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## **Chancellor's Century Circle What Is PVAMU? Why Is PVAMU So Important?**

George C. Wright

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## Chancellor's Century Circle

### What Is PVAMU? Why Is PVAMU So Important?

Good Afternoon! To Chancellor McTeer and his staff, to the Presidents of other A&M Universities, and above all to members of the Chancellor's Century Circle, it is a distinct honor having you here on our beautiful campus. I am very very pleased that Mr. Don Clark, a person I admire, a PV alum and the Co-Chair of our Capital Campaign, is now a member of the CCC (sounds like ~~so~~ a work-force program <sup>of the TDC</sup> started by FDR). I mentioned our beautiful campus; do not be deceived by the rural, almost tranquil appearances of this campus: PVAMU is a very demanding institution. As President, I am expected to take part in a wide range of educational, community, political, and social activities. This ranges from Goat Day here on campus, to various church activities, to doing "steps," to serving as a judge at the annual Chili Cookoff. Even though I have been President for 18 months, it is <sup>already taking a toll on me:</sup> I used to have a lot more hair and I was even taller! show picture No seriously, I have never been treated better in my life: A wide range of people affiliated with PVAMU treat me as if I am royalty. In their minds, they can't do enough wonderful things for me as their President. This is a great place to be and it is a real honor serving as President of PVAMU!

**I have two goals in this presentation: to mention my background and philosophies; and to give you a sense of this important, historic University. In talking about my background, I did not believe until last**

night that that would be difficult to do. But, last night, as you know, President Robert Gates gave a presentation highlighting his long and distinguished career in the service of our government. The things that I say about myself, by comparison, will not be impressive at all. Just take for instance, Gate's close relationship with the Presidents. How can I top that? He mentioned President Carter; I once attended a History Conference where "former" President Carter spoke; Gates mentioned at length President Reagan; I arrived in Berlin on June 14, 1987, two days after Reagan had moved the people of that historic city; I attended the same program, as did President Clinton and indeed, I gave a speech in Little Rock in honor of the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Desegregation of Central High. But, President Clinton left immediately after speaking, as did 95% of the audience and only a few friends remained to hear me speak. I didn't even get to shake his hand, though later I did shake the First Lady's hand, which to some of you may be a good thing to some of you, it might not be a good thing. Finally, the <sup>current</sup> ~~then~~ President Bush and me: about the best that I can say is that I know Don Evans who served as Secretary of Commerce and I know Alphonso Jackson, who current serves as Secretary of HUD. Jackson's daughter used to babysit for me when she was a student at UT! Do I compare with Gates or not???? Seriously, I was enthralled by his remarks last night; and it is an honor for me to be serving as the President of a sister A&M school along side someone like Bob Gates.

**When speaking before a group for the first time, I normally say “That I am a History Professor masquerading as an Administrator.”** I do so, in part, to get everyone to cut me some slack, as if faculty, students, and above all alums would really do that for a person in my position! But, I tell faculty, staff, and students that I am first a Professor and second an Administrator to let them know where my “educational roots” are, that ultimately I am a teacher who believes that my main responsibility is to enlighten, exchange ideas, offer constructive criticisms, and above all “inspire” students and everyone to “reach beyond what may seem to be their grasps.” **In pursuing this approach, I do not “devalue” the role of President; but I want to remain focused on the “real job,” which is to educate students and enhance the professional careers of our faculty and staff.**

I hope this does not sound boastful: **I am a very fortunate person because of the many truly outstanding people who have made a difference in my life, starting with my wife of 34 plus years, who I married when I was 20 years old, and because of the wonderful jobs I have held at several outstanding Universities since 1977.** The early formative years of my life were lived in a segregated society, which I describe as “Life Behind A Veil,” in my first book. In many ways I benefited from growing up in an all-black community. The adults in my community were focused on making sure I became a productive citizen. For instance, in the all-black schools I attended through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I had extremely dedicated teachers who brought out the best in me. They told me that I could accomplish things, that I could change my life situation, and that I could “make something of myself.”

