

*President Cynthia Teniente-Matson Remarks  
Spring 2021 Convocation—January 14, 2021*

As we officially start our 2021 spring semester in this hybrid modality, I am compelled to say, “Is this really happening?” As both a statement and a question, these four simple words took on a new meaning that became a constant refrain throughout 2020. Turn after turn throughout the year, we asked ourselves and others, “Is this Really Happening?”

In early 2020 we felt the global pandemic creep its way into our daily lives. And then, mid-semester, practically overnight, we “masked up” and moved all our coursework and support services online! We asked each other, “Is this Really Happening?”

And certainly, we all asked ourselves that question when we witnessed George Floyd’s killing and the subsequent reawakening about perennial racial and social injustices. As many of us watched or participated in the Black Lives Matter movement that captured our country in the wake of that tragedy.

And, just last week, we asked ourselves again, “Is this really happening?” On January 6, mesmerized by live feeds streaming from a Capitol under siege by American rioters, we lived through a dark day in our nation. A day that will have lingering impacts.

Since then, what I’ve asked myself—and what I’d like to ask you—is a different question. “What can we learn from this moment? What do we do now?” And when I say *we*, I genuinely mean you and I as university citizens, politics aside.

When I think about what comes next, I understand the obvious: We are days away from the inauguration and the peaceful transfer of power. Hallmarks of our democracy. The pandemic and the recent violence in our nation’s Capitol guarantee that the day will look different. Yet, the presidential inauguration remains a cherished civic event, and an enduring symbol that our country is moving forward.

We, too, are moving forward, recognizing the undeniable importance of the role that public higher education upholds in the modern pandemic era. Next week, the White House will become home to an administration that includes a president, a vice president, and a first lady who all graduated from public universities as either undergraduate or graduate students—and notably, our first woman, and woman of color as vice president, who also happened to attend a minority-serving institution.

Now, as our students might say, “it’s been a minute since it’s been normal.” I urge you to think of today as *the* minute in the continuum of teachable moments. It is *the* minute to recognize the trust and tremendous responsibility bestowed on public institutions of higher education.

So, what does that proverbial *minute* look like in our socially-distanced and Zoom-bound classrooms? Perhaps in this moment, we can reexamine how students intake information, how

they engage in sense-making, how they come to live and understand the tenets of American democracy, and their respective roles in upholding the principles upon which our nation was founded. Now is *the minute* that students should demonstrate democratic literacy. And this “high-alert” moment demands that we vigorously and vehemently reject misinformation and we reject extremism, we reject expressions of hatred and intolerance, in word and in deed. As a campus community, we will continue to champion spaces that reject violence and embrace civil discourse throughout our community. We will not perpetuate a cycle of untruths, cynicism, or inaction.

This is an inflection point; it is *the* moment to reexamine the teaching and learning enterprise in this most challenging and fatiguing time.

To our faculty members—you carry an enormous influence in our nation. You are at the core of discovery, knowledge production and content creation. Your teaching and research spaces incorporate inquiry to shape independent intellectual thought. Your classrooms are the places students will learn how to think and develop skills that will help them navigate these multiple crises. Together, we must reinforce the principles of a liberal education, the value of the general education curriculum, and the importance of experiential learning.

I *know* our community. While we may not be perfect or agree on every issue, collectively, we are in a position of strength—especially when we hone in on inclusion and empathy, act with equity-minded intentions, and embrace a diversity of cultural experiences.

As we start the semester it may be useful to reacquaint yourself with what we know about our student population, their households, and the pandemic’s often disparate impact on them and their families. Like me, you might confront the stark reality and implications of the generational wounds within us and our students. And you might recognize that the pandemic is intensifying the conditions for mental health issues, food insecurity, domestic violence, and homelessness. There’s no question that it’s all taking a toll on learning.

Fortunately, our campus has safely remained open, flexible and empathetic in our daily support for students and each other. We should work to maintain that spirit of empathy, even as vaccines become more available and eventually, when restrictions are lifted. The truth is, the harsh realities created or exacerbated by this pandemic won’t *magically disappear* overnight. “Is This Really Happening?” is and will likely remain the state of mind for our students. And students *need* those brave spaces you provide for listening and encouraging dialogue.

One of our unique competitive advantages is the energy we have as a young Hispanic Serving Institution university. We were founded in the face of unthinkable circumstances, led by Senator Frank Madla. The idea of a university situated off Loop 410 on an undeveloped, mesquite-covered lot was an audacious vision—and some probably had other, less optimistic words for it. Yet, every year, our faculty, staff, students, and alumni have fulfilled that audacious vision, reaching tremendous milestones that demonstrate resiliency, excellence, and a commitment to co-create a modern university that serves and lifts the community. In the spirit of Senator Madla, we were born nimble, in uncertain conditions but with big ambitions to

make our region great and to graduate students who are well prepared for academic and professional success and for the civic engagement that sustains our democracy.

