

INVESTITURE COMMENTS

I was both honored and humbled to have been named the sixth President of Texas A&M International University last November. I want to thank Chancellor Sharp and the Board of Regents who have put their trust and confidence in me and my ability to provide the leadership necessary to make our University shine that much more brilliantly in this community, region and State. I am also very appreciative of the strong support I have received from the Faculty, Staff, Students, Alumni, and the Laredo Community. I am grateful for the hard work of the Investiture Committee in planning and executing this wonderful event today. I have to say – they brought some interesting proposals to me. Finally, I would like to like to thank my wife, Norma and our children Jonathan, Cristina, Rebekah and Pablo for their encouragement and support. I have missed many a birthday and anniversary; yet they have always been understanding.

Nearly nine years ago I came to Texas A&M International University to interview for the Provost position. I was attracted to TAMIU for many reasons; chief among them was the clear vision and mission of

TAMIU and the fact that everyone; faculty and staff, was committed to the mission. The other reason I found TAMIU so appealing was the strong connection to Laredo and the region, and the desire to become a cultural and intellectual hub for the community. Today, we are stronger than we have ever been. Our dedication to ensuring a high quality post-secondary education for the citizens of Laredo and this region continues to permeate the campus, infused into everything we do. We continue to promote art, music and other cultural events, in addition to outstanding lectures.

Then as now, my overarching philosophy is two-fold. First, we are in the business of developing **human capital**. We should be producing graduates who think critically, communicate effectively (often in multiple languages), work collaboratively and are competitive in the global marketplace. These attributes need to be among the learning outcomes we strive for in each course we teach. Secondly, we should be a **regional economic engine**. We need to work hand-in-hand with the local and regional business community, as well as the city and county. We have to be sensitive to the changing landscape in our disciplines, and modify our curricula to ensure that our graduates have the necessary knowledge

and skills to be competitive in the regional and global marketplace.

Today, TAMIU is uniquely poised to become a model for the State of Texas, and indeed the nation, on best practices leading to student success in the changing demographics of this State and country. Over the past three years, we have received many accolades. We have been praised for the upward income mobility of our graduates, for the value added of our degrees, for our success in retaining and graduating students, for the success of our teacher education and business programs and for our affordability. On average, over 30 countries are represented among our student body and many more among our faculty, making us truly **International**.

Our students are actively engaged in the community. Last year, over 800 students devoted 37,000 hours volunteering for various community projects. Many of those hours were by student-athletes. The economic impact of our students' community engagement and service since 2010 exceeds \$3.2 million.

This past fall, enrollment was up over 4% and semester credit hours up over 7%. That placed us seventh among 38 public universities with a sizable percentage increase in semester credit hours over the past year. We

also enrolled over 1,100 freshmen, the largest class we have ever had. This May, we will graduate 750 students, also a record.

We now embark on a new adventure, a new journey, a new chapter in the continuing evolution of Texas A&M International University. The stage has been set and we are primed to expand our success, but we have to **Go Beyond**. We have to **Take Chances**, be **Bold** and **Innovative and Think Outside the Box**. We have to enter this new era with an entrepreneurial spirit, and a willingness to explore new ideas, new pedagogies. We have to be willing to forge new paths.

I am committed to expanding our academic offerings, keeping in mind the needs of the people of this region, and to fostering economic growth. Together, we will work to provide more opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to develop leadership skills. We will provide more high-impact experiences for our students, including increasing study abroad, internships and research opportunities. We will engage students on campus and beyond, so that they become a more vital part of campus life, and make an impact on the Laredo region.

Together, we will explore new ways to work with local governments and educational entities, civic groups,

donors and partners, and the business community to improve accessibility to post-secondary education for the young people of this region, and all of Texas. I am committed to ensuring that the “International” in our name means that we are fully vested with institutions across the western hemisphere and the world, and that we are truly global by providing opportunities for all our students, faculty and staff to experience TAMIU’s global interconnectedness.

We will **Go Beyond** – beyond the 7,500 students we have today. In discussions with the Vice Presidents and others, we have set a goal of 10,000 students within the next five years. We will have the physical space with the addition of the new Academic/Laboratory building, which will add 118,000 sq. ft. of classroom, laboratory and office space. This state-of-the-art building will allow faculty to **Go Beyond** in exploring new approaches to the teaching/learning paradigm, and perhaps even developing new strategies which could be adopted nation-wide.

We have already begun recruiting first-year students in new ways, and I am sure that as we refine our strategic enrollment plan, those processes will yield more students. However, we cannot depend on incoming freshmen alone. We need to develop a stronger, tighter relationship with

Laredo Community College, as well as other Community Colleges, so that there is a seamless pathway for students to transfer to TAMU and to be “on-track” once they arrive. We need to improve and expand our recruitment of graduate students. The changes made in the Graduate Office are already starting to yield dividends as graduate enrollment is up. However, recruiting graduate students is not the sole province of the Graduate Office and we-- faculty members--need to be more engaged in recruiting students, both our own undergraduates, and students from outside Laredo.

