

DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
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Tuesday, September 12, 3 p.m.
The University of Texas — McCullough Theatre

Remarks as delivered.

President Gregory L. Fenves presented his remarks after being introduced by Faculty Council Chair Steven Hoelscher.

Thank you, Steve, for the kind introduction and also for your leadership of the Faculty Council. I look forward to working with you and the entire Faculty Council and the faculty in the coming year.

Last month, on a plane headed for the Rio Grande Valley to visit with new UT students and their families, I was looking out the window at the landscape below.

A great Texan — state senator, congresswoman, and former UT faculty member Barbara Jordan once said about that landscape, “I get from the soil and spirit of Texas the feeling that I, as an individual, can accomplish whatever I want to, and that there are no limits. That you can just keep going, just keep soaring.”

And this month, we’ve seen that spirit brought to life, as Texans from across the state have pitched in to help the survivors of Hurricane Harvey. The recovery efforts will take time, but the people of Texas are leading the way — inspiring the entire nation.

Over the last nine years that my family and I have lived in Austin, I’ve come to understand and embrace the Texan idea that there is limitless potential here. And when I met our new students in the Valley — many of whom are the first members of their families to go to college — I could see in them Barbara Jordan’s message of unbounded potential.

These students embody the hopes of their parents, grandparents and siblings. And through the education they receive, they will achieve their dreams. They will get that life-changing education right here at the flagship university of this great state — our university, where we teach, learn and discover.

UT’s core mission is to provide groundbreaking education, research and health care to serve society.

And in recent years, we have received national recognition for strengthening our top-ranked academic programs, accelerating students’ time-to-degree, fostering innovative research, and reimagining medical education at the new Dell Medical School.

These are all areas where we have made excellent progress, but there’s still much more to do. And later, I will talk about the steps we must take to achieve UT’s mission at an even higher level.

However, first I want to ask a question: not, what is our mission, but what is our purpose? What is the purpose of The University of Texas? It’s something I’ve thought a lot about over the past year.

And the answer became clearer when I visited the Valley and talked with the new, motivated and ambitious UT students.

Our deepest purpose as a university is to unlock potential.

We bring top students from diverse backgrounds and experiences to this campus, and the faculty impart fundamental knowledge and the methods to think, to solve problems, and to be creative. It is this education that enables each student to pursue their goals and their aspirations.

But UT does even more. Whether in the library, the lab, the clinic, or one of our world class collections UT faculty are constantly unlocking the potential of their own ideas. What starts as a concept becomes a project and often years of scholarship that eventually lead to new solutions and new ways of understanding the world.

And through these ideas, we unlock the potential of the great state of Texas. We address social challenges in our cities, the security of the nation and America's role in a complex world, health care challenges in our communities, and educational opportunities in schools across Texas. We do this with the scale and impact that only a public flagship university can, and today, society needs us more than ever. Now is a time where leadership in education and research is needed. The University of Texas is needed.

And for UT to lead, we must be bold.

This afternoon, I'll discuss three priorities that we will commit our energy, our focus, and our resources to.

The first is to increase UT's role as an engine of upward mobility so that more students and their families can achieve the American dream.

The second is to build upon education that transcends the lecture hall and empowers students to learn by doing — to make experience an essential part of a UT education.

And the third is to invest in the very core of the university — our faculty — to support their research, scholarship, discovery and creativity to advance knowledge and human understanding.

These three priorities are bound to our mission to educate and create knowledge, and in addition, they speak directly to our purpose as a university — to unlock potential. They will address the needs of students, strengthen the education we provide, and increase the impact of our research and graduate programs.

In the Rio Grande Valley last month, I met an incoming UT freshman named Vallery Valle. Without any advance notice, the master of ceremonies asked Vallery to come to the podium and speak. At first a bit hesitant to walk to the stage, her speech was personal and powerful. Afterward, I spoke with Vallery and learned her story.

She grew up in a home beside a small dirt road in a rural part of South Texas. Her family worked hard, but money was always a concern. During high school, she faced many obstacles outside of the classroom. For Vallery, college was always her goal. Being accepted to UT was her dream — a path to a better life. This past year, she earned a scholarship to UT, and last week I saw Vallery Valle on campus for the beginning of her freshman year.

And there are many other stories of incredible students who have come here to change not only their own lives, but the lives of their families. These UT stories come from 220 of the 254 counties across Texas, from throughout the U.S., and from countries around the world. Everywhere we look, we see people whose futures have been elevated by an education on the Forty Acres.

Now, I tend to cite statistics too often. And though I'll keep my stats to a minimum today, here's one that displays the power of The University of Texas.

A recent study shows that nearly half of the UT students who graduated in the early 2000s, who came from families in the lowest income quintile, are now earning at least twice the amount their families' earned.

