



LAMAR UNIVERSITY

MEMBER THE TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM™

**YOUR
Moment
IS HERE**

**Investiture Speech, Lamar University
President Jaime Taylor
November 11, 2021**

Thank you, Chairman Amato, and Chancellor McCall.

And good afternoon, everyone! Thank you for being here today!

I'd like to begin by acknowledging all the faculty, staff, students, alumni, and friends of Lamar University. At some point in your lives, you chose a path that led you to Lamar. I chose that path, too. And so, this day is yours as much as it is mine. Fortunately, we walk a wide, Texas-sized path, and there is room on it for many personalities, backgrounds, ages, cultures, and abilities. I promise you; I will rely heavily on this diversity of thought and experience to move the University forward. I have seen first-hand how complicated problems can be solved effectively when there is diversity of thought. It's not that one idea *rises above* the rest. Instead, the best idea emerges out of the *intersection* of many ideas. The remarkable diversity of thought that is inherent in Lamar University is one of the main reasons I'm happy about my choice to take this path. So, thank you for celebrating this day with me.

And to Chancellor McCall and the entire search committee, thank you for giving me the privilege of leading this institution. When I was a young and very awkward physics student some 35 years ago, I fell in love with mathematics and how it helped me understand the physical world in a new way. I didn't know then that I would eventually fall in love with teaching physics, or that improving students' lives as an academic administrator would become my passion. And I certainly couldn't have imagined this day. But I'm grateful for every experience that has led me here, and I am deeply honored by the trust each of you has put in me.

I'm very excited that most of my family is here with me today. My mother, Millie, my brothers, Ron and Brian, and Brian's wife Kim. And my father-in-law and mother-in-law, Joe and Linda Roper. Unfortunately, my sister, Marlena, and her husband Kenny couldn't be here today. Thank you ALL for the support you have given to Stacy and me over the years.

Our daughter Makenzie and her husband Matt are here today, and our son Jordan and his wife, Elizabeth, were able to visit Lamar University earlier this Fall. I could not be prouder of, or happier for, Makenzie and Jordan. They have become remarkable young adults. I admire them, and I learn from them every day. They care about the world, and they have a wicked sense of humor that rivals my own. But I also remember, and am grateful for, their understanding and

love of adventure when they were young children. They often had to entertain themselves in the physics department. All the times they came over to eat supper with me when I had night classes, and all the weekends they spent on campus--these experiences sustained me both personally and professionally. Makenzie and Jordan: Thank you for being who you are.

And most importantly, to my wife Stacy, your support and confidence in me is *everything*. After my two-year stint as interim provost at Austin Peay State University, I fully expected to return to the faculty and resume my teaching career. We had a wonderful and comfortable life in Tennessee, with plenty of lifelong friends and family . . . and my beloved creek in the backyard. I loved my students, and I loved teaching them. But at a time when I couldn't fully grasp what I could do with my skills as an academic administrator, you had been watching me grow. You saw my potential and encouraged me to explore this path. It led us first to Marshall University, and now to Lamar University. Thank you, Stacy, for encouraging me, and for taking this amazing journey with me.

When Stacy and I made our first visit together to the Lamar University campus in June, our hosts wanted to make sure we had the opportunity to see the Spindletop and Gladys City Museum. I'm really glad they took us there, because it tells an origin story of unexpected wealth and opportunity, and one of transformative power. The nation was never the same after that first oil geyser here in 1901. Southeast Texas suddenly had a major power source, and the modern oil industry was born.

Beaumont quickly became a boomtown, and rapid population growth required equally rapid developments in housing, healthcare, schools, and retail. But I find this next crucial bit of regional history inspiring. Very early in the boom, community leaders--especially the school superintendent--saw the need for higher education here.

Now think about that for a moment. The city's leaders really had remarkable foresight at a time when long-term greatness was not necessarily expected of boomtowns. Boomtowns often just as quickly became ghost towns, but Beaumont's leaders made a deliberate choice to lay the groundwork for the next generation of Texas entrepreneurs. Although they recognized that the boom was attracting people from all over the nation and world, they also knew that this very diverse "next generation" would not thrive if they were left to rely solely on the promise of oil. So, they turned their attention to education. As innovators, they sensed that education was a force multiplier, and that the power of Spindletop could be maximized and transformed through the power of learning.

This story is such a fantastic example of the impact of higher education. Once a community comes to value critical thinking skills in the workforce and in its leadership, we're able to tackle social, technological, or economic problems in a completely different way. The problems we face are no longer *barriers* to innovation; they are, instead, the *drivers* of innovation.

Lamar University's story is remarkable. And it's only the first 100 years!! What's the next century going to bring? I came here because I believe we can build further on the region's rich history of entrepreneurial thinking. There are so many good things happening here. And there are so many strong, nationally ranked academic programs that I can't highlight them all in such a short speech. But there is one example I do want to make a point of today.

As most of you know, in a typical university, faculty do most of their teaching and research work within an academic department. It's an organizational structure that has governed higher education for quite some time. But at Lamar University, we also have numerous centers of excellence, and these transcend academic departments. The idea behind a center of excellence is to bring together faculty from across multiple departments, community leaders and other experts from outside the university, together with students at the graduate and undergraduate level.

