2019 State of the University Address

Remarks as delivered.

President Gregory J. Fenves presented his remarks after being introduced by Faculty Council Chair Ellen Ernst.

Thank you, Ellen for your very kind introduction. I look forward to working with you and the members of the Faculty Council in the months ahead. Please, everyone, let's give Ellen Ernst a round of applause.

And I'd like to thank elected members of the Texas Legislature who are here with us this afternoon:

- Representative Chris Turner, Chairman of the House Higher Education Committee and
- Representative John Zerwas, who is currently Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee but will return to serve as Chairman of the Higher Education Committee when he returns to the 87th Legislature.

I thank each of you for your extraordinary public service.

A little over 10 years ago, I was recruited by President Bill Powers to serve as Dean of the Cockrell School of Engineering. I was attracted by that had grown to the first academic job after graduate school. And one little two decades, I've seen enormous progress.

Your brilliance and imagination have made our university into one of the finest in the world. We are poised to have an even greater impact on society for the years ahead.

But before we talk about the future of UT and where we're going, I want to take a few moments to look back over the past. Some years are fleeting, while at times they were challenging, they also empowered our university at its very best — resilient, bold, and ambitious.

Ten years —

Ten years ago, we were just beginning to embrace new approaches to improve graduation success for our students.

At that time, a little over 52% of UT students graduated within four years. Today, our four-year graduation rate is 69%.

Further, the graduation rate for African-American students has increased 28 percentage points, and the rate for first-generation students has increased 21 points. This profound improvement has been made possible by countless faculty, staff, and academic leaders, and especially, our students themselves.

Ten years ago, there was no Dell Medical School at UT. It was a mere proposition. We had no faculty, no students, no dean, no plan, no money, no building.

Today, our medical school is one of the most innovative and groundbreaking medicine. Not to identify cancer during surgery, Karen Uhlenbeck hasn't seen the chart from — mathematics! Highest honor — and "Austin," the first and only freestanding structure by the artist Elizabeth Kelly, hasn't been brought into the art museum yet, but it's coming soon.

And to most of these last 10 years, Longhorn Football struggled to find its way back to the top. But this year, the Longhorns came back stronger the case. Though we have seen up and down, we've seen a very bright future, and we were once again on Austin, Texas, which is how it should be.

And all of this is to say — ten years ago, we were at a crossroads.

And our evolution and growth is also reflected in the personal stories of thousands of faculty, staff, and students. Here's just one.

In 2013, Carmen Goodman was trying to Cedar Hill with his mom and sister. He was a junior in high school and doing well, but then, the unthinkable happened. Carmen's mom lost her job. And when it came time for college a year later, Carmen passed up his UT admission offer at home, enroll in community college, and work to help his family. He went on to finish at the top of his class and spoke at his graduation ceremony.

Then, with his associate's degree, he came to UT to be his lifelong dream of becoming a doctor. He's now a senior and a Baden Scholar in Pharmacy. He helps pay for his education.

He had to balance little of work with assignments and studying, but he found the support he needed on campus. Now, he's a senior and will graduate on time through the ranks of student government. And in March, he was elected Student Government President, along with Vice President Anne Jean. And next year, Carmen will again speak at his graduation ceremony but this time as President of the class of 2019. Carmen's story is one of perseverance and grit. Yet Fewer, as the first member of his family to earn a college degree.

Carmen, would you please stand?

Carmen's story is a testament to his persistence and his extraordinary drive to succeed. Yet it also underscores the critical role that our university plays in ensuring opportunities for all students and thanks contributed gifts of people who have attained better lives for themselves and their families through a college education. There is no much potential out there, to be realized.

And the UT System Board of Regents understands this, which is why they took historic action in July.

Under the leadership of Chairman Kevin Eltife, the Regents established a $150 million endowment from the Permanent University Fund to expand financial aid for middle- and low-income UT Austin students as part of the Texas Advance Commitment.