For these graduates, this is the American dream come true. From a policy perspective, it is the definition of upward mobility — the idea that in the course of a graduate's lifetime, they earn more than their parents.

But this dream has slipped away for many, with long-term consequences for communities and society. Over the past half century in the U.S., a child's prospect of earning more than their parents has fallen from 90 percent to 50 percent. It has been a dramatic change, and it affects every person in every walk of life.

There are many reasons why mobility has decreased. But we know, and the data show, that American universities are the great engine of upward mobility. This has been true since the Morrill Land-Grant Acts provided resources to start the public universities, during the height of the Civil War. This has been true since the G.I. Bill enabled millions of World War II veterans to produce unprecedented economic growth after they returned home.

I believe now is the time for the nation to rededicate itself to strengthening these great engines of upward mobility — public universities like The University of Texas.

And we must do our part for all students. When a student comes to UT, they get a life-changing education that dramatically improves their future. But therein lies a problem. You have to get here first. You need access to achieve success. And that requires more than just gaining admittance. That means a student needs to be able to afford a UT education.

Now, UT is recognized as one of the best values and best examples of a public university fostering upward mobility. Our record in improving graduation rates has been remarkable. We've decreased the time it takes students to earn a degree, which reduces the cost of education. And as a result, we've been able to accommodate a larger freshman class.

Today, The University of Texas is admitting a thousand more freshmen than we did only six years ago — 1,000 more freshmen — without UT's total enrollment increasing.

This has provided more access to the state's flagship university for students of all backgrounds. And I ask that we commit to do more, to set new goals for ourselves, so that we can foster opportunity and help renew the American dream.

One way to do this is through careful stewardship of tuition. UT's resident undergraduate tuition is still among the lowest of top-ranked public flagship universities in the country. And that's because of the dedication of our faculty and staff, and decisions by our leadership team and the Board of Regents. Whenever we consider tuition rates, we will always be mindful of the cost to students.

Another way to increase access is through financial aid. It is a fact that many middle-income Texas families don't qualify for much federal or state aid, so they have to take out loans to pay for the full cost of education.

To help address this reality, last year I announced additional financial aid for students from middle-income families, but we need to go further.

This year, we will commit recurring funding to provide additional financial aid for low- and middle-income students, with the objective of improving access to UT. These funds will come from the increased AUF funding we received from the Board of Regents.

UT's new senior vice provost for enrollment management, Rachelle Hernandez, will involve faculty, students and staff in an in-depth examination of how we can improve the use of financial aid.

We will involve leading experts among the faculty and from across the country.

We will appeal to philanthropists and policymakers to help us create opportunity and unlock potential — for all students.

And we will call on other universities to join us in a commitment to renewing the American dream.

So the first step is identifying and enrolling exceptional students. In these new approaches, we will consider the economic diversity of students throughout the state as well as our longstanding commitment to the educational benefits of racial and ethnic diversity. And we need to be much more intentional about keeping the most talented students in Texas.

Once these students are at UT, we want their education to reflect the timeless nature of learning and also the realities of the world they will graduate into. To do that, we must continually innovate, adapt, and reimagine the way we teach.

I think I can say that every person in this room has been in a lecture hall — we're basically in one now. The design is familiar: seats facing a stage and a presenter facing back at the students.

Earlier in my career, I was invited to give lectures in a 15th-century classroom at the University of Pavia in Italy. I was awed by the history of that room, where Leonardo da Vinci once taught. Like lecture halls across our campus, it was built as a place for an expert to deliver knowledge and for students to absorb the information.

But in 2017, lecture halls aren't nearly enough, especially given the talent of our students, what we know about how people learn, the role of technology in education, and the fact that today's students have been using digital technology for their entire lives.

If we are to truly engage with students to provide an education that is meaningful and applicable, we need to evolve. And at UT today, faculty are leading the way — expanding the concept of what a course, and what teaching, can be.

The university educational experience is just that: an experience. To be effective, it must be multi-faceted, immersive and engaging. Now, there's a popular notion that the job of a professor is to provide all of the answers. To serve as the keepers of knowledge. But how can that be? Ask any faculty member about their work and their discipline and you'll find that they are experts and that they are enthusiastic about sharing their findings. But more importantly, you'll see them asking questions. Questions that they are striving to answer through their scholarship, their research, and their creative endeavors.

A UT education is about faculty and students learning how to create, build, probe, discover, and solve together, so that our students are prepared for life after they graduate. And there are many examples of this kind of learning and teaching taking place.

Last year, the College of Fine Arts began offering the first Bachelor of Science degree in its 80-year history — the B.S. in arts and entertainment technologies. This degree program blends artistic expression with hands-on training using the latest technology to produce new works.

