

**SPRING ASSEMBLY ADDRESS
JANUARY 15, 2015**

Good morning, everyone, and welcome back to campus. It's great to see you all here. I hope everyone had a wonderful winter break. The Joneses had a pleasant time reconnecting with family and getting in a little R&R, including a trip to Houston where we took in a Texans game at Reliant Stadium, where we saw the Texans, unlike the Cowboys, win their last game of the season, even though their season ended a little sooner.

We spent a pleasant weekend in Fort Worth celebrating the wedding of Taylor Fore and the former Jenna DeLong, two young members of our Lion family who met in the athletic program at A&M-Commerce – Taylor, as a graduate, former member of the Lions football team, and development director, and Jenna, as assistant softball coach. We also took a trip to the Fort Worth Stockyards, where we spent a pleasant afternoon getting in touch with our region's Western heritage. As you can see here, Aislinn got a little more closely in touch with her Western heritage than the rest of us did. For the record, she wanted to have this picture taken – see, she's smiling. Jalinna and I didn't make her do it.

I'm sure that many of you had more far-flung adventures than we did. Even though we didn't wander far, it's always a joy to be back in Commerce

and enjoy some beautiful winter evenings, such as watching the moon rise over the pasture east of the president's home.

We have a lot to do this morning, so let's get started. We begin with a hearty welcome to all of our new faculty and staff, too numerous to recognize individually here today. As always, a complete listing will appear on our website, along with the entire presentation. I do wish to publicly welcome a new member of the leadership team: Mr. Jacques Fuqua, executive director of global programs, who comes to us from Auburn University-Montgomery. With our QEP, Preparing Students for an Interconnected World, well into implementation, and our ever-expanding portfolio of international activities, we look to Mr. Fuqua for leadership and creative innovation in globalizing our university.

Those of you who were at the November University Community Update will recall that I announced a new benefit for all vacation-eligible employees: a day off during your birthday month. I know that you were listening because we've already gotten lots of questions. The approved procedure is now in place. So: check out the guidelines to everyone who has a birthday this year – and that would be everyone – Happy Birthday!

Also, I am pleased to announce that plans are in the works for the formation of a Staff Council. Thanks to the 2014 Leadership Cohort for

spearheading this project. You will be hearing more about this in the very near future as the plans continue to develop.

I think most of you also know the good news we received at the SACSCOC annual conference in December: our reaffirmation of accreditation, which touched virtually every aspect of the university and required the dedication of every person, was successful. Sometimes, folks outside of academia have a little trouble understanding how important accreditation is and why it is so much work. But we all know that it means a lot more than just getting to stay in business. It means that, as judged by our professional peers, we are in full compliance with 97 very exacting requirements and standards. There can be no question as to the quality of our institution and all that it does. Thank you, everyone, for your tremendous work.

As is often noted, accreditation is a journey, not a destination. We now have a very strong infrastructure in place for maintaining our compliance with the SACS standards, particularly in the area of institutional effectiveness. While it is a time to celebrate, it is not a time to relax. I have no doubt that the commitment that secured our unconditional reaffirmation will continue to strengthen our university.

I am also pleased to report that the College of Business received news late in the fall that its accreditation by AACSB had been reaffirmed, maintaining a distinction that was first achieved in 1975. AACSB is the gold standard of quality in business education, with fewer than 5 percent of business schools worldwide earning this recognition. Congratulations to Dean Steve Williams and the entire faculty and staff of the College of Business for their achievement.

Our nursing program also reached an important milestone receiving national accreditation by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education. There is no higher standard of quality in nursing education. Fewer than half of nursing programs nationwide can lay claim to this distinction. Our nursing program, barely a year old, now enrolls 80 students, with more than 1,200 self-declared majors hoping to get in. Clearly, this is an area where excellence will provide the foundation for robust and sustained growth.

Also, just yesterday we received the news that Mr. Luis Franco, Director of Hispanic Outreach and Student Programs, has been selected as the first recipient of the Distinguished University Staff Award by the Texas Association of Chicanos in Higher Education, or TACHE. Mr. Franco will be formally recognized next month at the TACHE conference. Thank you, Luis, for your excellent work with our students.

I would now like to call upon Dr. Mary Hendrix, Vice President for Student Access and Success, who will update us on our current enrollment numbers for the spring.

Dr. Hendrix.....

