



FALL 2021 CONVOCATION PRESIDENT'S REMARKS

Thank you, Kathy. What a wonderful way to pay tribute to the campus community members we've lost.

As we start today, I feel the energy and the positive sparks that happen when we're together and able to share in institutional milestones and traditions, such as Convocation marking the start of the new academic year. These are the moments that connect us.

But as much as we all have hoped for a fall semester in which face coverings and social distancing were things of the past, the sobering reality is that the pandemic is not over. With the emergence of COVID variants, cases are peaking and we are once again heading into a semester clouded by public health uncertainty.

While the A&M System has committed to maximizing in-person teaching, learning, and working opportunities, we are proceeding with care and with your safety, and our students' safety, foremost in mind. The experiences of the last year and a half have taught us how to adapt and how to carry out our mission as safely as possible.

During the last nearly 18 months, we have lived through a collective trauma the likes of which haven't been seen in the past 100 years. It has been an experience that has touched every human soul—no one is immune and no one is unchanged by this trauma. In talking with our faculty, staff, students, and alumni I've heard a common theme – that this is a universal moment to pause, wrestle with the unknown, react, and transform.

The conversations vary, of course, but they all seem to lead back to some big questions: Do I understand my purpose in life? Is my

work meaningful and contributing to the world? Am I devoting my time in a way that advances my purpose? Am I personally fulfilled?

With so many lives lost and so much disruption, there's an undeniable awareness that time is an asset that should be directed with **purpose** to our most important activities. We know that the tomorrow we imagine may not be guaranteed. And that today we must continue with intentionality about purpose. This is the moment to reset our expectations for the future.

The repercussions of the pandemic have been challenging, but they have also reinforced *our* special purpose, as we work together to advance our mission to serve our students and the community. The way that we work and the way we *think* about work has been transformed. The pandemic accelerated trends already in motion. For example we transformed our technology and reset our expectations about teaching and learning.

Today we have a deeper understanding of how to communicate digitally and virtually— we also recognize and have a deeper appreciation for the undeniable value of the human connection. We are now more capable of co-designing a blended workplace with a hybrid or remote setting without sacrificing people or mission.

We are evolving as an organization—not just in reaction to the pandemic, but also with intentionality as we begin to imagine a post-pandemic world. And our evolution depends on the people who are doing the work every day. People—all of you—are our greatest asset. The talent and valuable resource that fuels our engine. And since we're on the subject of our wonderful employees, I thought it would be nice to pause for a bit and hear from some of you about what you've missed and what you're looking forward to, post-pandemic.

I love seeing these faces and hearing everyone's enthusiasm about reconnecting. And clearly, our students have been missed!

Over the last few months, I've been visiting with campus leaders about leading with compassion and empathy, being purposeful in taking care of each other.

I know we're *all* fatigued and suffering from the collective and individual trauma of the pandemic. It has been hard on all of us in ways that we didn't anticipate, and we may not even yet fully understand. We are returning this fall as different people. We are changed.

And the way we think about work has to change, too. I have asked our Chief Human Resources Officer Martha Gonzalez, to lead an effort we're calling CARES—which is an acronym for Collaborative Approach to Reconnecting Everyone Safely. This academic year, Martha and her co-collaborators will guide us in rethinking our shared work culture, with conversations, professional development and other resources that help us reimagine the workplace.

One of our strategic plan goals, which you'll hear more about later, is about building a culture of excellence. You, are the foundation of that culture and this university should always be a place where your contributions are valued, a place that enriches your professional development and promotes your wellness.

I believe that this *is* the kind of community that we enjoy. But it is not something we can take for granted or leave untended. It requires our shared commitment to our values and it requires intentionality. Taking care of each other and maintaining a healthy campus culture and climate are as important as anything else we do here. And I think we all agree that this is a time for extra care to be given.

Going forward, the “after care” of employees, post-pandemic, will be just as important as what we do *during* the pandemic. I want to be sure that our campus rises to the occasion. It’s going to be among my top ongoing priorities to provide the support, resources, and flexibility you need to happily work here, especially as we look toward recovery from the worst of the pandemic.

We continue to learn from the last year and a half about our own resilience, flexibility, and purpose, and we don’t want to leave those lessons behind. We are stronger. Let’s listen now to some of your colleagues’ perspectives on how the pandemic has influenced and continues to shape their work.

We hear the recurrent theme—the strength and adaptability of our trajectory and the campus community. As I stand before you today, I’m proud of our accomplishments and optimistic about the future.

Throughout the year ahead, our strategic plan will emphasize three concepts: the value of being and working **together**; an emphasis on thinking about **tomorrow**; and the **transformative** power that beams throughout our institution.

Developing our strategic plan, together, is one of the most meaningful activities that anchors our future. With all this talk about purpose, you might ask why should you care or be involved in the strategic planning process. I think that our current uncertainty actually makes it the perfect time to be thinking and deliberately preparing for our future. But as Steve Jobs once said, “If you are working on something that you really care about, you don’t have to be pushed. The vision pulls you.”

