

CHAIR'S ADDRESS TO THE BOARD OF REGENTS—JULY 2013

President Pattillo, Chairman McCarty, university regents, esteemed ladies and gentlemen. . . good morning! To everyone here, thank you for the opportunity to visit with you on behalf of the faculty at Stephen F. Austin State University. As the chair of the Faculty Senate for the next year, I will have the opportunity to speak with you a total of four times—to serve as the messenger, the advocate, and the emissary of our professors at this fine institution who are, at this very moment, teaching, researching, and serving the university in a myriad of ways. I am both humbled and grateful for the chance to represent our faculty. But I do not take on this task alone. Please allow me to present my right-hand woman—Dr. Jannah Nerren, associate professor of elementary education, who is this year's chair-elect. Together, we will operate as the chief liaisons for the faculty at SFA and will strive to make our presentations objective, candid, and meaningful to this valued body.

As this is my first time to formally speak with you on behalf of SFA's faculty, I would like to take the opportunity to introduce myself. I have been at the university for a short six years, which I understand is but a blink of the eye in the university's history.

It occurred to me at the April Board of Regents meeting, as I watched our wonderful students paraded before you and listened to their amazing achievements, that my journey to SFA began many years before I realized I was already on the—dare I say it?—purple brick road to Nacogdoches. This university has been on my radar since I was in high school, as a certain spirit squad began winning national championship after national championship. As cheerleading served as my primary identity as a teenager, my thought process at that point in

my life was to follow that particular avenue to college. SFA was the best of the best in this arena, and I wanted to be with the best. Sadly, the weekend of tryouts coincided with a district gymnastics meet, and I couldn't be in two places at once—a game I am still trying to win. Hence, I pursued cheerleading at another university on the opposite side of the state, but very similar to SFA in scope, size, and feel—in short, I attended a major regional university in a small town with faculty who genuinely cared about the students and went out of their way to help them achieve the goals to which they aspired. As Anglo State University had a very highly respected pre-med program, I began college as a biology major with ambitions of becoming a pediatrician. I went to class every morning, lab every afternoon, and practice every night. My first year in college proved to be a lesson that many freshmen learn each year. College was far more demanding than anyone could possibly communicate, and that it was a lot like an airplane crash—if you could get up and walk away, you were okay.

Needless to say, neither my academic nor extracurricular activities panned out the way I expected. But something far more wonderful was already in the works. Even as I dreaded my science courses and lab practicums, I loved my liberal arts classes, history in particular. Thanks to many wonderful people, including an assistant dean of student life here, an admissions director there, a certain chief of police, even the president of the university, and more professors than I can possibly count, I was on my way to becoming a member of the academy. As the old adage proclaims, it takes a village to raise a child. As a professor, I believe that it takes a university to graduate a student.

Several years later and just before I graduated from Texas Christian University with a doctorate in history, the chair of the SFA Department of History, contacted me. Dr. Sylvia McGrath, whom some of you may remember, asked if I would be interested in a position as a visiting professor. Interested did not even begin to describe how I felt about this opportunity, and we had a wonderful conversation. In the end, I felt I had to decline the offer in order to complete my dissertation and conclude that particular phase of my life, which gone on for more years than I wanted to admit! I did, however, make it clear that SFA was a place that I would very much like to end up if at all possible. The university, and the department in particular, had a terrific reputation for having a strong program and a collegial faculty, which reflected the experience I had enjoyed as an undergraduate and one that I wanted to repeat as a professor. Dr. McGrath confirmed these rumors, but agreed that finishing the dissertation was of the utmost importance.

Sadly, Dr. McGrath's battle with cancer ended just a few weeks later, and I interviewed for her position early the next year. Almost six years ago to the day from my first class at SFA, I stand before you incredibly thankful for all that the university has given me in this short period—the chance to hone my craft while living in Nacogdoches, working and raising a family in a small, tight-knit community. As my brilliant four-year-old daughter gave her hometown the Mary Poppins seal of approval just last night, declaring, “supercalifragilisticexpi-nacogdoches!” I'm not entirely sure how to spell that, but someone might share that with the marketing focus group. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity

to give back to my communities—residential and university—and specifically our students, as I see so much of myself in them.

