**State of the University Address**

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**Student Activity Center Ballroom**

**September 22, 2014**

* *Remarks as prepared —*

I’d like to begin with a story. It was a cold and dreary day in February of 1977. I was at the University of Washington in Seattle, and my phone rang. My best friend from law school, Guy Wellborn, was teaching at the UT law school, and he asked me if I wanted to come to Texas. That phone call changed my life.

In August I got here in an un-air-conditioned Fiat pulling a U-Haul trailer. I spent my first night at the old Villa Capri motel, where the football practice facility is now. Elvis Presley died the next day. And in the next few weeks I began to discover what a truly remarkable and special place this is. You might say I fell in love. When I became President in 2006, I told alumni that they could teach me a lot — and they certainly have taught me a lot — but they didn’t need to teach me to love UT. That happened all the way back in 1977.

UT is one of the great teaching and research universities in the world. It started first as an *idea* by a group of visionary Texans in the 1860s, and then as an actual *fact* in 1883. Even then it was blessed with an endowment of university lands, first in East Texas and now — thank heavens — in the Permian Basin. And so UT grew from a local college, to a regional, and then national, and then great world university. I’ve been here for more than a quarter of that journey, and I’ve been blessed to lead UT for almost nine years. I’ve seen the impact of the Centennial Commission and the Commission of 125. I’ve watched UT raise its sights with Peter Flawn’s “War on Mediocrity,” the Commission of 125’s “Disciplined Culture of Excellence,” and hopefully with my own claims that B+ is our biggest enemy and that we should work every day to be the best public research university in America.

To be immodest for a moment, I’m proud of what we’ve done for the last eight and a half years, largely following the beacon set before us by the Commission of 125. We’ve focused on our undergraduates’ education with the Signature Courses, the School of Undergraduate Studies, and the system of flags to help students navigate through the ecosystem of courses over four years. The Freshman Research Initiative in the College of Natural Sciences puts more than 800 freshmen — yes, freshmen — in *real* research laboratories with faculty and graduate students to do *real* research. Students who take these courses do better in their other courses. So-called “at risk” students improve even more. We’ve taken advantage of technology to develop online and blended courses, flipped classrooms, and MOOCs. We’re using learning analytics that some of these formats enable to further fuel improvements. We’re trying to simplify the pathways through our majors to help students graduate on time. We’ve done all of this to ensure that, when our students set foot on our campus, they see the world, as Congressman Jake Pickle said, for the first time in Technicolor.

We’ve given department chairs more responsibility for strategic planning and leadership, and we’ve recruited strategic thinkers into those positions. We have the best group of department chairs and deans in my 37 years on the Forty Acres.

We’ve budgeted our resources in more selective, disciplined ways so that we can focus them on what matters most: our faculty’s research and students’ success. I have called this the *Moneyball* approach, and it has made a big difference.

We’ve built more than three million square feet of new facilities, and we’ve dramatically renovated and retooled almost two million more. These buildings allow us to do more collaborative research and to teach our students in new, project-oriented ways. And, we’re building a new medical school, the first one to be built at a tier-one research university in decades. It will transform health care, health care delivery, health care education, and health care research in Central Texas for years to come.

We’ve become a much more diverse campus, and we’ve successfully defended the need for diversity in the *Fisher* case. We’ve established the Department of African and African Diaspora Studies and the Institute for Urban Policy Research & Analysis, and we’re currently establishing a Department of Mexican American and Latina and Latino Studies.

External research grants have grown from $477 million in 2006 to $634 million in 2013, and during the last eight years we’ve received total external research grants of an astonishing $4.5 billion. Eighteen faculty have been elected to the national academies, and our faculty have won the Steele Prize, the Japan Prize, the Pulitzer Prize, the National Medal of Technology, the Turing Award, the Wolf Prize, and countless other awards.

Athletics income has grown dramatically, and millions upon millions of these dollars have supported our academic mission.

