

## Fall 2025 Faculty and Staff Convocation Speech

Good afternoon, everyone!

It is great to see you all here today. There's a buzz on campus at the start of every academic year—a kind of energy you won't find anywhere else. That excitement, and that buzz, comes directly from your passion and your commitment to Lamar University and to our students.

As we kick off the new year, I want to start with a clear message: **Our greatest strength has always been our people.** You, all of you! My commitment is always to invest in you.

That's why I am thrilled to announce we're moving forward with another **3% merit raise**. This is a direct result of the strong financial health of Lamar University and the hard work you do every single day. We are also very fortunate to receive strong support from the Texas State University System, our Regents, and our local State Representatives, and I want to thank them all for their partnership.

To put it in perspective, this marks our **fourth 3% merit raise** since I arrived. It brings our total investment in salary increases to **\$10.4 million**. And that's on top of the **\$3.3 million** we've put toward faculty and staff salary equity over the past four years. When you add in benefits, **we have increased our annual salary and benefits budget by \$17.2 million!**

This is an investment in you, and it's well deserved. Thank you.

Now, success doesn't happen by accident. So much of what we have accomplished can be traced back to the roadmap you're holding in your hands: **our four Guiding Principles**. They aren't just ideas on a page. You have brought them to life. Your conscious efforts to boost enrollment, foster student success, and improve how we operate have changed everything. Lamar University is a better place, because of you.

So today, I do not just want to say thank you. I also want to show you how our recent successes are **proof** that we are living these principles, together.

**Our first principle** is about who we are as a university. For over a century, we have built *the* Lamar name around a simple but powerful idea: and that is, **a university exists not to serve itself, but to serve its community**. We didn't invent this idea, but we are determined to perfect it. It's the same humble purpose that gave birth to teacher colleges and land grant institutions across our country. We continue to embrace our unique, regional identity because **there is great value in doing one thing and doing it well**.

Our identity has always been woven into the DNA of Southeast Texas. We were founded to prepare professionals to lead during a boom in oil and technology. Today is no different, even if the region's needs have *evolved*. We continuously fine-tune our degree programs to meet the changing needs of our region. And this singular focus is a considerable strength. It means our students get unmatched, hands-on experience. More time in the lab. More internships. More time in our research centers. We do more than just teach "professional skills." We provide opportunities for deep, practical experience. Our students are grappling with the real problems of Southeast Texas before they even have a diploma.

And it's working. Our graduates are **immediately competitive**, not just here, but all over the country. That is a testament to the immersive education they get right here at Lamar University. But that's only part of our value. The broad liberal arts education they pursue here gives them the foundation for a career that can change and grow with them, wherever they go or whatever they may do.

People are starting to notice, and the quality of our incoming classes shows it. We're attracting more valedictorians and more top-ten-percent students because they see the unique value in a Lamar University degree. They appreciate the research opportunities, the dedicated mentorship of our faculty, and the clear pathways to a great career. We don't try to be everything to everyone. **But for our students, we are determined to be everything that matters!**

Our **second guiding principle** is just as clear: ***we place students at the center of our focus***. In everything we do, from the biggest projects to the smallest details, we ask one simple question: "**How will this affect our students?**" This has created a sense of shared purpose among us. We have built a campus culture where everyone sees the impact of their work on our students. It also means all of our projects and our budgets directly contribute to student outcomes, from their academic success to their personal wellbeing.

This principle has been a powerful tool for us. Let me give you one quick example. Support from our donors is crucial. But we also know that not every potential gift aligns perfectly with our strategic goals. Today, our *Guiding Principles* guide even our donor conversations. By keeping the focus on the students we serve, we are better able to align a donor's personal passions with a purpose that perfectly supports our students.

The real power of our university is what happens when these first two principles work together. On the one hand, *Guiding Principle #1* ensures we develop relevant degree programs that support our region and the entire state. On the other hand, *Guiding Principle #2* helps us create a student-friendly culture and strengthens our commitment to all students who simply need a genuine opportunity to thrive.

That commitment is already paying off. It's helping us drive down the student debt load for our graduates. We're creating an environment where students feel like they truly belong here. And when students feel they belong, they stay—which leads to higher retention and a more dynamic academic culture for everyone.

And it turns out, this powerful combination we've built here is exactly what the nation's top *educational foundations* are now recognizing as the future of higher education. This year, the Carnegie Foundation introduced a new way to identify the universities that are true engines of social and economic mobility, the ones that provide access to students from all backgrounds and prepare them for successful, **wealth-generating careers**.

This isn't just another ranking based on prestige or exclusivity; it's a new classification based on **performance and outcomes**—on what **truly matters** to students and families.

They call these institutions "Opportunity Colleges and Universities."

**And I am incredibly proud to tell you that Lamar University is an Opportunity University!** We achieved the highest rating for providing both high access and high post-graduation earnings. This is a powerful validation of your work. It's a validation of who we are—a reliable pathway to a better life.

Our first two principles are our **mission**. They are the promise we make to our community and to our students. Our next two principles are our **method**. They are the commitments we make to each other to deliver on that promise.