So in answer to the big question of 2020 and *any* question about what we can accomplish in 2021, “Yes, this is really happening” and we have much to celebrate. Let’s look back at a video of activities that “really happened” in 2020, and that give us reason to smile and to look forward to the future.

I know the fall semester was hard on all of us but I consider our Fall 2020 a success. And that success and the start of this new semester would not have been possible, or nearly as safe, without our public health and safety assistants’ help. They are supporting our front-line efforts with students, visitors and all of you who have spent any time on campus over the last several months. Let’s cut over and say hello to them!

We are so fortunate to benefit from the talents of some current students and recent graduates, among others, to help lead these critical efforts to safeguard the campus. Thank you all for your patience, good work, and flexibility during many changing conditions.

There is goodness happening everywhere, as you saw in the video. Our Jaguar Lift initiative—to which many of you generously contributed— has supported a whole new form of micro-scholarships and micro-grants to help students meet unforeseen needs. And we’ll be able to continue helping our students weather financial difficulties, thanks in large part to a record-breaking Day of Giving on December 1st. Thank you to everyone who included A&M-SA in your gift-giving this year.

As we reflect on how flexible the campus has been, we *have* to take a moment to thank those involved with Rec Sports, E-Sports and Intercollegiate Athletics! Their excellent staff and coaches reimagined their traditional activities and role-modeled what it means to be “flexible,” sharing their expertise by taking on temporary roles with the COVID-19 case-management team—something I’m sure they never imagined as part of their job descriptions! Let’s cut over and say hello to this incredible team...

Thank you again—you genuinely have exemplified the Jaguar Spirit!

And of course, in just a few short weeks we’ll start competitive play in our inaugural athletics programs—playing our first official game in February. I’ve been told there may even be a pandemic-style pep rally in the works!

During this time of such uncertainty, which has pushed us past what we *thought* were our limits, I am grateful for how the A&M-San Antonio family embraces the spirit of service.

And speaking of service, I want to check in on one more group that I know is watching together; they live with the notion of service to others. A final shout-out to our Military Affairs team.

They are tirelessly ensuring that our military-affiliated students are well supported and able to access the benefits they earned through service to this nation, in the face of changing academic

calendars and changing course modalities. This semester alone, I know they certified 560 students for benefits—all from a distance! Richard, how are you all doing?

Thank you, Richard and team. And I know the many students you serve thank you, as well. You and your team are the driving force behind our ranking as the #35 “Best for Vets” university by Military Times, and we’re so proud of the work you do.

So, back to the big question: “Is this really happening?”

Well, 2021 is upon us and as we start the spring semester, we also enter into the 87<sup>th</sup> legislative session. The reality is that we anticipate a challenging scenario, and preparations are underway to ensure our campus is ready for the aftermath of the economic downturn. This semester, the University Resources Commission led by Kathy Funk-Baxter and Mike O’Brien will be at the forefront of planning and preparing for the legislative session’s outcomes. Fortunately, we will also have Higher Education Relief Funds, or CARES Act, Part II funding that will be incorporated into our planning and help launch critical investments that will bolster our future growth. The URC will reconvene later this month and guide the campus planning conversation.

2021 is also the last year in the life of our current strategic plan, *Build. Impact. Transform.* In anticipation of our *next* five years, throughout the fall semester, the President’s Cabinet has been preparing for an update to our campuswide strategic plan. This semester, we will circulate draft documents made up of three parts: a vision statement for the year 2040; a 20-year vision for building academic excellence; and a renewed five-year strategic plan that will pick up in 2022, where *Build. Impact. Transform.* leaves off.

In the coming weeks, our campuswide planning committees will convene—in fact, committee invitations are going out today—and you all will have multiple opportunities to contribute your feedback, through a series of forums, workshops, focus groups and surveys. We’ll be assisted in our planning efforts by consultants from a firm called CampusWorks, which specializes exclusively in supporting higher ed institutions.

This strategic plan will articulate the priorities that will guide us for the next five years. We need your active engagement. Please participate in the process to ensure that your voices and views are reflected in the work. You’ll begin hearing from my office about opportunities for participation within the next few days.

In support of the strategic plan, we embrace “diversity within diversity” and an institutional commitment to equity and inclusion. In that spirit, the President’s Commission on Equity—or PCOE—has been hard at work, too, updating the PCOE Framework Report to document our past work, our current state and our goals for the future—the updated framework will be shared with the campus community later this month.

