Speech - May 6, 2002

Text of Gov. Perry's Announcement in Houston On Higher Education Initiatives

(NOTE: Gov. Perry frequently deviates from prepared text.)

There is no greater priority in this state than the education of our young Texans. An educated Texan inherits a world of unlimited opportunity.

Over the last couple of months, I have talked about my concrete, detailed plan to improve public schools in Texas.

I have focused on improving early childhood learning, creating a better teaching environment, improving science instruction, utilizing classroom technology better, and keeping more students in school because a child who drops out of school faces a lifetime unfulfilled promise.

But our educational mission does not end the day a young Texan receive that high school diploma. We must change the culture in this state so that every child sets his or her sights on a college education. A college degree means great empowerment, and greater opportunity.

In the Texas of the 21st Century, we must have a seamless Pre-K through 16 educational system.

Our greatest challenge in higher education remains ensuring our schools are accessible and affordable for every qualified student. Today, I am unveiling a number of ideas that will make higher education more accessible and more affordable, and that will help make the transition from high school to college easier for many Texas students.

In the months to come, I will address other challenges in higher education, but the discussion about higher education must always begin on the subject of accessibility.

The good news is that over the last three years, we have taken important steps toward improving college accessibility.

We created the TEXAS Grant Program, and last session tripled its funding to $300 million, so 100,000 Texans from families with limited financial means can pursue their college dreams.

We created the TEXAS Grant Two Program to help more Texans get a marketable skill at a two-year college in Texas. We also passed legislation to expand the pool of computer science and engineering graduates coming out of Texas colleges.

Our children must be set on the pathway to college long before they enter high school. That's why we now require guidance counselors to inform students of all grades about the importance of going to college. That's also why we will soon begin a marketing campaign that stresses the importance of a college education.

We also made the college-prep curriculum...known as the recommended high school program...the standard coursework in Texas schools beginning with the freshman class of the fall of 2004. Students who enter college well grounded in the core subjects are much
more likely to finish their education.

All of these reforms have been implemented, or are in the process of being implemented, so that the young men and women in this room are ready for the opportunities of tomorrow.

My life was forever changed because the doors of Texas A&M University were open to farm kids like me. I was part of the first generation in my family to go to college, along with my older sister.

I believe we must make a special effort in this state to recruit students from families with no college history to pursue a college degree. The sons and daughters of a college graduate are substantially more likely to go to college themselves.

If we attract more first generation college students to our institutions of higher learning, it will pay great dividends for generations to follow. The average SAT score for a child of a parent with a graduate degree is 53 points higher than the national average. The average SAT score of a child whose parents only have a high school degree is 35 to 40 points below the national average.

That's why I am proposing that we create a new $20 million competitive grant program that gives colleges and universities an incentive to attract first generation students.

The funds from the First Generation Grant Program would be directed to colleges to recruit, counsel and prepare first generation students for college. At the discretion of each college and university, those funds could also be used as financial aid for first generation students. And we should encourage partnerships with private sector contributors to expand this program.

There was a day in Texas when a high school degree was good enough. That day has passed us by. There should not be one child in this state who thinks college is not in their future simply because mom and dad didn't go or couldn't go.

Programs like Project Grad here at Wheatley High are helping to send that message. Every child can learn, and every child can go on to college, if given the proper motivation, and exposed to the right influences.

My second proposal addresses college affordability. I am advocating today that the state of Texas revamp its College Access Loan Program...also known as the Hinson-Hazlewood program...to allow loans up to $5,000 a year to be offered to college students at zero percent interest. Utilizing $150 million in currently unused general obligation bond authority, we can help 25,000 additional students each year attend college.

By expanding the College Access Loan Program, we will provide a helping hand to many more deserving students from low-income and middle class homes.

Another important measure we can take to make college more affordable, with a modest $5 million investment, is to triple participation in the state-funded work-study program.

The work-study program is a successful program that sends a message to students that we want them to graduate, but we also want them to build up a little sweat equity in working toward that degree.

Currently, 2,600 students benefit from the Texas work-study program. My proposal will expand participation to 8,200 students. And if students agree to tutor or mentor children in our public schools, I would like to see the state pick up 100 percent of the cost.
To prepare more students for college, and increase access to higher learning, I believe we must encourage more partnership arrangements between our state colleges and our public schools.

The partnership between the Dallas Community College System and the Dallas Independent School District is a good example. At the El Centro campus, they formed the state’s only middle college, where under-performing students from the Dallas public schools can get a high school degree and an associate’s degree in a five-year program on the El Centro campus.

The Gates Foundation just announced they will be dedicating $40 million to further promote the middle college concept nationwide. I would like to see Texas compete for those funds so more students can finish their high school courses in this kind of alternative environment, and get a jump on college.

Second, I believe we should encourage two-year colleges to provide remedial coursework for high school students before they finish high school. We currently spend $150 million each year on remedial coursework at our colleges and universities. I would like to address areas where students are under-performing before they graduate from high school.

And third, we must encourage greater participation by high school students in concurrent courses….or dual credit courses…where a student takes a course at a community college that meets their curriculum requirements for high school, while also giving them credit toward college.

Concurrent courses will ensure more students graduate from high school prepared for college, and with a head start on college credit.

Finally, we must make greater use of modern technology to help increase college access.

I would like to see the recently established Virtual College of Texas develop several state-of-the-art core curriculum courses that any student enrolled in college could take, and that would be recognized by every institution. Internet-based learning will provide some students the added flexibility they need to finish their education sooner, saving their parents money, while making room for additional students each year.

I am proud that for the first time ever we have a million Texans enrolled in our colleges and universities. But we must take greater measures to ensure a college education is the opportunity of all, and not just the dream of some.

More young Texans must be trained for the opportunities of tomorrow. That means we must make every effort to attract first generation students to our colleges and universities, while continuing to take innovative steps to ensure our students are ready for college, and able to afford college.

A higher education is critical to achieving higher aspirations. We must empower more young Texans to live their dreams. Thank you.