Those statements have held me in “good stead” from the time that I was a teenager, when feeling peer pressure, from the time when I thought that I did not have the “smarts” to make it in college or as an untenured faculty member, and down to the present, when I often face criticism for the decision I make.

**Above, all the adults in the black community made me accept responsibility for all of my actions.** (Mention the “snowball incident” in New York City involving the Dallas Cowboys). **Assuming responsibility for their actions is perhaps the most important lesson from my life that I want to share with PVAMU students.**

*\* My Mother SAID “ACT like you have good sense.”*

Despite being born into a racially segregated society, my teenage years coincided with a time of tremendous change in American society, when the doors to higher education opened widely for young blacks. I am only slightly exaggerating when saying that I was admitted to college in 1968 because I had a high school diploma and I could breathe. To honor the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the University of Kentucky started a summer program that led to my being awarded a scholarship for my four undergraduate years, a fellowship for the Master’s Degree, and then Duke University, a private school, awarded me a fellowship for the Ph.D. **The results, I a mediocre high school student, obtained the Ph.D. at age 27 and had a number of truly incredible opportunities awaiting me.**

In presentations to PVAMU students, I mention my educational background for several reasons: first, to illustrate that I come from the same kind of background as them; that of a single parent background, where I qualified for the free lunch program while in high school, where I was at best a student who did not study and plan for my future while in high school.

*Key point: I had pride: would not go through the free lunch line.*

*Frugal: would not buy a flower to go to the prom.*

**Second, I stress to them that I seized the opportunity that was made available to me by the University of Kentucky, and that they must do the same thing here at PVAMU. I tell them something “radical:” that in spite of all the problems that exist in society and in their personal lives, only they can prevent themselves from accomplishing whatever goals they set for themselves, that ultimately just like me, they will, in the final analysis, be limited only by their own lack of vision and will power. That, I truly believe is what PVAMU and American society are all about!**

**Third, I say to our students that because of the opportunities that have come my way—without my having done anything to deserve these opportunities—I must help other people. I did not take part in the Civil Rights Movement, but I greatly benefited from it. I often quote one of my favorite Bible Verses to students, which centers around “Sowing and Reaping.” I sent you to reap where you did not sow; others did the work, but you received the harvest. In other words, not only me, but PVAMU graduates must “sow so that others may reap.”**

**Based, I must admit, more on my upbringing than my years in educational institutions, I have adopted a rather straightforward, easy to understand, philosophy as President of PVAMU:** (1) We must block and tackle. (2) Students must receive an “education and not just a degree.” Winston Churchill once said. I believe his quote applies to receiving an education, which is, an on-going, never-ending process. To be educated one must be grounded in the basics, starting with writing and developing communicating skills. I encourage students to read a very important book, one that I read as a freshman in College: Strunk and White, Elements of Style. To state my point another way, **PVAMU students, to be truly educated, must think and write critically.** They must be able to defend their ideas; they must be open to viewpoints that differ from their own, and they must accept constructive criticism.

A key point: **I have learned some important lessons from every University that I have been associated with as a Faculty Member or as an Administrator, lessons, I believe, that will help me in my role as President of PVAMU.** My first teaching job was back home in Lexington, at the University of Kentucky. That might not be a big deal to you, but to Kentuckians, that is a bigger deal than UT and A&M combined! The people of Kentucky, even those who have never set foot on the campus in Lexington, have a sense of pride in their University and a desire to make it a premier University. That is an important lesson to share with everyone affiliated with PVAMU.

After teaching at UK, i.e, back at home for three years, I decided I wanted to go somewhere else, where no one knew me and see what would happen. This led me to Austin, Texas, to UT, a place that to me seemed bigger than life in both good and bad ways. **Key point: UT has long had a tradition of strong Faculty Governance, outstanding research-oriented faculty, many of whom are outspoken critics of the University or society at large. UT is noted for the independent thinking of its students.** In fact, when I was there, there were demonstrations every day, so much so that I told everyone to get me some help if they saw me participating in certain behavior! (Tell the joke about the religious groups). There is even a level of “cockiness,” that exist at UT, which is not all bad. I experienced many things at UT that I am bringing to PVAMU.

