



**LAMAR UNIVERSITY**

MEMBER THE TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM™

## **Faculty & Staff Convocation 2021**

**Dr. Jaime Taylor**

Good morning!

I am incredibly excited to be here! You are here, students are moving in, the campus is springing back to life, and I know how very fortunate I am to be here at Lamar University. My wife Stacy and I arrived a little more than a month ago, and we have simply been overwhelmed by the hospitality we have been shown. If I have not yet had the opportunity to meet you, I hope you will introduce yourself after the program today or the next time you see me out and about on campus.

And what a time to get to know you! Without question, everyone at Lamar University has given new meaning to the word “perseverance.” I understand that you’ve faced an onslaught of external and very devastating challenges—from Hurricane Harvey and Tropical Storm Imelda just a few years ago, to Hurricanes Laura and Delta last year. And when the 2021 Texas winter freeze crippled the electrical grid which happened during a global pandemic. I am half tempted to say, “Job well done, everyone!! You can just go on home now.”

But you’re not at home. You’re here today and you’re ready once again to make a profound difference in the lives of our students. What you have faced together in such a short period of time has forced you to innovate quickly and strategically. It has also required you to tap into enormous stores of empathy and patience. As a result, the University is very well positioned to take advantage of opportunities you might not have imagined even a few months ago.

I want to tell you about some of those opportunities right now. Lamar University fared very well during the last legislative session, in large part due to the efforts of Speaker of the House, Dade Phelan. I think the biggest news is that we were able to secure “equity funding” of \$8.5M annually. Lamar University was the only institution in the State of Texas to receive an equity adjustment of this sort, correcting a longstanding statewide structural appropriations imbalance, and bringing our budget for general operations more in line with our peer institutions.

Lamar University also secured an additional annual increase of \$5.1M based on the Texas “Formula Funding.” This time, the formula benefited us primarily because of the increase in student credit hours generated by our online master’s degree programs. Because annual funding is appropriated in both fiscal years of the biennial state budget, we are certain to receive a combined equity and formula funding increase of \$13.6M in fiscal year 2023 as well.

Lamar University was also allocated \$2.5M annually to establish and support the Center for Resiliency, which is a networking and data collaborative center that provides service, outreach, and education to improve multi-disaster resiliency in the Gulf Coast region.

We also received one-time disaster-related funding, specifically, \$5.7M in Natural Disaster Recovery Funds to reimburse Lamar University for costs related to Tropical Storm Imelda and also to address facility damage and prevention from future storms.

This presents us with significant opportunities. First, I am very pleased to tell you that Lamar University will provide a 3% equity raise pool for faculty and a 3% cost of living raise for staff. You will get a letter from HR outlining this information.

Lamar University will also adopt an \$11/hour minimum wage for our full-time employees, which allows us to raise the “floor” for full time wages as we continue to work to enhance compensation and rewards for all.

Finally, we will be making increased investments in our Faculty and Staff Tuition assistance program.

These investments in each of you are important and strategic. Our goal has to be to continue to attract, retain, and reward high quality staff and faculty in order to improve our university and the lives of our students.

I can't take credit for the fact that Lamar University is in this position. These raises are possible due to the work all of you have done to grow enrollment in our online master's degree programs, which in turn led to an increase in our Formula Funding. Online programs will continue to be an important strategic area for us to develop.

The equity funding increase brings our operational appropriation more in line with our peers. For a significant period of time, Lamar University has used cash reserves to meet the operating expenses of the university. National higher education benchmarks recommend that institutions have cash on hand to cover five months of expenses, and each of the Texas State University System institutions do, except for Lamar University. Lamar University finished the year with cash reserves for approximately one month of expenses. Equity funding will now allow Lamar University to stop using cash reserves and funds from our auxiliary services, that should have been going to maintenance, to cover our annual operating expenses. Over time, we will be able to restore our reserves to healthy levels, undertake many deferred maintenance projects, continue to modernize our facilities, and strategically invest in physical plant infrastructure.

Our state funding increase will also provide for a budget to support emergency situations. Lamar University has been hit by numerous hurricanes over the past several years. We know this will happen again, and we need to be financially prepared for it. Insurance and FEMA reimbursements are sometimes available, but these funds take years to obtain and do not always cover all of our costs.

