

**President Cynthia Teniente-Matson Remarks
Fall 2020 Convocation--August 18, 2020**

Thank you, Melissa. And, Thanks for your seven years of service to A&M-San Antonio and your dedication to our students.

We will be sending Melissa off next Monday in a socially-distanced celebration in the Ceremony Room. I encourage you all to drop in and wish her well!

It has been 148 days since March 23,—the day we converted to remote instruction and shifted toward virtual operations. We shared a common bond of uncertainty, tempered with optimism, in the most flexible way possible, to ensure that our students could maintain academic progress. In the beginning, there were undoubtedly far more questions than answers; we made our way—naturally gravitating towards data, science, and evidentiary facts to anchor some challenging decision-making. As time has gone by, we recognize that we still don't know how long the virus will be with us or how wide-reaching its implications will be. We have always known there are health disparities and comorbidities that occur differently across race and ethnicity, just as we have known about generational poverty and racism—but the pandemic sharpens the focus. We see the disparities manifested in the very neighborhoods our university supports and where some of us, like myself, live. It will be years before we fully understand the long-term impacts of COVID-19, but right now, there are disparities that we cannot "unsee." We cannot look the other way. We are in a perfect storm with imperfect solutions.

Many are saying this is *the* disruption of a century, and indeed, no higher education institution, nonprofit, business, or government has been spared. In our professional world, this disruption is ushering in a paradigm shift as we prepare to welcome the fall 2020 semester!

I wish we were all together. Instead, out of necessity, many of you have logged in from home or, for distancing purposes, are spread out across multiple campus locations. I know that some of you have organized departmental "watch parties," departments like Military Affairs. Let s say "hi" and see what they are up to over in Patriots' Casa.

This is flexibility at its finest—I love the ingenuity in generating that "new academic year" energy that rejuvenates us. You just witnessed a

substitute for an energetic in-person performance, albeit pre-recorded by *Son de Esperanza* mariachi group. It was their first gig, and they already have a music video! And you may see them again at a "drive-up concert" before we can all gather in person. If you have not noticed, we have converted everything, with the same level of dedication and care, and carefully limiting in-person support.

I offer a special thank you to Joe Simpson, Leonard Love, and past chair Claire Nolasco of the Faculty Senate for working closely with the Provost, Deans, and Chairs, navigating through unforeseen challenges we have faced since last March. And, to Miriam Magdaleno and past chair, Nancy Larson, thank you for your leadership and contributions; I appreciate the continued close partnership with the Staff Council executive committee. All of you have been instrumental in meeting the challenges; you shared information via email, joined in managers' meetings, and in virtual town halls. Now, more than ever, I am relying on shared governance and the efforts of both the Staff Council and the Faculty Senate. We have always collaborated, and now we must accept the challenge of working together remotely. We may not see eye to eye on all fronts, but that does not diminish the value or need for shared governance—especially at this critical time when our best thinking and best solutions are needed.

I know that challenges create opportunities.

For years, the industry and business community have debated and studied the future of remote or virtual work. Generally, higher education has been hesitant to adopt the practices of remote working—even when online teaching and learning were embraced, the idea of day-to-day university business operations remotely was unheard of. Now, out of disruption, we normalized remote work and flexible schedules. Everyone has learned the tips and tricks of WebEx, Zoom, MS Teams, Google tools, and many, many more. I want to give a special shout-out to our HR team and thank them for all of their work in supporting our transition to remote operations—they mastered processing alternate work location agreements and helping us understand our options. Let us check in with them now.

For everyone working remotely, I know this was yet another disruption to your lives—I know it is not all WebEx-ing in your pajama pants or quiet desk time. Some of you have taken on new responsibilities blending your home and work lives. The joys of parenting expanded when you became homeschool "teachers" while working and sharing makeshift office space

with your children or family members. Some of you became caregivers to someone at risk, and others experienced job loss in their families. Somehow, you managed—learned new technology and navigated your work differently despite constant uncertainties and up-to-the-minute alerts in a COVID-19, *curbside* society. We will likely keep the best of remote working because we *know* we can do it! But, we also learned that we need the connectedness and collaboration that happens on a university campus.

In the heat of the Texas summer and through the Saharan plume, there has also been a core group of people coming to campus, sparingly, at first, then, in waves, slowly increasing as public health conditions permitted and as operational needs picked up. Thank you all for leading the way for all of us.

