

**Spring 2017 Convocation**  
**Dr. Cynthia Matson's Remarks**  
**January 12, 2017**

Good morning and Happy New Year!

I would like to start by sharing a story—that should provide a visual image about the lives of our students and your profound impact. It also reminds me about a quote that I often use which is attributed to Nicholas Kristof, “Talent is Universal, Opportunity is Not.”

Recently Dr. Debbie Vera, Department Chair for Education and Leadership Preparation, sent me a powerful reflection written by one of her students. His name is Manny Esquivel, I'd like to share an excerpt. I quote:

“I was not a successful student. While I was in high school my family was rocked by divorce, abuse and alcoholism and I was not able to rise above the distractions. In the classroom, the

work seemed trivial. The uncertainty of my home life is what monopolized my attention. Through it all, I always found refuge in art and music. While working at a children's shelter, I found myself in a classroom setting and succeeding. It was a rewarding experience and I knew that somehow what I had been through in high school better equipped me to understand these young people who had been through so much themselves.

I earned an Associates of Arts from St. Philip's College and chose Texas A&M University San Antonio to complete my Bachelor's and Teaching Certification. It has not been easy.

However, the passionate and compassionate professors at TAMUSA, while preparing me for the teaching profession, have also helped me to learn more about myself. When the struggle of managing a full course load, a full-time job and raising a 2 year old seemed too much, there was always a professor there to

coach me up and remind me that not only could I do it, I could do it well. The knowledge I have gained from here and the team of professors at TAMUSA is invaluable. I am preparing to graduate with high honors. I feel prepared to survive the challenges of teaching. I have learned the importance of designing lessons with purpose, setting high expectations and differentiating instruction to meet the needs of all students. I am committed to utilizing these strategies in my classroom. My experience has provided me a sturdy foundation but I have much to learn. I believe that to teach we must continue to learn, but passion trumps all.”

Thank you Dr. Vera for sharing this story because it personifies an important role a public university plays to inspire discovery, inquiry and innovation. We have a personal responsibility to inspire creativity, and spurn thinking that will eventually lead to

problem solving. Stories like this are pervasive in our classrooms as a daily reminder of the learning that is changing lives, every day. Thank you for what you continue to do for our students.

2016 was an incredible year. Our University has accomplished a great deal in a short period of time and today, I ask you to reflect on the magnitude of all that we've achieved. Today, is a day to celebrate faculty and staff service, which we will do later this morning with our annual service awards. Your commitment exemplifies the solid foundation of this University and is the infrastructure that supports continued growth at a Jaguar pace. Many of you have been great advisors, advocates and doers as we have moved this university forward. We have quantifiable evidence of our growth and continued maturation as a comprehensive university. Let's take a moment to view some of those events and accomplishments.

It is also a moment for traditional academic fellowship prior to the start of the year, first and foremost we welcome everyone who has relocated from Brooks Campus. We are glad you're here. I am also extremely grateful to those in Business Affairs and University Advancement who have temporarily relocated. I realize the personal stress and period of disruption that occurs with packing and unpacking and getting resettled in a different environment. I appreciate your leadership and service as you embody our values of excellence and audacious thinking.

Today as we think about the year ahead, I have three points to share with you: 1) We are Developing our Institutional Niche 2) Building a Culture of Excellence (3) We have a roadmap for our future. This semester promises to be another year of dynamic growth as we successfully evolve into a comprehensive **university that is serving all of Texas**, from San Antonio, the

Rio Grande or Houston, students from throughout Texas are interested in our University! Each of you in this audience has provided leadership alongside the President's Cabinet, the faculty, the Senate and Staff Council and we will continue our transformation as a 4-year university and building a National model for Student and Academic success. My first point as we develop and refine our institutional niche—we must embody our role as a public university, we have many responsibilities and we will continue to stretch to meet public expectations during this next biennium. As a state institution, we embrace enhancing the public good and equitably serving underrepresented communities, and today, we are a living demonstration of an institutional-niche that the American Association of State Colleges and Universities coins as a “Steward of Place.” We are tangibly contributing to building vibrant and sustainable economies, and more importantly we have a public duty to

prepare students to excel to their potential. As reported in the San Antonio Express-News and in the City’s strategic growth plans, other major institutions also see A&M-San Antonio as a “Steward of Place”—or as a regional economic hub that will support continued growth in our great City. Over the last week, there has been an Express News exposé framing the impact and growth of poverty in our region. We must be diligent in our responsibility as a public change-agent using affirmative and progressive thinking as we develop our institutional niche. Yes, clearly we have an audacious vision for our campus and so do our stakeholders. And there are positive external signs of support for our emerging institution. We are striving to meet the niche needs of the demographics and academic areas we serve as we make critical decisions about our future.

