



Spring 2022 CONVOCATION PRESIDENT'S REMARKS

Thank you, Mari. Welcome, everyone. After a bit of a respite and connection with loved ones, we usher in 2022 with all the hopes and resolutions that a New Year brings. I know we all share in the disappointment of another semester beginning in the shadow of the pandemic, but we are committed to safety measures that support a safe learning and working environment. I was looking forward to seeing many faces this morning as we commemorate the new semester with convocation, but I am grateful for the technology that keeps us connected and able to be together from the comforts of your offices today.

As this new year and semester begin, I am delighted to welcome interim Provost Mark Weichold, from whom you just heard a few minutes ago, and I have recently appointed an interim VP for University Relations. I welcome Dr. Adriana Contreras to the leadership team as she supports the responsibilities of University Relations while we continue the search for the new VP.

First, let's begin the morning reflecting briefly on the significance of this date—January 6th, a pivotal national moment, fresh in our memories. Just one year ago today, we all watched the U.S. Capitol attack unfold with shared horror. Just as we've endured the collective trauma of the pandemic, we are, I think, forever changed by that moment in time. In the year since then, I have reflected often about the vital importance of

public universities, and the role we play in combating dangerous ideologies and “alternative facts.”

Our institutions are the backbone of unfettered open dialogue, places for diverse and competing viewpoints, places that teach the value and importance of democratic processes. University campuses remain “ground zero” for amplifying and demonstrating the value of critical thought and informed action.

University campuses are also a place where the important work of advancing equity and inclusion is done in earnest. At A&M-San Antonio we strive to embody the core values of diversity and inclusion that America’s public universities foster and revere. And, as a public Hispanic serving institution, we have a special purpose to ensure students from historically under represented communities are growing Con Fuerza --with strength, and with the equitable support they need to face the challenges and opportunities before them.

Although we are a growing university, we are still a small campus community and the work you’re doing is notably important to our student success mission and to building a vibrant, respectful community. (Pause) Transforming Tomorrow Together, our new strategic plan and core values, have strengthened our focus on our people and an equity-minded culture of inclusive excellence.

I recognize many of us are still living through a collective trauma. As people and as an organization, we have and are still experiencing various stages of *grieving, recovery and repositioning*. I've heard from faculty and staff, with pride and positivity, that we've emerged stronger throughout the fall semester, adjusting to ever-changing conditions but unwavering in our commitment to ensuring our students are successful.

I have met with many students and they uniformly express gratitude for being offered multiple modes of instruction. They also appreciate the in-person student activities and co-curricular engagement opportunities they've had. They tell me they feel supported and safe, and they feel a strong sense of dedication to their success from everyone they encounter. As difficult as it has been, you are making a difference in the lives of our students and university community.

In juxtaposition to those positive things, I've also heard from everyone about what a difficult time this has been and how exhausted they are. In short, we're fatigued with being fatigued. Many of us are carrying multiple duties, above and beyond the norm, in every aspect of our lives. Last semester, I held a president's round table focused on employee wellness and wellbeing and gathered input about our current state and areas where we should direct attention. I remain committed to flexibility in how we design positions, and how we ensure our workplaces are supportive of campus business needs and the needs of our students, while also providing an environment in which faculty and staff can thrive. We are taking a more focused look at compensation and employee wellbeing, which ultimately drive our organizational health.

As one step in that direction, I'd like to introduce the employee "wellness release time" benefit. This is part of the A&M System benefit that allows for release time for structured wellness activities. Our campus program, sponsored through recreational sports, features uniquely designed events that are part of the JaguarGetFit program that was piloted last fall, and is intended to support your physical and mental fitness. Throughout this semester there will be a variety of programs to support your overall wellness.

Another important aspect of employee wellness is compensation. Back in 2015, the A&M system, with the support of Price Waterhouse Cooper, engaged in a salary analysis and made recommendations to our system regarding pay scales and job classifications—since then, times have changed and we need to take another close look. This semester - in consultation with the University Resource Commission - we are undertaking a compensation study for both faculty and staff. The intent is to ensure we are keeping pace with salaries in the metro area. The motivation for this initiative is simple: You all add incredible value to A&M-San Antonio and I want to do everything within our power to reward your dedication and keep you here.

So far I've talked a lot about what's going on *within* the university—the successes and challenges of the present, and our plans for the near future. Now I'd like to take a moment to look *outward*, to consider our presence and impact outside of these beautiful 694 acres. Goal 4 of our strategic plan, focused on impact and engagement, describes our

ambition to expand our institutional visibility, reputation, and our distinction in an ever-widening sphere.

