

(AS WRITTEN)

Vision 2020: Creating a Culture of Excellence:

Reaffirmation and Way Forward

R. Bowen Loftin, September 16, 2011

Howdy! Thank you, members of The Texas A&M University System Board of Regents; Chancellor Sharp; Dr. Watson; Speaker Benedik and members of the Faculty Senate; faculty, staff and students; and distinguished guests. Welcome on this special day in the life of our university.

Our Academic Convocation is more than a mere marking of the beginning of the new academic year. Our coming together this afternoon is a celebration of the central mission of Texas A&M University as a land-, sea- and space-grant institution dedicated to serving the public good. It is a time of deeper contemplation of our long-term commitment to our institutional goals.

It is a rededication of our skills and talents to the life of discovery and scholarship. And this year, it is also a rededication to the exciting and forward-looking goal that was set forth more than a decade ago in Vision 2020—Creating a Culture of Excellence.

On October 10, 1997, the President of Texas A&M University, Ray Bowen, “proposed that [the university] strive to be recognized as one of the ten best public universities in the nation by the year 2020, while at the same time maintaining and enhancing our distinctiveness.”

Recognizing that last year (2010) marked approximately the halfway point between the adoption of Vision 2020 and the time for it to be realized, we created a Mid-Term Review Task Force to (1) assess progress to date in achieving the goals of Vision 2020; (2) examine the premises underlying Vision 2020 to make certain that they are as relevant today as they were twelve years ago; (3) update Vision 2020 to reflect any changes in the original premises and to take into account the results of a number of planning activities that have taken place in the past two years; and (4) recommend, at an appropriate level, actions that can be taken by the university to ensure that it achieves its long-term vision. The work of over 200 individuals who served as part of this Vision 2020 Mid-Term Review Task Force has recently been completed. I am deeply grateful for their service, and pleased to share with you today the most important results of this effort.

First, a query to get us started today:

How many here today were members of the Texas A&M family on October 10, 1997?

Now let us ponder four very important questions:

First, since its completion in 1999, what specific examples of progress have been made by Texas A&M in achieving the goals set forth in Vision 2020, Creating a Culture of Excellence?

Second, are we still committed to the key component of Vision 2020—being “recognized as one of the ten best public universities in the nation by the year 2020”?

Third, how will we reach our goal over the next nine years?

And fourth, how will we know that we have reached our goal?

For this 2011 Academic Convocation, we will explore these four questions. We can answer the first two of these questions with certainty today. The remaining two will require additional time and your help.

Notable Accomplishments on the Road to Achieving Vision 2020

This is an exciting time to be associated with Texas A&M University. The answer to the first question regarding examples of our progress is straightforward. We have made significant and focused progress over the past decade in moving toward the ultimate aspiration of being a top ten public university. The work being done at the departmental, college, divisional, and institutional levels should be celebrated. There is solid evidence of our creating a *Culture of Excellence* through concentrating on effective planning and assessment as well as on building our strengths through sound investments. Vision 2020 cited two measurements by which to gauge our overall progress—our ranking by the *U.S. News and World Report* among public universities and the graduate program rankings of the National Research Council. The latter measure was radically changed in the most recent release of assessments of graduate programs by the National Research Council and no longer provides traditional rankings. However, in the 2011 National University rankings published this week by *U.S. News and World Report*, Texas A&M University moved from 22nd place in 2010 to 19th place among public universities. The 19th ranking is shared with the Universities of Connecticut, Florida and Pittsburgh. Ranked above us, but not in the top ten, are (at 17th) The Ohio State University and the University of Maryland—College Park; (at 13th) the Pennsylvania State University, the University of California—Irvine, the University of Illinois—Urbana-Champaign, and the University of Texas at Austin. The 10th place ranking is shared by the University of California—Santa Barbara, the University of Washington, and the University of Wisconsin—Madison. To have, in just one year, moved up by three in our ranking is very noteworthy and speaks to the quality and

dedication of our faculty, the achievements of our students and the untiring support of our excellent staff.