Starting in fall semester 2020, in addition to tuition and fees, students from Texas with family incomes of $65,000 or less will receive a tuition waiver equivalent to completely cover their UT tuition. And students with financial need from families with incomes up to $125,000 will also receive some amount of assured financial aid.

This is huge. A major step forward for college affordability in Texas.

Since July — when we first made this announcement — we've received a tremendous response. Texas from all around the world have been inspired by our commitment to our students and our state. And many UT System institutions have created or strengthened a plan together by seeing, "Can we do more?" And the answers, is yes.

I'm pleased to share with you today that we've established the Texas Challenge — a $50 million matching gift program to increase the Regents' commitment. Every dollar our alumni and friends contribute will go directly to student scholarships, helping to reduce educational costs for highly qualified UT students who financial need.

The Texas Advance Commitment is an investment in the future of our students, our state, and our university. It's a bold statement of our collective belief that talent, UT educational excellent, hungry, and aspiration need be blocked by Grants, which provide financial aid for students across the state.

I'd like to thank our Longhorn Governor Greg Abbott, along with Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick and House Speaker Dennis Bonnen, for their leadership on education.

The Chairman of the House Higher Ed Committee, Representative Chris Turner, and the Chairman of the Senate Higher Ed Committee, Senator Brandon Creighton both did an outstanding job. It is an honor to work with them, and I'm not just saying that because they're Texas Ex's.

Our elected officials deeply understand the importance of higher education, and we, at the University of Texas, are grateful.

The Legislature is doing its part, but alumni are doing their part, and the University of Texas is doing its part. We are. We are. We are. We are. We are. We are to offer a college education accessible for all talented students.

At a student government meeting last February, an economics and government double major named Chas Rice asked a very simple question about housing. He said the high rents in Austin were a significant concern for many students. And he asked me what the university was doing about it. It was a great question.

Throughout much of UT's history, Austin was an affordable college and graduate school. Students could live in a vibrant neighborhood near campus, which contributed to their education. But in the last 10 years, the Austin housing market has become of the fastest growing in the country. Rents have skyrocketed, and the demand for housing near campus has far exceed 10,000 students. And while that's a good problem, and a towering housing market, which have fostered many students to live far away.

And numerous studies, along with our own data, have shown that proximity to campus is a key factor in student success, especially for low-income students. So, it's clear that we need to take action to make university housing more widely available.

But, the rent is priceless when it comes to quality, it will require planning, the development of new partnerships and new ways to finance projects, and eventually construction.

We will soon begin working with an experienced consulting firm to conduct a study of student housing. UT and their recommendations will inform our plans with the eventual goal of being able to offer university housing to all first-year undergraduate students.

And our work has already begun.

In fall of 2015, the housing complex at 2400 Nueces — which UT recently purchased — will be available as a university housing option, adding nearly 700 beds to our inventory. Construction is underway on a 600-bed student housing replacement for the old Creekside dorm. We estimate of this time the new building will add at least 600 new spaces. We will also move ahead with a planned project to purchase and develop the west side of the campus.

These actions mark the beginning of an effort to improve access to housing for students. It will take time to get it right, but our goals are clear.

If a student can't afford to live in Austin, that's a barrier to success. And as a university with a history of already providing access to qualified students, it's our responsibility not to allow barriers but to create opportunities for students from across the state of Texas. Housing is one of the most important investments we can and educator at The University of Texas.

When we address the problems students face and overcome them, it enables us to better achieve our purpose. To paraphrase President. To inspire, to teach, and to educate in the most dynamic, forward-thinking ways we can.

And as we look toward the future and consider the realities of our students' lives and careers after graduation, we realize how essential it is that we empower them now. To take charge, gain experience and develop learning opportunities for themselves.

Last year, we inaugurated the President's Award for Global Learning, which over seven teams lead projects this past summer in Mexico, India, Lebanon, Ghana, Georgia, South Africa, and Colombia.

And I want to focus on Colombia project for a moment.