Cross-functional teams like this can tackle regional, national, and even international problems using a truly interdisciplinary approach. They're often able to compete for state and federal funding and leverage those funds for even greater impact. Each center creates opportunities for communication and collaboration, and ensures that we don't overlook crucial components of the problem. In this way, our traditional academic departments and our centers of excellence allow the University to fulfill its mission to be "**a vital contributor to the socioeconomic wellbeing and resilience of the Gulf Coast region.**" We are not only an institution of higher learning. We are also citizens here, and we participate. And I think the leaders of Beaumont more than a century ago were counting on just that.

I just quoted from the Lamar University mission statement. It's very easy to remember; it's only two sentences long. But in just a few words it says so much about who we are and who we aspire to be. So, if you don't know it by heart, here's the other sentence: "**We are a diverse and accessible global university for life-long learners with a passion for broad-based community engagement.**"

This is absolutely a mission I believe in. Community engagement is fundamental to the success of students in college and beyond. At Lamar University, academics is central to our identity. It's the core reason we come together at all. But philosophically, I believe the majority of student learning takes place outside of the classroom. What happens IN the classroom provides the foundation--and by that, I mean the opportunity, the tools, and the training. But in order to fully integrate something intellectually, we need to do something with it. This is one of the reasons I promote and encourage student engagement of all types: athletics, band, community-based learning, laboratory research, theatre, field experiences, student government, academic competitions, clubs, or even attending sporting and cultural events. When students take their newfound tools and skills out into the community, they experience what it means to be life-long learners. They begin to understand that their life's work will eventually, in one way or another, intersect with and improve the communities in which they live.

Diversity and accessibility are also integral to our mission. Over the past five years, Lamar University has seen unparalleled growth in the number of African American and Hispanic students earning undergraduate degrees and certificates. And at the master's level, it's even more striking, with 162 and 123 percent growth, respectively. That's unheard of. But the story here is not just one of numbers. Every morning and evening I walk across campus from the house to the office and back, and as I look around, I've noticed that students seem to naturally gather together in diverse clusters. For the most part, they don't self-segregate. I'm encouraged and inspired by this. The inclusive culture that Lamar University has clearly nurtured over the years makes students of all backgrounds and identities feel welcome. They feel at home, they feel appreciated, and they feel connected. And I believe they will take these formative experiences into their personal and professional lives long after graduation, wherever they go across the region, the nation, and the world.

Throughout my career as a faculty member, chair, dean, and provost, I have developed considerable expertise in student success. It's what I'm really passionate about. And recently the literature has focused quite a bit on how we can foster a sense of belonging in our students. Now in the history of higher education, at least in the United States, one might say we've come a long way from our original purpose. We no longer simply educate. We also pay a lot of attention to our students' finances, their mental health, their level of engagement with activities on campus, even their "customer satisfaction." One might even say we do too much.

But to this I say: the grand experiment of higher education is not over. In the 21st century, new knowledge is produced at an astonishing rate. Just as we can't close the book on cancer research and say, "Well, we've discovered all there is to know," we also can't close the book on the question of how people learn. The profession continues to develop and test new theories of learning, and the ever-changing social and technological environments in our homes and communities require us to stay on top of and participate in this research. Our students are changing, and we are changing.

Let me give you a quick example of how we are researching, evaluating, and adapting new theories of learning here at Lamar University. Through the efforts of Speaker of the House Dade Phelan, Lamar University was approved to receive \$44.9 million from the state legislature to renovate the Mary and John Gray Library. At first glance, this may sound like a straightforward capital improvement project. And don't get me wrong. Much needed capital improvements and deferred maintenance projects have been funded as well. But the library is something else. This is not just a renovation; it's a re-VISIONING. The plan is to move several of our student success initiatives there and redesign library spaces for today's unique students to study, learn, and collaborate--even remotely across the globe. We will also improve digital accessibility to library resources. The aim is to transform the Mary and John Gray Library into the academic learning hub of the campus. I see this as one of the most important of our capital projects because it puts student success at the heart of the design.

I can't leave the podium today without acknowledging the accomplishments and leadership of my predecessors, President Ken Evans and President Jimmy Simmons, whose work is now

deeply woven into the remarkable history of Lamar University. As I stand in their shoes today, I'm finding that there is quite a bit of wiggle room in there, and that it will take time for me to grow into them. But with every new position I have taken in my career, I have begun my work by listening. I welcome your ideas and your excitement about the future, but I'm also deeply interested in the ongoing disagreements that are inevitable when passionate and creative people with different talents are trying to work together.

So, what is Jaime Taylor's vision for Lamar University? And how exactly is he going to change things?

To be honest, I am not really sure that's for me to say. We will find our future together if we consistently do what's in the best interest of our students -- whoever they are, and however they evolve over time. I have found the faculty and staff here at Lamar University to be passionate in their work with students, and this is crucial in building and sustaining a culture of student success over a long period of time. No single president can successfully set the strategic vision of a university. That kind of vision requires the collective personality of an entire institution. But a president can help an institution find focus and create surprising opportunities for collaboration that might otherwise seem impossible.

I began my remarks today by talking about the path that led us all here. Our goal now is to help others find that same path.

Thank you for being here and sharing this day with me.