



THE PRESIDENT'S INTERIM REPORT
TO THE
COMMISSION OF 125

May 10, 2007

Dear Commission Member,

I hope you take pleasure in seeing your ideas and recommendations bear fruit at the University. It has now been two and a half years since you issued your report, *A Disciplined Culture of Excellence: The Report of the Commission of 125*. A year of that time has been on my watch as president. I'd like to use this opportunity to share news of how your recommendations are changing life on the campus.

Perhaps the most exciting news is in response to the first strategic initiative: *Develop a new undergraduate core curriculum to better prepare students for lives of accomplishment.*

With the legislative measures required for curriculum reform now well underway in the Faculty Council, we are focusing on enriching the freshman-year experience. **Paul Woodruff**, whom I appointed the first Dean of Undergraduate Studies at UT, is leading the effort to design signature learning experiences and enhance academic advising.

We believe a shared academic experience provides students with a strong start at the beginning of their education at UT. This means providing each freshman with a **First-Year Signature Course** taught by the best faculty at UT. These courses will expose new students to resources that are only available at the University—our libraries, museums, special collections, research labs, and other distinguished faculty. The Signature Courses are also intended to be contemporary and interdisciplinary. The great problems confronting society tend to require interdisciplinary solutions, and as knowledge expands, the boundaries between disciplines grow less distinct.

The first Signature Course, "Sustaining a Planet," was taught last fall and was a tremendous success. The course brought together environmental, economic, and social equity issues to examine global sustainability. The course was team taught by **David T. Allen**, Chemical Engineering, and **Jay Banner**, Geological Sciences. I encourage you to visit their course website:

<http://www.geo.utexas.edu/courses/302P/>

The new curriculum also requires knowledge and skills in writing, quantitative reasoning, global cultures, multicultural perspectives and diversity, ethics and leadership, and independent inquiry. This fall, for example, we are offering an **ethics course to first-year pre-medical students**. The course will be taught by **William Winslade**, who holds doctorates in philosophy and psychoanalysis, as well as a law degree. Professor Winslade, who holds

faculty appointments at UT and at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, is one of nation's preeminent experts on medical ethics and end-of-life issues. In the past, he has taught medical students, medical school graduates in clinical training, and upper-division Plan II students.

Winslade's seminar, "Ethics, Law, and Health Care: Cases and Controversies," will take an interdisciplinary approach that combines legal and ethical case analysis with medical and psychological perspectives. Topics include ethical questions regarding emergency lifesaving treatment, organ donation, the definition of death, brain injuries, physician-assisted suicide, and mental illness. This remarkable class will be a novel freshman experience unlike what is available at any other university.

In addition, Professor Winslade is acting as a consultant to help us design other ethics courses for undergraduates that will satisfy the ethics and leadership requirement for all undergraduates. This is a direct result of the Commission's recommendations. Through scores of small triumphs such as, these we will transform the undergraduate experience at UT.

The First-Year Signature Courses will be taught in conjunction with the [University Lecture Series](#). The purpose of the series is to create a campus-wide conversation on a contemporary topic. I extend an invitation to each of you to attend this fascinating series. The entire series schedule appears below:

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| September 10 | Associate Professor Ellen Spiro , Department of Radio-Television-Film, 2007 winner of the Gracie Award for outstanding film direction, and Professor Darlene Grant , Department of Social Work, 2006 Social Worker of the Year. |
| September 12 | Admiral Bob Inman , Professor, LBJ School of Public Affairs, former Director of the National Security Agency. |
| September 19 | Professor David Oshinsky , Department of History, winner of the 2007 Pulitzer Prize. |
| October 2 | Professor Stephen Weinberg , Department of Physics, Nobel Laureate. |

Each of these will be followed by a diverse panel of UT faculty members who will discuss the lecture and, presumably, present an example of productive academic disagreement. I hope you will join us in this campus-wide conversation. The lectures will be held from 6:00 to 7:30 p.m. in the Erwin Center.

To create more Signature Course opportunities, Dean Woodruff is greatly expanding the number of first-year seminars, which will all become Signature Courses. This fall, some 80 seminars are planned and our goal is to schedule more than 100 by fall of 2008. In addition to the small seminars of 15 or fewer students, there will be Signature Courses developed as larger lecture classes.

Dean Woodruff is also developing a strategic advising center to help students select their major and, eventually, their career. One aspect of this effort is a web-based instructional program under development on how to choose a major. We intend to make this interactive program available to 17-year-olds throughout Texas before they get to our campus or any campus—to get them thinking about majors and to give them useful information on which to base a decision. Poorly informed and poorly considered major selection is a leading cause of graduation delays.

