

President-to-Presidents Lecture
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Virtual

“Being ‘All In’ Everyday—Leading in Higher Education”
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Javier, thanks for the nice introduction. I am so honored to be asked to provide this lecture today, and, admittedly a little intimidated. When Dr. García called to say the Board nominated me for this honor, I wondered what message I could bring to a group of people I so admire. I hope my message reminds all of us why we chose this career.

As president at SHSU, I learned quite a bit about the university’s namesake, Sam Houston. One of his quotes not only aligns with our topic today but is also one of my favorites—“A leader is someone who helps improve the lives of other people or improve the system they live under.”

Sam Houston made several courageous decisions based upon personal values. Facing overwhelming pressure, he chose to step down from the governorship of Texas versus pledging allegiance to the confederacy. Houston would remain a pariah for the rest of his life.

While the consequences of our decisions may not be as dire as those experienced by Sam, the work done every day by all of you requires courage and value-based leadership in order to make a difference in thousands of lives. It’s challenging but tremendously satisfying.

I have seen evidence of the difference that has been made at universities and colleges across the nation, when leaders like those found at both SHSU and within the membership of AASCU, go all in for the communities and constituents they serve. Some of my fondest memories are the stories I have heard from many of you about a specific student or a new initiative to benefit students. Your passion was on full display. As such, each of you have my admiration and gratitude for choosing this as your life’s work.

With that in mind, I would like to share why I believe being “all in” every day not only set me on a path of leadership but also made all the challenges and sacrifices worth the price of that leadership.

Before I start, I want to ask you to be all in for the next 20–30 minutes and set down your cell phone. Why you might ask? Well, I hope that answer becomes apparent as I share my personal leadership philosophy in combination with some inspirational guidance from notable leaders over the past century.

So, in this first section let’s capture the moment and take out a piece of paper for notes.

While John F. Kennedy’s life was tragically cut short, his three years as President were filled with big dreams. His ability to inspire a nation as well as his courage to confront hard issues and challenges not only began to shine a light on systemic racism but even brought humankind to the moon! Kennedy was all-in when it came to leading the nation and, in so doing, helped the United States become a world leader.

His words underpin my philosophy of establishing a clear direction and purpose every day!

Being all-in to me is about passion. It fuels our efforts and gives us the courage to move forward. Focusing this energy and power on the tasks at hand, can bring about sustainable change.

The most successful people in life are always thinking big even while tackling the smallest of details. That’s how dreams come true. It takes courage and conviction, an all-in everyday attitude with passionate determination, to move your organization into the future.

As you know, it wouldn’t be a lecture without a few exercises sprinkled in. I’d like to pause here and take the opportunity to reflect on passion and how it relates to our jobs.

Exercise #1: Remind yourself of why you do this job. What are you passionate about? Write it down. Now focus on that passion. What does all-in look like and feel? How does it translate into one decision you need to make today.

Interpersonal relationships are key to both professional and personal success. I would say that an “all-in every day” approach has helped me build critical relationships and connect with people from all walks of life. Its human nature to react positively and open up when you feel someone is personally interested and vested in you. People need to feel they are heard and understood. Inspiration begins with a belief in oneself and others. Empathy and effective communication are key aspects of good leadership.

In organizations, particularly at the senior level, topics are rarely brought up without an underlying reason. If you are not all in, your attention focused and centered, you might miss the critical nuances and context of the conversation, which can lead to miscommunication and ultimately, flawed decision-making.

Encouraging and soliciting ideas, having thoughtful conversations, building confidence to speak up and inspiring others to think in innovative ways are the result of good communication and can lead to transformative change.

Exercise #2: Write down one big picture item important to you right now. Can you list who you need to listen to, who needs to be in that conversation? The obvious choice (often based on the org chart) is not always the best choice. Make sure to include people with boots on the ground as well as key influencers.

We’ve talked about courage and touched on confidence and change. These three C’s have enabled me to make the decisions I need to make, to sometimes go against the tide and do what is right. Having passion, focus, building connections, actively communicating are all within an individual’s control to become all-in every day.

Being all-in during my career, there have been several times where I disagreed with prevailing, entrenched beliefs or expectations of an organization or individual. All three C’s come into play in these instances. You have to have the confidence to be willing to communicate in a constructive way armed with data-driven solutions in support of change. There is always a risk to do so, but if you have been bringing that all-in everyday approach to the organization—you bring credibility to be heard.

