

DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
STATE OF THE UNIVERSITY ADDRESS**

Tuesday, September 13, 3 p.m.
The University of Texas — B. Iden Payne Theatre

Remarks as delivered.

President Gregory L. Fenves presented his remarks after being introduced by Faculty Council Chair Charlotte Canning.

Thank you, Dr. Canning.

Welcome, everybody. Not only is Dr. Canning the chair of the Faculty Council, she is also a theater and performance scholar. And the B. Iden Payne Theatre, where we are now, hosts many of her department's productions. This is a place for actors, dancers and musicians. It's Dr. Canning's home turf. And I thank her for welcoming me onto this stage. I'm not an actor. I'm not a musician and, as Carmel knows, I'm definitely not a dancer. But I'll do my best this afternoon.

I want to begin at ... well ... at the beginning — the start of my service as president of The University of Texas at Austin.

It was in June 2015 — my first day on the new job. I remember stepping out of the front door of my house into the familiar, hot, Austin summer air. I got in my car, drove a couple of miles to campus as I had done for years as dean and then provost, and then, over the course of that day, I saw the brilliance of this university in an entirely different way.

First, I toured the Facilities Complex and introduced myself to hundreds of UT staff members who bring our campus to life. Then I met with community leaders from East Austin, and we talked about how to be good neighbors to one another. I met with our students, and they discussed their academic experiences, as well as their lives at UT. Later, I met with our Longhorn governor, the Honorable Greg Abbott, and we talked about his goals for the flagship university of the great state of Texas. And I ended my first day as president at a dinner with our faculty members, where they shared their aspirations and their ideas for the next era of UT.

In that one day, I listened to many people who represented a wide spectrum of viewpoints and experiences. Their voices showed me, in an indelible way, that UT is like no other institution. That we are distinct. That we are defined by the work of outstanding individuals from all over the world, with a tradition that belongs solely to The University of Texas.

Now, it's been three years since that first day, and the respect I have for the people of this university, along with my hopes for UT, have grown even more. I've seen how we serve the state and create a more vibrant Texas for all who live here. And I've learned so much from our faculty, our staff, our students and our alumni. I even learned recently — what a meme is. And I have our Student Government leaders Colton Becker and Mehraz Rahman to thank for that.

Colton, Mehraz and thousands of other undergraduate students are beginning their senior year at UT. We had the same freshman year. But in 2019, they will earn their bachelor's degree. I'll get to speak at graduation, but it's not quite the same. Our graduates will go out to change the world, and then a few months after commencement, a new class will take their place. That's the cycle of a great university — a process of seeking out the best students, educating them, graduating them, and empowering them to contribute to society.

So, this afternoon I would like to reflect on what we've accomplished, together, since my freshman year of 2015. And I'll also look ahead to the future. Not just this weekend, when we have a big game where we're going to beat USC, but the distant future. To see where we're going and what we're striving for.

In 2015, Issac Turrubiate Salinas was a senior at CC Winn High School in the small city of Eagle Pass on the Rio Grande. Issac grew up in public housing. His mother Ana had worked for two decades at Walmart to provide for him and his brother and sister. Issac did all he could to help his mother. He transported wood, cut grass, did landscaping, whatever job he could find all while going to school.

English was Issac's second language, and no one in his family had ever attended college. He thought about joining the Army to serve his country and to save his mom the concern of having to pay for his education. But after long deliberations and financial aid offers from UT and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, he decided to come to the Forty Acres.

And Issac's here with us today along with his mother Ana, sister Genesis, and niece Danika. They're all here with him at the beginning of his junior year. Issac's majoring in economics and government. He's done internships. He's worked on campus. He recently won a prestigious writing prize. Issac is reaching his potential on the Forty Acres. And we couldn't be prouder.

Issac's story reflects the purpose of our university, which is to unlock potential. We offer opportunities to talented students from all walks of life. All walks of life ...

For half of UT's 135 years, the university did not admit African American students. Our history of exclusion and segregation gives us a responsibility to stand as champions of the educational benefits of diversity. It is vital that qualified students have access to UT, and once here, have the opportunity to work with, and learn from, a diverse group of students, faculty and staff. People who understand the world we live in and drive innovation in their community, professions, the arts, and business.