It is far easier to retain students than it is to have to recruit larger and larger classes every year to replace those who have graduated. Our institutional retention rate continues to be among the best in the State, hovering around 80%. We certainly can do better, and I am challenging us to raise that to 85% within the next 5 years.

Despite our retention rate, our four and six-year graduation rates rank us in the middle of the pack among public institutions in Texas. We need to redouble our efforts to improve our four-year and six-year graduation rates. I challenge each one of us to **Go Beyond --** to be forward thinking in how we reach a six-year graduation

rate that is near 60%, a 10% increase, over the next five to seven years. We need to improve everything from advising, to class scheduling, to early warning mechanisms -- to ensure that students are on track to graduate.

The final piece in this growth process is the expansion of our footprint **beyond** Laredo and the region, **beyond** the 150-mile circle we all talk about, **beyond** Texas.

I am proposing that we work towards becoming a **Destination Institution** – a University that students from around the world want to come to because of our unique programs and location. We already have several programs that we can market to a national and international audience – Criminal Justice, BBA/MBA in International Business, Nursing and the MS in Counseling Psychology. There is no doubt that these programs, because of our location along the U.S. / Mexico border, and our bilingual/bicultural community, have a distinctive flavor unmatched anywhere else in the country. For example, I do not believe that any other Counseling Psychology program nation-wide is focused on training bilingual/bicultural clinical psychologists. Again, the point is to **Go Beyond** what we are doing now.

We are classified as a comprehensive Master's institution with a regional focus. We have a specific mission of providing higher education opportunities for the people of this region and the state of Texas. Again, we need to **Go Beyond**. We will build on our name, mission and location to become a center of excellence for cross-border studies including business and commerce, health, transportation, security and cybersecurity, energy, and bilingualism/biculturalism.

I have mentioned to all the units I met with on campus that I want to add new bachelor's degrees in Engineering and Health Sciences, including an interdisciplinary informatics program, as well as developing entrepreneurship and leadership across the curriculum. These additions will have a positive impact on the local and regional economy.

We will develop interdisciplinary master's degrees with emphases on bilingualism, health informatics, engineering, and international politics and law. We will move to a doctoral designation by adding new doctoral degrees over the next 10 years. A short list includes criminal justice (with emphasis on cross-border issues), counseling psychology and school counseling (with an emphasis on bilingual counseling), psychology/education

(with an emphasis on the cognition of language learning) and intercultural/border studies. These are but a few of the suggestions that came from meetings I had with faculty and staff across campus.

We will continue to grow our international footprint, especially in the Western Hemisphere. We are working closely with our partners to establish a presence in Queretaro, and we have been asked to oversee the modernization of the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. These international efforts, along with several others in Mexico and Argentina, will provide faculty and students with remarkable study abroad, research and teaching opportunities.

I realize we will need funding to accomplish this vision, which will be more difficult with the fiscal uncertainties of the State and the nation. Again, we need to **Go Beyond**.

We need to expand our research portfolio and infrastructure, especially in education, STEM and health. I have tasked the Office of Research and Sponsored Projects to oversee the doubling of our research expenditures, which are currently around \$3.5M, over the next five years. In parallel, we need to build intellectual property opportunities. We must also look to the private

sector for help in funding for research, program development, and scholarships.

The Laredo community has been very generous to TAMIU, and I greatly appreciate all that our donors do for this institution and our students. We must look beyond Laredo for philanthropic opportunities. We have a unique and compelling story to tell. We will **GO Beyond**. We need to expand our endowment, add new scholarship opportunities, as well as academic professorships and chairs as we transform this institution. We look to expand the Office of Institutional Advancement to take up this pivotal challenge.

We will continue to engage the local business community, our elected officials, the private sector, the educational sector and the non-profit sector. **They** are our partners, **they** employ our graduates, and **we** need to listen to them. I am promoting the development of an Incubator and Entrepreneurial Center that can serve as a catalyst for small business entrepreneurial development.

In conjunction with the approaching 50th anniversary of the creation of the University and 25th anniversary of the construction of this Campus in 2020, I am convening a Vision 2045 Committee. This group of faculty, staff, alumni, students and community leaders will be tasked

with developing the road map for the next 25 years. We will unveil the roadmap during our 25/50 Celebration.

Finally, as I mentioned earlier, we were recently recognized as third in the nation when measuring upward income mobility. To put this in perspective, our average student enters the University with an annual family income of \$30,000, which puts them in the bottom 40% of income earners – at poverty level. Through an analysis of IRS tax returns, 10 years after graduation, on average, those same students were in the top 40% based on income --- middle class and higher. This is how we change lives – this is how we **Go Beyond!** Through our efforts, we give our graduates the tools necessary to be successful, resulting in their moving into the middle class and beyond. This is what we should be most proud of – **WE CHANGE LIVES!** That is everyone’s job on this campus.

In closing, I am honored to lead this team of committed faculty, administrators, and staff who will help develop and deliver on our important mission of providing quality higher education for South Texas. Together with our alumni and students, we will truly **GO Beyond.** Thank you all for joining us this morning.