by Michael Strysick

New Horizons

“As I officially take up the reins as the 15th President of Austin College, I wanted to extend my appreciation to all of you for the welcome that has been extended to me and my family.”

With these words of gratitude, Dr. Marjorie Hass began her presidency on the morning of July 1, 2009.
“I am honored and humbled by the trust that has been placed in me and the significance of this call to service,” she continued. “I spent my first few nights on campus in the Collins Alumni Center, and as I slept, generations of loyal alumni whispered in my ears, ‘We love this place; don’t mess it up.’ I will indeed heed this warning to ‘first, do no harm.’ But, my ambitions for this College go far beyond maintaining the status quo—glorious though the present state may be.”

She ended with a reference that reflects the deep sense of faith that permeates her approach to these new responsibilities, “I have jumped into this family with both feet, saying to you, as Ruth said to Naomi, ‘Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people.’”

**EVER BETTER**

In the intervening weeks and months since beginning her duties, “ever better” has become a phrase that Dr. Marjorie Hass is fond of using to describe her ambitions for Austin College. The expression exudes calm confidence on several levels, for it suggests not only that the College is in a position of strength from which to achieve even greater heights but also that Dr. Hass is up to the challenges that lie ahead.

Much has changed since November 8, 2008, when Marjorie Hass was selected by the Austin College Board of Trustees to succeed Oscar C. Page. Chiefly, the global economic crisis gained greater strength and continued to inflict further economic damage here and abroad, crippling the private and public sectors alike. In the world of higher education specifically, college endowment values began to drop precipitously, and at many colleges, donations significantly decreased. Austin College was not immune from these widespread challenges, and further, its fall 2008 incoming class ended up 9 percent below its enrollment goal.
CANDOR, HUMOR, AND CALM ANALYSIS
Since arriving on campus, Dr. Hass has expressed her certainty that Austin College would be able to weather these storms. In fact, her candor in articulating the College's unforeseen challenges and the path forward have won the new president early praise. Along with this frank regard, Dr. Hass's calm analysis, deep thoughtfulness, and good humor have impressed faculty, students, and staff across the campus. For example, in her remarks at the annual Worship and Perspectives service prior to the opening of school, President Hass commented that these challenges have eliminated the relaxing honeymoon period new presidents often are able to enjoy. “We've gone straight to the marriage,” she said. But she immediately followed up that after 22 years with her husband, Dr. Lawrence Hass, she knows the marriage is really the best part.

The ideas and metaphors Dr. Hass uses to describe these challenges are natural and organic because, she says, they apply so well to the living and growing enterprise of liberal education. For instance, she identifies the “rocks and boulders” that stand in the way of progress, and she speaks about needing to nurture the “roots and branches” of Austin College so it can continue its trajectory to become “ever better”—and assume its rightful place as one of the nation’s premier liberal arts colleges.

As President Hass put it in her first message to the campus community: “We will water the roots that have sustained us by investing in our strengths in the sciences, in academic excellence, in global education, and in leadership development. We will place the College on firmer financial footing. We will enhance the bonds of the Austin College community. And, we will make certain that our bright light is visible regionally, nationally, and internationally.”

Her confidence has merit. Even before she arrived, numerous and difficult cuts were made to reduce by half the College's budget deficit in the wake of the global economic crisis. President Hass called these measures on the part of faculty and staff “heroic,” and she looks forward to the time when such cuts can be rescinded. And further, Austin College had an extremely successful year in recruiting the Class of 2013 that just started classes on campus—a recruiting effort that set several records for Austin College. The numbers of applications, net deposits, and incoming freshmen (413) exceeded all past achievements. Finally, the College’s prospect pool for next year is deep and the sheer number of campus visits by potential students is high—both factors being positive indicators that recruiting the Class of 2014 is well underway.

Having now become the chief advocate and champion of Austin College, as well as its chief fundraiser, President Hass has been working to secure its financial footing and future. Also, she already has begun a new round of strategic planning for the College’s forward path. And through a series of “Meet the President” events scheduled throughout Texas and at key locations around the country, Dr. Hass is eager to share her vision for the future, while encouraging and listening carefully to the advice and suggestions she anticipates from the alumni, parents, and friends. Along the way, she will hone her message about the ways academic excellence and educational access remain the cornerstones of Austin College as it continues its 161st academic year.