Our commitment to diversity and inclusion is part of our history now. And with every student who comes to UT, and then graduates, we fulfill our purpose. We unlock potential.

In 2011 — under the leadership of President Bill Powers — UT started a movement to improve undergraduate retention and graduation. The problem was clear — too many UT students were not earning degrees in a timely fashion, and some weren't graduating at all. So, the university's administration, faculty, staff and students all collaborated to improve student success.

We created mentorship programs like the renowned University Leadership Network, which Issac and thousands of other students participate in. Faculty retooled their classes and curricula. Students signed up for full course schedules, put in additional hours to study, and worked very, very hard.

In short, UT changed its culture from one that “weeded out” students in some majors and had complicated paths to graduation in others ... to a culture, now, where students are challenged and graduate on time, while receiving the support they need. That transformation happened because of the efforts of our entire university ... because of you.

By 2017, UT's four-year graduation rate had increased by about 15 percentage points overall, and by 17 points for Hispanic students and 20 points for African American students. We have narrowed an achievement gap for low-income students and students of color that has persisted for far too long. But there's much more to be done.

To keep improving access and student success, we need to make a UT education financially possible for more qualified students than ever before. And we will do this by investing in financial aid to benefit students and families from all over Texas.

This past spring, we introduced the Texas Advance Commitment. It enables first-year UT students with family incomes of up to \$100,000, who have financial need, to receive guaranteed aid. Guaranteed. And students with family incomes of up to \$30,000 receive, at a minimum, aid to completely cover their full tuition costs. Guaranteed.

That was a big step. And I'm pleased to announce today that these four-year financial aid awards are now available to all eligible undergraduate students. Sophomores, juniors, and seniors are receiving Texas Advance Commitment funding to support their four-year graduation success. Everyone's a part of this commitment now.

And I am grateful to the UT System Board of Regents for supporting our university's dedication to access. Recurring AUF funding allocated by the board enables us to create greater opportunities for Texas students to receive a high-quality UT education. We couldn't have made this commitment to financial aid without the regents' investment.

Our responsibility to UT students starts with access, then moves to graduation, but it doesn't end with graduation. It continues with upward mobility and our students' ability to achieve the American Dream — that is, to live impactful lives and thrive in ways that previous generations could not, is part of what we do.

The University of Texas has been a national exemplar in driving upward mobility. Many of our students earn their degrees and go on to have lives defined by service and achievement. We know this. But we also know that we can prepare even more students for lasting success after graduation.

That's why we've introduced College to Career — an initiative that will provide increased support for students so they can explore a broad range of career paths and opportunities. Through experiential learning and mentoring from our faculty, graduate students and staff, we will help our students develop skills that suit their long-term goals.

We cannot expand our efforts as an engine of upward mobility without reinforcing our students' understanding of what their work, their study and their research is setting them up for in the future. Regardless of their major, all students at UT will move forward and develop their lives after graduation. We want those lives to be exceptional.

And in 2019, we will start building a new, university-wide center for students in the FAC. It'll be called the Center for Career Exploration and Development.

Many students already receive excellent career counseling through their colleges and schools. This new center will build upon that strong foundation and offer additional resources that will help undergraduate and graduate students succeed after graduation.

So, when it comes to our students, there are three main goals — first: increasing access; second: prioritizing quality education with timely graduation; and third: driving upward mobility. By dedicating ourselves to all three goals, The University of Texas will continue to unlock the potential of students in the years ahead.

And our faculty are the key to doing this.

UT faculty are mentors. They guide our students, open their minds to new concepts, and prepare them for a lifetime of learning, creativity and contribution.

Our faculty are researchers. They are thinkers and creators. The originality and brilliance of their work is unparalleled — in so many disciplines.

Here are just two examples ... two of many:

In the past year, UT religious studies scholars Geoffrey Smith and Brent Landau were doing research at Oxford University when they discovered something extraordinary — the first-known Greek copy of a heretical text that purports to describe Jesus' secret teachings to his brother James. Scholars didn't think this text had survived beyond the third or fourth century, but these UT professors found it tucked away in Oxford's archives, and it enhances our understanding of the history of Christianity.

