



Meeting Notes
Texas A&M University McAllen Higher Education Center Advisory Council
McAllen, Texas
May 6, 2016

The first meeting of the advisory council was convened and held on May 6, 2016, at the McAllen Convention Center in McAllen, Texas.

The following members of the Board were present for the meeting: Alonzo Cantu, Rene Ramirez, Sergio Contreras, Keith Patridge, Steve Ahlenius, Josh Klostermann, Mike Rhodes, Roxanne de La Garza Garcia, Pat Kunz, Anabell C. Cardona, Trent Bishop, Eduardo Campirano, Conrado Alvarado, Daniel M. L. Hernandez, Carlos Margo, Roberto “Bobby” Villarreal, Ricardo X. “Ricky” Ramirez, Gilberto Salinas.

Task Committee members from Texas A&M present for the meeting: Mr. Chad Wootton, Dr. Kristi Shryock, Dr. Deb Matthews, Mrs. Olga Gabriel,

Welcome and Introductions

Advisory Council Chair Alonzo Cantu convened the meeting and introduced Dr. James K. Nelson, Director of Engineering Academic Initiatives, Office of the Vice Chancellor and Dean, and University Project Coordinator for McAllen Initiative.

Dr. Nelson introduced task committee members present from Texas A&M and proceeded to read a prepared statement from Chancellor John Sharp thanking the advisory council members for serving. Dr. Nelson reiterated the goals for the meeting.

Mr. Cantu asked everyone present to introduce themselves. After introductions, Mr. Cantu informed the council that the Attorney General has advised the University that PUF funds can be used for capital construction of the proposed higher education center, dependent upon all appropriate board of regents, higher education coordinating board and other approvals pertaining to delivery of higher education in Texas.

Mr. Cantu and Dr. Nelson reviewed the operating guidelines of the Council, which had been shared with each member previously. , Mr. Cantu requested a motion to approve council’s operating guidelines; the motion was seconded and was passed unanimously.

Dr. Nelson presented some background information to the Council and emphasized the number of students from the Rio Grande Valley that were admitted in the Fall of 2015 (950) and just under 400 officially enrolled. Since 2005, 1,999 students from the Valley have graduated from the university. His presentation continued with an overview of Texas A&M's presence in the Valley today and which programs are being offered.

Chad Wootton, Associate Vice President for External Affairs, Texas A&M University, added that 1,000 students from the Valley have been accepted this year and about 600 have accepted the admission offer.

Dr. Nelson continued his presentation and stressed several points about why Texas A&M is pursuing this endeavor. He said the university does not want to look at this in silos; rather the University is looking at unique opportunities it can bring to the table that students in the Valley would otherwise not have.

Dr. Nelson mentioned the partnership that has been developed between Hidalgo County, City of McAllen and Texas A&M with intention to expand Texas A&M offerings of education to people of the Valley. He reviewed briefly the existing site and efforts in the 4 county area including Agrilife Research & Extension Center in Weslaco, Colonias program in 42 Community Centers along the border, Healthy South Texas initiative in concert with Texas A&M University Health Science Center and Agrilife Extension, as well as the currently approved site in McAllen, on McCoil Road where Public Health degrees are currently offered.

He reviewed the partnership elements including the negotiated land in Tres Lagos development, which includes a 100-acre site where the proposed higher education center will be located when all approvals are obtained.

Dr. Nelson continued by touching on guiding principles: make sure that what the university is doing is relevant and that what is being done is needed. He stressed this is a part of Texas A&M University flagship institution in College Station and not a separate regional institution.

The next part of Dr. Nelson's presentation focused on next steps: identify needed programs (through town hall meetings, industry advisory council, workforce projections), seek necessary approvals, classes anticipated to be offered (Fall 2017 initial offerings at a location yet to be determined, Fall 2018 in the higher education center).

Dr. Nelson indicated that while the process is moving very rapidly for an academic initiative, Texas A&M is committed to meeting all required approvals and to gathering community input to ensure it is a successful proposal with lasting impact. He offered that Chancellor Sharp set a bold goal of having classes in the new degree offerings begin in Fall 2017 with a late summer 2018 ribbon cutting on the new facility at Tres Lagos.

He continued by discussing the industry needs in the Valley that the university has been hearing the most about: mining (oil and gas), biomedical and life sciences, agriculture, and manufacturing.

At this time Dr. Nelson directed council members to their folders and encouraged members to fill out the workforce worksheet, with the information to be taken back and used in College Station.

Mr. Cantu again stressed the goal of the meeting and asked members to voice their ideas for future program offerings with a focus on what jobs will be available in the coming years. He mentioned SpaceX and the growing healthcare sector.

A council member mentioned the ability to tie in to other programs, logistics, for example, whether related to producing or to freight mobility and shipping.

Another council member noted that it is hard to find good engineers in the Valley and mentioned the challenge of keeping engineers in the Valley after graduation.

