

College Board Southwestern Regional Forum

Dallas, Texas
February 4, 2004

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Let me begin by thanking former Governor Gaston Caperton, Martha Salmon, and the College Board's Southwestern Regional Council for inviting me to address you today. It's my pleasure to join you in Dallas. I always enjoy Dallas when I'm not here to watch Texas play Oklahoma in the Red River Shoot-out. Addressing educators is a lot less stressful than addressing disappointed football fans. But I'm like the student taking the SAT for the third time: Hope springs eternal.

We have all come to this forum to discuss the challenges of successfully preparing students for college. Included in that task is sparking the desire to pursue higher education and to succeed. This is a critically important mission: for individuals, for their families, for the nation. But nowhere is it more critical than right here in the Southwest, where there are so many families without a college-going experience, where college-going rates are so low, and where the population is so youthful. The challenge is enormous.

I inevitably view all of this from my side of the equation, as a university president who wants to attract the best students to The University of Texas at Austin, to provide them with a great learning experience, to ensure their success while they attend our institution, and to prepare them for their future. Like every public university represented in this region, our university owes obligations to the people of our state. We must be fair in our admissions process. We must afford access and opportunity to every community and segment of our population. We must provide a safe and supportive environment to those who are entrusted to us. We must offer the highest quality education possible. We must counsel, advise, and lead. We must do our best to transform thousands of young lives for their own personal advancement and the betterment of society.

These are all noble aspirations. The University of Texas at Austin cannot expect anything less of itself. We have been called upon by the Texas Constitution to maintain "a university of the first class," and the bar for excellence is raised higher every year. But we compete among the best and are considered by our peer institutions to be one of the premiere public universities in the country. Only Harvard has more National Merit Scholars than UT Austin. A great many of our academic departments are ranked in the top 10 in the nation. One of our graduates in English -- the novelist J.M. Coetzee -- recently won the Nobel Prize in Literature. We have the largest student body in America and ambitions to match our size. The University of Texas at Austin is, for good reasons, a remarkably popular choice among Texas high school students and their parents.

But the central challenge for our university -- and for public and private institutions everywhere in our region -- remains the same as 20 or 30 years ago: How do we offer

broad access and opportunity to all who are prepared -- and at the same time manifest the highest possible standards of excellence?

As we consider that large challenge, I would like to put three more particular questions in front of you today:

- How can we more effectively get the word out that college is both important and possible?
- How can we better prepare our students?
- How can we maintain the vitality of the universities themselves?

This last question is writ large for public colleges and universities in America today, because they are being hammered by three powerful trends:

- A consistent retreat, over two decades, by state governments from the tradition of appropriating operating funds sufficient to assure a low cost of attendance for in-state students.
- Growing resistance among families and political leaders toward increases in tuition and fees charged by public institutions.
- A superinflationary drive in the cost of delivering instruction that is both intrinsic to the labor-intensity of our activity and coupled with the demand built into accountability systems that our efforts become ever more labor intensive.

At stake is the ability of American public institutions to continue to offer educational quality roughly at parity with that available in private colleges and universities. This is an important issue, because about 80% of the students in higher education in our country are served by public institutions. What quality will most of America be offered? For decades in this country, we have managed to uphold a reasonable parity of quality between the public and private sectors, when the comparison is made across colleges and universities with like mission and scope. I do not believe that this parity can continue if the three trends that I have identified continue unabated. It will not be healthy for our democracy or our economic vitality if quality in higher education comes to be found only in the private sector.

Tuition and fees cannot be all of the answer. State governments must reverse their long-term habit of supporting a steadily decreasing fraction of the cost of delivering education. And we in public higher education must lead a vigorous effort to address the cost of delivery. It is critical that we find effective ways to lower the rate of cost growth without a loss of quality.

Now let me move to the second of my three questions: How can we more effectively get the word out about college?