Finally, a portion of our funding increase will allow Lamar University to create a strategic investment fund. In order for the university to become more competitive in the state and the nation, we need the cash flexibility to selectively invest in new degree programs for which there is a growing market. I have experience in this area and find it to be a winning strategy for academic growth. Some academic programs have enormous start-up costs but within just a few years can bring in tuition revenues that exceed instructional and other expenses. Making reimbursements to the strategic investment fund from the net revenues of these newer programs will allow us to replenish the fund and invest in the next targeted area for growth. Note, this is just one possible use of a strategic investment fund for Lamar University.

Increased enrollment, both on campus and online, is crucial to our continued success. I believe additional students will choose Lamar University as we market current and develop new and innovative degree programs. We must also focus on the success of students who are already in our classrooms, as their continued enrollment will be key to our future fiscal outcomes.

Opportunities to connect students with academic services and high impact practices are available, and the assistance of our faculty and staff will be very important as we promote student participation in these services.

Although this is my first address to you as your new president, I decided to start with the budget news because it says a lot about all of you. You clearly have the drive and dedication to work collectively in response to all manner of challenges. You've seen these challenges through, and now your persistence is starting to pay off. It's with that solid foundation in place that I'd like to tell you about my number one priority for Lamar University. The fact is, it has been my number one priority in every administrative position I have held. In short, I want us to work together to understand, appreciate, and improve our Campus Culture.

So, what do I mean by Campus Culture?

First, I have a strong belief, and a significant amount of experience that supports it, that people want to be passionate about their work, they want to achieve goals, and they are not only willing to work very hard to achieve their goals, but the hard work they put in to make "stuff" happen, provides them with a great deal of satisfaction and inspires them to do more.

I have worked for a couple individuals that believe people only work hard when you force them to work hard, or that people require significant oversight. The type of environment this attitude creates can get you results, but those results are minimal and short lived.

If instead we create a campus culture where we truly value each other, where we communicate with each other to better understand our roles in the organization, and we support and value the work each of us is doing, I promise you that amazing things will happen!

Next, I will work hard to foster an open environment where individuals feel comfortable asking questions about what they are doing and why. We don't need to be afraid of pointed questions. They come from a place of authentic experience, and they help us to understand all facets of a problem and to avoid making assumptions. As we become more comfortable asking questions, we also need to be ready to come together to discuss how something might be done differently. I spend a lot of my time pulling individuals together into cross-functional teams. That way our decisions will take into account the university as a whole, not just one particular area. And if we pool our expertise, we can also protect the most valuable resource on campus, our time.

We also need to think deliberately about which actions we take now will lead to the long-term success of the university. Whether we like it or not, public universities are bureaucracies, and from the student point of view, that fact can make us seem too rigid and unfeeling. But universities also have unique, collective personalities that are influenced by the student body, the staff, the faculty, and the administration. As with any personality, a university's collective personality does evolve over time. Twenty, forty, sixty years ago, Lamar University was something different than it is today. And in the end, Lamar will outlive us all. What we do today will affect Lamar University's identity in the future. Let's not favor short term individual wins at the cost of long term institutional success. Let's do things in such a way that one day when we look back at Lamar University we can sleep well and be proud knowing we did our part.

Finally, I invite us all to contribute to a Campus Culture that puts students first in all facets of our work.

Before we decide to pursue a project or initiative, ask yourself how it will impact our students. When we come to work every morning, consider how just one casual interaction might change the course of a student's life for the better. When we celebrate student success results, ask whether there is a more cost-effective way to get the same results for more students?

Before I close today, I have two things I want to ask of you in the coming year, two collective goals.

I get the sense that Lamar University is a well-kept secret in Texas. I want us to change that! We need to find a way to help people outside the Lamar community see what an amazing place this truly is. And so, my first charge to you is to focus your creative thinking on increasing residential enrollment. Recruiting students isn't as straightforward as you might think. Every time we get in front of a prospective student, we can be sure that ten other universities got in front of that same student. For every communication piece we send out, a prospective student will receive 50 pieces from other institutions. It can be difficult to decide how to compete. But there is a simple but elegant answer to the recruitment equation that I think many universities overlook, and that is relying on the faculty and our current students as our strongest asset.

High school seniors headed to college may be looking forward to modern amenities, competitive sports, and new freedoms that come with the college experience; at that age, short term rewards are always paramount. But there is one long term endeavor that will cause them to invest years of their lives, and I'm not talking about the bachelor degree itself or the future job security that comes with it. I'm talking about the concrete experience of having a legitimate academic interest.

If you think back to early adulthood, everyone in this room will remember that moment when a line of software code first made sense to you, or when you first smelled a very old book in a rare books room, or when you looked through a microscope and something very surprising happened between the two slides.