I would like to mention a few highlights of the progress we have made towards other recommendations. We are mindful that your recommendations are intended to shape our

agenda for 25 years and that we cannot tackle all the tasks at once. Nevertheless, I am personally disappointed that we haven't made more progress on Strategic Initiative Two, which admonishes UT to establish a more demanding standard for academic leadership at the departmental level. Like Strategic Initiative One, this effort requires a cultural change at the University. Cultural change comes slowly. We have made a good start with our ambitious program for improving the Department of History. But now that curriculum reform is moving forward, I intend to make Strategic Initiative Two my personal project for the coming year.

There is good news regarding the UT libraries and collections:

Recommendation 4: *Libraries, museums, and information technology resources at The University of Texas must rank with those of the best in the world.*

The UT Libraries have surpassed **nine million volumes** this year, sixth among academic libraries in the United States. A private gift of \$500,000 is funding the creation of a student learning commons in the Perry-Castañeda Library with collaborative workspaces, casual seating, and wireless internet resources.

In the meantime, the Ransom Center has made major acquisitions of manuscripts, letters, and other materials of playwrights David Mamet and Samuel Beckett and novelist Graham Greene.

Recommendation 15: *The University must provide the broadest and most effective access to its knowledge and collections in order to share its assets with Texas and the world at large.*

The University of Texas Libraries has joined the **Google Books Library Project** to enable users around the world to search the full text of one million books from our libraries. UT also houses the **AVOICE Virtual Library Project**, developed in conjunction with the Black Congressional Caucus Foundation. AVOICE is a central online repository for information on historical and contemporary issues concerning the African American political experience.

Recommendation 10: *Construct student activity space on the east side or on the perimeter of the campus.*

Commission member Rick Archer and his firm, Overland Partners, are the lead architects for a new Student Activity Center on the East Mall, immediately north of Gregory Gym and the Aquatics Center. The project will enter the schematic design phase this summer with the goal of presenting plans to the Board of Regents next year. The center will be funded through fees that the students approved by referendum last year.

Recommendation 14: *The University should serve Texas by marshaling its expertise, programs, and people to address major issues confronting society at large. The culture of the institution should convey to students, as well as to faculty and staff members, that a commitment to service is intrinsic to a University of Texas education.*

I believe that for many members of our faculty, scholarship, teaching, and research are their public service. If you believe in the transformative power of higher education, how can you not view the training of the next generation of leaders and the expansion of knowledge as a service to society?

Let me give you an example. **Darlene Grant** of the School of Social Work studies the effects of addiction on women and their families. Nine years ago she started working with Girl Scout Troop 1500, composed of girls whose mothers are incarcerated at Hilltop Prison in Gatesville. Grant and her social work students have worked to break the cycle of crime

within families and open doors of opportunity for these girls, who are six times more likely to end up in the juvenile justice system than children whose parents are not in prison. Troop 1500, based in Austin, travels once a month to Gatesville for visits with their mothers, where Grant and her students observe family communications, group therapy sessions, and life skills programs.

The results are encouraging. Of the 45 girls now registered in Troop 1500, 96 percent have not been pregnant before age 18, 93 percent have not dropped out of school, and 100 percent have not been arrested. Professor Grant was named Social Worker of the Year in 2006 and is the 2007 recipient of the Rosa Parks Award.

UT filmmaker [Ellen Spiro](#), associate professor of Radio-Television-Film, was drawn to the project and filmed a documentary entitled “Troop 1500: Girl Scouts Beyond Bars.” Earlier this year, Spiro received a Gracie Award for outstanding film direction for the documentary, which was aired on PBS:

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/troop1500/>

Not all faculty members and their students have such a direct social impact. But in many cases the natural progression of curiosity, creativity, scholarship, and research brings the work of our faculty and students to bear on social problems. Because it is an extension of intellectual pursuit, this kind of effort cannot be mandated by the administration. In fact, as administrators, we would never be creative enough to propose all the ingenious ways that our faculty members intersect with society. Certainly the professor who is a public intellectual—writing op-ed pieces in *The New York Times*, giving public lectures, testifying before our lawmakers—is engaged in public service.

I believe we are fulfilling the intent of Recommendation 14. We are also actively involved in finding new ways to introduce service learning into our curriculum, and we can do a better job of coordinating and quantifying these efforts. But be assured that your University is confronting the challenges of society in thousands of inventive, resourceful, and effective ways.

As you know, some of your recommendations have already been successfully implemented. I will present a more detailed report at the third annual briefing of the Commission of 125 at 2:00 p.m. on Friday, [September 28](#), which is the same day as the Distinguished Alumnus Awards ceremony and the fall meeting of the Development Board. Please mark your calendar.

I look forward to seeing you in September.

Sincerely,



William Powers, Jr.
President