And, of course, we’ve just finished the Campaign for Texas. It began during the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. Skeptics said we shouldn’t start, and they said that our $3 billion goal was beyond our reach. But as Gary P. Nunn sang in “London Homesick Blues,” “… when a Texan fancies, he’ll take his chances, chances will be taken, that’s for sure.” We did it. To everyone who contributed, thank you!

We’ll see the impact of these changes for years to come. Crucially, the impact will be at the core of our mission: on our faculty and the research they do, and on the learning experience of our students. To those who think universities never reform themselves — that universities never change — just look at what we have done. Yes, I’m proud of what the University has done over the last eight years.

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Nevertheless, we still face serious challenges. Too many families are being left out of higher education because they can’t afford it. The demographics and needs of our students are changing. Technology is changing how we interact with each other and absorb information. The needs of the work force are changing. Global competition is increasing. Other demands on diminishing public resources are growing. We need to face these challenges thoughtfully and with open eyes and steely resolve.

So I’d like to focus on our future. In just 22 years, we will celebrate the bicentennial of the Republic of Texas. Many of our current faculty and staff will still be on our campus. Our current students will be in the middle of their careers. Even I hope to still be alive! The bicentennial is not that far away. What will UT look like in 2036? How will we get there? What should we be doing now? I can’t chart a specific path, but I would like to offer some broad-brush observations.

My first observation is that to meet these challenges we’ll need to be tough-minded and disciplined. We’ll need to focus on what is most important to our core mission: research and teaching. We’ll need to focus our resources on being competitive for hiring and retaining faculty, and we’ll need to focus our resources on improving our students’ academic experience. These resources are more than just financial; they include how we use our time and effort, how we use our faculty lines, how we use our student credit hours, and how we use our space.

*Moneyball* means that it’s not enough that a project will produce more good than it costs. It also has to be *better* at doing that than competing good projects. Our task isn’t just to weed out bad projects from good ones, although we certainly need to do that too. Our task is to be selective even among very good projects. Our task is to select excellent projects.

Spreading resources is easy. That is what institutions like UT have historically done. Being selective is hard. That is what we need to do. We simply don’t have the resources right now to do everything we want to do. We’re still at or near the bottom of our peer group in per-year, per-student state resources. And yet we are in a ruthlessly competitive market to recruit and retain faculty. Merely spreading our resources is the surest path to B+ and mediocrity. Being tough-minded and selective will be the hallmark that distinguishes between public universities that thrive and those that don’t.

But being tough-minded is only half of the recipe. Tough-mindedness is hollow without vision. We need always to focus on what it is that we are trying to accomplish, or produce. What outcomes are we trying to achieve? Concepts like return on investment, productivity, and efficiency are by their very definition relationships between inputs and outputs. They literally are *meaningless*without defining the results we seek to attain. We need a vision of those outputs, or all of our tough-mindedness will be for naught. Most of the debate about higher education in America is about this very point. What we should be seeking is innovative leadership from our students in the future, and cutting-edge advances in knowledge that will drive our economy and civic life for decades to come. These are the proper outputs of a world-class teaching and research university.

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I’d like to illustrate this by talking about fractals. A fractal is a mathematical construct where a shape is replicated at every level of magnification. The front of your program has a fractal. Take a moment to look at it. It’s a star. Magnify the star, and each line is not just a straight line, but is itself made up of stars. And the lines of those stars are stars, and so on forever. Every level of magnification — every level of detail — resonates.

What in the world does any of this have to do with what we do at UT? It’s pretty abstract, but bear with me. It means that we always need to make decisions about our more detailed designs with an eye toward what we are trying to do in our more large-scale mission. And we need to make decisions about how we design our large-scale structure with an eye toward what is being done in the details on the ground.