To show how fortunate I have been, even though I had the perfect job at UT, I was offered an endowed chair at Duke University. Duke, like UT, has strong Faculty Governance, committed alums, and a very strong desire to be a better University in the future than it has been in the past. **All of us “Dukies” actually take pride in the fact that Duke has improved to the point that we would not be admitted to the school today.** (That is most surely the case regarding me, and I worry a little bit that they might retroactively increase admission requirements and take the degree back, away from me)! Two important lessons: enhancing the reputation of the University is essential. Second lesson for PVAMU: Duke, like UT, shows what can happen when you have endowed money, and it is incumbent on those of us in leadership positions at this University to be increasing the level of external funding.



I learned some very important lessons during my 8 years as the Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs at the University of Texas at Arlington. I discovered, for example, that being the Provost is much more difficult than being the President; it is like being a jack-ass in a hail storm! I came to realize that the President gets the glory while the Provost does the work. No seriously, in many ways, being the Provost, the Chief Academic Officer, just might be the best job at the University.

There is no question that my years at UTA most surely prepared me to come to PVAMU. UTA, like PVAMU, has a great range of students, with the largest group being first generation. Why is that so significant? Because first generation students are often not as well prepared for college, in the sense of knowing what to expect; of not having the “support network” at home. First generation students are often rather fragile, and can decide to quit school over one or two negative incidents, with faculty, staff, and administrators. **In short, many PVAMU students are unsure of why they are here, of what college will lead to, and above all, they have little knowledge of their rights when trying to navigate through the University maze.**

All schools—including Texas A&M College Station, the University of Texas at Austin, and Duke—should be student-centered in their actions. But, this is especially true for PVAMU. Why, because of a far too common belief from a segment of the students at UTA and PVAMU that they are “second class citizens” compared, in UTA’s case, to students from UT-Austin and UT-Dallas, and in the case of PVAMU students, in comparison with students from Texas A&M, College Station. To counter this destructive belief here at PVAMU, we must have faculty who are not only knowledgeable about their subject matter but they understand that “inspiring” students is an important aspect of the job. Our faculty must be the right kind of role models for our students. Our faculty must understand that they can make a profound difference in the lives of the students who take their classes.

Please hear me on this, especially those of you who are affiliated with PVAMU: **we do get some of the best students; but more than that, we nurture our students and we provide them with new opportunities. We change the direction of the lives of our students. This is an important result of our providing access.**

All of this leads to a key point: virtually everyone who is proud of this University is quick to point out that along with UT Austin and Texas A&M College Station, PVAMU is mentioned in the Texas Constitution as being a University of the First Class. This is very important, and because of the AUF, it provides us with Excellence Funds. As President of PVAMU, I must do everything to maintain and strengthen this aspect of the school’s mission.

**Another truly important aspect of this school is that we are a special serving University.** What does that mean? It means that we must provide opportunities to first generation students. It means that we need to reach out to Hispanic young people and other “newcomers” to this nation. I take very seriously what was said in the OCR document of 2001 about the type of institution PVAMU is to become.

### **PVAMU Today**

There is a great deal of excitement and optimism on campus today fueled largely by the funds coming to PVAMU as a result of the Office of Civil Rights Priority Plan. This funding has led to the start of Ph.D. programs, additional Master-level programs, and the upgrading of course offerings at the undergraduate level. We are especially excited about our newest venture, the Undergraduate Medical Academy.

As you will see during your tour, our campus has some new buildings: Science and the Memorial Student Union. Under construction are the Architecture, Juvenile Justice, and Electrical Engineering buildings, all of which will be “state of the art,” but perhaps the “crown jewel,” is our new Nursing Building, which will be completed sometime within the next year in downtown Houston in the Texas Medical Center Complex.