In support of our long-range goal we have taken many significant, specific actions since the adoption of Vision 2020 in pursuit of our long-range goal. For example, we have:

- Hired over 1,000 outstanding faculty (some new and some replacement), including Nobel Laureates;
- Increased the percentage of tenure/tenure-track faculty members teaching undergraduate courses (Fall 2009 – 55% vs. Fall 2004 – 46%);
- Enhanced the diversity of the faculty and staff and adopted a comprehensive diversity plan focused on accountability, climate, and equity;
- Achieved over \$3 billion in research expenditures and now rank among the Top 20 institutions, private and public, in Research Expenditures by the National Science Foundation;
- Involved our researchers and graduate students in research projects in every continent of the world, with more than 600 projects currently underway;
- Planned and built over \$800 million in new facilities since 2000 including the Interdisciplinary Life Sciences Building and the Emerging Technologies and Economic Development Building, with the construction of the new Liberal Arts & Humanities Building well along;
- Established a highly successful and fully accredited branch campus in the State of Qatar;
- Raised \$1.5 billion in the *One Spirit, One Vision Campaign for Texas A&M*, which includes funds for 55 endowed faculty chairs, 44 professorships, and over \$100 million in graduate fellowships and undergraduate scholarships;
- Enrolled more than 75,000 first year and transfer undergraduate students of whom 27% were first generation college students.
- Achieved one of Texas' highest graduation rates for both students of color and non-minority students;
- Become chartered as a distinguished member of *Phi Beta Kappa*;
- Accepted an invitation to join the elite Association of American Universities;
- Enhanced the undergraduate experience by improving access to majors, course offerings (including honors courses) and student enrichment;
- Strengthened programs in the arts and humanities, including the addition of new undergraduate programs in women and gender studies as well as new options in Africana Studies, international studies, visualization and music, and new graduate programs in performance studies, visualization and Hispanic studies;

- Enhanced the graduate student experience by improving support directed at attracting the very best graduate students and selectively expanding the graduate student population;
- Doubled our expenditures for library materials from \$8.9M in 1999/2000 to \$17.8M in 2008/2009, bring us to a ranking of 11th among ARL academic libraries;
- Established the Texas Digital Library in collaboration with 15 other public ARL libraries in Texas providing a set of shared services for scholarly communication;
- Established numerous and significant interdisciplinary research programs in energy, genomics, health care, quantum physics and engineering, nuclear solutions, computation innovations, neural sciences, digital humanities and education; and
- Adopted a Campus Master Plan and empowered a Council on the Built Environment to guide the physical development of the campus.

Our Continuing Commitment to Vision 2020, Creating a Culture of Excellence

The answer to our second question, regarding our continued commitment to Vision 2020 goals, is also straightforward. We are on the right track, and we unquestionably renew our commitment. The final report of the Vision 2020 Mid-Term Review Executive Committee contains the following key section:

It is our position that Texas A&M University strongly reaffirm its ultimate aspiration of being recognized as one of the ten best public universities in the nation by 2020. While maintaining and enhancing our historical distinctiveness of developing leaders of character who embody our core values, Texas A&M will leverage its extraordinary role as a land, sea and space grant institution to continue to build a Culture of Excellence focused on meeting the evolving educational and societal needs of the state, nation and world.

In fulfilling the aspirations of Texas A&M, the Vision 2020 Mid-Term Review Executive Committee views the changing environment as an opportunity to prioritize and focus strategic initiatives and strategic partnerships that leverage our strengths to address state, national and world needs.

Our traditional Core Values of Excellence, Integrity, Leadership, Loyalty, Respect and Selfless Service will continue to guide our decisions, programs and student development emphases. We will continue being effective and efficient stewards of resources and the public trust. We will develop further the university's human resources to create a learning, research and service environment of the first order.