Thank you, Dr. Hendrix. I would now like to call upon Dr. Adolfo Benavides, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, who will share with you an update from the Division of Academic Affairs.

Dr. Benavides....

Thank you, Dr. Benavides.

Now for a quick update on strategic planning. I am pleased to report that this university-wide effort continues on time and under budget. Well, on time, anyway; we didn't really have a budget, other than the occasional lunch for the committee members.

The information-gathering phase of the process was completed in the fall; the next step will be a series of open forums in February to solicit input on a draft plan. These will be followed with the posting of an interactive website that will allow for additional feedback throughout the spring, with the final plan to be delivered to me on May 4.

Thanks to all of you who have shared your ideas, suggestions, and aspirations throughout the process. Please stay engaged this spring. A special thanks goes out to our co-chairs, Dean John Kaulfus and Dr. Derald Harp, for their leadership.

I also need to update you on the current status of the system-wide administrative review that was initiated last year, which has now entered a new phase. You will recall that the goal of this review, conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers, is to identify administrative costs that may be redirected to the university's core mission of teaching, research, and service. This is not a budget-cutting maneuver; it is an exercise in the redistribution of resources away from administrative operations and toward our core mission.

The review of all system members based in Brazos County, including Texas A&M University, was completed last summer. Implementation at the flagship and Brazos County-based agencies is now under way. Our university, along with the nine other regional universities in the A&M system, comprise Phase Two of the study. We received the draft report shortly before the holidays. We have analyzed it and responded with our questions and concerns. We expect the report to be finalized and approved by the Board of Regents in February. Pending the Board's action, I will immediately appoint

a university-wide team that will guide us through the process of implementation.

I'll have more news after the regents meet, in about a month.

The members of the Budget Review and Development Council were appointed this week, with a charge that differs from previous years. This spring, I am asking the Council to examine our overall financial profile, focusing specifically on our effectiveness in maximizing formula funding for our academic programs. As I think everyone here knows, formula-based funding is our financial lifeblood as a regional university, and we need to ensure that our good work is generating the maximum funding possible. My hope is that, based on this analysis, we will have a better understanding of how we may not only increase enrollment, but how we may increase funding as well. While we have grown in thoughtful and creative ways over the past few years, this piece of the puzzle – essentially, a strategic financial plan – has been missing. This is a big job, but it's important if we are to compete effectively for scarce state resources in the marketplace of public higher education in Texas.

This spring, we are expanding our efforts in the area of diversity and inclusion under the leadership of Chief Diversity Officer Dr. Edward Romero. Dr. Romero has done much good work for us in a variety of roles since joining

us several years ago. This year, he is focusing specifically on the core mission of the Office of Diversity: creating a university community that not only reflects the diversity of the many constituents we serve, but also one that promotes tolerance and inclusion, all to help our students better succeed.

Three important pillars of the process will be put in place this spring:

- The appointment of a standing university Committee on Diversity and Inclusion**
- The administration of a University Climate Assessment**
- The development of a Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan**

I'm very excited about these initiatives. I hope you will participate in the effort to make our university a community that values the dignity and contributions of all of its members.

If you happen to be in downtown Dallas on February 6, please drop by 1901 Pacific Avenue, the location of our new, greatly expanded, and much more visible Universities Center at Dallas teaching site. This new location takes our UCD program to a new level, and opens up tremendous opportunities for expanding our presence in downtown Dallas.

As I think most of you are aware, last fall the student body voted to more than double the recreation center fee, from \$65 per semester to \$150 per semester. The election produced a record turnout of 2,050, and a margin of

victory of nearly three to one. The additional fee will fund major improvements to the Morris Recreation Center over the next four years, including the addition of an outdoor multi-activity court. Also important: the fee will allow the MRC to return approximately \$100,000 per year back to the Student Services Fee Allocation Committee for distribution to other worthy initiatives.

Now for a quick facilities update.

We've made some recent improvements to athletics facilities, but nothing is more exciting than the softball stadium, now nearly complete. Mark your calendars for Feb. 1, the inaugural game for Lions Softball.

We have some work planned for the horse barn this spring, and are doing a variety of other upgrades and improvements. Lee Street, which was finished for the first time last fall, will be remilled and repaved after the close of the spring semester.

We're working on additional parking, and are doing a renovation of the Heritage Garden fountain, as well as improvements to the second floor of Gee Library to make it more secure and attractive for late-night use.