Exercise #3: For you, what brings you courage and inspires confidence? How do you outwardly project that to others? How do you instill that in your institution?

This credibility combined with an all-in passion can instill confidence in your judgement. Success can be achieved by moving things ahead, oftentimes in smaller, incremental steps. As a leader, you just have to keep the forward momentum. Part cheerleader and part facilitator, we motivate others to move forward while clearing their path of obstacles. An all-in attitude is always strengthened through courage, confidence and a focus on constructive change.

I would like to speak a bit more on the idea of change. I believe courage and confidence helped me in accomplishing the most critical part of leadership today—managing change. Everyone is living through an unprecedented time, where change—or the third ‘C’ is more important than ever.

The only constant in the world has always been change, but it is accelerating as never before. The amount of information—the very size of the digital universe will double every two years at least, a 50-fold growth from 2010 to today, 2020. At no time in history, have we realized the acceleration of change like in the past six months of the pandemic. All of us, can be leaders of change at any level of the university or at any organization. Part of my starting the Emerging Leaders Program at SHSU was the numerous high-performing faculty and staff we have at the university who work so diligently every day. This program graduated key influencers across campus at varying levels who could help lead change from inside the organization. They help to remove barriers to change in ways that are meaningful to their colleagues.

Exercise #4: Rate your organization’s willingness to embrace change on a scale of 1 to 5. Five being very high and one being very low. What steps can you take to improve your rating or maintain it?

The idea of no action is not an option if you are all-in every day—why? Because if you are all-in, you want to continue to make progress, even incrementally. My philosophy is to never really let off the accelerator. Yet how do you know if it is working. It is not a short-term answer, as Gates says, it may take ten years to realize. My belief in “all-in every day” can go a long way in creating a culture open to change, which works well with the concept of sustainability.

You have your daily validation of accomplishments and realize the long term will take care of itself if you take care of the short-term items. You do not let roadblocks derail the need to accomplish the change. You might have to refocus in a different way but like running water, it finally gets through.

At SHSU, we realized that a college of medicine focused on the healthcare needs of rural and underserved communities was in great demand. It took four years of planning and research to get the concept approved by the Board of Regents. It took another two years to get the appropriate state approvals. Then almost another two years to receive accreditation approval and seat our first class in the fall of 2020. There were numerous challenges along the way, with lots of intermediate steps, both backwards and forwards. Yet, the full realization of the benefit of this change, won't even be achieved until these students become practicing doctors in another seven years. So many times, you work on the numerous parts before ever realizing the whole of the change and its long-term benefits.

Let me emphasize to you as an employee in higher education—if you are all in, the educational enterprise will move forward and you will impact not only students but society as a whole. When you provide access to an all-in, quality education, students will continue to excel in class every day. Several years later, they accomplish their dream of a college degree, which changes their life for the better long-term. We see this happen every day in our roles. Over these students' lifetime, they will typically earn \$1 million more in earnings than their counterparts who only possess a high school education. Those connections and relationships produce a return through our alumni in terms of support and goodwill. I constantly heard stories from alumni where a faculty or staff person made a meaningful difference for them—the story might be 10-20 or more years old. Warren Buffet has stated that, “Someone is sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago.” You all plant trees!

Critical to being all-in every day for me, personally is time!

If you are all-in every day—you optimize your daily time. You accomplish more and stay more focused to have the time for the things that mean the most—faith, family, friends—your dog, whatever enhances your daily life. So, let me give you a couple of quick examples:

Traveling in France about 7 years ago, I had to take a critical work call. Because of the time difference, I paced back and forth on the front steps of Versailles—got off the phone and returned to focus on a tour of the gorgeous villa and gardens with my husband and did not think about the call at all.

Or, when we were watching our grandsons and the youngest was not feeling well. The only way he slept was me holding him on my chest. Believe me I was into the moment of helping him rest. Nothing else was entering that moment.

Looking back at this point, I realize even more that life is about the moments, and those precious moments have created many great memories, making all the difference. We need to carve out time to replenish and focus on ourselves and our personal relationships.

My all-in every day philosophy is what has always helped to provide me that much needed balance, which in the end, I believe allowed me to have a successful, enriching career and personal life including incredible relationships.