And this summer, the country's largest indoor chemistry experiment was hosted by UT researchers in the Cockrell School of Engineering. It was called HOMEChem, and UT faculty members Lea Hildebrandt Ruiz and Atila Novoselac helped make it happen.

They built a testing facility to identify some of the key causes of indoor air pollution. And the results will give scientists and medical researchers new data and understanding as they seek to reduce the prevalence of diseases caused by indoor air pollution.

To facilitate even more scholarship and research at UT, we have increased the investment in faculty compensation over the past three years. We will continue to invest significantly in the coming years. We're doing this because top universities compete for faculty at a very high level. And we don't just want to compete, we want outstanding faculty to have their careers and lives here with us in Austin.

And the research by UT faculty is increasingly collaborative.

Professors, graduate and undergraduate students are using multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, and taking on some of the greatest challenges facing society and they are doing that working together. They do this across different units on campus.

We know there aren't such clear lines separating the arts, humanities and sciences. A great university must recognize our interconnections and use them to collaborate. New technology will be more relevant if we develop it with an understanding of design, culture and artistic expression. New critical thinking about literature can emerge from the latest discoveries in neuroscience. Digital media offers musicians and artists a new palette from which to create. Genetics, behavioral science, lidar imaging, and our knowledge of ancient languages, and much, much more, all help us better understand ancient history and the human condition. The world is increasingly multidisciplinary. UT must be too.

Which is why we established the Bridging Barriers grand challenge program, which initiated its first challenge — Planet Texas 2050 — this past January. It brings together nearly 100 researchers from 13 colleges and schools to address the scientific, economic and social issues that Texas will face for generations to come.

And today, I'm pleased to announce the second Bridging Barriers grand challenge. It's called Whole Communities — Whole Health.

Faculty from across the university will work together to explore ways to foster the healthy development of children and families struggling with adversity by fundamentally rethinking how cohort studies are conducted on social, behavioral and health issues. The aim is to develop new ways of establishing a strong scientific understanding of the contexts and the complex inter-relationships of the many factors affecting families, children and individuals in a community.

The faculty and researchers in Whole Communities — Whole Health have been working together over the past eight months to lay the groundwork for this initiative, and their efforts will begin in earnest this fall.

UT faculty conduct outstanding research. That is clear. But as we know, that's only part of their job.

As mentors, faculty have a remarkable effect on students for their entire lives. The data bear this out.

Last year, UT asked Gallup to conduct an in-depth survey of our alumni, and the results identified experiences at UT that alumni believe helped prepare them for engaged and successful lives. Two of the leading experiences were:

1. Having a professor who challenged them academically.
2. Having a professor who cared about them as a person.

The Gallup results showed that UT faculty are doing both of these well, and they are doing them at higher rates than faculty at other top universities.

While the Gallup survey applied to undergraduate education, UT faculty also mentor, guide and teach graduate students.

Graduate students at UT will be the professors, researchers and professionals of the future, and they are teaching and discovering right now.

Here's one example:

In recent years, a fast and affordable gene modification method, popularly known as CRISPR, has provided possibilities for building new medicines and therapeutics.

A team of researchers led by UT graduate student Isabel Strohkendl and professor Rick Russell recently developed an upgrade for CRISPR that can make gene editing safer and more accurate. It's an outstanding discovery. And a UT graduate student helped make this happen.

But UT faculty and students cannot accomplish any of their work without the dedication of the 12,300 staff members who run the actual university. They make sure that we are operating at the highest level — as an academic institution and as an organization.

And, in terms of the way we operate, a major change is coming.

In November, as you should all know, the university will launch Workday — an enterprise software system for human resources and payroll. Workday will improve our administrative procedures with modern systems that will meet our business needs now and for decades to come.

But, any change like this that thousands of staff use daily comes with many challenges, and I thank all of the dedicated staff members who are working to make sure that this transition is as smooth as possible — through communications, training and help desks.

Now, our staff also includes the officers and employees of the UT Police Department who keep our university community safe.

Over the past two years, UT has substantially increased the number of police officers in UTPD, enhanced emergency communications practices, and most recently, launched a district representative program.

We continue to strive for a safer campus. We know our efforts can always be improved, but these are important steps forward.

