



**LAMAR UNIVERSITY**

MEMBER THE TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM™

**YOUR  
*Moment*  
IS HERE**

**Faculty and Staff Convocation Address**

**President Jaime Taylor**

**August 16, 2022**

Good morning! It's great to see everyone here today. On a university campus, the summers are always busy, we have new student orientations, summer school, and academies and camps. Additionally, faculty and student research and scholarly activity never stops. Even though work continues in the summer, I always get excited when fall arrives and a new academic year is ahead of us. I'm someone who believes progress is always possible, and what better way to see it unfold than to step up to a new starting line. Lamar University is hopping with activity and energy, and I hope you feel renewed and ready for the new challenges and opportunities that are sure to come this year.

Along those lines, I'd like to draw your attention to one of the outstanding opportunities you have available to you--and that's the Provost's Kick-Off tomorrow from 8am to 3pm in the Setzer Student Center. Sponsored by the Center for Teaching and Learning Enhancement, the Kick-Off is a teaching and learning conference with two separate tracks, one for faculty and one for academic leadership. It's a chance to meet new and returning faculty and staff, and to acquire new tools to help you do the campus work that is important to you. I hope to see you there tomorrow.

A priority of my first year has been to raise the visibility and increase awareness of today's Lamar University. The Office of Marketing Communications has produced a fantastic video narrated by our Distinguished Alumnus Bill McAtee describing our people, programs, and our sense of place. Let's take a look.

**I.**

After seeing that video, I hope you are as thrilled as I am to be a part of Lamar University.



**LAMAR UNIVERSITY**

MEMBER THE TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM™

**YOUR  
*Moment*  
IS HERE**

As most of you know, we're approaching our one-hundredth year as an institution of higher education. Although our story didn't officially begin until 1923 with the founding of South Park Junior College; the staggering economic and demographic growth of Southeast Texas after the 1901 oil gusher at Spindletop is absolutely part of our prologue. We are a school that has always had to adapt quickly to our environment --

- whether it be in response to rapid population growth,
- or due to disruptive technologies,
- or even in the devastating aftermath of a hurricane.

*We adapt.* And as Texas culture has evolved over time, we've been known to challenge conventions well ahead of the pack in order to open up more opportunities for more students in Texas and beyond.

I've been trying to think of a simple way to put this -- this question of who we are and what we do. But that is not my job alone. In the coming year, we ALL have a once-in-a-century opportunity to reflect on our history and measure our impact since our first days as a junior college. Are we the same institution? Well, yes and no. Back then, our mission was more narrowly focused on technology education. And while our engineering programs are absolutely central to our identity today, we are also a very well-rounded university that is grounded in the liberal arts. But make no mistake: the kernel of our broader mission was already embedded in the work of Beaumont city leaders back in the 1920s. They recognized that fostering strategic thinking and entrepreneurial risk-taking through education was crucial to building a strong and healthy community over the long term.

Our collective personality as an institution is hardly a static thing. The evolution of Lamar University is a story of constant adaptation and re-formation.

- New students every year,
- new professionals who join the faculty or staff,
- new technologies, new knowledge, and social challenges,



**LAMAR UNIVERSITY**

MEMBER THE TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM™

**YOUR  
Moment  
IS HERE**

- new alumni who shape what's possible for the students yet to come.

This continual process of integration teaches us all how to adapt, which is why each new member of the student body, staff, and faculty is so important to our ability to innovate "on the fly."

Institutions that don't innovate often find it difficult to keep their promises to its students. Our students change over time, and so must we as educators. The professional world they enter after graduation will have evolved dramatically . . . and--*in some fields*--exponentially in just a few short years. That's why Higher Education has a prime directive to stay on the cutting edge of research and innovation. We are called to nurture robust curiosity in our students and give them the tools to imagine problems that don't yet exist. In other words, we educate not for today but for the future.

I wonder: Are our students aware of this region's history, or how Lamar University came to be, or even who we are today? Or do we need to get better at telling our story? I would love to see all of us participate in creating that same inaugural spirit today to benefit students who have never thought in adaptive and entrepreneurial terms. I want to be sure that our students are exposed to the revolutionary concept that is the Lamar University birthright.

## II.

At convocation last year, I talked a lot about Campus Culture and why I believe the way we behave as a TEAM affects what we can achieve as an institution. To put it another way, how we treat each other every day absolutely affects our students' short-term and long-term success. That's why you'll hear me talk about campus culture again and again. It is the key to our success, and to our students' success.

Why is that?--especially when working as a team is so difficult? Sometimes it's just easier to take charge and do the work on behalf of a group. We can reach our



**LAMAR UNIVERSITY**

MEMBER THE TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM™

**YOUR  
*Moment*  
IS HERE**

"short term and small" goals more quickly if we don't have to negotiate every decision with someone else in mind.