Over the past six years, I have visited many high schools in Texas, generally serving neighborhoods where college-going rates are not close to the statewide average. Most of these neighborhoods serve predominantly Hispanic or African-American families. I have discovered that many students -- even those at the top of the class, those who are academically best prepared -- do not really grasp the importance of a college education for themselves, their families, and their communities. They do not fully understand its elevating spirit and economic power. One of the most important things we all must do is to consistently emphasize the tremendous value of a college education to academically talented young people, wherever they are. We need to go far out of our way to do this.

We in higher education also must become more effective with our message about affordability. Money is indeed the major obstacle for many students and families, but the fact is that we can make college possible for any student who can gain admission at UT Austin, and that is true for nearly all other colleges, too. But when I speak to outstanding students and tell them that we can make their education happen -- that we can make it affordable and manageable -- they often just don't believe me. It sounds too good to be true. Yet we -- and other colleges and universities in this region -- do just that every day.

I am asking everyone in this audience to help to more fully represent the importance of a college education to the young people, especially to the young African-Americans and Mexican-Americans of our region. I am asking you to spread the word that The University of Texas at Austin and other colleges and universities are committed to providing access and opportunity to students who are ready for college. I am asking you to help me develop within the families of our region a greater faith that the money can be managed -- that finances need not be a bar to a college degree -- that colleges and universities will come to the aid of those who have studied hard in high school and are prepared to accept the challenge of the next level. The message must become clearer, but here it is: "We are willing and prepared to provide the same financial assistance to you that we provide to thousands of students at our university. Please come and take advantage of this offer."

Those of us in higher education need to think hard about new ways to get these messages across. What we are doing now is not good enough.

The third of the questions that I posed above was simply, "How can we better prepare our students?"

I'd just like to make one point, about writing.

Two years ago, I was invited by Governor Caperton to serve on the College Board's National Commission on Writing. I accepted readily because I see the ability to write as so very closely connected with the ability to think. I believe in the power of writing and in the need for every student to learn -- and every school to teach -- better writing skills.

And yes, I'm a chemist.

I'm very pleased that UT Austin took a leadership role as the first institution in the country to announce that we would require the new writing sample of all our applicants, whether they take the SAT or ACT. The SAT is taken by nearly 2 million college-bound students every year, and the new SAT will create stronger incentives for students to learn how to write well and for schools to emphasize the writing craft. Writing is important to every student, no matter what interest he or she may pursue.

Ben Streetman, my colleague and the dean of Engineering at UT Austin, has said this:

This new requirement will be a great help to us in choosing students who can succeed in engineering. One of the most important skills an engineer has is the ability to present his or her ideas verbally and in writing. Virtually every engineering project begins with a written proposal, requires interim reports, and culminates in a written summary. Professional success in engineering depends not only on the ability to apply the techniques of math and science to solve problems, but also on the engineer's ability to write those proposals and reports in a way that helps others understand the work.

Every high school and every university that wishes to improve the professional prospects of its students -- regardless of their cultural backgrounds -- should emphasize the need for good writing. This skill is important. It will open college doors. It will strengthen the individual like no other skill.

Please let me conclude where I should have begun -- by expressing admiration and full support of the teachers in our schools, who put themselves on the front lines every day, in every community across this land. I was a teacher for three decades, and I understand the demands and responsibilities of the profession. Is there any group more dedicated and more sacrificing than the classroom teachers of this nation? Many of us entered the education profession because an outstanding teacher showed the essential nobility of teaching and inspired us to pass on what we know and love. To quote the philosopher and teacher Sydney Hook, "a successful democracy may honor its statesmen, but it must honor its teachers more . . . for they have given the people vision, method, and knowledge."

So I salute you, classroom teachers. Through your diligence and devotion, and through the exercise of your imaginations, you transform the world one student at a time. At The University of Texas at Austin we see the results of your labor in the students you send to us. The path that brings them to our door leads through your classrooms. The best in them is a reflection of the best in you. There is no higher calling, no greater service than to enrich the lives of the students who believe in you. You do this every day -- admirably -- and I offer you my sincerest gratitude.

I thank the College Board for giving me this opportunity to speak. And I thank you all for listening.