A Call for Distinction

An excerpt from a speech
by F. Dominic Dottavio, Ph.D.
on the occasion of his inauguration as
Fifteenth President of
Tarleton State University on
October 2, 2009
I am pleased to share with you the address I delivered to the university community at my investiture on October 2, 2009. I hope that it conveys to you the sense of pride I feel to be president of this vibrant university that is unique in its history and character. Spirit, pride and tradition are woven into our fabric. I look forward to a future bright with opportunity.

Sincerely,

F. Dominic Dottavio, Ph. D.
President
October 2, 2009

Regent Stallings, Chancellor McKinney, Presidents McCabe and Thompson, ladies and gentlemen: I am honored to wear the chain and accept the mace representing the office of President of Tarleton State University.

Tarleton friends and family: Thank you for trusting me with the university you love, for teaching me its glorious traditions, for showing me its great strengths, for allowing me to work beside you on behalf of this wonderful university. I have been here just over a year, and only now am officially installed. You might say I've had the honeymoon without the wedding! Dr. McKinney, the delay could imply that one or the other of us got “cold feet.” Nothing could be further from the truth.

The real facts are these: We have simply been too busy working for our students and this university to take a breath.

The pace has been as fast as a Roderick Smith touchdown run, as relentless as the drum beat at Homecoming, as exhilarating as the Tarleton Stampede. My thanks to all of you for your welcoming spirit and for making me a true Texan—a Tarleton Texan.

I have had a taste of Texas in my life for nearly 40 years. When my sister Annie married into the Evans family, we knew she would move to Dave’s hometown of Houston because his roots go back several generations in Texas.

Little did I know that some 35 years later both of our children, Aaron and Adrea would move from Ohio to Texas to start their careers.
Nor could I have predicted that Lisette and I would come to Stephenville and to this extraordinary university.

I am fortunate to be surrounded today by many members of my Ohio, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas family. Your support and love mean a great deal to me.

Although she has already been introduced, I would again like to recognize my dear wife and best friend, Lisette. She has truly been a partner in all of my endeavors.

I am also delighted that so many friends from The Ohio State University and Heidelberg University are here today.
I am amazed that they traveled halfway across the country to meet all of you—and to say “goodbye” to me—again!

I am grateful for their counsel, wisdom, and especially their friendship. Their contributions to their institutions continue to inspire me.

To my campus and System colleagues and friends in Stephenville, thank you, thank you, for your Texas-sized welcome and your helping hands as I navigated the learning curve of Texas history and culture—academic and otherwise.
To advance my Lone Star education, this summer I read *The Texas Almanac—The Source for All Things Texan Since 1857*. It includes topography, archaeology, history, and even a guide to pronouncing place names in Texas.

I then tackled James Michener’s classic historical novel, *Texas*. All 1,332 pages.

Clearly, everything is bigger in Texas! Reading it reminded me that Six Flags isn’t just an amusement park, “Friday Night Lights” is much more than a TV series, and armadillos dig two different kinds of holes.

Perhaps the most famous line from the book is the last. Michener writes: “Never forget, son, when you represent Texas, always go first class.” May I say gratefully to the Inaugural Planning Committee, and every member of the campus community: Thank you for a celebration that has been nothing but a first-class Texan occasion.
The weeks’ events capture the energy and vitality, the pride and promise that are Tarleton.

Ours is a unique institution whose history, traditions, and character offer strategic advantages among 21st century universities. Tarleton combines the best of both public and private institutions of higher education.

This university, which started 110 years ago as a private college, maintains the vision of its founder and benefactor John Tarleton. But we have also been a proud part of the Texas A&M System for more than 90 years.
I have had the privilege to attend and lead both private and public universities. I can argue that possibly the single best model of higher education in the world is a mid-sized, “right-sized” public university like Tarleton.

One that provides an intensely personal education and is focused on student success. One that effectively blends curricular and co-curricular programs in a 24/7 learning environment. One that fosters, as Bryant Cureton suggested, a liberal approach to professional education and a professionally-relevant approach to liberal learning.

And one that does so at a public university price.

I appreciate President Thompson’s participation today and his wise counsel. At his inauguration in 1982 as Tarleton's 13th President, right on this stage, Dr. Thompson spoke of the importance of a well-rounded curriculum.
He said, and I quote:

“We are an increasingly specialized society, turning out millions of bright lawyers, accountants, pharmacists, engineers,—and farmers and ranchers. Do these graduates know anything else of life? Do they know how to speak, read, write, listen, or enjoy life better than the graduates of a 19th century university?”

End quote.

We can ask the same questions today. Are graduates being prepared to be effective leaders in their careers and their communities?
In my years as a chief scientist for the National Park Service, the scientific programs I led were multidisciplinary, covering most every discipline from anthropology to zoology.

This was never more clear than on a complex and controversial project which I helped to initiate: moving the Cape Hatteras lighthouse, the tallest brick lighthouse in the world.

In 1870 the Cape Hatteras Light was 1600 feet from the ocean. In 1987 it was 120 feet from the water.

Moving the lighthouse to safety was a remarkable feat, called by National Geographic “one of the engineering triumphs of the 20th Century.”
The planning issues were environmental, geological, architectural, and mechanical. They also were economic, historical, and definitely emotional.