## **Building a Culture of Excellence**

I have often said our faculty and staff came here as architects of change and builders of a great university. Well, today January 12, 2017, we are at a point where we're still building and growing; and there is no doubt there is a clear demand for the A&M-System excellence. Through a process of shared governance, we will continue to understand what needs refinement and building upon what is working. With evolution comes institutionalization. For example, with the initiatives we launched during the last 12 months, we're inspecting what we've done thus far—somewhat like the building inspector role, we call it assessment or continuous quality improvement. We are focused on institutionalizing our innovative practices to become part of our culture. Late last semester we began the normalization of standing university-wide committees. A few special committees will find their work coming to a close because the work is either accomplished or has become part of



our norm—both indicators of a job well done. Some will find that their committee work is shifting to permanent committees that also intersect with established governance committees through faculty senate or staff council. For example, the master planning committee will finalize its work in the coming weeks—more to come on the progress and our audacious facilities future! The Super Committee tackled an enormous role to **focus on equity** while building a comprehensive four-year university. The Super Committee tackled the ground work to develop a National Model for Student and Academic Success that focuses on retention, time to degree and degree attainment. I am pleased to say that the Super Committee completed its initial goals and the remaining work transferred to two newly formed permanent committees one under VP O’Brien and one under VP Mahan. The work between them will overlap and they will collaborate to keep a strong focus on quality and student

success in the classroom and preparedness for a career or graduate school. The Assessment Committee is chaired by Drs. Holly Verhasselt and Bill Bush and the Committee on Retention Efforts also known as CORE is chaired by Drs. Melissa Mahan and Ashley Spicer-Runnels. Both new groups will be sharing the results of their work at the President's Roundtable and at College or department meetings. I encourage you to reach out to the co-chairs if you'd like further information.

Beyond committees, we are continuing to examine internal organizational processes that touch students, faculty and staff. For example, we will continue to refine our approach to our first year students such as the optimal solution to ensure TSI compliance, course placement and entrance paperwork/deadlines. We will also continue to refine block scheduling, priority scheduling and establishing automated

waitlists, to name a few. Dr. Spindle has provided leadership stability for our administrative infrastructure that is necessary for the business and operations of running a university. He is thoughtfully assessing our critical infrastructure needs as we consider the importance of keeping administrative costs low. In University Advancement, Dr. Richard Ortega will continue to build an infrastructure to support the philanthropic needs of a growing university. He is restructuring our development, alumni affairs, advancement services and marketing/communication strategies. For example, as you may have noticed, our institutional website has been. We have strong teams and dedicated staff in place across the University to move us forward and a roadmap is already underway in each division. To reiterate my second point; we are settling into our new culture as a four-year university. As we've defined in our strategic plan, we are purposefully building "A Culture of Excellence."

## **Roadmap to Our Future Finalizing our Strategic Plan**

I'm pleased to share with you that the Strategic Planning Committee has been diligent in its effort to complete its work. We are in the final steps of formatting our core values, mission, vision and priorities with clearly established goals, strategies and outcomes. To my 3<sup>rd</sup> point—we have a roadmap to guide our future—one that was thoughtfully developed and represents many voices and more importantly represents an inclusive approach to defining our institutional niche, sharpening our focus and guiding our destiny. The A&M-System is also in the final process of adopting a new system wide strategic direction and we are in alignment. Over the latter part of the fall semester, I met with Chancellor Sharp and several of his cabinet members to discuss the strategic plan and our journey to define an institutional niche, like becoming a polytechnic university.

There is system support for the distinction and differentiation that must exist for A&M-San Antonio. I am scheduled to informally present to the Regents at their workshop next month regarding our strategic plan and the exploration of a unique identification like a polytechnic in Texas.