Many of you, and many students, have reached shared personal experiences and hardships. Hearing your stories tells me that, yes, you have had a hard time, but it also tells me that you all are remarkable and resilient; that is the character of our A&M-San Antonio community.

As we have navigated through this uncertainty, I have certainly questioned and second-guessed: Are we doing the right things? Are we doing them well? Are we poised for the future? I have reexamined our institutional strategic plan and our core values. It's like having one foot forward and one foot holding back. And, as I look *backward* at how we've performed in a prolonged crisis, I can say with confidence that our institutional values have guided our actions: Excellence. Student focus. Audaciousness. Opportunity. And collaboration.

Our mission, vision, and values have held up, and they helped make our path clear. We are not veering off-course. No one looked the other way. Everyone ensured students were getting the technology tools, the academic support, and wrap-around student support services without sacrificing excellence. In the face of significant challenges, you were there.

This is true for the A&M system, as well. In case you missed it, the Texas A&M University System Board of Regents created a special \$100 million scholarship fund that targets diversity issues and adds support for first-generation and low-income families. The financial support is vital in the wake of the disparate impacts of COVID-19, high unemployment rates, depleted savings, and, as I said earlier, generational poverty. I am proud

to say that the A&M System is not looking the other way. We are taking action—action that goes right to the heart of why we are all here, supporting our students, both current and future.

And speaking of future students, since creating the Enrollment Management Division almost two years ago, we have been retooling recruiting strategies and now adjusting again. With the Regents scholarship fund and with our existing resources, we can strategically grow enrollment. I know the value that we are offering prospective students—a value that is captured in our recruitment campaign, CREATE YOU NOW. I want to preview this new video message.

I applaud the divisions of Enrollment Management and University Advancement for their work launching this campaign. And I applaud all of you, our dedicated faculty and staff, for making everything that it says about the remarkable student experience at A&M-San Antonio true.

You may recall that the fall 2020 freshman class was recruited under new admission standards. And there was some worry about whether increasing selectivity would hinder our growth. Pre-COVID, we were on track to break all records for freshman enrollment. Applications increased by 15%, and admits are up by 33%. We do not know yet the final yield for 2020. But we do know the new standards did not adversely impact applications. Across Texas, first-year students seem to be staying closer to home or sitting out for a variety of reasons related to the pandemic, but I feel good about our incoming class and the gains we have made in attracting academically-prepared students. We are maintaining relationships with our local school districts and creating a clear path to college.

To date, we awarded Top 10% Scholarships to 926 students, and as of last week, 136 of them had registered, which means we are poised to exceed the number of Top 10% scholars we enroll for the second year in a row. Funded by the Greater Texas Foundation, we have 34 GTF Scholars registered.

We also have 44 new Dream US Scholars, up 29% from last year totaling over 100. And because of the excellent work led by our Financial Aid department and ITS, our undocumented students now have the capability to apply for State Financial Aid electronically. The electronic process has removed a barrier for some of our most vulnerable students; now, their experience is just like that of our other financial aid recipients.

You may recall we have a Bexar County partnership focused on foster youth—this year, we have 20 new incoming foster or adopted youth, 15 first time in college, and five transfers; we are up to 66 funded on these waivers.

And meaningful work in the partner school districts for our ASPIRE agreements continues, including the placement of dedicated advisors for our biggest local feeder districts and more outreach for K-12 students. And, this academic year, we will open our first SB1882 in-district charter schools in Edgewood ISD.

So you can see growth in both the number of students and their academic preparedness; we are leaving no one behind. Our commitment to access and equity is the foundation that we are building on. I am confident about the experience they will have here on our campus and virtually.

Everyone is adjusting— it is likely, every faculty member has adjusted courses. CARES Act Funding allowed us to enhance instructional support by upgrading technology in classrooms and labs. We contracted with the Online Teaching Consortium to give faculty the choice to personalize their needs. Over 140 faculty have engaged in professional development based on Quality Matters standards and best practices in online course delivery.

We are in the process of hiring additional term funded instructional designers for E-courseware development and to offer more faculty support, as needed.

With the support of the A&M System, we have engaged in conversation about fall 2020 campus operations asking thoughtful questions, like how can we best meet the needs of our student body and keep the campus safe? Within A&M system guidelines, our focus has been on maximizing choice for students to maintain academic progress and to mitigate risk.