As I visit with students and alumni, they all share their enthusiasm and the impact that this university is having on their lives. Their stories are symbols of collective impact and reinforce that we are building programs and opportunities that are truly transformational for our students, their families, and the community. Let's hear from a few of those in our campus community that have been impacted.... [Video]

As you know, there are many critical factors that impact the continued growth and development of our campus. I'd like to call your attention to three of them, which are foundational to our success: (1) We have the prominence and excellence of the A&M system behind us; (2) physically, we are at the heart of the most dynamic and promising area of development for San Antonio's future and growing geography to catapult the future regional impact, and (3) We have maintained our incredible momentum, even during a global pandemic. Far from grinding to a halt over the last two years, we have amassed some considerable laurels and accomplishments. Without a doubt, our impact is growing, and creating a ripple throughout San Antonio and the nation. You don't have to take my word for it—let's hear from a few community members about our institutional impact [VIDEO]
[VIDEO]

Of course, there is more work we have to do to share the incredible stories of A&M-San Antonio. We are doing great things and impacting lives; however, those great things are not as visible as they deserve to be. We've all had this experience—you're out in the community, and the subject of where you work comes up. Now raise your hand if you've had people say to you "I didn't know there was an A&M campus here;" or maybe you've jumped in an Uber or Lyft and the driver says "well, that's a first—I didn't know there was an A&M-San Antonio." There are other examples, but you get where I'm going, right? When I hear this, I have to pause and take a deep breath—because I know the countless hours of effort that every one of you has invested in building our university from the ground up. Today we have many incredible faculty, staff, and students, as well as more than 13,000 accomplished alumni out in the world doing great work. And it can no longer be a best kept secret.

I have been challenged by our system and our Board of Regents to do more to eliminate that haze around A&M-San Antonio's existence, to continue to grow enrollment and to build our research agenda—which all depends upon making ourselves seen, heard, and known. To that end, the system has provided supplemental expertise and resources to aggressively build brand visibility campaigns to increase awareness and enrollment for graduate students and transfer students.

With this additional support, we are investing in more promotional sponsorships and digital advertising in prominent locations within the metro area targeting families, potential students, and business leaders. You'll see us at the San Antonio International Airport [PAUSE], at Spurs

games [PAUSE], at the San Antonio Zoo [PAUSE], and even on the SA Monopoly Board [PAUSE]... and that's just to get started. These campaigns will supplement the efforts already underway in the ASPIRE network, through the Achiever Promise, and our statewide undergraduate recruiting. We are pushing past the image of a tiny University, unknown to many, and it is largely your accomplishments that are advancing the institution's distinctiveness and reputation. It is with A&M System pride that every member of this institution collectively, should ask... *"Can you see us now?"*

We must and will become impossible to ignore. Developments adjacent to the campus will also help raise our visibility—VIDA, of course, and down the line, the University Health hospital facility that will be our very close neighbor. We are not letting a single opportunity pass us by—and the hospital introduces some incredible opportunities to build our health sciences research agenda. Just last month Kathy Funk Baxter, vice president for business affairs, and I briefed Chancellor Sharp and his senior leadership team about the potential opportunities that exist with the development of the University Health Hospital. Interim Provost Weichold and Vice Provost Golla will work with our faculty and others in the A&M Health Science Center to develop action plans in alignment with our strategic goals, and I expect a roadmap for our health initiatives by August 2022. Dr. Golla provides us with an overview of the academic vision in this video.

[VIDEO]

Some of our most critical efforts in the coming year will not be as obvious as a new building going up or a new academic program being

added— yet, these are no less vital to our institutional health and future. In support of Transforming Tomorrow Together, we have launched a data administration task force that will spend the next year or more in an intensive effort to improve our internal systems, infrastructure, and processes related to data.

Improvement on this scale will require commitment from across the university and we have garnered additional resources to ensure that we have the project management and change management support to accelerate our progress. A robust data infrastructure and careful stewardship are vital to both our ongoing activities and our future work.

Last November, through a competitive process, the university was awarded a place in two new initiatives, both through AASCU. As you previously heard from Dr. Mari Fuentes-Martin, the first, is the Transformation Accelerator Cohort, funded by the Gates Foundation. In this initiative, we are joining a national cohort to enhance and build upon our collective retention efforts. Second, is a Transfer Initiative Cohort of four-year universities and community college partners, which is funded by the Aspen Institute. Our campus effort is led by Brandy McLelland, vice president for enrollment management, and we will be partnering with Palo Alto College. Both of these efforts will overlap with work we're doing around the Seal of Excelencia, where we were accepted into a national cohort model of prominent Hispanic serving institutions. And we are part of the First-Gen Forward, a national cohort focused on advancing First-Gen success. To measure our progress in all of these initiatives, and the impact they will have on our

students' success, the availability of reliable, timely, and accessible data is crucial. [PAUSE]

When Secretary of Education Cardona visited San Antonio, he talked with me about the partnership at Gus Garcia University School and the university's efforts to develop programs at the middle school level. And later, as part of the Secretary's public statements about his visit, he shared that Gus Garcia and the partnership with A&M-San Antonio was an aspirational model that should be replicated across the nation. This was a strong affirmation that the work we are doing is contributing to the civic good in public education. We will continue to step up our efforts in the ASPIRE network as we continue pandemic recovery.