I truly appreciate your attention to my philosophy of being all in everyday and its impact on my life and beliefs in leadership.

I would like to conclude with a lesson from another great leader. Given the social upheaval we have seen in response to long-standing, systemic racial inequalities, I believe ending with the inspirational and thoughtful insight of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr regarding education is timely and pertinent to our leadership today.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke about education quite eloquently. As an 18 year-old student at Morehouse College, he published "[The Purpose of Education](#)" in the February 1946 edition of the student newspaper. As an educator and university administrator, I am amazed that over 74 years later, Dr. King's profound words and observations remain so relevant and immutable.

I would like to share with you some excerpts from "The Purpose of Education" that I believe resonate with the present-day challenges being faced by colleges and universities as well as by the students attending or aspiring to pursue a college education.

Dr. King wrote—and, once again, he was only 18 years old when he published this article:

“It seems to me that education has a two-fold function to perform in the life of man and in society: the one is utility and the other is culture. Education must enable a man to become more efficient, to achieve with increasing facility the legitimate goals of his life.”

He goes on to state, that:

“Education must also train one for quick, resolute and effective thinking. To think incisively and to think for one’s self is very difficult. We are prone to let our mental life become invaded by legions of half-truths, prejudices, and propaganda. At this point, I often wonder whether or not education is fulfilling its purpose. A great majority of the so-called educated people do not think logically and scientifically. Even the press, the classroom, the platform, and the pulpit in many instances do not give us objective and unbiased truths. To save man from the morass of propaganda, in my opinion, is one of the chief aims of education. Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction.

I think that is worth repeating:

“...Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, discern the true from false, real from unreal, and facts from fiction.”

His observations are even more applicable today. A story can go from a single tweet to global coverage in seconds given the digital nature of mass media and the internet. There is an overwhelming volume of information and data, which is often not vetted and comes from dubious sources, available to anyone with a click of a mouse or swipe on a pad. How many of you remember your parents having a full set of encyclopedias proudly displayed on the shelf? And how many times when you asked a question were you promptly invited to peruse the pages of the encyclopedia or dictionary? Today, when we have a question, the response is often just two words that we’re all too familiar with...“Google it.” And, finally, our conversations are being reduced down to fit in 280 characters. In this brave new world, I believe Dr. King’s words are even more prophetic, and that education and its underlying purpose has become even more critical.

Finally, Dr. King sums up the purpose of education with these words:

“We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education. The complete education gives one not only power of concentration, but worthy objectives upon which to concentrate. The broad education will, therefore, transmit to one not only the accumulated knowledge of the race but also the accumulated experience of social living.”

He clearly states intelligence plus character is the goal of true education. Therefore, we must not confuse education with knowledge.

The lesson that young Martin Luther King, Jr. draws is intelligence and critical reasoning are not enough to make us educated. Through his eloquent prose, he reminds us key personal attributes are needed to develop a sound mind and also a solid character. Our life’s work is to develop those attributes in our students.

Dr. King speaks of an education that teaches ethics and critical thinking hand in hand, an education that produces students with an understanding of personal and social responsibility. Students who are ready upon graduation to enter the world and the workplace and make a meaningful contribution to both.

As a university president, you lead and guide a very special community. One where men and women, representing the true purpose of education, dream of a making the world a better place.

Dreams are beautiful things. They are the provenance of humankind. Through their dreams—Jules Verne inspired our imagination, Thomas Edison shattered scientific boundaries, and Leonardo da Vinci redefined creative intelligence. Men and women throughout history have helped to reshape our world by pursuing their dreams. But Dr. King’s dream is different. His dream wasn’t an individual pursuit—a scientific discovery or a work of art - it was vision for a different future, a dream to be shared and embraced by society. One that continues to inspire us, challenge us and unite us.

Obviously, I’m not as eloquent as Dr. King, nor as visionary, but I am honored and blessed to spend my time in an industry where I see the impact and relevance of his dream every day on campus. People, many who are campus leaders and students, are carrying Dr. King’s vision forward, and keeping the dream alive. I truly believe AASCU institutions understand and embrace the true purpose of education.

I hope you take a moment to be “all in” with both your dreams and the collective dream for a better world.

Thank you for this honor of speaking today.