In my own discipline of law, there’s a classic hypothetical case designed to instruct students about the legal method, or what it means to “think like a lawyer.” A city passes an ordinance that says, “No Vehicles in the Park.” Language is inherently ambiguous, so questions arise about skateboards, baby strollers, old military equipment on display, and bicycles. Are they prohibited? We could try to define “vehicle” abstractly: it transports people or goods, has wheels or runners or wings, and so on. But we could also ask *why* we have the law in the first place. What’s its purpose? If it’s to create fresh air, bicycles shouldn’t fall under its edict. If it’s to create safety for children playing, maybe they should. Neither purpose seems to implicate exhibits of old military equipment, but if the purpose is to preserve a bucolic space, they might be excluded as well.

This approach doesn’t end the debate; we might still disagree about the purpose. But it does force us to always ask *why* we are doing something when, on a more detailed level, we are trying to determine *how* to go about it. It’s a bit like a fractal.

At the large-scale level, we are asked to justify the kind of education we offer at a teaching and research university. We say that producing new knowledge is critical to the future of our state and country, that teaching undergraduate students in a research environment prepares them for creative and innovative careers, and that educating the next generation of researchers in our graduate programs is essential if we want this virtuous cycle to continue.

As I’ve said before, we have an odd case to make. We take young people out of the work force to educate them for four years, or even longer for our graduate students. We take our best researchers and thinkers and allow them to work on esoteric problems that may have no short-term practical payoff. Why? Because we think those students will be more creative and innovative in the future. It won’t just be the immediate knowledge and skills they learn, it will be their analytic ability and creativity. We think that our researchers will, in the aggregate and in the long run, advance the base from which technological innovation will grow in the future. We think our humanists will create a better civic life.

Research universities have a good record of that. Just think what the world would be like if, at some point in the past, we thought we knew enough and stopped doing research. What would the world be like without Einstein’s work on relativity? We wouldn’t have GPS systems today. What would the world be like without Watson and Crick’s work on the double-helix geometry of DNA? We wouldn’t have genome sequencing. Apple didn’t discover the basic science that led to the iPhone; university researchers who had no interest in iPhones did. As Linda Addison asked when she became a Distinguished Alumna, “How different would the course of history be had [someone] said to Copernicus, ‘Don’t worry about whether the planets revolve around the earth or the sun,’?” And our students who learn in this environment go on to creative and innovative lives of leadership. Where will we be at the Texas Bicentennial if we short-change the future now by not doing basic research and by not educating our students in a research environment?

All of this should sound familiar. It’s the broad outline for the value proposition of a great research and teaching university like UT. I believe in it deeply. I have staked my reputation on it. My observation here is that we need to take this vision of our large-scale mission and drive it down into every detailed decision we make about implementing our programs.

Let me give a few examples from our current work.

The Freshman Research Initiative in the College of Natural Sciences is tightly aligned with the goal of teaching our students to solve problems and create new solutions. Lectures by faculty who create the knowledge are good experiences for our students, but they just give our students the *product* of research. They don’t expose our students to the *process* of research, with all of its dead-ends, failures, and frustrations. The Freshman Research Initiative does. So we get more bang for our buck by designing the FRI the way we do. In fact, we need to expand this concept into other areas, including the humanities.

We say we want to teach critical thinking and oral and written communication, so we actually designed the Signature Courses with those outputs in mind. The subject matter isn’t the goal, so we don’t specify it. Designing these courses with an eye toward our goals has been crucial. I teach a Signature Course called “What Makes the World Intelligible.” We read Oedipus, Hamlet, The Book of Job, Plato, Dostoyevsky, and others. How does the world look different when we explain it through the voice of science, or God, or free will? How do science, religion, and the humanities try to accommodate these tensions? But the real goal is increasing the student’s abilities to think critically and communicate.

Just three weeks ago in class I had a prolonged discussion with a student, and it had dead ends, eddies, false starts, and epiphanies. Then we talked in class about the discussion itself. Had we wasted our time? The student thought not. She and the rest of the class thought we made a lot of progress about how we actually do make progress. You don’t just learn results, you struggle to find them. For a teacher, it doesn’t get better than that. That detailed little moment resonated with the larger goal of the Signature Courses. And in turn that goal resonated with the larger goal we espouse when we talk about undergraduate education at a research university. Just learning another fact about Oedipus did not.

