date – will participate in the Jaguar March—no doubt, it will be another scorching day in Texas! I hope that despite the heat, you’ll all join in the festivities by greeting them at the finish line right before Freshman Convocation. **(Slide 16)** Now, I’ll ask you to turn your attention to the campus profile of our current students. This is a quick snapshot of our current student body. These are

the students whose success you will be supporting in your work this year.

And as you may know, we are also closely tracking campus progress on many variables, some of which you will find on the strategic plan handouts included in your packet of handouts today. As we continue to monitor our campus progress toward meeting the ambitious goals laid out in our strategic plan, *Build. Impact. Transform.*, we will use this data to inform our resource and programming decisions. I encourage you to discuss this data in your department meetings and if needed, reach out to our IR director Steve Taraszewski or chief of staff Jessica Loudermilk, who oversees the campus strategic plan reporting.

This last academic year the President's cabinet made slight modifications to the Goals and Outcomes of our campus strategic plan; those also are in your handouts. These measures

are guiding our campus activities and priorities, **(Slide 17)** primarily those around student academic learning and performance. Last year, our strategic plan efforts helped inform changes in our admissions standards that will take effect in Fall 2020. In support of those new standards **(Slide 18)**, this academic year we will expand partnerships with the Alamo Colleges that include dual-admission and transfer guides for Early College High School Graduates to ensure a guided transition onto campus. While we are poised to continue our enrollment growth, increase our physical footprint, and support our campus community – we are making strides in achieving our long-term strategic vision as laid out in *Build.Impact.Transform*. Thank you for all that you're doing to make the university a better place, for each other and for our students.

I'd like to turn for a moment to one of our colleagues, Dr. Richard Ortega, and invite him to stand and be recognized. This is his final fall convocation as he begins a life of retirement in the next couple of weeks. Richard has helped lay the groundwork for philanthropy at Texas A&M-San Antonio. There is still much work to be done but Richard's work as our inaugural Vice President built a strong foundation for the future.

(Slide 19) Recently, he led the establishment of a \$1M endowment from the Financial Literacy Foundation of South Texas which is targeting students studying Finance and Accounting, an area where we continue to have academic strength. To date this year, we have received \$3.3M in cash for a variety of scholarships and program initiatives.

Academic excellence, our outstanding faculty, and our progress in student success are the keys to building a recognizable

university brand and enhancing our institutional reputation, as we work to establish a culture of philanthropy that will inspire investments from individuals, corporations and foundations.

Over the coming months, we will intensify our efforts in fundraising and it will become one of my top priorities to raise support for our new academic building and initiatives that provide greater opportunities for scholarship support for our current and prospective students. And as I ask others to give, it's important that I lead by example. Next month, we will relaunch our President's Circle, with a giving campaign during the last quarter of our tenth anniversary year. I have seen and experienced first-hand the long-term impact that scholarship support has on the lives of our students and our campus community, so I am committing the first \$10,000 gift in honor of our 10 year anniversary. I have asked the Vice Presidents to join me in leading the launch of the President's Circle 10-year-

giving campaign. Later this fall, you'll receive information asking you to consider contributing to the University as we build together toward a better future for our students. **(Slide 20)**

In closing, I want to share that over the summer, I was privileged to take a trip to Israel on an educational visit – several stops included visits to the Holy Lands. That experience inspired me to share today a paraphrasing of a verse that is commonly quoted in Christian faith, but that I believe expresses a value that goes beyond religious belief. Many of you may be familiar with this sentiment, from Luke 12:48: “from those to whom much is given, much is expected.” Each of us in this room is part of a community – one committed to a common purpose and institutional mission. It is a privilege to be a part of this community; to have the opportunity to impact students’ lives is a profound gift that we have been given. And much is expected

from all of us. I have spoken often of leading a “conspiracy of high expectations” for our students. But I challenge all of us, myself included, to have even higher expectations of ourselves. We must collaborate, inspire and continue our efforts to build a culture of excellence and success. Our students’ futures depend upon it, and I have every confidence that the A&M-San Antonio family that you all represent will rise to the occasion.

Again, welcome back to campus. I wish you a wonderful and productive fall semester! Before we adjourn to the cafeteria for lunch, please enjoy a closing performance by the Harlandale ISD Mariachi group. **(Advance to Slide 21 – closing image)**