You've heard about the CULTIVAR grant—an arts education grant led by Karen Burgard from the College of Education and Human Development and our partners at South San ISD and the Tobin Center. And the TuCasa program, under the leadership of Dr. Mayria Davis, assistant professor of special education, is focused on individuals with intellectual disabilities transitioning to a university experience, to enhance their capacity to lead independent adult lives. The university has also been in a leadership role in tackling digital equity both on campus with the LIFT Program, and in the ASPIRE ISDs. And that work is important and valued in the community.

As such, this morning, I am pleased to announce an investment of \$1M by USAA to support an initiative we call *La Familia*. This is great news! Under the leadership of Vice President McLelland, this investment will support pre-college family programming and provide scholarship

support for those pre-college students to attend A&M-SA. We are grateful to USAA for the continued support and commitment to increase access to a college education, and turning the dreams of many families into a life-changing reality.

Throughout this semester and beyond, we will continue our momentum in these key priority areas that I've presented here today—the Health Science Research Agenda; Data Governance and management; and ASPIRE –Pre College programming and student recruitment. The fourth major area of emphasis for the near future is on fiscal stewardship—an objective in goal 5 of our strategic plan, focused on operational excellence, led by Vice President Funk-Baxter.

As you heard earlier from Kathy, the University Resources Commission will focus this semester on the preparation of the FY23 Budget submission to the A&M-System. In late November, we were notified that we will receive additional base funding of approximately 750 thousand annually under the new comprehensive regional university (CRU) funding model, intended to supplement our student success and retention efforts. We've also received over one million dollars in new one-time appropriations from the workforce commission for workforce development initiatives led by Dr. Edwin Blanton (TX Two Step \$255K + Data Analytics Certificate \$162,080), and from the coordinating board we received funding for data support (Reporting Modernization Grant \$50K) and re-entry to college (Reskilling \$300K + and the Advise TX (\$268,240). And we will continue to be helped by the HEERF Funding we received from the federal government, which must be applied to

expenses directly pertaining to our pandemic response and mitigating the disruptions it has caused in our operational and academic activities.

In Closing:

If this all sounds like a lot, that's because *it is*. But we *can* do all of these things and continue to elevate A&M-San Antonio. As I have said, we are rolling into 2022 with strength—Con Fuerza. In a few moments we will have an opportunity to take a look back at all we collectively accomplished in 2021, and during a global pandemic, no less, which gives me full confidence that we can make meaningful progress on all of our strategic priorities in 2022.

As we're rolling ahead, we're juggling a lot—juggling critical projects and opportunities, along with some challenges. And like with jugglers, occasionally something drops and we need a moment to rebalance. The university needs you now, more than ever. I know it's been a difficult and tiring 2 years with little opportunity to rebalance, during a period of great uncertainty. Your talents, your flexibility, and your ingenuity are needed. 2022 is a critical period in our enrollment growth and physical development as a university, as well as for making strides in academic excellence and enhancing our reputation. We are still building and the work that you do as builders is valued. You matter and your contributions are making an impact.

As we move ahead, we have an abundance of opportunities before us as our geographical region continues to grow and develop. This semester you will see visible signs of progress as the Business and Library Building prepares to open, and as we begin the outdoor

hardscape for the 2nd quad. And later this semester, we should know more about the scoping of our next building. As you heard Kathy mention, we also have a funding request for a bond initiative to support roadway expansion to help minimize future traffic patterns as the hospital and the university grow. We will also see progress in the VIDA development and our own housing projects to accommodate further growth.

With all that's going on in and around our campus, no more will people be able to say that they've never seen us, that they didn't know there was an A&M on the south side. We are steadily raising our profile, through your good work, commitment to excellence, and openness to new possibilities. As we enter this new year, yes, we're all tired -- and perhaps still reeling from 2021. But I'm choosing to focus on the opportunities in front of us—and to believe that all we want to accomplish in 2022 is possible, and more. As the great Colin Powell, whom we lost in 2021, wrote, "Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier." I hope you'll join me in some collective, perpetual optimism about what the future holds for A&M-San Antonio. We are and will continue to be a university on the rise, Transforming Tomorrow Together.