Would the lighthouse collapse? Were we destroying its historic context? Did the Park Service have the right to move the cultural icon of North Carolina? Did it cost more to move it than it was worth? And on and on. It is possible that this project did more to prepare me to be a university president than any other.

Moving a 208-foot tall structure weighing 4,800 tons, that has been standing in the same place for more than 100 years, and moving it over 1000 yards—that’s about like moving an academic department or program in a slightly new direction.
I am fortunate my university studies were part of a well-rounded curriculum that provided a context for problem solving throughout my career.

Likewise, Tarleton provides both the context and curriculum to understand the global and local problems that face us today. Tarleton provides both a liberal arts education and professional preparation. We have a unique history and wonderful traditions. Our faculty and staff strive mightily to excel in teaching, learning and scholarship and to encourage student success.

These statements together describe Tarleton. But, what truly defines this university? What sets us apart from other universities of our size? What makes a Tarleton education distinctive?

We have a unique history and wonderful traditions. Our faculty and staff strive mightily to excel in teaching, learning and scholarship and to encourage student success.
For the past year, this is the question I have asked departments as I visited across the university. What makes you distinctive? I have listened to what is and what might be. I have seen passion and possibilities, momentum and motivation.

Drawing on those experiences, Provost Gary Peer and I have started a discussion on distinctiveness. And, we are asking the campus to join the conversation.

Across higher education, sometimes I think the only thing that sets us apart are mascots and colors, … and I know something about mascots.

I have been an Ohio State Buckeye—the poisonous fruit of the buckeye tree, otherwise known as “a killer nut.”

If that wasn’t difficult enough, I have also been a Heidelberg Student Prince. Believe me, that gives opponents a lot of ideas for taunts and creative signs!
So you can imagine my delight when I learned that we are the Tarleton Texans and our mascot is the Texan Rider! Accomplished students and capable horsemen and women, the Texan Rider is a magnificent representative of Tarleton spirit and pride.

Except for a colorful array of mascots, in truth, many colleges and universities look very much alike.

And so my question: How can Tarleton stand apart from the crowd? What is or can be distinctive about a Tarleton education?

I ask the question not because we want to be purple when everyone else is red. Our distinction will not be in being different, but in making a difference in the lives of our students and their communities.

Students and their families expect a university degree to lead to a good job and a meaningful career. But they also expect more. And, so do we.

As educated women and men, Tarleton graduates should be prepared not just to do something, but to stand for something.
Facing a number of complex social, cultural, and political issues, they should be ready to be change makers and difference makers, or as we challenged our new freshmen, to become legendary. Our opportunity for distinction is to connect a university education to real life issues, to effectively link in-class and out-of-class learning. Or as our Quality Enhancement Plan Committee suggests, we need to “Keep it Real.”

No single discipline has a monopoly on solutions to the global and local problems that face us today.

Leveraging Tarleton's already broad strengths across the curriculum and in our co-curricular programs, we can offer a menu of experiences for our students—internships, study travel, research projects, co-curricular endeavors—that are integrated around particular themes.

Several preliminary themes that Dr. Peer and I have discussed include: leadership and service, scholarship and intellectual inquiry, global and multicultural perspectives, new technologies, creativity and innovation.
We would like to explore whether completion of electives in thematic areas like these can be linked to co-curricular experiences and then tagged as “degrees with distinction.” Certification in the academic record would confirm that a graduate explored an issue in depth as part of a co-curricular program.

How will this work? That, ladies and gentlemen, will be the subject of our campus-wide conversations.

Regardless of how it works, such a distinctive program will communicate our relevance and advance our strategic goals.

Under President McCabe's leadership, a Strategic Plan was developed that provides a foundation for our continued growth. Last fall, I distilled the essence of that plan into four strategic goals, the 4Es:

**Excel in Scholarship, Teaching, and Learning**

**Expand Our Horizons**

**Encourage Leadership, Service, and Student Success**

**Extend our Reach**
These “Four Es” took hold, and departments, colleges, and individuals have brought them to life and advanced the quality of a Tarleton education. With these shared goals and a clear mission, we are ready to take our place as a great regional research university with distinctive undergraduate programs that integrate the liberal arts, professional programs, and co-curricular activities with real-world challenges and opportunities.
A decade ago, Tarleton celebrated its Centennial and, as many of you remember well, the ceremony included an inspiring new song, “The True Flame.”

The words are a call to action and a promise of success.

Like a beacon in the darkness
Shines our alma mater bright,
As one hundred bonfires burning
Guide us homeward through the night...

In our ever-growing embers
Shines Tarleton’s bright pure call
To a culture of distinction
In her varied hallowed halls.
Together we must hear the “bright pure call” to Tarleton’s “culture of distinction.” Working together, distinction can be, will be ours.

I have told each of the graduates on my watch, the Tarleton gates are always open. Open to new ideas. Open to new opportunities. Open to all of you. With your help this will always be.

Thank you for the support and inspiration you have given me and that you continue to give to this remarkable university.

F. Dominic Dottavio, Ph. D.

Fifteenth President of Tarleton State University
Item with ink applied necessary for Print Booklet to handle "blank" page
“The gates are always open.”

Tarleton State University

A member of The Texas A&M University System since 1917, Tarleton State University, an Equal Employment Opportunity and Affirmative Action Employer and Educator, is committed to excellence through diversity.