The question is whether we’re doing this in every area of our curriculum? Requiring students to take breadth courses is motivated by a desire to expose students to the thought processes of disciplines outside their chosen field. But when we design those breadth courses do we actually have those goals in mind? Do English majors really need to learn to integrate trigonometric equations? Are engineers well served by taking a course about a single author from 19th-century literature? If a breadth course is the same as a course in the major, is it really a breadth course? Wouldn’t we further the *goals* of these breadth courses better if English students learned something about how the calculus works, but also learned something about number theory — why are there more real numbers than rational numbers? — about statistical reasoning, about topology, and about n-dimensional spaces?

Why don’t we have a course in which scientists learn how poetry works, how the novel or short story speaks differently from poetry, and how a third-person narrative works differently from a first-person narrative? In some areas we do this well, as in many of our astronomy courses or other science courses actually designed for non-majors. We just need to do more of that. I’m happy to say that faculty in Math and English are actually working on these issues. Even in courses for majors, are we just driven by growing needs for coverage of expanding areas, or are we pruning the material so we can also focus on problem-solving and analytic skills, the goals we claim to be pursuing?

I think that all of this is actually related to discussions about productivity. It is what the call for increased productivity *should* be about. We need to make sure our detailed designs are producing what we want to produce on a larger scale, that every investment we make — including our teaching time and our students’ learning time — advances the vision we have for our outputs. We need to do it in a disciplined, tough-minded way. If we are going to focus on being productive and efficient, this is the right approach. We need to do more than just focus on the cost side, simply making our work as cheap as possible. We will make more progress by making sure that what we do on a detailed level is tightly aligned with the overall outputs we are trying to produce. Just think about the example of breadth courses. Other than start-up costs, a newly designed math or English breadth course would not add much to our marginal costs. Students would just take these courses rather than another section of a traditional course for majors. That’s the dream solution for productivity: increased outputs with negligibly increased inputs.

Let me express some important caveats here. All of this is complicated by the fact that we don’t have a *single* goal for what we do. We have multiple goals, and they are contested and debated. We will not always agree about the details. My point here is about our approach. We need always to have an eye on our goals when we do the more detailed work of actually designing our curriculum and courses. Put another way, we need to push our debate about how to teach our students into every nook and cranny of our curriculum, and we need to be relentless about that.

We also need to remember that our outputs come not just from one class, but from a four-year experience in an entire ecosystem of learning. The issue isn’t just whether every individual class is better designed or taught one way or another, but whether the ecosystem is well designed to produce the outputs we desire. Are the pathways *through* our curriculum designed to give our students the variety of experiences that will serve them well?

If we aspire to instill leadership and ethics, why don’t we give credit — one of our most important inputs — for *experiences* in leadership, such as in Student Government or other organizations, in internships, or even being “TAs” in Signature Courses or flipped classrooms? Technology could be used to surround these experiences with material on psychology, sociology, and ethics. Technology might also allow us to augment experiences off campus — such as summer tours to museums or extended stays at historical sites or geologic areas — with the appropriate content and exercises. If these pathways foster four-year graduation, all the better.

And focusing on our goals in this way can help us decide how to use technology. Some courses — like those in our outstanding Business Foundations Program in the McCombs School of Business — are designed to familiarize students with basic concepts. They don’t seek to make them experts. Designing those courses, and deciding whether to deliver them through technology, might call for a different approach in the overall ecosystem than courses in the major.

So far, we’ve been looking at this fractal through one end of the telescope. The large-scale pattern repeats itself as we focus in on the detailed structure. But we also need to look through the other end of the telescope. The detailed structure builds up into the large-scale structure. I have said that we need to do our detailed work at UT always with an eye toward our large-scale goals. But when we are dealing with large-scale structures in higher education, we also need to look at the fine structure and take lessons from the people who are doing the actual work of teaching and research.