Fortunately, our planning is informed by A&M system expertise from the Health Science Center and the Texas Division of Emergency Management, also known as TDEM. And we are operating as a system with large scale purchases of COVID-19 tests and systemwide contact tracing and facilities guidance, to name a few advantages. We have created a plan that de-densifies campus for instructional purposes and examines

facilities with a different lens for air handling, enhanced sanitation, and transition spacing.

Our ability to safely reopen this fall reflects the collective work of many—who have spent the last several months learning how to work differently under continually changing conditions. And you know what a heavy lift that has been—so I would like to take a few minutes to hear from some of your colleagues, in their own words, about how they have navigated the challenges.

Wow! As you can see, we are *deeply* dedicated to our mission.

I want to extend a special thanks to some groups that have been instrumental in developing fall readiness.

It bears repeating that there is a stellar campus cadre on our COVID-19 Risk Management working group—initially assembled to oversee and advise the cabinet on the emerging crisis. They developed policies and procedures in response to rapidly changing circumstances. Later, we convened a Return-to-Campus task force to plan for the safe return of administrative staff in waves. The task force helped maintain full campus operations at a time when students needed us most and laid a strong foundation for our fall planning. We are grateful for your patience, leadership, and guidance.

And to the four sub-committees of the Blueprint 2020 Fall Planning task force, whose work produced the *Community. Safety. TOGETHER.* Plan, I extend a heartfelt and public thank you. I encourage all of you to familiarize yourself with the plan. It is regularly updated and located on our campus website.

This is a perfect storm, with an imperfect solution—but I *can* say with confidence that a dedicated group of experts carefully devised our plans; they kept the health and safety of our campus community and the support of our students' academic goals top of mind. And our academic leaders, primarily the Chairs, created a schedule that offers students choices and flexibility to maintain academic progress.

I offer a special thank you to our senior leaders—our vice presidents, academic deans, chairs, our athletics director, and my chief of staff, for their leadership during this time. They have been thinking non-stop about the ins and outs of the academic term and campus operations, and they

have been the front line to help ease anxiety and uncertainty. They have been to me what Psychology professor Richard G. Tedeschi refers to as expert companions. As president, I feel an enormous sense of responsibility for every member of our campus community—and I know our senior leaders do, as well. Together we have shared that heavy load.

The aftermath of the pandemic includes an economic disruption and trickle-down effect to state appropriations, which ultimately affects all public universities. You may have heard the Governor has requested what is known as a "clawback"—a return of State funds that have already been allocated. For FY20, the fiscal year just wrapping up, we had to return 5% of our state allocation, as well as returning 5% for FY21. Our share is approximately \$2.38M, which our campus has met through the elimination of 66 vacant positions along with spending, travel, and hiring freezes.

We know that we are entering a challenging budget year in FY21. Still, I am confident that barring further, unforeseen disruptions, and with a steady enrollment, we have a financial plan that supports *no furloughs* and *no layoffs*. The University Resources Commission receives regular updates about our fiscal position, and our first Power Hour of the year will be the annual Budget Forum on September 1st.

Make no mistake about it; there is a lot about our fiscal future that remains unknown, including reductions to our exceptional line items of up to 25% per biennium and an uncertain enrollment future. But I am cautiously optimistic.

At our recent cabinet retreat, we discussed the academic plan and maintaining investments in new program growth and development. It may not feel like it now, but eventually, we will be on the other side of this pandemic, and our planning for that day cannot fall by the wayside. We will continue to make investments to ensure we build our academic and research enterprise and maintain support for student success. Faced with an uncertain future, we will not look the other way. Just the opposite—we are developing programs, and we are making investments in specific academic initiatives that support public health, environmental health, pre-med, and enhancing our Quantitative Reasoning initiatives in math.

The best plans are the product of consultation and collaboration, and I take every opportunity to sit down and talk to experts. Recently I visited, virtually, with our academic leadership, provost Dr. Mike O'Brien, and Dr.

Vijay Golla, vice provost for research and graduate studies, about how the academic plan has been impacted and how we move forward into a post-COVID future. I want to share some of that conversation with you now.

Thank you again, Mike and Vijay. I want to reiterate my appreciation to all the faculty and staff who are unwavering in their commitment to providing learning opportunities for our students—whatever that may look like at any given time—and continuing to move us forward.

