Good morning. When I took the oath of office as the 47th governor of this state, I told Texans that as long as I serve in public office, my passion will be higher education.

A college education is the ticket to opportunity in the new millennium. In the last decade in the U.S., twice as many jobs have been created that required a college degree than those that did not require a college degree.

Graduates of 4-year colleges, on average, make $1.2 million more in lifetime earnings than their counterparts with no more than a high school degree. Looked at in annual terms, a college graduate earns an average salary of about $45,000 a year compared to the high school graduate who averages $24,000 a year.

Perhaps the most telling statistic is that only one in five Texans has an undergraduate or graduate degree. Among our Hispanic and African-American populations, those numbers are lower. Clearly that is a trend that cannot continue if we are intent on a future of greater promise and prosperity as a people.

Last year I formed a special commission to fully examine higher education in Texas. The bright and diverse minds that make up the Special Commission on 21st Century Colleges and Universities have traveled our state and extensively studied our system of higher education. They have found some things they like, and they have found some things we can do better as a state.

And I will tell you this, I will never be satisfied with the status quo when the goal is something greater.

Today we are unveiling a wide-ranging proposal to make a good system better. It is built on a few core principles:

First, higher learning should be accessible to every willing Texan. Second, the success of higher education is dependent on the success of public education. And third, while we strive to make our institutions great, our ultimate and primary goal is to educate…and to move forward the lives of our 20 million citizens.

This report is therefore aptly titled “Moving Every Texan Forward,” because that is what education is about…providing hope and greater opportunity for every one of our citizens.

Toward that end, the commission is putting forward numerous recommendations today, some of which are directed...
Let me first discuss our goals for the upcoming legislative session.

We would like to see funding for the TEXAS Grant program more than doubled. This visionary program provides access to citizens who would otherwise be left out of the college classroom.

In 1999, of the 83,500 students who graduated from high school having completed a college-preparatory curriculum, 44,000 demonstrated financial need making them eligible for a TEXAS Grant. Because of limited funding, only 25 percent of that population actually benefited from a TEXAS Grant.

Not only will expanding this program help our neediest Texans, but it will primarily help our minority students. Currently, Texans of minority descent represent 47 percent of graduating seniors, but 66 percent of our TEXAS Grant recipients.

Secondly, the commission is making several recommendations to establish a more seamless system of pre-K through 16 education.

The main components of this plan include making the “Recommended High School Program” the standard curriculum, creating a statewide marketing campaign to highlight the importance of a college education, and authorizing a “PreK through 16 Council” to advise policy-makers on how to align the goals and mission of public education and higher education.

Additionally, access and participation must be accompanied by high standards of excellence. Critical to furthering the goal of educational excellence is mission focus. We would like to see all of our colleges and universities develop centers of excellence.

We believe the legislature should target supplemental funding to be used as an incentive for the pursuit of educational excellence. And we also would like the legislature to lower the student-faculty ratio to improve the learning environment.

There are other items to be considered in the next session that you will see in the report, including recommendations to improve college preparation, provide incentives for collaboration, and enhance research capability. But I would like to finish by discussing a long-term idea that can transform higher education in Texas.

When it comes down to it, our primary focus is on students: the primary customers of higher education. I would like state legislators and all Texans to consider a new funding system that is student-centered.

We should look at the commission's proposal to change our main funding mechanism from one that emphasizes direct appropriations to institutions to one that emphasizes funding for student grants.

If you compare Texas to a number of other states, we have a very low grant to loan ratio. The need for continued expansion of grant opportunities is abundantly clear as too many Texans miss out on the opportunities of higher learning. By directing more and more funding to students and parents, institutions may better serve the needs of students.

This is a bold idea. It essentially means that the state of Texas will guarantee a scholarship to every Texan who qualifies in an amount that would cover the average cost of tuition, fees and books at a public institution of higher
education. And it puts students first.

It doesn’t mean we would entirely eliminate direct funding for research and construction, but it does mean more young, fertile minds will be empowered to pursue their dreams regardless of family income, the color of their skin, or the sound of their last name.

I have said often, and I will say again, that I would not stand before you today as the governor of this state if I had not had the opportunity to attend an institution of higher learning. From humble beginnings often come the most vivid of dreams. There are a lot of young Texans with vivid dreams, and our primary goal in state government should be to help them realize them.

Before I turn over the podium to chairman Adams, I want to say a heartfelt thank you to him, and to all the members of this commission, for the long hours of hard work and dedication they put into this effort. There is no more important effort related to our future as a state than that of improving higher education.

With that, I will turn the podium over to chairman Adams to speak about the tremendous work of the commission.