

PRESIDENT STEVEN P. O'DAY
AUSTIN COLLEGE

State of the College Address

October 13, 2020

Nearly two months ago, the Austin College campus community gathered, virtually, for our annual Perspectives and Reflections Service. In my remarks to faculty and staff, I shared a quote from the American poet Robert Frost, in which he summed up all that he had learned about life in just three words: “It goes on.”

It does, indeed. 2020 has been a year marked by tumult. A year of sickness, unrest, fear, division, and hardship for millions across the nation and around the world. Along with the constant march of life, Austin College has also kept marching and persevering. We have launched our 172nd year, and there is much to be proud of and to build upon. It is my honor and privilege to report that the state of the College is strong.

Enrollment

Despite the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to our efforts in recruiting and enrolling this fall’s class, we were pleased in August to welcome a third consecutive large incoming class—over 370 first-year and transfer students. They hail from Texas and 12 other states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, US Virgin Islands, Washington), as well as eight other countries (France, India, Israel, Oman, Spain, Venezuela, Switzerland, Germany).

Students of color represent 49 percent of the class. Almost 25 percent are first generation students. Almost 40 percent are student athletes. They are racially diverse and come from varied socio-economic backgrounds.

Further, our first-year students bring a strong academic profile with an average high school GPA of 3.5 and an average SAT or ACT score of 1220 and 26, respectively.

Advancement

Fiscal Year 2020 (ending June 30) was another remarkable year for fundraising and engagement, with over \$21 million in gifts, commitments, and grants despite the financial market turbulence we saw during the final two quarters of the fiscal year. This represents a third consecutive year of record setting fundraising for the College. As of the end of August, the College’s endowment also set an all-time record of over \$160 million.

You may recall that at this time last year we launched the public phase of the POWER Austin College comprehensive campaign. I am pleased to share that we have now exceeded our ambitious \$125 million goal. This makes POWER Austin College the largest campaign in the history of the College! We look forward to celebrating this milestone—and all that the campaign made possible for our community—over the course of the coming year.

While all that was happening, I was so pleased to appoint Gillian Locke '07 as the College's new Vice President of Institutional Advancement after serving for a year as the Interim Vice President. As you can tell from the successes of the last several years, her work and the work of the entire Advancement division has been extraordinary. She really made this appointment an easy decision. I hope you'll congratulate Gillian the next time you see her!

Our colleagues in Institutional Advancement will not be kicking back and relaxing. They never do. We still have critical projects to complete, and the team remains committed to securing scholarship funds, renovating Apple Stadium, and building the new Jack B. Morris Center for Business Studies. There is much excitement ahead.

Academic Affairs

This fall, notwithstanding the shadow of the ongoing pandemic, all of our students are experiencing the same high-touch, high quality Austin College educational experience. From music and the arts to the natural and social sciences, faculty across the campus have designed each of their courses to be offered in-person and synchronously remote. This unique form of high-flex hybrid learning provides students the opportunity to experience an educationally comparable experience within the in-person and synchronous remote formats. Most classes meet in person on a regular basis but also have remote components due to health accommodations or classroom capacity constraints. Make no mistake, this is difficult and not what we want to continue for the long term. It is, however, necessary for this moment in time and I salute our faculty for their ability to pivot, adjust, and see this through for as long as we need to.

This past year, the College successfully hired four new tenure-track colleagues in the humanities and social sciences divisions, as well as a new Director of Institutional Research and Assessment, Dr. Amon Seagull. We also welcomed Professor Greg Kinzer into his new role as Dean of Humanities.

Thanks to a generous donor's gift, we were also able to bring on board a new Director of Student Success and Transitions, Traci Howard Moore. Traci's arrival to campus is an example of our ongoing commitment to implementing initiatives designed to broaden our efforts to enhance student success and persistence. We are seeing signs of progress. This past year saw a four

percent increase in student persistence, the highest since 2015, and we look to grow this in the years ahead.

Additionally, this year saw the development of new opportunities and innovative programs with the implementation of the [Texas Tech at Austin College](#) masters programs. The partnership between Austin College and Texas Tech University affords our students the opportunity to accelerate both their undergraduate and graduate degrees, often without leaving campus. Three different tracks are available: a Master of Arts in Strategic Communication and Innovation, a Master of Arts in Technical Communication, and a Master of Public Administration.

Also in Academic Affairs, in response to prospective and current students' interests, we engaged Teresa Hall to collaborate with David Norman to launch a revitalized Exercise Science and Sports Management major and minor. This program will be designed to prepare students for careers in the fields of education, sports business, sports management, and sports marketing by combining business related and education courses with studies of sports and physical education. This program also articulates perfectly with the sports communication track in the Texas Tech Master of Arts in Strategic Communication and Innovation.