The Athletics Department recently opened its new academic support center, which will officially become the James Thrower Academic Center following approval by the Board of Regents in February.

Fall sports had great seasons. Lions Women's Soccer played deep into the playoffs, winning the conference championship and reaching the Sweet 16 for the first time in many years. Congratulations, Coach Neil Piper and the Lady Lions. Football capped off a championship season with an exciting 72-21 win over East Central Oklahoma at the Heart of Texas Bowl. This year marks the first back-to-back bowl appearances for the Lions since the 1957-58 Tangerine Bowl games. Lions Football also hold season records for most points scored in a season, and highest average score per game. Two players, Vernon Johnson and Joe Bergeron, will represent A&M-Commerce on the American team this Saturday at the NFLPA Collegiate Bowl in Los Angeles.

Lions not only win, they graduate. Twelve student athletics crossed the stage at the December commencement ceremony.

The Advancement Division has a busy spring planned with a number of 125th-anniversary-themed events, including alumni receptions across the state. The highly successful Alumni Ambassador Forum will take place on February 26th, and I know that departments are finalizing their plans now for this event that is popular with alumni and students alike.

Best of all, Advancement is on track to raise more than \$1 million in scholarships during the current fiscal year, a record-breaking achievement.

Our Bridge Builders campaign is under way, giving the members of our university community the opportunity to support the great work we all do. Of special note: every department reaching 100 percent participation will receive an ice cream social from Advancement.

And speaking of sweet: here's a photo of the dedication of the Mary Bonham Equine Pavilion, honoring one of our university's most loyal and generous supporters.

Tomorrow, work begins on a major exterior campus art project by Patrick Dougherty, an internationally recognized sculptor who crafts his unique works out of locally available natural materials. The installation will be on the south lawn of the library, and will offer lots of opportunities for participation by students and community members. Make sure that you stop by the site to monitor the project's progress throughout the spring.

As you know, the 84th Texas Legislature convened on Tuesday in Austin. While it is often said that the current legislative session is the most difficult in history, somehow it always turns out to be true. We can expect no less of this session. I won't offer my thoughts on the interesting political dimensions of the current session, at least not today, and not in a public forum. We can meet at Luigi's after work and chat, if you'll buy the beer.

Let me focus instead on the agenda for higher education in general and for A&M-Commerce in particular. Governor Abbott has made both K-12 and higher education top priorities, and has committed to increased state support in both areas. With increased support comes increased expectations for performance and accountability. And as you can see, higher education will be competing with other important priorities for the state.

We hope to see some relief for the Hazlewood Exemption, an important benefit for veterans and their dependents, yet one which will cost A&M-Commerce approximately \$3 million in foregone revenue this year, with much higher estimates for years to come. Of course we favor increases in financial aid to students and higher levels of funding for the formulas, as well as some form of funding for capital projects – which have not received state funding since January 2006, in the third special session of the 79th Legislature.

We will also be paying close attention to proposed legislation that would allow certain community colleges baccalaureate-degree-granting authority.

Here are our requests. We are asking for two new buildings: a nursing and health sciences building, and a library and center for educational innovation and faculty development. We are also seeking four exceptional items, which are special projects funded outside of the formulas. Each of these requests aligns with our strengths and aspirations as an institution; if

funded, each will help this university grow to serve more students in ways that benefit both them and the State of Texas. I'll not take the time to discuss each of these, but there will be additional information on the website.

We've already done preliminary planning and scoping for the proposed nursing building. Here's a rendering of the facility which, if approved, will become a signature structure on campus.

Upcoming dates: I've already mentioned the first softball game. A number of us will soon be going to Austin, along with other county leaders, to participate in Hunt County Days at the State Capitol. The Mane Event Preview Day is March 7, so please be sure to set aside time that morning to meet prospective students and their families. Professional Development Day is March 26, and finally, there will be a University Convocation honoring Dr. Ben Jang as Regents Professor of Chemistry, this spring – the date will be announced soon.

That's the news report. Before we return to the very important business of getting the spring semester under way, I'd like to reflect with you on where we stand as a university, and what lies ahead. Let me set the tone by saying that for the first time in a number of years, I believe that our university

is more fully in control of our destiny than we have been in quite some time.

Let me explain why I feel this way.