At a young university, what each of us does matters. Our work is purposeful and pulls us forward. It’s clear to me, that the road to

building a Hispanic Serving University from the ground up requires a 20-year outlook, and today we're introducing a Strategic Vision for 2040 that captures our long-term aspirations for the future, a vision that will pull us toward excellence. And that 20-year vision provides a framework in which our new five-year strategic plan operates.

While our strategy is forward looking, it is also founded in the ideas and work of those who were here before us. So I'd like to take a moment to recognize those who have been with A&M-San Antonio for ten years or more—and in some cases, since our inception.

Thank you all for your service to the university. You have made A&M-San Antonio what it is today. You have built the foundation upon which our future rests.

You may have heard me refer to this strategic planning process as a *renewal*, rather than a total redo—so you're likely to recognize many elements that echo the concepts and priorities of our previous plan: Build. Impact. Transform. Simply put, we haven't changed who we are. We haven't changed our direction. We're just five years further down the road than we were—remember we wrote that plan before our first lower division cohort arrived on campus. Now we move forward with more knowledge and experience.

The goals of the strategic plan map *what* we're going to focus on in the next five years as we advance the institution. Our core values get at the "how" we do that work together. They express the shared principles that underlie, support, and guide all that we do here.

We are student centered; we are equity minded, inclusive, and respectful; committed to excellence; we are visionary; we are a catalyst for opportunity; we are collaborative.

I've challenged campus leaders to keep these values foremost in mind and to really think about nurturing and exemplifying these values within their spheres of influence—and I'd like to challenge you all to do the same. Be purposeful in living these values in your work and on the campus committees in which you serve. [PAUSE]

One of my colleagues said in a recent meeting that it's time to "shake off COVID"—while that thought brought a vivid Taylor Swift image to mind, I am also reminded of one of my favorite quotes by the late Maya Angelou: "Do the best you can, until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."

As the pandemic has unfolded, I can say with confidence that we are doing the best we can. We altered our operations and remained flexible while complying with State of Texas and public health guidelines. And as we learned more, we did better and now we continue to do better.

You have in your materials today a COVID Report Card that captures our **collaborative spirit** and accomplishments as we faced incredibly challenging times. I'd like to pause for a moment of self-congratulation: If we were assigning scores during COVID, we earned a solid "A".

Of course, it's now clear that the pandemic is not over. And even when it is, the world we knew before the pandemic will not be magically restored. We cannot possibly know exactly what the lingering effects will be. However, we have a **visionary** approach to pull our momentum moving forward. A&M-San Antonio is too important to falter—we are a major anchor for South Bexar County and leading the transformation of the South Side community.

As we start this new academic year, we're ready to look around the corner, to start thinking about transforming tomorrow, together. And that starts with the core of what we do—delivering transformational educational experiences for our students.

Under the leadership of Provost Mike O'Brien, Vice Provost Vijay Golla, and our three deans, we continue to enhance and advance our teaching, learning, and research frontiers. Let's take a few moments to hear from our academic deans about what's in store for the coming year in each of the colleges.

Wow—even through a public health crisis and major upheaval, you can see that preparing to meet the needs of the future hasn't stopped. It is blossoming.

You will see growth and expansion in our program offerings. In addition to the Bachelor of General Studies Debra mentioned that's launching this fall, we are planning for six new programs next fall, 3 graduate and 3 undergraduate. And in fall of '23, we anticipate adding two more graduate programs, including, as Rohan mentioned, our first PhD program, in Cyber Security. As I mentioned, it's not so long ago that we welcomed our first freshman class... and now we're reaching the other end of the spectrum, by becoming a doctoral-granting institution. At the Board of Regents meeting next week, we anticipate six of these programs getting the "green light."

We will continue to stretch, exploring new academic programs in much needed areas like the health sciences and we are seeking opportunities for partnership that impact and serve our communities. For example, in the wake of the unemployment crisis created by the pandemic, we answered the call to help displaced workers and local employers, by joining in the City's workforce development planning efforts. Even as the worst of the economic

effects of the pandemic begin to subside, workforce development remains a critical need. To support workforce needs we have added a well-known leader who was an early champion for this campus. She personifies a commitment to our community—I am pleased to introduce former City Councilwoman Rebecca Viagran as Director for Workforce Development and Community Partnerships. She joined us last month. Let’s hear directly from her about the importance of this work.

We’re delighted to have such leadership to help maximize our contributions and investments to the Texas workforce of the future.

This fall, we’ll be creating opportunity for our largest freshman class ever— more than 1050 as of last week! We’ll be welcoming 42 new Dream.US scholars to campus, bringing our current total to 117. We’ll welcome 29 former foster youth, bringing that total to 72. And no matter who our students are, whatever their background may be, however they come to us... we *are* transforming lives.