A RISING STAR
In commending her selection, Robert M. Johnson ’53, chair of the Austin College Board of Trustees, referred to Dr. Hass as “a rising academic star.” Indeed, in her 16-year career at Muhlenberg College, she moved quickly through the academic ranks to achieve tenure and promotion to full professor. In that time Dr. Hass also assumed a series of administrative appointments that reached their peak in 2004, when she began five years of service as Muhlenberg’s first-ever provost. Before this appointment, she served for nearly a year as interim dean of the college for faculty and vice president for academic affairs. She also was director of the Center for Ethics at Muhlenberg for three years, responsible for its programming and its integration into the curricular and extra-curricular life of the college.

As Muhlenberg’s chief academic officer, Dr. Hass led and participated in numerous initiatives, such as the construction of a major new science building and the centralization of diversity as a curricular foundation of liberal learning. As part of this effort, she played a decisive role in creating Muhlenberg’s first multicultural center and in developing procedures to recruit and retain minority faculty. She also helped secure a Mellon Foundation grant that expanded the curriculum in significant ways. Additionally, she created a central initiative in strategic planning that enhanced the quantity, quality, depth, and breadth of faculty-student research collaborations, study abroad experiences, and service learning opportunities.

Given such experiences, it is no surprise that President Hass has achieved national recognition as a learned and passionate spokesperson for the importance of liberal arts education for individuals, communities, and for global citizenship. Her experiences also make her a perfect fit for Austin College and its long-standing emphasis on international education, mentoring, and student-faculty collaborative research.

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AN EXPERIENCED TEAM PLAYER

President Hass has noted that her early transition to administration offered the first opportunity to work in a truly team setting, and she describes her leadership style as constructive and collaborative, with a strong appreciation for critical thinking and alternative viewpoints. “My deep disposition is to foster collaboration and consensus,” she says, “but I do not hesitate to make difficult decisions when necessary.” It is thus no accident that the first topic on the agenda of her first Austin College Senior Leadership Team meeting was “How We Work Together.” While Dr. Hass understands her chief executive role as the College’s president, she knows that success requires careful planning and execution by a dedicated team that works collectively and addresses tough issues through careful research and with frankness and transparency.

As a child growing up in Chicago, Dr. Hass loved to read and travel, and she excelled in individual endeavors like dance. Later she developed a yoga and Pilates practice to help with the stress of graduate school—activities she pursues to this day as an important part of staying healthy and balanced. She credits this balance between mind and body (also spirit) as an important corrective to the often solitary pursuits of a philosopher-scholar, and, as a faculty member at Muhlenberg College, she came to see this “whole person” approach as essential to interacting with students as an intellectual guide and mentor. So it was natural for Dr. Hass to use these insights and practices when she moved into her administrative positions there.

Clearly, as president of Austin College, Dr. Hass is encountering responsibilities at a new level. She is concerned to balance the budget, raise money, and strategically plan for Austin College’s future. She also is pre-eminently concerned to meet and engage all the long-standing friends and colleagues in the College’s extended community. Dr. Hass credits her confidence in meeting these goals to her upbringing as the daughter of two practicing psychoanalysts, from whom she developed the abilities to clearly identify problems so they can be addressed and to listen closely so relationships can be forged. Her father, Dr. Michael Hoit, began practicing in the 1960s and worked for the U.S. Army to counsel soldiers returning from Vietnam. He has since been in private practice in the greater Chicago area, where Dr. Hass was raised along with her two sisters, and he also recently served as dean of the Chicago Institute of Psychoanalysis. While President Hass’s mother, Dr. Sally Hoit, was a schoolteacher for many years, she later went back to graduate school at the Illinois School of Professional Psychology, and mother and daughter completed their doctoral degrees at the same time.