But there is much to be lost in the name of “short-term” efficiency. Done well, teamwork is a force multiplier! It may slow us down at first, but the cumulative force of the intersection of ideas will eventually outpace a more dictatorial approach. We must become more comfortable with cognitive dissonance, especially when there are no immediate or straightforward solutions to the complex problems that face us as professionals. This kind of teamwork requires trust and respect, giving each other the benefit of the doubt. If we want to provide the best possible education for our students, figuring out ways to eliminate the siloes that separate divisions and units on campus will be key to a new approach.

I think there's probably a general expectation that university presidents are supposed to lead the university so that others can follow. But I want you to know that I see myself more as a university coach. I'm not here to lead you; I'm here to support you. And I think one way I can provide significant support is to create the conditions for you to work more strategically. It's not about increasing your level of activity, it's about improving results. And that can happen when you pause to make strategic decisions, when you consider where best to invest your time and how to leverage the time you have. And that's where the value of teamwork really comes into play. It's like the beauty of compounding interest. Collaboration will eventually pay you back in ways you couldn't have anticipated.

So, what does this look like day to day? Well, it will require some degree of regular self-reflection. What are your goals--for yourself, for your students, for your department or your division? How do those goals connect to the university's goals? What results are you trying to achieve? Then at the end of each day or each week, take a second to mentally review what you actually spent your time doing. Did you spend your time on the projects you deemed important? Or were you distracted by the unexpected fires you had to put out? Think: what caused that fire? Is there something you can do to keep it from happening in the future? Is there a policy that needs to be updated? Do new guidelines need to be



**LAMAR UNIVERSITY**

MEMBER THE TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM™

**YOUR  
*Moment*  
IS HERE**

developed? Or does Staff Council, Faculty Senate, or the Council of Instructional Departments need to act to help eliminate bureaucratic barriers for students or faculty?

Find a way to keep the less important items from taking ALL your time. Then you'll have time to do the strategic, collaborative work that will take Lamar University and our students to the next level.

### III.

In higher education, the availability of resources is always top of mind for everyone. We were very fortunate last year to receive an annual equity adjustment to correct a longstanding structural appropriations imbalance. This brought our budget for general operations more in line with our peer institutions.

Now that we're on a more level playing field, we're in a position to think strategically about how to allocate our resources and how to leverage what we have to further increase our resources through enrollment increases, improvements in student persistence and completion, federal and state grants, research dollars, and alumni & donor development.

Lamar University has come a long way towards stabilizing its finances. In the past two years we have increased our operational cash on hand from one-and-a-half months to three months. It's worth noting that all other TSUS institutions have five or more months of operational cash on hand. Five months is the amount recommended by the National Association of College and University Business Officers.

I am absolutely committed to working toward the goal of having five months of operational cash on hand, particularly in light of the ever-present threat of hurricanes in our region. Our ongoing institutional resilience depends on precisely this kind of financial flexibility. However, it is also extremely important to recognize everyone's hard work this past year in helping to recruit students and in



**LAMAR UNIVERSITY**

MEMBER THE TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM™

**YOUR  
*Moment*  
IS HERE**

helping the University better manage its resources under challenging circumstances. For this reason, Lamar University will issue a one-time Meritorious Payment to employees who are eligible to receive merit pay. A merit pool of 3% of base salary will be created for this, with minimum and maximum payments of \$1,200 and \$3,500 respectively being made. Payments will be made in November in time for the Holidays.

We will also be watching the Fall and Spring enrollments closely, and toward the end of the Spring semester, I hope to have an estimate of where Lamar University will be with the Texas Formula Funding for the next biennial. My goal will be to make an announcement before the end of the Spring 2023 semester as to whether or not we will be able to provide a salary increase to begin in the Fall of 2023.

#### IV.

Let me leave you with this thought today. We are Lamar University, and our mission is education--for the good of our region, our state, our nation, and even our planet. And so, students should be at the center of everything that guides our work. Every employee at Lamar University does work that matters, and every employee should be given the opportunity to connect the dots between their work and its impact on prospective students, current students, and alumni. So, when you and your colleagues articulate goals for yourself or for the entire unit, ask yourself and your team to describe the direct or indirect impact that reaching those goals will have on students. Be intentional. Tie specific projects and budget items to student-specific outcomes, such as academic success, social and psychological wellbeing, equity and inclusion, student research, or engagement and service. If we keep our students at the very center of our work, we will find renewed focus and inspiration to move forward every single day.

Thank you for coming to Convocation today. It is an honor to be working with you here at Lamar University.