The results: because of our new resources, new facilities, new programs, PVAMU will continue “Producing Productive People.” This fine University has provided the educational foundation for thousands of students who then entered and succeeded at professional schools and graduate programs. PVAMU is rightfully proud of its alums who have made careers in the government sector; indeed, we have produced generals and admirals and a countless number of graduates who have served this country in combat and in peace. Increased resources will ensure that these numbers grow.

## **Conclusion**

I will conclude by mentioning a number of goals that must be reached. **A very important goal is to increase the resources that are consistent with being a First Class University.** For one thing, sooner or later, the OCR dollars will be gone. We have launched a \$30 Million Capital Campaign to raise student scholarships, endow faculty chairs, and a range of other endeavors. So far, we are successful, though there is still a steep hill that must be climbed.

**A major goal: PVAMU must be true to its heritage, of being an HBCU.** Why is this so important? Because so many young blacks don’t know that members of their race have achieved. They don’t know their History. At the same time, an important aspect of understanding our History is to know that there have always been whites committed to this School. Why? Because our students need to have a fair, balanced view of race.

**Not just in the area of higher education, but in all aspects of the black struggle for change, there have been some committed whites involved.**

**Third, at this HBCU, it is important for all of ours students to think seriously about race, to where they know how “complicated” race is and how such issues as “Diversity,” “Affirmative Action,” and there will be others, have more than one perspective.** I want black students and the students of other races who attend PVAMU to experience Afro-American culture in its various forms. I want students, while at this University, to read some good books. The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin helped me get through my undergraduate years. Richard Wright’s 1940 Autobiography, Black Boy, helped me understand “race.”

**Ironically, for PVAMU to fully reach its potential it must change. It must become a more racially diverse University.** Whites need to be here. Why? They need to know the minority experience first hand. If our programs are of the quality that we believe that they are, then this should attract people of all races to this campus.

From its inception, PVAMU has served predominantly black students. But in the future, providing opportunities and educating the “underserved” means that PVAMU must aggressively recruit Hispanics. Why should this be done? Because of the changing demographics of Texas and American society. Please hear me on the point, which I am probably saying more to members of the PVAMU community than to our visitors: **While not neglecting our commitment to Afro-Americans, here at PVAMU, we must recruit Hispanic students because it gives us yet another significant way to truly make a difference in our society. The very nurturing that PVAMU has done for blacks will benefit Hispanic young people.** But here is the bottom line: regardless of the race of its students, PVAMU must continue making a strong contribution to society, and this will best be achieved by providing opportunities to the under-served of Texas and American society.

Finally, I want to thank all of you for coming to our campus. Thank you for providing me with this opportunity to tell you about myself and this truly outstanding national treasure of a University. I hope that I have convinced you that PVAMU is making a contribution, that it is of value to our State and World.



***The Texas A&M University System  
2005 Chancellor's Century Council  
Annual Meeting***

Friday, March 4, 2005  
Memorial Student Center Ballroom  
12 noon

***Program***

Presiding  
Ms. Sabrina Hodge  
President, NAACP  
Prairie View A&M University Chapter

- Invocation.....Mr. Cory Neblett**  
President, Political Science Club
- Greetings..... Mr. Nigel Redmond**  
President, Student Government Association  
Delegate, Chancellor's Student Advisory Board
- Occasion..... Mr. Warren Hardy**  
Delegate, Chancellor's Student Advisory Board
- Music Selection.....Prairie View A&M University Percussion Ensemble**  
Mr. Larry Jones, Director

**Lunch is served**

- Introduction of the Keynote Speaker.....Mr. David J. Harris**  
Mr. Prairie View A&M University  
2004-2005
- Keynote Speaker.....Dr. George C. Wright**  
President, Prairie View A&M University
- Remarks.....Dr. Robert McTeer**  
Chancellor, Texas A&M University System
- Music Selection.....Prairie View A&M University Jazz Band**  
Mr. Robert Sanders, Director
- Closing Remarks.....Ms. Brijette Robinson**  
Director, Campus Activities Board