Another council member added that automation and robotics will bring plant costs down across the manufacturing sector. He emphasized the need for workers to be trained in tool design and toolmakers. Another member drew attention back to manufacturing side, including machining operation. He made mention of a new company in town that asked for a list of available engineers (mechanical, electrical and chemical engineers) and the difficulty of putting this list together. He said at the moment there are not enough engineers to fill the available spots.

A council member made note of fiber development, fiber design, and entrepreneurship and business programs.

Mr. Cantu also mentioned the need for construction engineers—specialized engineers—fueled by the growing needs of hospitals and the healthcare system.

Dr. Nelson circled back to the entrepreneurship question and made mention of the existing programs and elective courses. Something could similarly be proposed into the curriculum here.

A council member confirmed this model is already a part of engineering programs in College Station, and referenced the 4 plus 1 program at Texas A&M University as an example.

Another council member mentioned programming, precision agriculture and other things that are emerging in technology. He noted a difference between considering the types of jobs that we have today or anticipating what jobs will be here in the future.

A council member again brought up the need for environmental science engineers to address the growing environmental issues, including water, sanitation and environmental impacts.

Mr. Cantu brought forward the notion of anticipating of what is going to be here and mentioned the new medical school, citing the transformation in San Antonio after the city got a medical school as an example. He stated the Valley is going to undergo a transformation, perhaps faster than San Antonio, and will need more engineers.

However, in light of these perceived needs, Mr. Cantu asked the council to also consider other areas that will expand apart from engineering as the Valley continues to grow, i.e. hotels, restaurants, service industry.

One council member made note of SpaceX and their recruiting efforts locally. SpaceX wants to start working with kids at the middle school level and they need to be prepared to take Calculus 3 by the time they graduate high school.

Dr. Nelson noted the middle school/high school outreach component as an action item, and stressed that Texas A&M University has been working on state wide outreach efforts and fully anticipates an enhanced presence working with k-12 schools across the valley. He asked that k12 outreach and STEM opportunities, be included as an action item for this discussion.

One advisory council member said the Valley has as an advantage in that kids do want to come back and live here. He pointed towards efforts to improve quality of life in the Valley, including building communities with desirable lifestyles that attract companies and courting high tech companies that will hold our children here. He also agreed that the familial ties and entrepreneurial spirit here is stronger than in other places.

Dr. Nelson added changing the perception for opportunities in the Valley/marketing the Valley and how to continue building entrepreneur philosophy as action items.

One council member suggested improving accessibility issues for kids in obtaining higher education is a major issue and “creating the opportunity” is an immediately attainable goal.

Another advisory member highlighted the point that the University needs to become a true partner with the community and work together to identify what we can be done, insisting they all become economic developers to help bring industries to the Valley – this is the core of what this initiative is trying to address.

Dr. Nelson added that the university can actively support the economic development expansion activities moving forward.

Mr. Wootton emphasized that the university is an educational entity foremost, with a teaching, research and service mission. He commented that university engagement in economic development, k-12 partnership, regional workforce development, community development/marketing, etc., is aspect of the service mentioned and that Texas A&M faculty embrace these opportunities as mutually beneficial enhancements of community and region.

Mr. Wootton also asked a few council members who hadn't spoken to share some thoughts, particular to opportunities in the agricultural and healthcare industries more specifically.

One council member offered that cold storage, logistics and food safety are particularly important. Food inspectors are in short supply, as well as staff that know compliance, biological and food processing rules and trade regulations and logistics will hamper the valley's position as a global leader if not addressed.

Mr. Cantu stated the need for leadership from across the Valley to get together and discuss the opportunities presenting themselves.

Dr. Nelson added planning a town hall to bring together leadership with Texas A&M acting as a mediator as an action item. This action was supported by several members of the advisory council who favored the assembly of local industry and educational leaders to discuss current and future opportunities to address.

A council member asked the members present from the local school districts if there is any evidence-based studies on what kinds of careers kids would like to pursue.

One school district representative stated there are ongoing efforts to establish a local STEM high school, but that there no evidence-based studies.

Another council member pointed out that IDEA schools have started taking kids outside of the Valley to visit universities. He further inquired of the council how this campus will be connected to "Aggie culture" and what efforts will be made so that students attending A&M here feel truly connected to College Station.

Mr. Wootton stated that in our proposals and evidence for accreditation the reviewer's expectations are that Texas A&M will make the investment necessary to ensure the rigor and experience is similar to that of College Station. He commented on the success Texas A&M has had in doing this in Ft. Worth at the new Law School and as far away as Qatar and that the commitment is to ensure this for the students studying in the Valley. He commented on exchanges between various sites of Texas A&M for students to interact and experience campus life, student organizations, the Aggie Ring, etc. as examples.

The meeting concluded with Dr. Nelson adding the following to the action items:
Work with EDCs to quantify manufacturing needs--including aerospace, quantify water and environmental needs and quantify nursing needs.

Meeting was adjourned and lunch served.