I asked the PCOE to refresh the framework report to capture two separate but essential tasks: first, recognizing and documenting how far we’ve come and second, sharing our approach to the critical work ahead of us. The PCOE updated the campus’ Statement on Equity, vetted

common language and continued to make space for critical conversations and programming across our campus. They engaged in leadership at a time when individuals and institutions alike were grappling with big questions, like understanding and openly engaging in difficult conversations about race, healing, and moving forward equitably amidst the ongoing trauma of social and racial injustice.

The PCOE has gone “hybrid,” hosting student focus groups, and welcoming new artists and creative works that showcase inclusion and a broad range of communities of color. We also are increasing our intentionality about how the campus “shows up” to a wider range of diverse groups with the Arts and Aesthetics Committee. The Mays Center continues to coordinate inclusive community engagement, including this weekend, in commemoration of Dr. King, when students will be volunteering outdoors at the MLK Academy, maintaining the campus landscape. And the campus will participate in the virtual MLK March—so look for our A&M-SA student representatives.

During Black History Month, we are hosting an art exhibit and lecture titled “Living in My Skin.” The show includes 22 paintings of Black men, including two who are members of our campus community. The lives of the various men are featured in a documentary airing on KLRN throughout February.

And I know many of you may be planning events and activities in your own departments that advance equity-mindedness on campus... I encourage you to reach out to the PCOE to seek sponsorship for the programming of hybrid or virtual events that integrate inclusion and equity.

2020 forced us to disrupt a historical pattern of ignoring inequities that act as unstable fault lines beneath our society’s surface—digital equity, health equity, and educational equity are now at the forefront of our conversations and actions. Our campus is actively engaged in bridging the digital divide. This year a pilot project with the ASPIRE network, particularly Edgewood ISD, will include innovations in the classroom and digital solutions that integrate our faculty, students, and administrative departments with external funding for activities that help eradicate inequities. We are lead partners in City of San Antonio’s Connecting Beyond the Classroom, showcasing a pilot to expand infrastructure, and introduces a Digital Inclusion Scholars Program and we’re launching a VisionCoders program, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade computer science course.

Perhaps in 2021, we will see a sustained focus on addressing these inequities, at a scale that will have us asking ourselves—but in a good way—*is this really happening?* Certainly, at A&M-San Antonio, we will remain focused on doing our part to reduce digital and health inequity.

I—and I’m sure you—often hear people say that we are living through one of the most difficult periods in our nation’s history. It certainly *is* and *feels* that way. But hearing that also reminds me of a *New York Times* article I read in April that made quite an impression on me.

It read, quote, “Given that we are now a nation of armchair epidemiologists, it felt eerily relevant to learn that George Washington survived the following diseases, among others:

smallpox, malaria (six times), diphtheria, tuberculosis (twice), dysentery *and* tuberculosis at the same time (four times), and pneumonia. We generally take it for granted that Washington was an impressive man, but to triumph over this many illnesses at a time when cures ranged from draining your blood to draining your blood again seems near superhuman.” End quote.

Of course, George Washington wasn’t superhuman, and neither are we. But stories like his remind me that resilience and tenacity are in our DNA as a nation, that our country has prevailed during perilous times before, and it will again.

Here at A&M-San Antonio, we face a future that is uncharted for an emerging university like ours. There is no question that there will be struggles in the wake of this pandemic, some of which we couldn’t have imagined when we were gathered for our more traditional convocation ceremony last spring. The answer to a simple question, “Are you positive?” has a new meaning.

Yet we are focused on a positive future. We are adaptable, flexible and equity-minded. And more importantly, our *students* are focused on *their* positive futures, and they rely on *your* leadership, guidance and support.

We might wonder if what we do makes a difference in the lives of our students. While I could tell you it does – let’s take a minute to instead hear it from just a few of our students who were on campus in December. They wanted to share in their own authentic way – during “COVID-time,” as students often say – using cell phone videos and images. After all, as our students also say: Without a picture, it didn’t happen. So here are just a few moments they shared – a few images and words of appreciation.

*That is why our work matters.*

And it matters more than ever. So as we embark on 2021 together, let’s reclaim that question. *Is this really happening?* Yes, indeed it is. We *are* moving ahead, with flexibility and optimism. We *are* rising to meet the challenges of the day. We are *not* shuttering our doors or closing programs. We *are* really building an outstanding university that makes a difference in lives, in families, and in communities.

And now *is* the moment to make it happen.

I ask you to remain focused on *our future*. I am more convinced of the essential role that our institutions of higher education—all of *us*—play in the days ahead.