These are the moments that changed everything for us and that drove us to pursue a certain course of study relentlessly, without any outside encouragement. These moments are so potent because they form a vital part of our identity. We actually say, "I'm a historian, I'm a biologist, I'm a sociologist," or, for me, "Hi, I'm Jaime Taylor, and I'm a physicist." What would it mean if the Lamar University faculty presented itself to prospective students in this way, not as professors, but as people who, years ago, succumbed to their own curiosity and got hooked on an academic discipline? Instead of "professing" what we already know in our classrooms, what would it mean if we said to our students, "Sit down beside me and let's figure this out together."

If we can focus our on-campus recruitment events on academics, Lamar University WILL stand out. I believe that, and I have experienced it. Lamar University has "Cardinal Boo" and "Lamardigras" coming up, and possibly a third recruitment event this year. These events will be the most important recruitment activities we do. And at the center of these events will be an Academic Showcase where potential students and their parents can meet with faculty and current students demonstrating what's cool about their disciplines, where they can catch a glimpse of curiosity in action, and an idea of where a degree in their discipline can lead them in life. This isn't just about explaining the requirements of each academic program to future majors. It's about convincing prospective students that in college, they will have time and opportunity to follow their curiosity. The Academic Showcase in each of these events can and should represent the absolute best that Lamar University has to offer, and will become the window into the heart of our university.

So first, we must build it. But what will motivate prospective students to visit campus and attend one of these events? My goal is to increase the number of potential students visiting Lamar University by at least 30% this year. In order to do that, we will need to reach out to our contacts in the K through 12 school system and let them know these are the key events their students need to experience. We need to invite the high school counselors to attend as VIPs. And then, after the first transformative event, word will get out. Juniors and seniors will talk to their friends, counselors will talk to their students, and attendance will increase each time.

Personally, I can't wait for these events. This is where I will have the opportunity to meet each

you on your own turf and learn about your research and how you engage with students. You might even be able to convince the physicist in me to try on a different hat for the day.

My second charge to you is to focus on improving student retention and success by connecting with students one student at a time. Over 60% of our students are first generation. Their lives are complicated. A death in the family for anyone can be difficult. A death in the family while working two jobs to support the family and pay for college. Well, these sorts of hurdles can often derail a student's goals entirely. That's why Lamar University offers more than academic experiences. We offer resources to account for the needs of different students. Because first generation students and other underrepresented students don't always know what's available to them, it's important for us to be proactive, particularly with new freshmen. Ask them how they're doing, listen to the issues they might have, and if a student is struggling, support them. Instead of telling them where to go next, make a phone call to get them in touch with the right person right away. If everyone here makes an effort to really help even one struggling student, our students will reach their goals. And we will all feel the effects of that!

I want to emphasize that I spent most of my career in physics and the sciences, and that I believe in having high academic standards. What you will find is that if you can support students with these other issues so that they can focus on their academic work, you will find that in many cases you will be able to increase your academic standards, and students will rise to achieve them.

This time next year at this convocation, I will be highlighting many of the amazing things that happened in the 2021-22 academic year. But today, let me simply say how impressed I am with who you are right now. Lamar University is a great university, and I am incredibly fortunate and honored to be a part of Cardinal Nation.

Now for a few announcements of recent or upcoming events to keep in mind:

- We now have a faculty authored book corner in the Mary and John Gray Library on the first floor which opened yesterday (Aug. 16).
- Tomorrow, August 18 - Provost Kickoff where all are invited to attend. Begins at 8am in the Setzer Center.
- Cardinal Kickoff on Thursday, Sept. 2 - community event in the morning with breakfast and giveaways from 7:30am to 9:30am in the Quad - getting ready for LU's first football game in the Western Athletic Conference (WAC) that evening at 7pm.
- The academic open houses that same day from 1:30 to 3:30 and I would encourage you to attend to welcome back to campus faculty, staff and all students. Each college will have a reception that should include all of you who work within the academic colleges and all levels of students with everyone else on campus invited to join in the festivities.

- A little farther out is Homecoming which will be Nov. 8-13 with the parade, Fan Fest and the game on the 13th. This year's theme is Cardinalpalooza.

If you haven't yet received a COVID vaccine, you'll have an opportunity to get one today. You'll find the vaccine clinic down to your left as you leave in the Visitors Locker Room - just follow the signs.

Again, thank you for being here today. I look forward to meeting you and working with you this year.