At the very heart of our **third guiding principle** is teamwork. And that commitment starts with a thorny challenge that's built into every great university.

On one hand, universities rely on the individual expertise of brilliant and passionate experts. Developing their expertise requires an intense, narrow focus on a specific corner of the world—a professional field, a line of research, a teaching area. On the other hand, our most important job—which is guiding a student's journey from applicant to graduate—means recognizing that each of us is not just responsible for one leg of the journey. We don't pass students from one station to the next. We are collectively responsible for their entire path. Resolving this paradox is why I talk so much about teamwork. It's the bridge between our individual expertise and our collective mission.

But lately, here at Lamar, the conversation has changed. I find I don't need to talk about the **idea** of teamwork so much, because I see it in action all the time. It has taken root and is thriving in so many areas across this university. There are more examples of this than I could possibly share with you right now, but I want to highlight one that has had an amazing impact: our **"Enrollment Flight Teams."** These groups focus on the entire student lifecycle. One team is dedicated to new student recruitment and enrollment, while the other focuses on helping our current students persist and re-enroll.

While these teams have been in place since COVID, they are thriving now that their work is intentionally guided by our *Guiding Principles*. The principle of teamwork isn't just a poster on a wall. It's a tool that empowers these groups to succeed.

These aren't your typical committees. They are active teams that bring together experts from admissions, financial aid, academic colleges, advising, housing, and student life. They use a shared dashboard and real-time data to solve problems, whether it's helping an admitted student enroll for the first time or helping a returning student persist toward their degree.

And this teamwork is delivering incredible results. For the first time in twelve years, undergraduate enrollment was up last Fall. And I am thrilled to report that our numbers show it will be up again this Fall. That is a huge achievement, and it comes directly from your hard work.

When you have that kind of teamwork in place—when everyone is focused on a shared mission instead of just their own turf—it makes the hard choices much easier. It allows you to be truly strategic.

Our **fourth guiding principle** is about the discipline needed to secure our future. It's easy for a university to be reactive—to spend money simply because the revenue is available, or to make cuts across the board when enrollment unexpectedly drops. But that's how you end up making bad decisions. In an emergency, there's no time to plan.

I am determined that Lamar University will never be in that position. We are strategic. For us, the answer is to be wise, not cheap. Over the last four years, every dollar we've spent has been a deliberate choice, building on our strengths and creating the greatest possible impact for our students.

It's probably no surprise that people are our biggest resource. On a budget sheet, they certainly are our largest expense. But in terms of the outcomes that define us, they are also our most valuable asset. A core commitment for me is to continue to approve annual raises. But to do that, we need to continue to do a good job, over time, in managing our resources.

At Lamar University, we view every vacancy as a strategic opportunity—we do not simply refill a position, we first ask a much deeper question: *Is this the most effective way to advance our mission?* When I first arrived, several executive-level roles became vacant. Rather than automatically refilling them, we took a thoughtful and deliberate approach—examining the responsibilities tied to each one. We reassigned essential duties to leaders and teams best positioned to carry them forward, and we eliminated tasks that no longer aligned with our core purpose. This process allowed us to streamline operations, retire several high-level positions, and conserve valuable resources. Most recently, when the Associate Provost for Research retired, we applied that same principle: instead of refilling the role, we redistributed responsibilities to sharpen our focus on research leadership. These decisions were not merely about cost savings—they were about ensuring that every action we take is intentional, strategic, and aligned with our long-term vision.

In my first year, both the Vice President for Finance and Operations, and I had each had an administrative assistant. At many universities, you'll find even more staffing in offices like ours. But when one of our assistants accepted another opportunity in my second year, the CFO and I sat down and asked: Do we both really need an administrative assistant? We agreed that one shared administrative assistant would be sufficient. It's a modest change, but it reflects a mindset that, if adopted across campus, could lead to significant savings—savings we could reinvest in what truly matters, like continued salary increases. Strategic decisions like this aren't just about cutting costs; they're about making sure every dollar supports our shared mission.

This is the discipline that will secure our future. It's the reason we are in a strong financial position today. By continuing to make smart, strategic decisions, we ensure our ability to invest in our most valuable resource—you.

So, with all of this incredible momentum, **what's next for Lamar University?**

We have to be clear-eyed about the world around us. Higher Education in the United States is changing in a big way right now, and it's also facing a real crisis of credibility. Many universities are struggling financially, and the public is questioning the value of a four-year degree more than ever.

But that uncertainty is **not** our story! While *other* universities may struggle to define their value, we stand strong—financially sound and laser-focused on our mission to serve Southeast Texas. Aligning our degree programs and our research with the industries and professions that power our region is what gives our degrees real, tangible value. It is what it means to be an **Opportunity University**. This is our brand, and it allows us to separate ourselves from our peers — to be pioneers, not followers.

At Lamar University, we know exactly who we are. **While other universities may be searching for their purpose, we are busy living ours!** Thank you for all you do to make that possible. Together, we are going to have a great year and an even brighter future!

We now have a short video, to remind everyone of why we are all here, and that is, of course, for our students.