A formal approval of our new mission statement will also go forth at the spring meeting. There is one common variable in our strategic plan, alignment with the System plan and our campus initiatives and that is **DATA**. As our culture of excellence evolves, we will continue to use data to analyze our results, allocate resource and drive decisions. We will continue implementation of the EAB Student Success Collaborative and the Vice Presidents have worked together to recommend technology initiatives that support our growth, continuous improvement and data needs. In a positive note of support,

Chancellor Sharp has agreed to provide resources to formalize a comprehensive integrated marketing approach that incorporates brand identity into our marketing and strategic communications for recruiting, public relations, admissions and overall institutional reputation. Dr. Richard Ortega is leading this effort to cull out the important messaging for our institutional niche.

I am focused on crystalizing our emerging strategic plan—and the embodiment of our core values: student focus, excellence, opportunity, collaboration, and of course, audaciousness.

Our culture is evolving and I am again asking you to embrace and model the common values that bring us together as we purposefully build a macro culture of excellence. We must remain focused on finishing what we started because growing a culture of excellence takes purposeful leadership and **time**.

This spring, we will also see visible signs on our roadmap for growth in addition to new faculty, staff and students. We now have further physical evidence of our expansion. As you know, we have consolidated from the Brooks Campus to the main campus. We are delighted by the opportunity and synergy that will emerge. Brooks City-Base was the right solution at the right time, and now our main campus is the right place for our bright future. We are all aware of the continued growth that is before us and yes, the President's Cabinet is working to ensure we have enough space to continue to meet our growth needs, especially for fall of 2017. We are looking at the addition of classrooms, an outdoor pavilion and a soccer field to ensure we meet the growing needs of our academic programs. We are planning for additional parking facilities to support our continued growth needs and have laid out the infrastructure for our next facility, along with plans for further development of our land parcels at

the entryway to the Tower. Just last week we engaged in a pre-proposal conference to determine the market based interest in our land and future opportunities to support students and our classroom needs.

The new residence hall is on track to open this summer and our enrollment team is deep into recruiting to ensure it is full. We have made significant progress in our new Science and Technology facility. Thanks to a dedicated group of faculty who have worked with Provost O'Brien and the other VPs, we have embraced an accelerated effort to move our Science and Technology Facility forward. We are on schedule to seek approval from the Regents at the upcoming February meeting and look to break ground in late spring allowing us to take advantage of market competitiveness as cost of construction continues to escalate. Our leadership team is committed to



ensuring we complete the facility and begin fundraising for any building or equipment shortfalls. With Richard Ortega, I am committed to enhanced fundraising and we intend to announce new gifts later this semester.

As you know, there has been a lot of talk about shifting political dynamics that have followed our US elections and its impact on higher education. Well before the election, our campus community had been proactively addressing equity and in our efforts to become a comprehensive 4-year university. Since the fall election, I have taken the time to visit with our student community and remind them that this is an institution committed to their support and success. We have taken proactive steps to connect with students to ensure they are aware of available campus resources and to remind those that may be from historically marginalized groups they are supported. It is

important that we are thoughtful about outwardly visible signs of inclusion especially since we are already a majority minority campus. I empathize with concerns, fears and hesitations.

However, I know it is not enough to simply discuss concerns; we must formalize our commitment to inclusive excellence as a core to what we do as a community. Prior to the winter break, I issued a call for prospective volunteers to work with me on a President's Commission for Equity and Inclusive Excellence.

This commission will advise me and help to formalize our collective voices and ongoing commitment to equity and inclusion. The commission's charge is on the slide above.

I will paraphrase by saying we will work together to ensure we have a roadmap that represents inclusion for the various forms of identities and social relations on our campus community; and that we will sharpen our focus to examine the services we offer,

we will bolster our internal professional development programs and remain mindful about how and what we communicate. My aspirations include a common vocabulary that exemplifies our shared knowledge about respectful dialogue, equitable practices and continuing our efforts to broadly practice inclusive excellence. I anticipate the work of the Commission will help develop cultural agility and enhance our collective cultural proficiency as an integral part of our overall professional development. We know our students face many complex situations in their livelihoods—especially those who face issues of poverty. We will continue to respond to issues stemming from financial diversity. For example, this spring we are launching a Food Pantry, under the name General’s Store, in partnership with the San Antonio Food Bank. General’s Store will provide food items to members of the A&M-San Antonio community who are in need, and offer volunteer and experiential

learning opportunities for our students. General's Store will be located on the first floor of the Patriots' Casa. We intend to bolster our internal professional development by offering workshops that proactively prepare us to deal with race, equity and respectful dialogue. Later next month, I have invited two speakers to campus Dr. Benjamin Reese and Ms. Kay Iwata as an opportunity to learn together. They will join us in February; further details will be announced. Later next week, please join me at an Inclusive Excellence forum to openly discuss our current state and have dialogue about a roadmap for our future. I remain committed to your personal and professional growth. As we continue to grow and mature as an organization, you should have the tools and development you need to be successful. Your commitment, patience, willingness to work together and yes, **GRIT**, is truly appreciated.