When I became interim president in June of 2009, I began to express our aspiration somewhat differently, saying that Texas A&M University sought to be counted among the very best public institutions of higher education in the United States. I did so because I was not certain how to claim “top ten” status, given that the only two measures cited in Vision 2020 were the rankings of *U.S. News and World Report* and the National Research Council. The work of the mid-term review team served, however, to convince me and others that we should indeed be on the pathway to recognition as a “top ten” public university. We will talk a bit later about the metrics associated with this ranking.

You will notice, too, that the reaffirmation also points to “maintaining . . . our historic distinctiveness,” emphasizing the leadership and character development of which we are proud as well as our focus on research and service that serve the state, nation, and world.

Starting from our overarching vision statement, the Mid-Term Review Committee evaluated the original Vision 2020 Imperatives, Precepts and Goals in light of the current and future anticipated contexts. We also synthesized a number of recent institutional planning efforts to inform the Mid-Term Review. This assessment resulted in the identification of three ***“Marks of Excellence”*** and a number of *illustrative and definitive actions* that (1) leverage institutional strengths and opportunities, (2) draw upon multiple Vision 2020 Imperatives and Precepts informed by recent institutional planning, (3) are externally focused, and (4) provide evidence of ***Creating a Culture of Excellence - Serving the Public Good:***

[Aside: Note the extension of the original subtext “creating a culture of excellence” through the addition of the phrase “serving the public good.” This extension recognizes the importance of providing an external dimension to what has largely been an internal focus of Vision 2020.]

(1) ***Lead in Scholarly Impact:*** - Our scholars' work (both faculty and their students) will have more impact in the classroom, the laboratories, the disciplines and the lives of people around the world. We will leverage our scholarly strengths to:

- ***Foster multidisciplinary and multi-modal research***
- ***Inform public policy***
- ***Fuel economic development and the entrepreneurial spirit***
- ***Build energy capacity***
- ***Enlarge the food supply***
- ***Enhance national security***
- ***Strengthen the letters and the arts***
- ***Advance the professions***
- ***Innovate technology***
- ***Generate advancements in health and the life sciences and***
- ***Build on the extension model to expand scholarly engagement***

(2) **Lead in Educating the Next Generation of Leaders:** We will graduate highly sought after leaders who are critical thinkers, effective communicators, and lifelong learners with diverse and global perspectives. We will build upon our historical emphasis on student leadership development to:

- **Accelerate our strengthening of graduate programs**
- **Graduate students who are highly valued**
- **Increase the number of graduates and reduce time to degree**
- **Ensure students have high impact educational experiences including international experiences**
- **Enrich the quality of life for a diverse and global campus environment**
- **Develop responsible servant leaders with a commitment to public service**
- **Value the residential experience**
- **Enhance the integration of the curricular and co-curricular experiences and**
- **Maintain accessibility**

(3) **Lead in Stewardship and Partner Engagement** – We will be the exemplar of responsible stewardship of resources, driven by transparency, effective planning and decision making. We will develop mutually beneficial partnerships and strategic alliances with external constituents that involve the creation, dissemination and translation of academic knowledge. We will

- **Be accountable for those resources entrusted to us**
- **Improve return on funds invested by the state and benefactors**
- **Earn the public trust**
- **Sustain and enhance the environment**
- **Foster continuous improvement**
- **Increase strategic alliances with K-12, community colleges, non-profit and for profit partners especially in urban areas**
- **Expand distance and continuing education and**
- **Enlarge the scholarly engagement with urban and emerging population centers**

Central to our capacity to advance effectively these opportunities is ensuring our "**Foundations of Excellence**" including

- (4) the Amplification of Faculty Excellence,**
- (3) the Support and Development of Staff,**
- (1) the Development and Diversification of Financial Resources, and**
- (2) the Maintenance and Enhancement of the Institutional Infrastructure.**

Next Steps

As we move forward, we must continue to be mindful of the context of public higher education within the larger society across both our state and nation. In recent times, Texas A&M and

other universities have been the subject of intense public scrutiny. These conversations are to be welcomed as part of our role as stewards of the resources that are entrusted to us. It is up to us to educate people beyond our campus regarding the valuable returns we provide on their significant investments in us.