It’s not for administrators to design courses. Faculty do that. Any organization that doesn’t listen to the people who actually do the work does so at its peril. Learning to think creatively and solve problems, for example, may be different in physics from in history. Physicists and historians know how to design those classes and those curricula. The best designs will come when the large-scale goals are informed by the details, and in turn when the details are informed by the large-scale structure, in something like what the philosopher John Rawls would have called a “reflective equilibrium.”

The great Irish poet William Butler Yeats closed his poem “Among School Children” with these lines:

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

We can’t. The dancer makes the dance, and the dance makes the dancer. Our dancers are our faculty. They make the dance. We need to remember that. But when they do it, they too should be thinking about the large scale dance they are participating in.

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In fact, we are trying to do just that on our campus. Over the last year, and for the remainder of this academic year, we were and are engaged in a “Campus Conversation” about teaching and our curriculum, including how we might better use technology. Just over two weeks ago the Campus Conversation had a day-long discussion among 150 of our most innovative faculty. It was a remarkable event. I dare say nowhere else in America could you find that many faculty spending an entire Friday engaged in a discussion about how better to design undergraduate education. It was truly heartwarming.

The discussion focused on the right goals. And, I am happy to say, it exemplified the point I have been trying to make here. It focused on granulated, operational ways we can implement our curriculum so that it actually produces the results we aspire to: innovative problem solving, collaborative cross-disciplinary work, leadership, and communication skills. It connected detailed implementation with global vision. It also used detailed examples to help shape that global vision. Many good ideas surfaced, including the need to continue this conversation with students and alumni. It was inspiring, and it will be a major focus for our campus during the coming academic year.

Three particular points stuck in my mind. All three recognized that innovation usually comes from the ground up, from people on the front line. First, leadership can set the tone, set the structure, and provide resources, but curriculum and teaching innovations will come from the faculty. To do this, we need to give our faculty more flexibility. They can’t innovate if our rules are so inflexible that degree requirements and rules about faculty teaching loads stifle them. How do we count team teaching, or structure learning experiences that don’t fit easily into 50-minute, three-day-a-week segments? We need to give our faculty more flexibility to be creative.

Second, how we keep score makes a big difference. Just consider what tennis would be like if one double fault automatically lost the entire set. Or what football would be like if an intercepted pass cost you 21 points. Servers and quarterbacks would be pretty conservative. The metrics we use to judge our faculty make a difference. Do these metrics encourage taking risks, or do they stifle creativity?

Third, we need to give innovative faculty and departments safe havens to fail. Innovation always involves some failure. We won’t benefit from the successes of innovation if we all live in fear of an overly punitive regime of regulations.

Herb Kelleher, former chairman and CEO of Southwest Airlines, wanted gate agents to take more initiative. For example, if an incoming plane was late, should they hold the connecting flights, risking further problems downstream? Or should they send them, risking stranding incoming passengers. Herb wanted the gate agent to decide, not to be paralyzed until someone higher up decided.

A flight destined for Long Island was forced to divert to Baltimore because of inclement weather. It was late, and there were no more flights departing for the night. The youngest, most junior agent — who was still a probationary employee — had to deal with the stranded customers. She chartered three buses to transport the customers to Long Island so they could sleep in their own beds that night — without regard for the expense to the airline.

She was summoned to Dallas, which probably made her a bit apprehensive. But when she arrived at the corporate headquarters, she discovered she was the guest of honor at a party just for her. Herb Kelleher celebrated her decisiveness, her courage, and her heart. He wanted everyone else to be more like her. She took a risk — and Herb backed her.

We need to be more like Herb Kelleher. Sometimes you have to take risks to get the job done right. We won’t get innovation if everyone is afraid of getting slapped every time an experiment in innovation doesn’t work.