Earlier this summer, Mayor Nirenburg appointed me to his Education and Workforce Leadership Task Force, along with Dr. Eighmy from UTSA and Dr. Flores from Alamo Colleges. We were asked to co-create a concept and high-level framework that could help the approximately 155,000 displaced workers through a San Antonio economic recovery plan. It is a two-part comprehensive initiative. Part I is using one-time funds, and the City is already building a training and jobs program targeted at those hardest-hit unemployed with an HS or HS equivalent credential. Our role begins at Part II, targeting displaced workers with stackable certificates that lead to skilled jobs and careers in high wage-high demand industries. Just last week, the City Council affirmatively voted to take this concept to the voters using a 1/8th sales tax ballot initiative targeting economic recovery. The ballot initiative is about equity in learning and laying a pathway to move out of generational poverty through skill development or by completing a degree. The big idea provides options to a pool of unemployed people who have some college credit and no degree. That is a solution to which we can contribute, and it is in direct alignment with our mission to equip students with marketable skills and prepare them for rewarding careers. Economic recovery is complicated, but we cannot look away from the challenge. I will be sharing details of the proposed initiative with the Faculty Senate and Staff Council in the coming weeks.

Now, we all know that the COVID-19 pandemic has dominated our personal and professional lives since March. The same is true for our students, and I want to take a moment to talk about them now.

Seeing our students back on campus reminds us why we've pushed for the last five months, so we did not delay academic progress. Seeing and hearing from students humanizes our work and reminds us of our purpose.

Unfortunately, among our student body, there are also some sad reminders of the human cost of the pandemic. As some of you may know, we lost two students to COVID-19. David Alvarado, a long-time instructional aide and passionate educator, was a senior in the College of Education & Human Development, seeking teaching certification. He passed away on July 21st.

Robert Wagstaff was also a senior. He was 30-years old and had been working for a decade on his accounting degree, taking a class or two at a time, while also working full time. When he passed away on April 10th, he was only two classes away from graduating and was awarded a posthumous degree—our first. Later this month, I will be visiting with Robert's mother, to deliver his A&M-San Antonio diploma.

Some of our students, and perhaps some of you, have also suffered heartbreaking losses. That reality struck close to home when one of our longstanding student assistants in my office, Brenda Johnson, lost her father, an otherwise healthy man in his early forties, to COVID-19 in March. The family was forced to say its final goodbyes remotely, and were unable to be together in their grief, due to quarantine restrictions.

Recently, I have been talking about the concept of Leading with Love; I ask you to reframe your mindset and recognize that everyone we encounter may be in mourning. Everyone we encounter may be grieving, whether it is the loss of a loved one, job loss, or some unforeseen postponement or cancellation to get through the pandemic, economically or emotionally. No one is untouched, and nothing is more important than our human connection at this time. We have found new meaning in the simple cliché that "Family Comes First." I too, had a difficult summer as I lost my dad. I experienced the difficulties prompted by this altered socially distanced reality of the grieving process in a constrained environment.

The realities are isolating, at least at times, for all of us. There has been a great deal of work to keep our minds busy, but in quiet moments, at some point, we have all experienced anxiety, fatigue, stress... and perhaps sadness. As campus starts to come back to life slowly, it is not back to normal, but it helps ease those uneasy moments. After last week's move-in days, we see students on campus again, moving in their typical beginning-of-the-year rhythms and routines—it is a sign that we are emerging, slowly, and safely.

We have actually got a group of our amazing student leaders and workers from the SGA, our Jaguar Ambassadors, and Student Activities joining us remotely today—let us take a moment now to check in with them.

It is so great to see students' faces again! It just does not feel like the start of a fall semester without that.

Now, I want to turn to a topic other than COVID-19 and the ways it has reshaped our lives and the worlds of work and learning. If you have been listening up to now, you might think that was *all* that has been going on in 2020.

But as you know, in late May, within the most significant public health crisis of our lifetimes... the killing of George Floyd ignited a powder keg of racial tension, which has been simmering throughout a long history of violence against people of color. George Floyd's name, and that of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery—some of the most recent victims of that violence—became rallying cries for social justice. I am heartened by the fact that Floyd's death seems to have sparked a global movement and the possibility for real change. And it is a movement that crosses racial divides and involves a real commitment to learning how to be allies for people of color. The nation is finally having long overdue and difficult conversations about symbols that reinforce a system of institutionalized racism and about the nature and manner of policing.