Beginning in about 2009 and throughout the ensuing years of the protracted economic recession, higher education was a favorite punching bag for those who saw waste and inefficiency behind every door of government. Most of our game plan during these difficult years focused on defense. We were in stop-loss mode, trying to hold on to what we had. And we were not always successful.

While the external economic and political environments are still very much in flux, I sense a subtle but significant shift. Don't get me wrong; we still have our critics, but the terms of the debate have shifted. The calls for higher education to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness while reducing costs to students, families, and taxpayers continue unabated. However, the grim, existential questioning we faced during the darkest days of the recession – pointed probing into whether a college degree was worth the time, trouble, and most of all, the expense – have receded – slightly, but noticeably. This is not a sea change, by any means; the student debt crisis, the high unemployment rate of recent college graduates in some fields (English majors!), and the perception that much university research is both costly and irrelevant are still familiar themes. But the conversation is slowly shifting, or

so it seems to me. In recent years, a favorite question among opinion leaders was whether America's universities were even worth saving. In place of these grim assessments, there is a growing appreciation of the fact that this nation's system of higher education is one of its most valuable assets, and an essential element of its future growth and prosperity.

Make no mistake, tough questions remain: why does it cost so much to run a university? Why does tuition keep going up? Why do students graduate with crushing debt? Why do they have trouble getting jobs?

Why are faculty members still doing research on Shakespeare?

I believe we can answer these questions, although I don't plan to spend much time on the last one. We are efficient, affordable, and effective. A great example is our Texas Affordable Baccalaureate – still the only competency-based degree program to be offered by a public university in the state of Texas. Yet as important as this innovation is to the students who are benefitting from it, it is but one of 144 degree programs that we offer, and not our primary order of business.

What about the rest of the university? How are we, as an academic community, answering the call to be the very best that our students and society at large need for us to be?

Too often, we in academia assume that our critics simply do not understand how good we are. Our proclamations of quality focus on those aspects of our enterprise we consider most virtuous and important. But we must offer more than an elegant restatement of our self-defined, and self-proclaimed, points of pride. The challenges we face as an institution are not the ones we faced 25 or even five years ago; our responses must be relevant, timely, and anchored firmly in the present.

To flourish as a university, we must be at the top of our game. We have to be the very best at what we do, and we have to make sure that everyone knows it, understands it, and supports it.

How do we go about doing that?

It all begins with a shared vision of excellence.

Sounds good, but what does an excellent university look like? It shouldn't be that hard, right? In our professional lives, whether academic or administrative, we rely on well-developed criteria to make informed, measured judgments about the quality of our work. In academic research, for example, the value of a scholarly article is determined by the standing of the journal in which it is published. In teaching, the quality of student learning outcomes is an important measure of excellence.

After our recent SACS reaffirmation efforts, I think we all have a much more advanced understanding of how this all works than we did a few years ago.

On the administrative side of the house, excellence can be measured in a number of ways as well. In financial services or human resources, it can mean getting a clean audit. In the bursar's office, it can be measured in terms of customer service and responsiveness. And so it goes.

So, "excellence," that overburdened word, is not an ineffable concept. We know it when we see it, and we have gotten pretty good at measuring it.

If we all have a pretty clear idea of what excellence means in our individual professional lives, what does it look like for the university as a whole? How do we measure it? And once those things are done, how do we cultivate a culture of excellence that is so compelling as to command assent and support well beyond the boundaries of our campus?

Let me suggest that we begin with what Prof. Mayo would call "fearless investigation," in this case, fearless self-examination. We're not talking about reinventing our university, we are talking about rediscovering, reaffirming, and improving upon those qualities which make us great.

We need to be able to define the enlivening spirit of our institution, that set of core principles or values to which we turn when we need guidance on

charting a course for the future, when making decisions about allocation of scarce resources, and, most importantly, when telling our story to those who have a stake in our future.

There is no simple or brief answer, which is fortunate; a university that aspires to excellence in a broad array of endeavors cannot be adequately referenced with a simple slogan or catch-phrase. But that does not mean that the indicators of excellence must, by their nature, remain elusive. If we are unable to articulate the essential excellence of our university, we will be defined simply by geography. We become the largest public university in the smallest town in the state, the place that used to be called East Texas State.

I think all of you know how much I enjoy learning and sharing stories about the history of our university, so I hope you'll allow me a brief diversion which I hope will help us better understand what makes our university so special. I'm going to read a letter dated July 10, 1923, from Edward Wray, head of the Department of English and dean of men, to a Mr. H. R. March of Quinlan. Mr. March had written inquiring about the welfare of his son, Jessie, who was a student at East Texas State Teachers College. My thanks to Barb McCord for sending me a copy of this letter a year or so ago. The original is in our archives.