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Let me turn to what this approach might mean for research. We do important applied and basic research that changes the world for the better, both in the sciences and in the humanities. Supporting that mission — both here and across the country at tier-one teaching and research universities — might be our single most important challenge over the next decade. Administrators shouldn’t direct how individual faculty structure their research, or the questions they ask. But we do need to make broad-brush decisions about what areas to support, and how our research effort aligns with our teaching mission.

Teaching and research are complementary at a great research university, but it would be stunning if there were an exactly isomorphic — one to one — match between the subject areas we need to teach and the subject areas where we need to do research. We already recognize this in competency courses like beginning foreign languages and technical writing. Even in broad areas, our emphasis might be more on teaching in one area, more on research in another. To match our implementation strategies with our aspirations about outputs, we need to have our faculty profile match our goals. Some departments or areas need a higher percentage of tenure, tenure-track faculty, while other departments and areas need a higher percentage of lecturers. We just don’t have the resources to do everything in every field.

We’re blessed by having a superb, stable, and professional group of faculty who are Lecturers, Senior Lecturers, and Distinguished Senior Lecturers. We have career tracks, and in certain cases job security. These faculty serve the University in many ways, including doing research, but they focus mainly on our teaching mission. So we are way ahead of the game on this issue. But to be more productive in our teaching and research missions, we will have to do more, and in a more granulated way, to make sure we are aligning our teaching and research workforce to the specific ways different departments contribute to our teaching and research missions.

Even the issue of tenure itself — usually a third rail for discussion — should be amenable to this approach. The institution of tenure has served American universities for a long time. It certainly is a necessary tool for individual schools to compete for the best faculty. But we need to be realistic by recognizing that it also has costs. It’s a form of institutional leverage, just like debt or any long-term contract, that locks an institution into a long-term arrangement that might be out of kilter with the needs of a changing student body and changing research needs. Coupled with the federal law that we can’t have a mandatory retirement age, it can present a barrier for young aspiring scholars to embark on teaching careers.

Rather than debate these issues as an all-or-nothing matter, we should implement our system in a way that looks to the purposes tenure serves. In fact, we already do that. American higher education, including UT, has been using an increasing share of non-tenured faculty. In this sense, American higher education has been de-tenuring itself, that is, unleveraging itself, for the last 20 years. My point here is that we need to do this in a purposeful way that is aligned with our large-scale teaching and research goals in ever more detailed ways. We need to use tenure when it is most needed: where competition is the keenest and where research is more central to the enterprise. It is less necessary where those two features aren’t present. Again, my point here is not that I have the answer. My point is that we can’t shy away from an issue even as sacred as how we use tenure. We need to lead the way by implementing everything we do in light of the purposes we claim it promotes.

There are a host of other issues we face in designing our academic programs. Which graduate programs are more critical to our teaching mission, and which are more critical to our research mission? Which programs are more critical to our mission of teaching undergraduates, and which are more important at the graduate level? We will always need a campus conversation to sort out these issues. But we won’t sort them out in a way that makes us better — makes us more productive — if we focus our aspirations and goals only at the broadest and most abstract level. We need to have an eye on our purposes and aspirations when we make detailed decisions about how we implement our academic programs, as illustrated by my earlier example of the vehicles in the park and my allusion to fractals. Then we will design better programs. We will be more productive and more efficient. And we will become the best public research university in America. This is the way we can think about being more productive in a way that resonates with the soul of a great teaching and research university.

There is one more ingredient we need for success. Design can do a lot, but it can’t do everything. We sorely need adequate resources, both for recurring operations and for capital projects. As I have said, we are at or near the bottom of our peer group in terms of per-year, per-student state resources, including general revenue, Available University Fund proceeds, and tuition. According to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, America has fallen from second to 10th in research and development expenditures in just 20 years.

Some good news comes from the Permian Basin and technological advances in recovery methods. I am optimistic about our future if we use those assets well, and use them in the tough-minded, visionary way I have tried to outline. I am gratified that our Regents have begun to tap into those resources more strategically, and I applaud them for it. But whatever the source, Texas will thrive at our bicentennial in 2036 only if we invest in our future by investing now in higher education — and for that matter in public education as well.