UT students Emma Lai, Eunice Chen, Katelyn Gallbraiser, and Ingrid Kong traveled to the capital city of Pinsen Rich to find ways to improve waste management in the urban environment.

Their interdisciplinary team of students and faculty conducted research and developed a plan to create a pilot project for a sustainable pilot system to divert organic waste from landfills, and instead, from compost for restaurants and markets to sort garbage from reusable materials. Their goal was to produce reasonable waste management from the ground up, and they did just that.

And here on the Forty Acres, students also have many ways to engage in experiential learning.

There's Bevo Video Production, a new collaboration between the Moody College and Texas Athletics, where students work alongside broadcast professionals at over 100 athletic events each year to deliver video content and produce shows that air on the Longhorn Network. There are the philanthropy courses in the College of Liberal Arts and the McCombs School, where students analyze the impact of philanthropy on our community. There's the Bridge, the Dell Bullock School in Lab Orchestra, which enable graduate students the chance to play and conduct modern compositions, but also to schedule concerts, organize rehearsals, fundraise, and recruit talent.

UT's colleges, schools, and departments are leading the way, making experiential learning a focus. We want every student to experience this case. There's even a major with in terms of new research and prepare our students, and it's been led by non-world-class faculty.

Simply put, the faculty are the heart of the university. Their teaching, research, and creative endeavors are what make UT a place where students can discover our students, and generate ideas and discoveries that have the power to shape the future. And all of the faculty's work must be done within a culture that is supportive and free of harassment and bias, bringing together leading minds to solve the world's problems.

During the past year, we hired over 60 faculty as part of the faculty investment initiative. For example, the Department of Mathematics hired three full professors, and the College of Fine Arts recruited two Macarthur Award-winning playwrights. And we're continuing the mission to hire 500 faculty between 2018 and 20.

We've also established up to 40 new faculty lines for cluster and interdisciplinary hiring — meaning faculty whose areas of expertise cross the boundaries of disciplines and teach.

In March, 93 teams of faculty put forward proposals for the additional interdisciplinary hires. The Faculty Council and Academic Affairs approved eight of the clusters to hiring over the next four years.

Here are three examples, reflecting the breadth of inquiry across the campus:

1. Global Internet, Media, and Disinformation — where faculty will analyze the potential and perils of a world increasingly connected by the internet.
2. Good Systems, the Ethical Bridging Barriers Grand Challenge — will seeks to ensure the ethical design of society where the design of artificial intelligence.
3. Diversity in Cognitive Functioning to Life Life — which is focus on understanding the distinct effects and impacts of cognitive aging on a range of populations.

I want to thank Provost Maria Errico for leading the cluster hiring, and the faculty, for identifying these fascinating interdisciplinary fields with tremendous possibilities for new scholarship and even more impact.

As we recruit new faculty, we must also recognize the central role of graduate education at UT, where we have 40 schools and specialties ranked in the top 10 for their disciplines. And graduate education is, of course, defined by graduate students — as evidence by Ana Lucia Hernandez and Alexandra Alvarado.

Provost Mckinney, Graduate School Dean Mark Smith, and the members of the Graduate Studies Committee have been working to make UT a more attractive, strengthening graduate education and funding. And with their recommendations, the university approved a $10 million, one-time allocation for both tuition and support for graduate students during the year.

This is just a first step, and I'm looking forward to receiving additional recommendations from the Taskforce in December.

And it should come as no surprise that our donors are getting involved and helping us elevate graduate education.

I'm delighted to announce that this year, with a generous gift from legendary Longhorn Charles Matthews, the College of Liberal Arts will be inaugurate a new graduate fellowship program — the Clyde Ballard Lindsley Distinguished Graduate Fellowship — to attract the most talented and promising graduate students. And the College of Liberal Arts plans to name the inaugural Lindsley fellows in 2020.

Now, I just want to take a moment to discuss two issues that I know have been on the minds of many as we university during these first weeks of the semester.

