

PRESIDENT STEVEN P. O'DAY
AUSTIN COLLEGE
Service of Perspectives & Reflections
President's Address to the Austin College Faculty and Staff
August 20, 2019

Welcome back! I am so glad to see you all here together! It feels like a celebration—everyone has gathered to start a new academic year.

I hope each of you has had a wonderful summer with time to take a breath and refresh, have an adventure, maybe change gears a little, and think ahead for a new year of teaching and learning.

And, here we are, about to begin the 171th year of Austin College! Obviously, today we are meeting in a different venue than last year. Changes in venue will happen on occasion because, as you can tell from the fencing and the dumpsters, renovations to Wynne Chapel have begun. I am pleased to report that contractors are making good progress, so these changes in location are temporary. We will hold Opening Convocation in Sid Rich, and if you're looking for John Williams, he is making his office in the Service Station right now.

This building also has changes in its future. Our current plan is for it to go offline at the end of this semester and for the Sally and Jim Nation Theatre and Learning Commons in the Ida Green Communications Center to open by the fall of 2020.

Ground preparation for the new student residence behind the Forster Art Building and Jordan Family Language House has begun, and the contractor has committed to its completion for occupancy at the start of the fall semester 2020.

Less than a year ago, I announced the public launch of POWER Austin College, our comprehensive campaign. As of today, we have reached over 86 percent of our ambitious and unprecedented goal of \$125 million. Of course, this is very exciting news, but we know that it's that last 14 percent that's the hardest.

Millions of the dollars raised will go directly to student scholarships. I've spoken frequently about how proud I am that the College is so dedicated to making our remarkable academic programs accessible to all students of high potential. And, someone out there, beyond our immediate community, is paying attention! In the May issue of *Money* magazine, Austin

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College was named as one of the Top 20 Colleges in the NATION in providing merit-based aid to students.

In just a few weeks, we will receive another accolade. Austin College is being honored by the Happy World Foundation with their Global Citizen Award. The Global Citizen Award honors global leaders from the United States and abroad for their contributions to global citizenship, diversity, inclusion, and cross-cultural understanding. Austin College is particularly being recognized for our support of language programs and our encouragement of students to take advantage of the many opportunities for study abroad and service learning projects. The award is being presented by the United Nations Chief of Academic Impact. Thanks to all of you for making this happen!

These awards are, of course, wonderful, but what we most think about at the beginning of a new year is the return of our students!

In three days, we will be welcoming the third largest incoming class in the history of Austin College—approximately 415 first year students and transfers! They hail from Texas and 10 other states (Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, and Oklahoma), as well as three other countries (China, Mexico, and Nigeria). People of color represent 54 percent of the class. Some will become physicians and scientists, attorneys and politicians, teachers and accountants, philosophers and writers, entrepreneurs and ministers, coaches and CEOs. They will also be athletes—38 percent, actually. They will also be gamers. They will also help establish a new College pep band. They will be involved in Service Station, ACTivators, student government, mock trial, and their own research projects. **All** of them will get to experience our new Compass Curriculum. Our classrooms and labs, our study rooms and meeting rooms, our lounges, couches, and swings, our study hideaways, our weight room, fields, and courts—new and old—will be hubs of activity on this magical campus.

And as we begin this new year, I'd just like to remind everyone of the extraordinary opportunity we have before us—to shape a generation. It seems everywhere you look today someone is talking about hatred, how someone learned to hate, or how incivility has become commonplace. It is frightening. It is intimidating. It is a global problem. So, how can it ever be solved?

We are the answer. Here, our students don't learn **what** to think. They learn **how** to think, how to analyze, how to collaborate, how to question, and how to solve problems.

In his book *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*, David Epstein writes about artificial intelligence and how IBM's Watson absolutely annihilated *Jeopardy* and was then considered to be the next revolution in cancer care. It flopped spectacularly. "As one oncologist put it, 'The difference between winning at *Jeopardy* and curing all cancer is that we know the answer to *Jeopardy* questions.' With cancer, we're still working on posing the right questions in the first place" (29).

Our students are learning to ask the right questions. Yes, it may help them cure cancer, but it will also affect their worldview and their relationships with other people. Before they reach for hate, our students can ask questions. They can listen and seek understanding.

That's why they're here. They are here for the education that will equip them with the skills of critical thinking, collaboration, and communication, but they are also looking for a **community**, a true community to do that in. On their Admissions Response Forms, incoming freshmen were asked why they picked Austin College. They said things like,

"It feels cozy and homelike."

"There is a close-knit family atmosphere."

"The people really care."

"This is a community that connects *all* students."

"Everyone is welcomed with open arms."

This is why they are here.

It's why we are here, and why we have come together in this way to start a new year. This is what we do. We shape generations. We transform the world. This our community. This is our calling. It is my great honor to be at this place working with all of you as we begin this 171st year.

Let's make it a great one. Go 'Roos!