Opening Session—August 17, 2008

Good morning and welcome back to campus. I’m very excited to start the fall semester and I hope that you are, too. To me, next to graduation, the start of the fall semester is the most exciting time on campus. We have new faces, new ideas and a new energy on campus. It is a time when all things seem possible.

That’s even more true on this campus today. We’re opening our first new residence hall in almost 40 years, and we’re up about 25 percent in the number of students living on campus. We’re working on the new Student Recreation Center and look forward to opening it next year.

I came to campus in October last year, and a lot has changed in my first year. Actually, I attended this
meeting last year when I was the sole finalist named for president of this institution. Then I joined the campus, and it truly has been the best year of my professional life. My first year was a very busy time, but Karen and I felt extremely welcomed by the university and the city of Kingsville, and we’ve thoroughly enjoyed it.

I came to campus just a couple of weeks before homecoming, and the entire semester is a haze. I gave six speeches in my first week. Then the Legislative session began, and things really heated up. My first session was truly an intense experience. I could be in my office at 3 o’clock in the afternoon and get a call to be in Austin by 7:30 the next morning. That happened more than once, and I’ll talk more about that in a few minutes.
I’d like to share a few thoughts with you about my first impressions – some positive and some negative – after my first 10 months in office. Then I’d like to talk about the goals I set for the first year and where we are with them. Then, I’ll share my goals for this year.

My initial impressions after 10 months are:

1. The campus had experienced tremendous change and transition during the previous year. Campus seemed very unstable and people had been through a great deal of turmoil. I was the third president in about six months and would label the university as one in post traumatic stress disorder as an organization. I was very concerned about that and wanted to do something about it.
2. While folks care greatly about the university, there has been no shared vision on why and what we want to be. There seemed to be no buy-in. Individuals seemed to be just waiting to see what would happen next.

3. Much of our administrative processes here have been decentralized. As a result, there is too much variation. Classroom scheduling, degree checkout, and IT are just a few of the examples of decentralization that hurts the institution. Many functions are being provided at the college level, and that takes too much time away from other things that colleges need to do.

We seem to be a federation of colleges or divisions more than we are a university. We need to pay close attention to this and make changes so that we make this the best environment for our students.
4. In my first year as President, I spent too much time meeting with people who were asking me for money. Student groups came asking for travel money. Faculty came asking for money for programs. We produce a wonderful publication, *The Journal of South Texas*, but regular funding is not in place to print it. I felt like Don Corleone handing out favors, and that’s not the way to run a university. We need to put processes in place to properly fund important initiatives and free up the president to do other work.

5. Contrary to popular belief, we are adequately funded to support our current array of programs. We don’t want to squander that money, but we do need to look at resources and choose wisely – together – how to spend what we have to our best advantage.
6. We have significant pockets of excellence at this university. We have some programs that are the best in the country. I’m going to name just a few: the Natural Toxins Research Center, the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Center and the Citrus Center are doing incredible, cutting-edge research and teaching. Our undergraduate music program is phenomenal, and the environmental engineering program is excellent. In Student Affairs, our Living Learning Communities are exceptional and achieve what they are meant to achieve. We know how to do it here and we do it right. It’s not in every program, but it’s there and we need to celebrate that and develop it even more in other areas.

7. We have not told our story well. To a large degree, folks do not know about us. I traveled across the state in my first year, and a lot of people just don’t know how much we’re doing
in Kingsville. Part of this comes down to funding. While our competitors are spending a million dollars or more for marketing, we’ve been spending about $250,000. That amount hasn’t changed in more than a decade. We’ll talk more about that in a few minutes.

8. This is a campus with unlimited possibilities. I believe folks want to grow in numbers and quality programs. We can be whatever we want to become, but we need a shared vision. We can be the premier institution of higher education in South Texas. We’re located in the right place, and we have the tools in place to do it. We are not victims, and we need to remember that.

9. Without taking sides and without spending too much time on this, I want to talk about the name change issue. I spent too much time on the name issue in my first year. While I stayed
neutral, I spent too much time as your president talking about the university’s name during this Legislative session.