With all this in her background, President Hass understands the importance of meaningful and collaborative conversation for moving an organization forward; thus, she meets regularly with her Senior Leadership Team and will schedule extra meetings with the executive committee of the Board of Trustees as circumstances require. Also, she is adding a “special topics conversation” to the agenda of all future meetings of the full board. The topic of this November’s meeting, her first board meeting, will be the addition of a much-needed, new science building, which she is moving forward as a top capital priority. In this effort, Dr. Hass will bring to completion the significant efforts of President Emeritus Oscar C. Page, who correctly foresaw the importance of this new building to position Austin College as a leader in science education and entrepreneurship well into the 21st century.

STRONG FAMILY VALUES

President Hass is married to Dr. Lawrence Hass, who serves Austin College as professor of humanities and who is an internationally known authority on the theory and practice of the art of magic. Trained as a philosopher—Larry earned his Ph.D. at the University of Illinois in the same graduate program as Marjorie—he specializes in phenomenology (the study of living experience) and aesthetics, and recently published an acclaimed book on the important French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Larry also has authored and edited books for magicians on the philosophy and performance of magic as an art form.

He comes by this understanding directly, because he is an accomplished professional magician on top of all else. He has performed from coast to coast and many times in Las Vegas, and in early December, he will return for a one-week engagement to the world-famous Magic Castle in Hollywood where he will premiere the new show he has been composing during the past year.

While Larry says his primary goals this year are to teach his classes well and insure that Marjorie and their children are getting settled in their new pursuits, he also intends to continue his ongoing work as a teacher of magicians, a publisher of magic books, and a producer of magical events and educational experiences. Perhaps some of this magic will find its way onto campus in the years to come!

Larry and Marjorie have two children, Cameron, a junior at Muhlenberg College, and Jessica, a sophomore at Sherman High School. Cameron is majoring in art history and political science, and anticipates going to graduate school or law school. Jessica is settling nicely into her new life at Sherman High; she has made several new friends and is involved in theatre arts and dance.

Despite a busy schedule that keeps her on the road meeting with alumni, parents, and donors, nothing gives President Hass greater pleasure than cooking dinner for her family. Indeed, when possible, the whole family gathers together in the kitchen to join in the preparation and then in the dining room for a long, lingering dinner and conversation about all the news of the day. (A Hass family tradition is for everyone at the table to talk about “Best Thing; Worst Thing.”) After dinner, or on free weekend days, she enjoys curling up on the sofa with a great book and the beloved family dog, Biscuit, or watching a movie with Larry or one of the kids.
The first couple has come a long way and traveled to many places since their first date nearly 25 years ago, but they never expected their journey would lead them to Texas. But they are delighted to be here in their new home state, where the sky is big and blue, where the barbeque is “to die for,” and where they feel nothing but gratitude for the extraordinary hospitality and welcome they have received from the campus and the Texoma community.

**INAUGURATION AND BEYOND**

As the Board of Trustees, campus, and community prepare for her inauguration celebration on November 5, 2009, Dr. Hass is splitting her time between traveling to meet alumni and Austin College friends and being on campus to engage the community in the ongoing work of becoming “Ever Better.” As she joked at one campus gathering, “The mission of a college president is to spend 75 percent of your time off campus raising friends and funds, and spending 75 percent of your time on campus.” But she says the work has been exhilarating: she wakes up every day and asks: “What is the best thing I can do for Austin College today?” and then “How can I do it better?”

With this energy and fresh perspective, it may come as no surprise that Dr. Hass has selected “New Horizons” as the theme of her inauguration. As she sees it, this theme represents one of the core values and essential strengths of an Austin College education. That is, “This extraordinary thing here called ‘liberal education’ opens new horizons on the ‘inside’ of our selves and spirits, but also toward the ‘outside’ world that hungers for us to live, think, create, and work as servant leaders.”

It is clear from the positive reception she has received since her arrival that the campus and surrounding community is excited by the new horizons that President Hass is opening up. At the same time, she is keenly aware that these are possible only because of the extraordinary work, leadership, and friendship from those who have come before: from the generations of alumni “whispering in her ear,” from the faculty and students who are deeply immersed in the constant business of teaching and learning, and from her predecessors who have shaped this campus through their vision. Indeed, as Dr. Hass put it in her opening statement to the community: “As the 15th president of Austin College, I am humbled to follow in the footsteps of the distinguished leaders who have preceded me, and I am committed to continuing their tradition of excellence.”

PHOTOS BY JACK I. LEE