

PRESIDENT STEVEN P. O'DAY
AUSTIN COLLEGE
Service of Perspectives & Reflections
President's Address to the Austin College Faculty and Staff
August 17, 2023

Welcome to the 175th year of Austin College! That is the first time I have gotten to say that; I'm sure it will not be the last! This is an exciting time—and not just because it's our anniversary. There is so much happening.

In May, I announced a \$20 million gift from the estate of Clifford J. Grum. That's the largest single gift in the College's history. This brought our total for the year to over \$36 million in gifts, commitments, and grants—\$5.2 million of which was designated toward the Annual Fund. All these totals are the largest in our College's history!

The Austin College Health Campus, the physical space that will be home to our newly launched physician assistant program, is now complete and was the site of what we believe was a successful accreditation visit this summer. The portal for applications has opened. We have slots for 34 students. As of now we have more than 1,500 quality candidates.

We've also launched the residence hall renovation project that begins with the renovation of Caruth bathrooms and showers. You can look forward to updates on our progress in the coming months.

This summer, we were able to effect needed repairs to many of the campus roofs that were damaged by the epic hailstorm this past spring. At one point in July, more than 100 external contractors were on campus. We've replaced and enhanced lighting across our 80-acre campus. We think you'll appreciate the difference that makes in both appearance and safety.

Another major focus this summer has been the grounds themselves. After an overdue tree pruning, a re-build of an irrigation system, three acres of sod, and 300 tons of river rock, we've created a new and dynamic campus commons just outside the Wright Campus Center. We've also tended to our iconic Windsor Mall with new gathering spaces and lights. This rejuvenated center of campus will be a hub of activity year 'round with outdoor meeting, teaching, and relaxing spaces for all to enjoy.

In this anniversary year, it is appropriate for us to acknowledge and reflect upon our traditions and our heritage, to ensure that the things we value are sustained and carried into the future. As

just one example, these considerations were part of the work of the campus esthetic committee. Windsor Mall is one of our treasured spaces. How can we be sure that this space is valued by our students now and in the years to come? How can we deal with the problems of erosion and drainage? Having an arborist tend to the live oaks was just the beginning of ensuring that our physical surroundings communicate our campus culture of belonging, wellbeing, and safety, both now and in the future.

Of course, the continuation of Austin College into its next 175 years is built upon the foundation of the academic program and *all* of the student experiences that comprise an Austin College education. To do this, we need both the academic creativity and financial wherewithal to keep the College moving forward. With that in mind, I am pleased and proud to be able to share that we are beginning the academic and fiscal year with a balanced budget. Hard work and fiscal prudence will, of course, be necessary to maintain that balanced budget in the months ahead, but I am confident in our collective sense of teamwork and collaboration to make it happen.

This financial stability allows us to continue our ongoing efforts to recruit, enroll, and retain students and to offer relevant curriculum in a changing world.

To this end, the faculty approved a Bachelor of Science degree designation and a new minor in Mindfulness and Health Studies. The Non-Degree Credential Group continues its work in exploring skills and content-based curricular designations. And, of course, I've already mentioned the Master of Medical Science – Physician Assistant program. In addition, we will be searching for 13 new faculty colleagues in strategic programmatic areas including engineering, digital imagery, kinesiology, computer science, finance, and data analytics.

Colleagues in student success, career services, and international programs have rebranded and restructured ways in which we engage students.

Through the \$1.3 million Mellon grant, Pathways to a Just Society, humanities faculty created 17 innovative new Humanities lab courses that engage students in problem-based learning. A total of 47 faculty members participated in two different social justice learning groups; six students have conducted grant-funded research, internships, or public humanities presentations; and Acumen has published a special issue of student research related to social justice.

Additionally, Austin College was approved to be an official observer at the UN Climate Change conference. This year, we will send eight students, known as Austin College Climate Ambassadors, to the UN Conference in the United Arab Emirates. We had two Fulbright semifinalists and a Goldwater Scholar. This summer, nine Social Entrepreneurship for Poverty Alleviation (SEPA) students wrote 37 grants for area agencies totaling just under \$500,000.

All this and a new website design coming, too. Indeed, across all divisions, there are countless ideas and initiatives being implemented that speak directly to our commitment to recruit, enroll, and retain students while preparing them for meaningful lives and successful careers. We have a lot to be proud of!

I can't help but wonder. Could Daniel Baker or Emily Austin have ever imagined all this? Probably not, but I'm sure they're smiling.

Now, of course, two days before their arrival, we are thinking about welcoming the incoming class. They are 346 first-year and transfer students. They hail from Texas and 13 other states (Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Maryland, North Carolina, Nebraska, New Mexico, Ohio, Oklahoma, Virginia, Washington) as well as five countries (Germany, Mexico, Thailand, United Kingdom, Vietnam). Students of color represent 50 percent of the incoming first year class, 33 percent are first generation students, and 43 percent are student athletes. They are racially diverse and come from varied socio-economic backgrounds. (And, by the way, if you're curious, please know that we haven't used race conscious admissions practices at Austin College in decades.)

Further, our first-year students bring a strong academic profile with an average high school GPA of 3.62. Seventy percent of our incoming class are test-optional, and those who submitted test scores have an average SAT or ACT score of 1240 or 28, respectively.

These students are state champions on academic and athletic teams. They are leaders of student government and community volunteers. One student is a member of the DFW Master Naturalist organization who worked to increase the number of pollinator gardens and rebuild the Blackland Prairie. Another was a production assistant for Netflix and AMC. Still another was an intern with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission who researched emerging technology in non-destructive testing methods for regulatory compliance and reactor applications. What an impressive group!

These students, and ALL of our students, are why we are here. That has always been why we are here. Students—recruiting them, enrolling them, retaining them, teaching them, and helping them grow—this has always been at the core of Austin College. That was true 175 years ago, and it is true now. I hope you realize how important you all are to their lives, to their experience as Austin College students, and to all of us as members of the College community. You are making a difference in people's lives. You are making a difference in the world.

As we begin this milestone year, I hope we can recognize and celebrate what has gone before and we can be excited about what the future holds in store. Thank you for all that you're doing.

What you do matters. What WE do TOGETHER matters.

175! Explore. Belong. Make a Difference. Let's have a great year!