Like the large majority of our undergraduates, I am a first-generation college student, an identity I never knew I had until a chance conversation with a TCU professor. Speaking candidly one day, she condescendingly remarked, “You can always pick out the first gens.” I nodded, remained silent, and for days tried to figure out what in the heck a first gen was. When I finally realized what she had unwittingly said to me, I was shocked and horrified. All these years, I had not known of my little secret—that I was one of *those*—a “first gen.” Today, I wear such a label with pride, having first-hand experience of what a university can do—one caring professor, one kind staff member, a patient librarian at a time—for one student at a time. Thanks to people throughout that university, I not only earned a college degree but was inspired to go on and pay it forward. To have the academic shoe on the other foot today is a dream come true.

Without a doubt, I know that I have been lucky beyond words on my road to academia, but my story is not necessarily representative of all faculty at SFA. Thanks to numerous scholarships, fellowships, and grants, I managed to earn three degrees in a relatively brief amount of time and with a comparatively modest amount of student loan debt. As the average person needs seven years beyond the bachelor’s degree to become an academic specialist and earn a doctorate in their field, he or she incurs an average—***average***—of \$52,000 of debt in their pursuit of intellectual expertise. And as our faculty, by and large, do not come from the “trust fund” segment of American “Ivy League” society, many of our professors

have a considerable financial weight to bear as they begin their careers at SFA, especially our professors who are also single parents.

Likewise, many faculty members at SFA have had the joy and sorrow of incredibly patient, supportive, but long-suffering spouses who have endured more moves and meager stipends over the years than they would ever wish to admit. Again, I have been lucky. My husband's profession is mobile, and thankfully, he has opened a successful business in Nacogdoches. But this is not always the case. Many of our faculty members' spouses and significant others hold college and post-graduate degrees. Sadly, many of them have been unable to secure adequate employment in our small community. As a wise and experienced member of the SFA family once observed, Nacogdoches is a nice place to live . . . but it is a hard place to make a living.

These realities—both the good and the challenging—are but some of the actualities the Senate will examine and address over the next year in an effort to make SFA and Nacogdoches an even better place to work and live. We have already embarked on a comprehensive analysis of the academic wing of the university with our true peer institutions in the state, and we ask for your thoughts on the matter. Where do you see SFA currently, and where would you like to see SFA in the future? It's hard to get to a certain place if you haven't clearly identified where you are, where you want to go, and fail to plan it out step-by-step. As Dwight Eisenhower once said, "The plan is nothing. Planning is everything."

Which brings me full-circle to my ill-informed plan of how all this started half a lifetime ago. I began my journey to SFA with the intention of being both a cheerleader and a doctor. While my plans did not unfold exactly as I anticipated, I

got both of my wishes—but in ways I could never have imagined. As a professor, I cheer on my students every semester as I teach them about the past and help them reach their goals and plan for their futures. The large majority of them are much more capable than they realize; they simply need someone to tell them they can do it and show them how. And, as a doctor, in a way, I get to work with “children,” as all of my students are someone’s child. As a mother, I think about how I would want my children’s professors to speak to them, push them, and treat them, many years from now. Some situations call for more compassion, others candor—and many, a balance of both. I wholeheartedly concur with Richards/Carlberg agency’s description of faculty from yesterday’s presentation as “nurturing experts” and enthusiastically endorse the decision you made in that regard.

As I serve as chair of the Faculty Senate, I will remain grateful of the good fortune I have experienced in arriving at this university, but ever mindful of the difficulties many of our faculty face on a daily basis. My hope and ultimate goal is to capitalize on what this university does best, while constantly striving to do everything I can to improve the professional experience, and where appropriate, the personal life, of faculty members who are experiencing significant challenges. After all, we want our professors to achieve their greatest potential as teachers, scholars, and university citizens, for such a condition can only benefit our students.

On that note, please let me share with you some of the exciting accomplishments our faculty have recently achieved and activities with which our professors are currently involved. [Faculty Activities and Accomplishments Report—July]

Thank you again for the opportunity to represent the SFA faculty. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have at this time. Alternatively, my name and contact information appears at the bottom of the faculty activities and accomplishments report. I would welcome the chance to visit with you at any time. Thank you.