Student Affairs

Not surprisingly, over the summer, there was continuous planning for repopulating the campus in this time of COVID-19. Life on campus looks and feels different this fall with the cancellation of events, the elimination of travel, and the implementation of numerous safety precautions like wearing masks, social distancing, changes in foot traffic patterns, limitations on social gatherings, and classroom modifications.

In mid-September, reliable and timely testing became available in this region of the country. We took immediate advantage of this opportunity and secured an on-campus testing facility so that all our students and employees (and community) could be tested (free of charge). By identifying and isolating those who test positive, we have been better able to reduce the spread of the virus. The President's Working Group continues to make timely plans informed by the available science and wisdom from a number of higher education organizations, health resources, and federal agencies. Every facet of life on campus has been touched by this insidious virus but we have not given up or given in.

After demanding search processes, two critical hires in Student Life have been made. Teresa Moore, M.A. LPC-S, is now leading our mental health efforts as the Director of Counseling, and following a lengthy vacancy in the spring, we were pleased to hire Amanda Handsbur as the Director of Student Activities.

As you may be aware, fall sports competition and championships have been cancelled. Know, however, that we have worked hard to develop plans to engage our student athletes in these programs with training and skill development opportunities. There is still hope that some form of a modified competitive schedule can be conducted in the spring for these sports.

Regarding winter and spring sports, we are closely monitoring the situation and are hopeful for the opportunity to compete but no final decisions regarding competitive seasons and championships have been made.

Finally, with respect to our football program, we are pleased to announce that beginning in the fall of 2021, football will compete in the American Southwest Conference (ASC) after spending the last four years in the Southern Athletic Association. This move will enable our football team to compete within the region with fewer travel expectations, opening up more opportunities for the families of our student athletes to travel to games played primarily within the state of Texas.

Marketing & Communications

Earlier this year, I asked Dr. Lynn Womble to oversee a new Institutional Marketing & Communications Division as Chief Marketing & Communications Officer. What began as a crisis communications team in March, combining the Public Affairs and Advancement Communications staffs, has evolved into a group that has operated with leadership and professionalism in delivering the right message at the right time. This innovative team will help meet the ever-increasing demand for internal and external communications that are compelling, consistent with our brand, and produced professionally. I am grateful for Lynn's background in business, as well as her nine years of experience here at Austin College. Given the challenges of the last seven months, I suspect Lynn has, from time to time, wondered about her decision to take on this role. I can tell you that she's been fantastic. Congratulate her next time you see her.

Capital Improvements

And, finally, while it seemed that most of the world was shut down, it was the opposite on campus. The summer was a busy time as we have moved forward with several new construction and renovation projects.

The new *North Flats*—a 133-bed facility—has been completed on time and under budget. This new student housing facility is beautiful, and students are loving it. This new facility has really helped to bring the north side of campus into the campus proper and allowed over 100 seniors to live on campus.

The creation of the new ***Sally and Jim Nation Theatre and Learning Commons*** is now complete. I hope you were able to view the Postcard from Austin College that we recently circulated. Everything is simply stunning! In fact, it's from where I am speaking to you today. With a state of the art theatre, as well as new classrooms and student study spaces, this is going to be a hub of activity for many years to come. Inside and out, this is a rejuvenated space and is fast becoming one of the most popular spots on campus.

The renovation of 62 year old Wynne Chapel was completed in the spring and is amazing. The ***Clifford Grum Sanctuary*** and ***Sallie Majors Chapel*** are beautiful spaces with new lighting, seating, and audio/visual equipment. They will continue to serve us well as places of worship while also providing multi-purpose space for gatherings and events of all kind.

Craig Hall received a new HVAC system and some needed outdoor rehearsal and gathering spaces.

The renovation of ***Hughey Gymnasium***, including the newly dedicated ***Jim Rolfe Court***, is also complete. Work this spring and summer included the installation of a new floor surface as well as new scoreboards, team seating, and other enhancements.

The ***Hannah Natatorium*** also saw several improvements with the installation of new scoreboards for Swimming and Diving, as well as Water Polo. New lane lines and other accents have renewed the pool deck. With some remarkable gifts received over the last year, we are now looking forward to the much anticipated renovation of the natatorium locker rooms. I hope to update you on this exciting project in the months ahead.

The ***Wright Campus Center Dining Hall*** also received a refresh with new equipment, a new allergen station, enhanced food station designs, cabinet fronts, and fresh paint.

Even ***Zauk Circle*** saw some repairs and resurfacing for the opening of school.

As you can see, even in the face of a global pandemic, we have not stopped moving forward. Across all divisions, we continue to launch initiatives, informed by deep data analysis and fueled by an innovative spirit. Our bold strategic vision positions the college for success today, tomorrow, and for years to come.

There is still more to do and I am confident that we are up to the task.

Life—It goes on! Austin College goes on as well.

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We look ahead with resolve, momentum, and optimism, determined to be equal to our moment in history.

Thank you to all of 'Roo Nation for your support—both in the past and yet to come. May God bless Austin College.