I went to Austin to talk about programs and facilities, and all people wanted to ask about was the name. I couldn’t get on an elevator without someone asking about it. As a result, we weren’t able to deal with the issues that we wanted to present in Austin; we couldn’t talk about teaching and programs. This is a distraction that we cannot afford. Texas A&M-Corpus Christi got an additional $4.5 million and Texas A&M International got an extra $2 million. We got nothing. The name change issue cost us dearly.

Those were my observations in my first year. Now I’d like to talk about the goals I set for the first year. I set out with five goals for the year:
1. Provide stabilization to a very turbulent year. We’ve made progress in hiring three new vice presidents, but I believe stabilization will take a while longer. If my first year was the “Year of Vice Presidents,” my second year will be “Year of the Deans.” We have several interim dean and assistant vice president positions, and we’ll be working on those.

2. Continue and follow through on redevelopment initiatives. We’ve cleaned buildings, added parking lots, added signage all over the place, and that will continue. We’re going to the Board of Regents next month and we’ll ask to build a new dining facility to go along with our new residence hall. Our campus master plan is underway and we’ll be looking at additional phases of construction.

3. My number one goal was always retention and recruitment. I firmly believe this is everyone’s
job – not just the Vice President of Enrollment Management. Everyone plays a role. When we come to work every day, we have an impact on students’ lives. They go home and say things about their experiences here – good things or bad things – and that makes an impression.

We lose 41 out of every 100 students, and we can’t afford to do that any longer. We have to improve our processes and improve our students’ experiences here.

We also have to look at our four-year graduation rates together. If we want to grow, we need more students, keep them here and we need to get them through the graduation pipeline faster.

4. I wanted to get to know the culture and the people before making any big changes. We do some things differently here, and some of those
things work really well. I didn’t want to start making changes until I understood what worked and what could be improved upon, and I’m glad I approached things that way.

5. Build Leadership Team.
As I said earlier, we’ve made strides in this area, and we now have all of our vice presidencies filled. I’d like to mention two people who really stepped up to help me in my first year. Within the first month, I learned that our Vice President for Finance and Administration was leaving. I found out that a man named Joe Garcia had retired from Texas A&M International and was helping out at the System Center-San Antonio. After some begging, I worked out a deal to have him work here a few days a week. He was a tremendous help to me—especially throughout the legislative session—and I appreciate his willingness to help until we hired a permanent VPFA.
I also want to thank Allen Rasmussen, who stepped in as Interim Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs with just a day’s notice. He did an extremely good job and will be a Provost some day if that’s something he wants to do.

Now, my goals for upcoming year:

First of all, the previous goals will continue to unfold. We’ve made progress, but there is more that can be done and they remain at the forefront.

However, I have added some new goals:

1. Marketing the University.
   I am adding a half-million dollars to the marketing budget so that we can do more. Our competitors are spending more than $1 million, and we have to make strides in this area. But
it’s more than just advertising and publications. You market the university every time you talk to colleagues and friends about the university. Think about what you say and the message you send.

2. Take scholarship to higher level (in terms of both publications and research dollars). I’m very proud that we rank 13th in the state for research and 2nd in the A&M System, but if you look at the numbers, that’s not spread across the university. We can hire good new faculty because of the economy, and we can encourage them to conduct research and publish their work. We need to really look at how we do business and must reward faculty when they are awarded research dollars. We have to shape that behavior and encourage it.

3. We must develop external relationships to support the University.
This is the president’s job, but I need everyone’s help to accomplish this goal. I don’t want to be a Super Provost. I’ve been a provost, and now I have someone here to do that job. My job as president is to be external and develop relationships that support the university.

I have to start working today for the next legislative session. I need your help to do that. I need to know your contacts and your areas of influence so that we can work together to make a difference here.

The theme of our inauguration in February was OUR MOMENT OF OPPORTUNITY. As I start my second year as president, I am convinced more than ever that the future of this university is in our hands to decide. Together, we will become the premiere university in South Texas and I am looking forward
to working with each and every one of you as we bring that goal closer to reality.

Thank you and let’s have a great semester.