There is the McCombs Real Estate Investment Fund, which allows undergraduate and graduate students to learn about investing through experience. The money is real, as are the lessons, and it's the only program in the country of its kind.

These are just a couple examples of how schools and colleges are bringing experiential learning into their curricula. There are dozens of other examples, but we need to embrace this approach more comprehensively.

I call upon the faculty, in every department, to provide all UT undergraduates the opportunity to participate in experiential learning that is integrated into their degree programs. The Provost's Office will be working in partnership with colleges and schools to support faculty in making this goal a reality.

Experiential learning adds depth to the education of our students and becomes a toolkit for them that can be drawn from throughout their lives. And for many, life — and career — truly starts with graduation.

Since 2011, a remarkable story has unfolded at UT regarding student success. We are very close to achieving the goal President Bill Powers set — for 70 percent of undergraduates to graduate in four years. Through the tremendous efforts of many of you here today, we have significantly closed the persistence gaps across socioeconomic categories, race and ethnicity, and first-generation college students.

We now lead Texas public universities in graduation success.

But our commitment to our students doesn't end with graduation. And as significant as receiving a degree is, I believe we need to broaden the definition of student success.

The first job a student takes after undergraduate or graduate study has an enormous impact on their later career development. It will probably be the first job of several, and I like to quote former Dean Rod Hart, who said, "We prepare our students for their third job, and that job probably doesn't exist now."

But that first placement is still important.

And today, to bolster our commitment to the success of UT students both before and after graduation, I'd like to introduce College to Career — a new initiative to prepare students for careers after graduation.

After many years of discussion about campus career centers, we have started thinking about the College to Career program. And with the additional AUF funding provided by the Board of Regents, we will be standing it up in the next year. Through College to Career, UT will invest in mentorship and help place students in their first jobs — where they can use the knowledge and the skills they have learned at UT. It will build upon the career services now available in the schools and colleges — to serve all students on campus.

At UT, our students are the lifeblood of this campus, and the faculty are the very heart of everything we do. The research that UT faculty pursue addresses many of the biggest and toughest questions of the present and future — socially, scientifically, economically and culturally.

For example, a few months ago, scientists at the McDonald Observatory finished a major upgrade of the Hobby-Eberly Telescope, the third largest in the world. Its science mission is to explain dark energy — one of the great mysteries of the universe.

This month, we inaugurated the China Public Policy Center, which will focus on China-related policy and the strengthening of U.S.-China and Texas-China relations.

And today, I am very excited to announce that the Dell Medical School is launching UT Health Austin — Dell Med's new medical group practice, delivering direct patient care by Dell Med faculty. This is a big deal.

A mere five years after the citizens of Travis County voted to approve local taxpayer funding for Dell Med, we will now have both a medical school — attracting many of the best students — and clinical care programs serving the people of Austin and Travis County. And it will all take place at Dell Med's state-of-the-art Health Transformation Building, which will be opening later this fall on campus. And it will complement our partnerships with Central Health and the Seton Healthcare Family, which earlier this year opened the new Dell Seton Medical Center at UT.

So everywhere we look at UT, we see action. But as I've been saying, we have a lot more to do. And these efforts must be led by our faculty across disciplines and fields of study.

The Bridging Barriers initiative was introduced at my last State of the University Address. Its goal is to accelerate collaboration across the disciplines and promote the type of research that thrives in an environment based on academic freedom. In the year since I made that announcement, the faculty response has been tremendous.

We received 125 papers from over 800 UT researchers. The ideas in these papers were distilled into six major themes, which outline the large, world-changing research challenges the faculty are confronting.

And each year, we will introduce a new Bridging Barriers initiative to address a major issue, one that is critical for the world and important for UT to lead in. I am looking forward to Dan Jaffe — vice president for research — announcing the first effort in the coming months.

To fuel ambitious, strategic initiatives in scholarship and teaching, such as Bridging Barriers, we must invest. Specifically, we must invest in faculty. Our purpose as a research university can only be fulfilled by having the best faculty to drive education and discovery.

So today, Provost McInnis and I are announcing the next phase of the faculty investment initiative to do just that. It will have two parts. The first is a multi-year effort to focus on salary competitiveness, after years of falling behind other top-ranked universities. The second will be to ensure that as we hire new faculty, UT's salaries and our facilities allow us to compete for the best talent.

This is so crucial that I have decided to substantially increase the permanent funding — drawn in part from the new recurring AUF funding — for recruitment and retention. This funding will also support an increase in the number of faculty in strategic areas across the university. The provost will begin collaborating with the deans to develop five-year faculty recruitment and retention plans for each college and school based on agreed-upon goals.