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In terms of the resources we do have, we are going to continue to focus them strategically. I began my term as President by focusing resources on core departments to help them reach the very top. We started with Math, English, and History, but the economic downturn derailed that effort. Even then we tried to be selective as we tightened our belt. In the last six months the Provost and I have scoured our budget in an effort to convert more of our one-time resources into recurring budget items, where they can address recurring needs such as hiring, competitive salaries, graduate student support, and enriching the academic experience of our undergraduate students. We did this by being more aggressive in our budgeting assumptions. Yes, that creates some risk, but the risk of eroding the quality of our campus is far greater.

We’ll use that money for a Faculty Investment Initiative. We won’t focus on increasing the number of faculty lines right now, but instead use the funds to supplement replacement lines to enhance quality over a five-year period, including cluster hires in some key strategic areas. We’ll focus on graduate stipends in some key areas. We’ll focus on teaching ideas that come out of the “Campus Conversations.” We’ll use some of the money for broader salary support. The Provost will lead this effort, and he will have more to say about it later in the semester.

I have tried to outline an approach to solving some of the challenges we face at UT, and that we face in higher education across the country. We are a world-class research university. We discover new ways of doing things. We need to lead the way on these issues as well, on the issue of how a great teaching and research university will operate in the future. How will it organize and deliver its education? How will it do research? How will it teach? How will it connect the these functions? How will it address affordability? How will it improve student success? And, crucially, how will it do these things consistent with its soul.

We read with pride — and rightly so — achievements of our faculty and students in their respective areas of expertise. We need also to take pride in showing the way forward on issues of how higher education will operate in the 21st century. One of my greatest moments of pride as President of UT was opening the *New York Times Magazine* earlier this year to see the cover story on David Laude and our student success programs. We need to be the best public university in America on these issues, too. And why shouldn’t we be? As Jeremi Suri asked in the Campus Conversation: Why not us? Why not now? Well: why not?

I want to close with just a bit more about fractals, and how they invite us to reflect on details as we contemplate larger structures. Earlier this month, I was thinking about our capital campaign, as I’m sure many of you have. It’s easy to focus on the staggering statistics, but let me suggest you do something else. Go to the James and Miriam Mulva ROTC Center on the fourth floor of the new Liberal Arts Building and watch the cadets going about their business. Go to the Visualization Lab in the O’Donnell Building and see how it’s transforming computational analysis in science and engineering. Go watch students rehearsing opera at the Butler School of Music. Watch students on the Main Mall and ask yourself how they would be affected if they didn’t have a scholarship. Those details, and more, are what the Campaign for Texas was all about.

When I think about the soul of UT — our “star” in the fractal — I think about the details, and the people. I think about the student I had in class 20 years ago who now is changing the world; about Professor Mark Raizen capturing individual atoms at near absolute zero in his physics lab; about Professor Maria Juenger fascinating a group of faculty around my dinner table with her work on, of all things, concrete. I think about a student in my Signature Course who came to UT to be in the band and was baffled by aspects of Oedipus, who then became a student leader three years later; about going to New York to see Professor Ted Gordon’s father’s collection of paintings and drawings by Charles White. I think about sitting with those crazy Hellraisers who paint their chests T-E-X-A-S.

And I think about lunches with our Staff Council Executive Committee. And here let me add a further word about our staff. With all of the cutbacks and budget challenges, our staff have had a tough time. They have been fantastic. We come to campus every day and sometimes take for granted that things work. Things work at UT because of our staff.

If we are to be the best public university in America, it will be because of the details in the fractal, from which the larger structure emerges. It will be about the people.

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Thirty-seven years ago I fell in love with UT. A lot went into that, but nothing more than our people. Our amazing students. Our unbelievably talented faculty. Our innovative and hard- working staff. Our astonishing alumni and friends.

I know all too well what all of you have done for me! Many of you are in this room today. From the bottom of my heart, thank you! God bless you! Hook ’em Horns!