The right to free speech is guaranteed by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. And that freedom has enabled our nation to flourish, evolve, and progress. UT has always been a hub for open discussion and debate, and free expression has always been a foundational part of our public purpose.

The recently rescinded Sussex Bill in legislature was supposed to protect universities. The major change that comes from SB 18 is that individuals from outside the university community have free speech and expression rights to the maximum outdoor areas on campus.

As I announced last month, we have redefined UT's rules to be consistent with state law and are making sure that outdoor areas — which is central to the university's work — is carried out according to the law and safely.

And also free to address another issue — ethical conduct.

There's a quote in the Jane Austen Academy Room in the Main Building that I believe every UT president has been reminded of. It comes from the longest serving president in the university's history, H.Y. Benedict. He said, "public confidence is the only real endowment of a university."

And I would like to add that public confidence requires transparency, a willingness to listen to critical voices, and to mistakes, and make meaningful improvements.

When you look at the past year at UT, there have been so many extraordinary accomplishments. But it is the mistakes I remember. Those are the moments that by individuals compromised our ability — as an institution — to carry out our mission and in doing so underminded our public trust, trust that is the bedrock of everything we strive to achieve. We must do better.

Earlier this week, I announced a new initiative — Honor Texas — to sharpen our focus on ethical conduct. I've formed an Advisory Committee on Ethics, which will be chaired by Chief Compliance Officer Jim Davis.

We need to have conversations about integrity. We need to recognize the ethical repercussions of our actions and decisions.

And my hope is that every unit on campus — whether at a faculty or staff level, or in a student group — will take a serious look at their ethical culture and practices and departments — has regularly discussions about ethical conduct and expectations.

There is only one way to make progress in this area. It begins with dialogue and a commitment to improve. And then, an understanding of accountability can take hold within each individual. That's what Honor Texas is all about — building an understanding and celebrating ethics in everything we do at UT.

So, when we look to the future, it's clear we need to have a strong sense of our values, as well as our goals. And this will empower us to serve society.

I mentioned earlier that Texas is a state that was in Dell Medical School at UT, is hard to believe.

Today, the faculty and students at Dell Med — and in many departments, schools, and colleges — are focusing their research on a wide range of health and health care issues.

For example, a team including faculty from Dell Med — in partnership with Austin Public Health and the Austin Police Department — is helping people struggling with opioid addiction a variety of essential services — including counseling and treatment during hospitalization. This aligns with other opioid-focused research and treatment being piloted at UT, which include faculty from the Steve Hicks School of Social Work and the College of Pharmacy.

And earlier this year, in partnership with the Steve Hicks School, Dell Med introduced its new Department of Health Social Work. Which is the first of its kind in the nation — a social work department embedded within a medical school.

With Dell Med and UT Health leading the way, we are making Austin into a model city for health care. And the university also has a profound effect on many other areas of Texas life. We are making our state more vibrant in so many ways, fake education, as one example.

Our College of Education prepares more than 350 education professionals in Austin Independent School District, and our College of Fine Arts engages more than 5,000 students, 150 professors, and hundreds of professional artists and administrators. Together, they will serve students in every grade and every part of Texas, from the Panhandle to the Rio Grande Valley.

To help small businesses venture in rural Texas, the UT Institute is funding new ventures, projects, focusing on entrepreneurship in small towns and cities. This is being one led by UT School professor Tracy Kitten that will explore the relationship between entrepreneurship and economic development in rural Texas. The data will be used to inform policymakers, business producers, and local governments on how to sustain vibrant rural economies.

A couple of weeks ago, we had a distinction at the Texas Advanced Computing Center for Frontera — the fastest supercomputer at any university in the world. Frontera will enable researchers to apply extraordinary computing power to a vast range of problems — from tracking hurricanes to analyzing the universe. Frontera will also provide the foundation for future supercomputing capabilities, UT is now the premier university for high performance computing.