As the flagship university in Texas, all of the progress we've made stems from one founding principle.

The Texas State Constitution of 1876 called for a “university of the first class.” UT enrolled its first students seven years later. And in the years that followed, we grew and evolved.

And in 2018, that means that we, as a university, have a crucial role in leading Texas toward an even more vibrant future through education, research and health care.

We aren't just looking at our students here today. We are looking at the next generation of students so that they can succeed too.

We are partnering with high schools, community colleges and other universities to increase the number and diversity of Texas students who are prepared to be successful in college. And already this fall, more than 30,000 high school students have enrolled in OnRamps courses designed by UT faculty. More than half of them are first-generation college students.

If you look at the state budget, the most funding goes to education and health care, and that's because both are critical needs for people in every region, town and city. At UT, education and research have always been our primary focus, but in recent years, we have also greatly accelerated our health care mission.

With the Dell Medical School, we are focusing on new ways to treat the sick and introducing better approaches to promoting health for all members of the community so they can avoid hospitals and clinics.

Dell Medical School now has three classes of students and nearly 300 residents and fellows. It now has its own clinics — UT Health Austin, which serve patients in Travis County — carrying out our commitment to the people of Travis County. And Dell Med has earned a planning grant for the redesign of the Austin State Hospital as the cornerstone for person-centered mental health care across Central Texas.

And I want to take a moment to recognize the Texas Legislature, and in particular Lt. Gov. Patrick and Speaker Straus, for providing essential funding from the state for Dell Med in the last legislative session. This new state funding allows us to further our goal of transforming health and health care in Texas. I look forward to working with the Legislature in the upcoming session to support our students and faculty across all three of UT's missions — in education, research and health.

Transforming health in Texas is one way we serve our state. Increasing educational opportunity is another. But there are many other ways that we make Texas a more vibrant place for all who live here.

In February, the Blanton opened "Austin," a stunning space designed by legendary contemporary artist Ellsworth Kelly, with chromatic windows, a serene interior, and dramatic marble panels on the walls. This is the only building ever created by Kelly, and it has expanded UT's reputation as a destination for art lovers, historians and scholars from all over the world.

In another realm, just a few weeks ago, the National Science Foundation awarded \$60 million to UT's Texas Advanced Computing Center for a leadership-class supercomputer that will be the fastest at any U.S. university and among the most powerful in the world. This new supercomputer, known as Frontera, clearly establishes UT as the top university for advanced computing.

Texas is our home.

From our home, we engage with partners from around the nation and the world. As the flagship in the second largest state with the most dynamic economy in the country, it is fitting that we aim higher and wider. That we look both inward and outward.

At The University of Texas, our goals should be ambitious. They should reflect the potential that lies within this state. Which is why it has become clear to me that there is one overarching aspiration that reflects the ethos of our university, and that is to be the best. To be the best public university in the nation.

That is what we're striving for. And it isn't that far out of reach.

To achieve this goal, we will continue to invest in our three priorities:

First ... Improving access, student success and upward mobility for talented students. If we do this, we will create a more vibrant future for our state and nation.

Two ... Strengthening our commitment to faculty and graduate students, who lead world-changing research and scholarship. Their teaching provides future generations with the knowledge, skills and experience to set standards of their own.

And three ... Serving the state of Texas and beyond. We do this across all disciplines, fields and areas of expertise that contribute to knowledge and progress.

So, with these goals for our university in mind, I'd like to leave you with the words of one of my favorite artists, Frida Kahlo. And her famous self-portrait behind me, which is part of UT's Harry Ransom Center archive.

When I was a young teenager, I visited the home shared by Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera in Mexico City. I saw the easel she painted on. The decorations they chose together. Their collections and art. And it was there I learned she struggled throughout her life with debilitating physical pain.

Yet, rather than hindering her, it influenced her work. Frida Kahlo transfigured adversity into creative expression.

She once said, "Feet, what do I need them for, if I have wings to fly."

Every person on our campus faces challenges — in the classroom, in the lab, in the studio ... in life. Challenges that we take on and transcend.

All of us are here to learn. To imagine. To improve. To serve. That is ... all of us are here to change the world.

Thank you all.