We will hire faculty to achieve our vision, in both excellence and diversity. As I said in my inaugural address, excellence and diversity are mutually reinforcing. And while we have made progress in recruiting under-represented faculty in the past year, the additional funding will provide resources to continue to make progress.

This summer, I announced the funding of merit raises for faculty and staff. These are crucial because they enable us to recognize the achievements of the faculty and staff, the very people who bring the university to life and excel every day. But as we invest in them, we also must make difficult decisions to limit spending in other areas.

It's about balance, not austerity.

We will dedicate our resources to enable the success of our students, faculty and staff, and we will be good stewards of taxpayer and tuition funds for the university.

I'd like to thank Governor Greg Abbott, Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, the Speaker of the House, Joe Straus, and the Texas Legislature for their support for the university despite a very challenging budget this biennium. I'm grateful that they prioritized higher education and key initiatives, including the Dell Medical School.

And I'd like to recognize Chairman Paul Foster and the entire UT System Board of Regents for their strong commitment to the flagship's success, especially as reflected in their recent decision to increase recurring AUF funding for UT. It's been an honor to serve the Board of Regents.

And I'm also tremendously grateful for the generosity of our donors and benefactors who believe in the mission of The University of Texas. We finished the fiscal year with one of the best fundraising efforts in UT's history. The generous contributions of UT supporters will help shape our future. Thank you to each and every donor — and I ask alumni and friends of UT who are listening today to get involved with your university so that we can build that future together.

At UT, we take on the big issues and answer important questions. We are committed to the principles of free inquiry and expression. All members of our community have the right to hold, defend and express their ideas and opinions. That's how we learn. That's how we build understanding.

And as we tackle the big issues, we also have to take a look at ourselves and assess life on this campus. Over the past year, the UT community has experienced a great deal. And at times, the climate has many feeling concerned, frustrated, and, some, even afraid. The challenges we face are significant, but we face them with empathy for one another.

Last May, former Dallas Police Chief David Brown served as our university commencement speaker. In the 1980s, he was a student here, but he left college early to return to his hometown of Dallas, where he started his career in law enforcement. He would rise to become police chief, and last year he became a national figure as his leadership helped his department, the city of Dallas, and the country through the tragic shooting that resulted

in the death of five officers during a peaceful protest. Chief Brown understands society's divisions. But he also knows he can overcome them.

In his commencement speech, Chief Brown said, "Invite someone home for dinner that doesn't look like you." It was a simple call to action, but a powerful one. And the sentiment in his words applies directly to our university. It is the very definition of an inclusive learning environment — where people can engage to exchange ideas, promote understanding, and make progress. We draw strength through a unity of purpose and a mutual understanding at UT, not through discrimination or divisiveness.

Last semester, we launched the University Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan, and implemented a hate and bias incident policy to review actions that threaten members of our community. These efforts are designed to foster a positive and supportive climate for everyone, as we value our commitment to free speech and the pursuit of knowledge. A climate free from ideologies of racism, bigotry and hate. A climate in which every single person at UT is included and respected, no matter their background or culture, including students brought to this country at a young age to lead better lives.

Now, some might say that these policies are only words. But words do lead to action. Both words and action matter. As a university, we will stand up for what we believe in. And we will also listen. We will listen to the voices on our campus, and we will learn from one another, respect one another, and keep making progress, together.

These are our goals, and these are our priorities moving forward:

First, provide educational opportunities for students of all backgrounds to help renew the American dream.

Second, continue to transform how we educate and prepare our students for success beyond graduation — with knowledge, skills and experience.

And third, invest in our faculty, who through their research discover and develop new insight, create new works, and take on the important questions.

In 2011, another commencement speaker, a Distinguished Alumna, former United States Senator and now Ambassador Kay Bailey Hutchison said, "I bleed orange and white," when she talked about her passion for Longhorn football, which, as you may know, plays USC in a few days. I'm looking forward to going to L.A. for the game.

But also in that speech, Ambassador Hutchison gave eloquent advice to our students: "When you confront obstacles, leap over or detour around, but don't ever give up. UT has shaped you, and now you will shape the world."

There is limitless potential in our state, and the way we tap into it is through hard work and an unrelenting sense of purpose. It is a combination of talent and persistence that defines a UT student, faculty member, staff member, and alumnus. That's what the ambassador was talking about.

At The University of Texas, we continually strive to reach our own potential, and we do that by unlocking the potential of all who come here to teach, work and learn.

We serve our community. We improve lives. We strive for progress. We transcend the status quo.

Our efforts take time. They take investment. They take passion, imagination and creativity. But that's what's required of us as a leading flagship university, and we embrace the challenge. That's how we rise to the heights we are capable of. That's how we unlock potential. And that's how we live up to those six words that define us — what starts here changes the world.

Thank you.