In fact, in a recent study of the economic impact of the university, it’s estimated that our average bachelor’s degree graduate sees an earning potential increase of more than \$30,000 annually, and \$1.2 million dollars in their working lifetime. And these numbers will only go up, as our program offerings expand and our reputation grows.

In addition to our impact on individual students, the university adds value to the community. In just a single year, between our spending and that of our students and alumni, we had a total economic impact on Bexar County of \$166.3 million dollars. That’s the equivalent of funding 2,156 county jobs!

We are a crucial difference-maker in our students' lives and in our community. And now, more than ever, we are laser focused on the university we want to be tomorrow—and in five years—and in twenty.

We have an ambitious agenda and a long road ahead of us, under any circumstances. Between the pandemic and the brutality that inspired the Black Lives Matter movement, we confronted inequities that have been perpetuated for far too long. As you have heard me say, we cannot “unsee” them. Perhaps we *can* agree that the pandemic has forced us to collectively pause for a moment of reflection—about health disparities, and digital and educational inequities. These three issues are at the heart of our geography. We have a responsibility to consider how we either contribute to the problems or create solutions. But we can't boil the whole ocean, so we have to focus on where we can make a difference. This includes recognizing our blind spots and harnessing our collective commitment to dismantling disparities.

Our work on this front is not new; the President's Commission on Equity has for five years taken the lead by providing educational and training opportunities, and fostering critical dialogues to help us increase awareness, understanding, and our capacity to effect change.

Today, I am excited to share that we now have a physical space for Equity & Inclusive Excellence, which is the home to the President's Commission on Equity & Inclusive Excellence. Over the summer, we also welcomed two people to that office in key roles for advancing the university's efforts in this area: Dr. Tamara Hinojosa as the inaugural 2-year Faculty Fellow for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; and Dr. Elizabeth Murakami as Special Assistant to the President for DE&I. Together, they will also co-chair the PCOE.

Let's take a moment to hear from them.

At the PCOE summer retreat, we framed our conversation around the concept of shared equity leadership—the key word there is “shared.” It is the idea that equity is everyone’s responsibility and asks campus leaders to make a personal commitment to share and demonstrate common values that support equity in their everyday practices. And by “leaders,” I don’t mean just the President’s Cabinet, or those with positional authority. We *all* have the potential to be leaders in our work to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus.

I started off this morning by talking about our strategic plan, *Transforming Tomorrow Together*, which you have in your packets. And I think it’s appropriate to return to it as we close today—because the plan is at the center of all that we do going forward. We have great opportunities ahead of us and I truly believe that there is endless potential for this university. We don’t reach that potential or realize our goals by chance. We have to be focused, set priorities, and align all of our actions and resources toward advancing them. Let’s take a few moments to hear about the strategic plan goals from the goal champions that will guide our activities for the next five years.

Obviously, we are not lacking for ambition here at A&M-San Antonio. Our goals are big and purposeful. And they are not impossible.

Think, for example, of how many of us reacted when we first heard about some “crazy” billionaire’s dreams of going to space—the sheer improbability made it comical, a prime target for skeptics and the brunt of many jokes.

I know everyone has an opinion about how these billionaires *should* spend their billions—in spite of that, we witnessed a big, breathtaking cultural moment when that crazy, laughable improbability became an amazing reality last month for not just one, but two of them.

We watched Richard Branson in a landmark moment for the commercial space industry, glide off towards space. Just nine days later, Jeff Bezos shot into a clear Texas sky, toward microgravity. Let's dissect their journey—for both of them, this work took 20 years—two decades of focus, determination, and pointing their efforts and resources toward a single destination—space.

How fitting that Bezos scheduled his Texas launch on the anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing—a historical example of unwavering focus on a single goal—to put a man on the moon.

In September 1962, President Kennedy, speaking at Rice University in Houston, said, “But why, some say, the moon? Why choose this as our goal? And they may as well ask: why climb the highest mountain? Why 35 years ago fly the Atlantic? We choose to go to the moon in this decade, not because that will be easy, but because it will be hard – because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills – because that challenge is one we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one we intend to win.”

Seven years later, on July 20, 1969, the Apollo 11 crew successfully completed its lunar landing. That success was made possible by setting an ambitious goal, carefully charting a course, and pointing efforts and resources in that direction for as long as it took to get there.

Our Vision 2040 and our five-year plan, *Transforming Tomorrow Together*, are both ambitious and focused. Our goals may not be as

lofty as exploring the final frontier, yet they are equally transformative—for this university, for our students, and for our community. And they will be hard to achieve. But in President Kennedy’s words, we have to be *willing* to accept the challenge and *unwilling* to postpone it. Today I ask you to reject the idea that we are returning to normal. Join me in purposefully committing to a shared vision, to fulfilling our promise of transforming to a better tomorrow.