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President of the Senate

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Remarks of Lieutenant Governor Rick Perry at the first meeting of the Special Commission on 21st Century Colleges and Universities

Thank you Chairman Adams. Let me start by thanking each of you for your service on this new commission and for your commitment to the great State of Texas.

Education is the most important thing we do as a state. By improving our higher education system and opening the door of opportunity for more and more Texans, you will help make this state a better and stronger place.

With an increasingly global economy, advances in telecommunications, and the incredible progress in high-technology, more and more jobs will require a college education.

But today in Texas only about 20 % - or one in five - of our citizens earn undergraduate or graduate degrees. Unless we encourage more of our citizens to pursue a college education - whether it's at a four-year institution or at a community or technical college - Texas will suffer from a growing education gap.

That education gap could mean a Texas with fewer jobs, less innovation and a host of social challenges in an increasingly competitive world.

Higher education has a dramatic impact on the future prosperity of our citizens and our state.

For those of you who regularly speak to school groups, the following statistic will immediately get the attention of any red-blooded high school student. By continuing their education beyond high school and earning a college degree they will earn an extra one million dollars over their lifetimes.

The earnings gap between high school drop-outs and those with graduate or professional degrees is a staggering \$2.7 million dollars. But in addition to personal wealth, college also means greater personal freedom. It means you have more choices about your career, your family, your future and your whole life.

The job of this commission - the reason I asked you all to serve Texas in this way - is to find ways to make college more accessible and affordable for more Texans, to raise the bar when it comes to educational excellence at our colleges. And to help make sure our higher education institutions are preparing our workforce for the jobs of the future.

I also want to make a few recommendations as you get to work:

I view this as a long-term project to create a blueprint for the future of higher education in Texas. It's taken almost 125 years to create our higher education system. We're not going to overhaul it in 13 months.

First, work with the Higher Education Coordinating Board, the college and university systems, state agencies and the private sector to see what they can accomplish on their own. When you have done that, work with the senators here today and with my office to recommend changes that require legislative action, recognizing that it may take four or six or 10 years to get where we need to be in higher education.

But we do need to get to work today in a visionary way, to make a good higher education system even better.

Second, avoid pitting our schools or systems against one another. As an Aggie living in Austin I can tell you that loyalties run strong.

One of the surest ways to bring this process to a screeching halt is to take from one system and give to another, or to favor a particular system or campus. Remember that parochial interests can undermine our goal to improve higher education across the entire state.

I would also encourage you to avoid pitting education against other important state functions like health and human services or criminal justice needs.

Education is our state's top priority, but without safe streets and healthy families Texas cannot succeed.

Third, money alone will not improve higher education. We spend more than \$6 billion a year on higher education in Texas - including a nearly \$1 billion increase last session.

We need to find ways to stretch those dollars, making them work better and smarter.

The Texas economy is strong, but it's too soon to tell what our budget situation will be in January of 2001. Don't count on money alone to get the job done for our colleges and universities.

Fourth, always keep technology in mind. The Internet, telecommunications and computer technology can dramatically change higher education.

It can change the way education is delivered. Computers and Internet access can complement bricks and mortar.

A single Mom in Edinburg, for example, can now use a computer at a public library, at a community college, or at home to access the best universities, museums, and libraries in the world.

Technology could soon become more important than geography when it comes to the delivery of knowledge and education. Technology also places new demands on workforce development. Without a skilled, educated, and prepared workforce, Texas cannot keep up the pace of job creation we have seen in recent years.

Higher education - especially community and technical colleges - can mean the difference between business and entrepreneurial success and economic stagnation. Those systems must be tailored to the needs of our citizens - offering courses in the evening, on weekends, and via the Internet.

That education must also be tailored to the needs of the workplace. Our colleges must be flexible enough to work with employers to train the skilled workers they need, as quickly as they need them.

Few adults can afford to take time off work to continue their education. Yet those same adults can't afford to let their job skills become obsolete. Community and technical colleges are well-positioned to afford our citizens lifetime learning opportunities and the opportunity to pursue their dreams of a better tomorrow.

Fifth, remember that Texas is an increasingly diverse state when it comes to culture, ethnicity, and our economy. Higher education must be accessible for all Texans, regardless of their backgrounds or economic status.

You may have noticed in the newspapers over the weekend that minority enrollment at our public universities and community colleges is now the highest ever.

This trend must continue. Diversity is an asset. An effective and inclusive education system strengthens that asset to the benefit of all Texans.

And finally, think differently. Ask the tough questions. Challenge the status quo. New ideas can be as powerful as new technology. And if someone tells you something can't be done ask "why not?"

Mr. Chairman and members, I look forward to your work.

I encourage you to travel our state and listen to local students, parents, and teachers. Examine what other states are doing so we can learn from their successes and failures. Talk to the business community that puts our college graduates to work - to determine what we can do to help them grow, expand and create jobs right here in Texas.

Thank you again. I'm honored that you would agree to serve and help strengthen the foundation of this great state - our education system. Nothing we do will be more important to the long-term future of Texas. Thank you.