Now that the residence hall is underway and we continue to hit our stride, I am frequently asked, “When will we field an athletics program?” My office will soon begin an athletics study with an external consultant and a task force to assist with the planning and development. Last fall, we talked about one of our most important new initiatives as the development of the academic plan. Under the leadership of Provost Mike O’Brien and Professor Robin Kapavik from the College of Education, much progress has been made. I applaud the efforts of all faculty who have been engaged in building an academic plan to guide our academic program future with a focus on meeting the niche needs of our region, research and a culture of excellence. Another clear step in the roadmap to the future is the 85<sup>th</sup> legislative session. It is early in the process and, as requested, we have submitted a 2018-19 biennial budget that is 4% less

than the previous one. We know it will be a constrained legislative session. I am working to preserve our budget; however, we remain in a strong financial position for this academic year and our plans for next year. We have already allocated \$1.1m for 17 new faculty that will start this summer. Last fall, we exceeded our tuition revenue goals by \$834,093, and this spring early indicators suggest we will exceed our tuition revenue goals by an estimated \$645,295. Closing Brooks is a strategic reallocation and saved the University more than \$379,000 this remaining year alone. We are reallocating those savings, which total approximately \$900K annually to future perspective budget cuts that may come our way to ensure we preserve all programs. Together, we have an estimated \$1.9 million in one-time available resources to allocate to our highest priority one-time strategic needs across the University through the URC this spring. I reported last fall that we planned for

approximately \$9.3 million in gross new revenue, with about \$5.8 million of that designated for debt service and other fixed-cost allocations. This left approximately \$1.3 million for merit increases and another \$2.1 million for new allocations. Because we exceeded our enrollment goals, staff merit increases were approved and are being implemented. Our budget is on track for a strong fiscal year.

## **Conclusion**

In concluding my remarks, I would remind you about the three points I've mentioned are important for this spring: 1) We are developing our Institutional Niche 2) Building a Culture of Excellence (3) We have a roadmap for our future.

Last fall, I was fortunate to team-teach Jag Tracks I with Dr. Edith Esparza Young. I was personally inspired by the energy, liveliness and bright future for our first-year students. It also

personalized for me the resources and academic support that are necessary to ensure success, up close and personal. Let me take a moment to share with you a sneak peak of the data on the progress of our inaugural freshman class.

As many of you know, we shouted far and wide about how proud we are of our freshman class of 501 students. It is extraordinary that we lost only six freshman students who withdrew during the fall 2016 semester. We have a 90% retention rate from 1st semester to 2nd semester for these students. 35% of these students ended the semester with a 3.0 or better. The programs we are creating are working. Yes, refinement is needed, and that is underway with Drs. O'Brien and Mahan. Colleagues, we have had tremendous success in our first semester and we can celebrate that at first glance these efforts exceed the state and national averages.



Another fun fact about our inaugural class that you might not know is that a few of those students weren't technically freshmen. And they aren't freshmen any longer. With the numerous dual credit and early college credit experiences in San Antonio, 13 of those students came in with enough credits to make them sophomores. And eight had enough credits to come in at the junior status. For this spring, 10 of those sophomores will now move to junior status after completing their first semester.

Our comprehensive expansion efforts continue to show the attractiveness of A&M-SA. Due to the 45 minimum credit restriction being lifted, we have seen an influx of students when compared to last spring and have a cumulative 418 new freshman and freshman transfers (including those starting last fall) and more than 500 sophomores, including approximately

265 new sophomore transfer students. These numbers will change before our spring Census date, but we now know that students who previously had to wait to attend A&M-SA are eager to attend earlier. Spring enrollment is strong with just over 5,200 students registered and we are well on our way to make our target of 5,422.

As we sit here today—it is truly a game changing period in our history. Throughout 2017, we will continue to blossom at each level of the University. Each of the staff and faculty has an important role or responsibility and I appreciate the sacrifices of your extra time and energy to ensure our students are successful.

We could not have arrived here today without you embracing your role as a university citizen and embracing our important responsibility.