My Dear Sir:

Your letter of July ninth addressed to the President of the East Texas State Teachers College has been referred to me for consideration. I have just had a talk with Jessie March, your son. I may say that the conversation was quite satisfactory. The young fellow seems to be a straightforward, frank sort of a boy who desires to do the right thing; a boy who can be trusted. You asked me to tell you something about necessary expenses. Just at present, Jessie needs a pair of tennis shoes because physical education is required of all students doing work in college. The use of the gymnasium in physical education requires that each student wear tennis shoes to prevent his destroying the floor of the gymnasium. It will therefore be necessary that Jessie buy a pair of tennis shoes. Then, too, it is quite desirable that you purchase for him, or permit him to purchase himself, a good fountain pen. I do not know what he will have to pay for one, probably anything from two to three dollars. His tennis shoes will cost him something like one dollar and fifty cents.

I questioned Jessie pretty closely relative to his weekly expenses and he tells me that you furnish him something like two dollars per week. This

may seem, of course, a great deal, but there are so many demands on the young fellow here, as well as in any other institution of learning, that he will not have at home. I do not believe he is trying to be extravagant. I have advised him to call occasionally at my office and talk with me about his work. If anything develops in the future that I feel needs your attention, I shall be prompt to notify you.

Very truly yours,

(signed) E. H. Wray

Dean of Men

A little glimpse of what student life was like in 1923 at East Texas State Teachers College.

Please understand that this is not my way of suggesting that we demonstrate our interest in the personal lives of our students by e-mailing parents with reports on the welfare of their children. What was in 1923 an act of courtesy to a concerned father is today a FERPA violation.

However, I do hope the letter offers some insight into one of this university's important hallmarks of excellence, as true today as it was in 1923. Dean Wray was not simply responding to a parent's inquiry; he was paying

close attention to a student’s needs. Jessie was not in trouble, his financial aid had not run out, he had not gone on probation; he was simply one of any number of students who was working hard to earn his degree and needed a little help.

Dean Wray says that he “questioned Jessie pretty closely” – not about what his problems were, but about what he needed. At the moment, these needs consisted of a pair of tennis shoes, a fountain pen, and maybe another dollar a week.

The altogether unremarkable tone of the letter suggests to me that these kinds of conversations were routine for Dean Wray, that he probably made it his habit to ask his students what they needed, to listen carefully to their answers, and to respond accordingly.

I’d like to suggest that Dean Wray’s simple courtesy to a student and his father provides the groundwork for a definition of institutional excellence. A university that listens carefully to its students, seriously considers their inquiries and suggestions, and responds proactively and positively will set itself apart from – and above – its peers, in important ways.

We need not call in and “question closely” every student to do this; in fact, we already have a great deal of information about our students. Largely as a result of our recent SACS reaffirmation efforts, we now have robust

institutional effectiveness capabilities. Every faculty member, every semester and in every course, gathers information from students about the quality of their academic experience. Furthermore, our institutional effectiveness efforts extend well beyond the classroom. As everyone in this room is keenly aware, every administrative unit on campus now regularly and routinely gathers information from its constituents about the quality and effectiveness of its operations, and uses that information in an organized and intentional process of continuous improvement.

Our successful reaffirmation of accreditation proves that we can satisfy accepted standards of quality and compliance. Let's now focus on exceeding those expectations by using what we have learned to make Texas A&M University-Commerce a truly exceptional institution – an institution that is distinguished in many important ways, but most especially for the high esteem in which it holds students.

If Jessie March needed a pair of tennis shoes, a fountain pen, and an extra dollar a week, what do our students today need?

Given the sweeping diversity of our student body, there is no simple answer to that question. I'd like to turn to our most recent 2014 Graduation Exit Survey Report for some clues. Let me first thank the faculty members

who conducted the survey and assembled the findings: Dr. Stephen Reysen, lead researcher and author; Dr. Shonda Gibson; and Dr. LaVelle Hendricks.

I'm not sure how many of you have seen this report, but if you're interested we'll be glad to make it available.