Today, much of this conversation centers on how much students benefit relative to their expenditures of time and money to earn a degree, as well as the work that remains for us at Texas A&M if we are to achieve our vision for 2020.

The nature of these conversations will change over time, but one thing will not change. I remain firmly committed, as President of Texas A&M, to be at the forefront in recognizing and celebrating you, our faculty and staff – your productivity, your expertise and the quality of your efforts.

Today our staff and faculty are accomplishing more than ever, even though their total numbers have been reduced over the past year. Our faculty continue to demonstrate their truly exceptional teaching, scholarship and creative contributions to serving the public good. Today I reaffirm the great work that our faculty and staff are doing each and every day on our behalf. I also reaffirm my commitment to ensuring that the great story of Texas A&M is heard by our numerous and diverse constituents across Texas, the nation and the world.

One part of this story is our reaccreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, or SACS. Representatives from SACS will be on campus this spring for a site visit. One of the issues they will be reviewing is our effort to strengthen the quality of the education we provide, known as our Quality Enhancement Program. This program was advanced by the Teaching and Learning Roadmap Committee, was informed by data on areas where students at Texas A&M and elsewhere can improve, was considered by our Faculty Senate and deans, and finally, was further refined by our Quality Enhancement Program committee. The final program is known as **AGGIES COMMIT**. The broadest aspects of this program will focus on enhancing our core values and strengthening student learning outcomes through high-impact experiences. This effort, like all that we do as an institution, originated with Vision 2020 and dovetails with our strategies for achieving this goal.

We have reached a critical milestone for our Vision 2020 process. Two important questions remain: How we will reach our goal over the next nine years, and how we will know that we have reached our goal?

We are now ready to release the complete report of the Vision 2020 Mid-Term Review Task Force for faculty, students, and staff to review. We also encourage the entire Aggie Network worldwide to review this critical document. There is much more, however, that we must do in the coming months to map our future path.

Given the lack of graduate program rankings from the National Research Council and the limitations of the yearly *U.S. News and World Report* rankings, we must grapple with the fundamental issue of how we can measure our attainment of top-ten status among public universities. The mid-term review report contains an expanded list of aspirational “peer” institutions as well as a number of suggested metrics that can be used to compare us to those universities. Moreover, we, as faculty members, fundamentally understand where our departments and colleges stand vis-à-vis our peers. We must work together to develop a consensus on what we will use to measure our progress and assure us that we have reached our ultimate goal.

The task force report, as I noted earlier, provides three Marks of Excellence and further enumerates, at a high level, actions that support each of these Marks of Excellence. It is essential that we examine these proposed actions, prioritize them and refine them into a form that allows us to make specific investments that move us, measurably, along our chosen trajectory.

To this end, we have proposed a series of dialogues under the rubric “Commitment to Excellence” that provide the framework within which we (faculty, students, and staff and key external stakeholders) can posit, debate, and shape detailed actions—actions that are achieved through our commitment and our targeted investment of resources.

These next three months will require energy, intellectual investment, and mutual respect, but I am convinced that this will be time well spent as we reaffirm our commitment to creating a culture of excellence here on campus and serving the public good across our state, nation and world.

During my Academic Convocation address last fall, I emphasized my belief that Texas A&M is unique in all of academia for providing a top-quality education and top-quality research while also embracing our rich history and traditions. This year, I want to emphasize my conviction that, by working together, we can not only retain the special qualities that make us unique, but also become known as one of the country’s top ten public universities by the year 2020. Thank you for all that you do to contribute to our culture of excellence. This is truly an exciting time to be associated with Texas A&M University.