On our campus, the intense focus on racial injustice provided an opportunity for our university community to affirm, unequivocally, that black lives matter. And it creates an opportunity for us to look at our own culture, our own climate, and find opportunities to better support our students, faculty, and staff of color—which starts with open dialogue but also requires action. I am grateful for the leadership of the Student Government Association, Black Student Union, the Black Faculty & Staff Network, and the President's Commission on Equity because I know they will not look the other way. Thanks to the leadership of Tim Gritten, the PCOE is already actively engaged in planning to sustain our focus on the campus climate and improving the experience of students, faculty, and staff of color.

As I say often and believe *emphatically*, one of A&M-San Antonio's greatest strengths is our diverse community, composed of individuals with many perspectives, experiences, and identities. That is something to be celebrated and protected in all that we do.

One of *the most* important things I do is *listen*. Simply put, I cannot do my job well without hearing from students, faculty, and staff, and that inevitably shapes and enriches my learning, my decision making, my perspective. Seeking out student voices has been one of my most persistent touchpoints. And I recognize that we must listen and create a stage for voices that may not always be shared or heard.

With that in mind, I am pleased to invite to the stage: from the Black Student Union, Marissa Galvin; you all know former SGA president, La-Tieka Sims; and Jamie Jackson, president of the Delta Chapter of the Zeta Phi Beta sorority. They will be giving a spoken-word performance of a poem written by La-Tieka, called "Black Summer."

La-Tieka—I cannot thank you enough for sharing your words with us. And Jamie and Marissa for helping to bring them to life for this audience. I am overwhelmed with pride to count you among our students and alums.

Only time will tell if the one enduringly good thing that comes out of 2020 will be this groundswell of support for social and racial justice leads to real and lasting change...Our students provide optimism that change is possible, and we must challenge them to never look the other way.

This very date, in fact, provides us some of that evidence. As you heard earlier, today, August 18th, marks 100 years since the 19th Amendment, granted women the constitutional right to vote. It was the work of many years, but change *did* happen. And how fitting that this too will be a historical election with a woman of color on the ballot, for the first time. And I have confirmed you will be able to vote on campus on election day!

It is time now for us to look around the corner to the year 2025; it is not far off. So, what is ahead for higher education? That is the big question. I recall back in the 90s, first hearing the concept of life-long learning, from then UAA Chancellor Lee Gorsuch. Now, the buzzword is "upskilling," a term influenced by digital transformation. In the last several months, all of us have been "upskilling" and adapting to changes in our daily lives.

So, as I think about the future in a networked knowledge economy and what it will require of us, I repeatedly return to 2 concepts: continuous digital learning or upskilling and closing the digital divide. The shift to digital tools and environments has been and will continue to profoundly

affect *who* gets to learn and *how* they learn—and there are inherent inequities, disparities that will grow deeper. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have laid that bare in front of us and we cannot unsee it, we cannot look the other way.

It is not enough to offer laptops or access to the internet; if you have never learned how to learn using technology. It is our responsibility to advocate and build bridges to widen digital knowledge and digital access and narrow the digital divide. As a society, *now* is our time to get this right. San Antonio has faced systemic inequities dating back to redlining and compounded by numerous social factors, including the digital divide. Inequity in education has shown up in uneven outcomes across school districts for decades, and the very south side community where we are located has been perennially disadvantaged by generational poverty. That makes it even more important that our campus, in particular, takes this moment to embrace our role as digital change-agents, whether in person or remotely.

In five years, when we look back at the decisions we have made today, I anticipate a future that has eliminated barriers caused by the digital divide; if our community comes together, it is achievable. In five years, you will see a flourishing university with academic programs and research opportunities offered in mixed modalities, and we will have widened the doors to graduate school or high demand, high wage careers and ultimately reduced poverty rates. Our university should be an anchor for economic development in South Bexar County. That is a future we can all agree on.

I am going to invite Dr. Jeanette De Diemar, Vice President for Advancement & External Relations up to make a few closing remarks and announce our door prize winners. But before I do, I just have one last thought to leave you with, and that is my gratitude and appreciation.

From the bottom of my heart, *thank you*. You're doing great work-- Important work that impacts equity in our community.

Jeanette? Come on up.