First, some good news. Overall, our graduates are pretty well satisfied with their time at our university. We receive consistently high marks – 6 or higher on a 7-point Likert scale – for the quality of our academic programs. And in spite of a few unhappy campers, the great majority of our graduates are leaving feeling pretty good about their college experience; a high percentage said that they have spoken positively about A&M-Commerce to others.

In academics and a number of other areas, our graduates provide reassuring validation of the high quality of our university's academic programs.

As part of the survey, students were also invited to provide open-ended comments about their university. These responses provide the most interesting and useful insights about how well we are meeting their needs, and how we might do better.

One need that was consistently expressed across graduates of all colleges – and one to which we are already responding – is the need for greater

consistency and less uncertainty, particularly when it comes to class scheduling and advising.

A sampling of comments:

“...I would recommend streamlining the course schedule.”

“Stop making classes only available in one semester. I had to wait a year to graduate just for ONE class. It was horrible and I hated that.”

My thanks go to the provost, deans, and department heads who implemented structural reforms to the class schedule this spring, offering sections across all available times, and in predictable rotations, whether in Commerce, remote sites, or online. Let’s keep up the good work.

And with regard to advising:

“Better communication with students, regular contact from advisors.”

“Advisors [need] to spend more time with you when you call and visit the office.”

Again, we have listened to our students and responded by dedicating additional resources to advising. We’re getting there, but we still have work to do. Graduates also cite the need for better web-based resources, such as degree plans, recommended schedules, program requirements, and so forth.

College is already complicated, they are telling us; our services and procedures should not make it even harder for them to navigate their own success.

I was neither surprised nor disturbed by these comments. We have devoted energy and resources to improvements in all these areas. Nonetheless, our graduates remind us that we're not yet where we need to be.

Another broad theme emerged which I did not anticipate, and where I believe we can make a real difference. That is students' desire for more meaningful engagement with their university. Some comments:

"I think there should be more social events for students. The spirit is getting better, overall great campus!"

"...promote student involvement..."

"I would have liked to have seen opportunities to attend more clubs or organizations related to the degree plans...."

And this particularly emphatic remark:

"Promote the school! Instill university pride!"

As a university community, we should be both heartened and challenged by these observations. Underlying the helpful suggestions the exit survey provides as to how we may improve our scheduling, advising, and services to students, there is a consistently expressed need for engagement,

inclusion, and pride. Our students want – no, they need – to have tangible reasons to feel proud of their university. Whether they lived on campus, commuted to Commerce, took their classes at a remote site, or attended online, they all need to feel proud of the choice they made to earn a degree from our university.

While we know that many of our students lead complex lives with little opportunity for outside-of-class activities, even these individuals say that they need to feel connected beyond the classroom and the computer screen.

They need to know that everyone at their university has their best interests in mind. Not surprisingly, the most pointed complaints expressed in the survey had to do with poor service and rude treatment, but the most fervent praise was for those professors, advisors, and staff members who went out of their way to ensure that a particular student's concerns were heard and addressed quickly and effectively.

Unbeknownst to Dean Wray, his conversation with young Jessie March was more than a passing act of courtesy; he was helping to define our unique character as a university. Every interaction with a student is an opportunity for each of us to show that this university is special. One of the greatest rewards I have known as a faculty member comes from having made a positive and profound difference in the lives of students through my words

and deeds. I am blessed beyond measure, as are we all, to have been given the opportunity to serve a university whose mission is nothing less than the unlocking of human potential through education. Our students, from all walks of life, come to our university yearning for the life-transforming gift of learning. Let us give that gift freely, holding them always in the highest esteem for the choice they have made. They have, after all, placed in our hands the most sacred trust of all: that of realizing the promise of their future.

The next few months will be momentous for our university as well as busy for those of us advocating for its future. I'd like to thank you, personally, for all that you do, every day, for this university and the students we serve. You breathe life into our mission; your good work and the incredible results you achieve provide irrefutable evidence of the innate worth of this institution, and of its unique and irreplaceable character. Let us seize these hallmarks of excellence and proclaim them proudly, to our critics and supporters alike. This region, this state, and this world are all better because Texas A&M University-Commerce serves its students so well.

I am put in mind of that marvelous poem by Robert Browning, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, which begins with this couplet:

Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be...

Actually, I am not that fond of the first line, so let's skip over that and focus on the second. I genuinely believe that the best years of this university are yet to be. Together, we can transform tantalizing opportunity into remarkable reality.

I wish you the very best spring semester ever.