In 2019, the U.S. Army selected Austin as the home of its new Army Futures Command. And they did this because of the resources and talent that dedicated partners. Today, faculty experts in robotics are working closely with the Futures Command, and we are currently recruiting the Texas Robotics Initiative, an innovative space for faculty, students, and Army personnel to collaborate on research and development of robotics and autonomy.

And the funding for the Army this collaboration was provided in part by the UT System Board of Regents, along with a budget that included an most generous portion of Rurf funds to bolster our educational mission and faculty recruitment. With the vision of Chairman Eltife, the Regents have invested in the future of our university, and we are now seeing the extraordinary return on grateful for Chairman Eltife's leadership at the Board of Regents.

With the backing of the Board of Regents, the university is poised to thrive in the years ahead. But what we want to know, what's the next step? What's next? What's next?

Last month, our country lost one of its greatest authors, Toni Morrison. She wasn't only a Nobel Prize-winning novelist. She was also a teacher, a professor at Princeton, for decades. And she once wrote, "If there's a book you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it."

And when we examine the idea of a book or for extraordinary insight, we see a call to action that transcends discipline, medium, and time. An affirmation that a book, or a piece of art, or a piece of research, can inspire people to pursue future, innovation creativity, and answers to a seemingly impossible question.

And as we look forward, we see so many questions that need answering.

What is the future of knowledge? What are the areas of research and scholarship where UT's leadership would have the greatest impact?

And education is always about the future, but what will that future be for students who are now in middle school? What will it look like in a world and an economy that are rapidly changing?

And in Texas, the second-largest and one of the fastest-growing states, what should the Regents university be now to meet the challenges of the future? Now?

As a university, we have a duty to answer these questions. Or to solicit Tom Morrison's words, we have the power to write the book on these ideas for solutions.

So, let's look ahead.

In 2033, The University of Texas will celebrate its 150th anniversary, we sesquicentennial. And though it is more than a decade away, now is the time for us to start considering what we want the university to be towards the end of this milestone. Now is the time to think big. Now is the time to be bold.

So today, I'm announcing the formation of the Council for 150th Impact.

The Council's purpose will be to think deeply about the future and identify key areas where UT can lead the most impact on Texas, the nation, and the world.

The Council will be chaired by professors Bobby Chesney the School of Law and Lauren Meyers in the College of Natural Sciences. It will include more than 20 members of the faculty, as well as three students and two staff representatives.

But I want everyone — I mean everyone — to be engaged with the goals of this Council.

Which is why we'll be holding a series of university forums over the coming months, beginning in the Spring Semester. I want to hear your voices. I want this Council to reflect our vision as a university.

And when we think ahead to the 150th anniversary, there will be a Commission of 150 to help us set even further. I don't want that sesquicentennial celebration to point back to this moment to see that choices were made by a university community that was creative and ambitious.

At UT, we say, "What Starts Here Changes the World." With the Council for TEXAS Impact, we will find ways to ensure that that world will look like decades now and imagine the breakthroughs, discoveries, and goals we should focus our energies on in the future.

I hope all of you will join me in this effort.

Over the past decades, I have seen that this is a university like no other. The scope of our influence is enormous. We cut our own paths. We create our own trends.

And as a result, people everywhere are looking to us to lead. They are looking to The University of Texas.

A few months ago, I was in Texas, New York, for my college reunion.

One morning, I went on a run along the pilgrim. Then I stopped to have a cup of coffee. And as I settled in the, I saw this guy, also in Gear for the reunion, giving his laptop. He kept staring at me. Finally, he stopped and asked me, "aren't you a Longhorn?"

I said him I worked at UT. And then we started talking. He told me about his three kids, each of whom had graduated from or was now attending UT. They had different majors, and their dad said the university had changed their lives and helped define them as individuals.

I'm sure that many of you have been in this same situation. Someone sees your hat, or a license plate, or a bumper sticker, and they flash you a smile. They want to talk to you about their college experience here at UT.

Graduates we go — from small towns to big cities — across the great state and to nations around the world, we need New Texas Exes and we feel the impact our university has on our communities.

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