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Dear Client:

“At The University of Texas at Austin, we aspire to be the best public university in America,” says President Bill Powers. Beyond academics, UTAustin can lay claim to being the single most important catalyst for the Austin area economy. Its stature and success, in large measure, will dictate the area’s future prosperity. So, what are the obstacles facing UTAustin in its quest?

Powers flatly states “The University of Texas at Austin is the best public university in Texas, by anyone’s ranking.” But, he says this “isn’t good enough.” Noting that “we are poised to take the next step toward leadership in American higher education,” Powers says his goal is to make UTAustin **“the great national public research university.”** Ambitious? Without question. Achievable? Let’s examine this.

“Our greatest obstacle today is the fact that UT is under-funded relative to our national peers,” Powers says. Who are these “peers” UTAustin must leap-frog to achieve his goal? “They are Berkeley, Michigan, North Carolina, Illinois and the other leading national public research universities,” he says.

Powers has lumped UTAustin into a 12-member group he refers to as the National Comparison Group. In addition to those mentioned above, the group includes UCLA, Minnesota, Michigan State, Ohio State, Wisconsin, Indiana and Washington. **Within this group, he says UTAustin ranks 10th in state appropriations per student.** When the income from the Permanent University Fund is added, UTAustin moves up to 7th.

But what about tuition? UTAustin has been asking students to pay more for their education with several recent increases. **“We’re still a bargain with an average annual tuition this year of \$8,310,”** said Powers. “And low-income students have been spared tuition increases.”

The bottom line: when state support and tuition are combined, UTAustin is near the bottom – ranking 9th in the list of the 12 peer institutions. **“UT competes against the best – but we must do so with low state appropriations and relatively low tuition,”** said Powers.

So what does Powers propose to **compete with the nation’s top-tier institutions** for faculty, graduate students and major research projects? Check out the next story.

Setting a goal to be “the best of the best,” is a lofty goal. But what are the specific tasks UTAustin needs to tackle to make that happen?

To become the best public university in America “is a goal within our reach,” UTAustin President Bill Powers is fond of saying. He also recognizes “we won’t achieve it this year or next, but every day on the campus we try to take the next step on that demanding journey.” He goes on to say “**I can assure you that we have the students and faculty to compete with the best.**” The nagging question remains: what are the *specific steps* that need to be taken?

“We have a vision for the future,” Powers says, “and we are pursuing that vision aggressively.” Powers points to a program he chaired while Dean of the UTAustin Law School prior to being tapped for the top job. It is a dramatic change in the way undergrads are taught, **requiring a core curriculum that Powers claims “will be a model in undergraduate education.”**

Another big bugaboo that has always impacted the evaluation of UTAustin when compared to other institutions: Powers, and just about everybody else, agrees that **the faculty/student ratio at the undergrad level must be reduced.** Too many students for the number of faculty have been a decades-long problem at UTAustin. Additionally, Powers is concerned about inadequate funds to support grad students.

Powers has other specific goals to overcome obstacles to becoming the best in the nation: a) re-allocating existing resources to focus on the most important initiatives in the various colleges and schools on campus, b) enhancing access for students from families at all income levels, c) building diversity in the faculty and student body, and d) more control over admissions through modification of the law that requires UTAustin to accept new students who are in the Top 10% of their high school graduating class, regardless of the quality of the school.

Many of these goals revolve around money. UTAustin is planning a very ambitious major capital campaign to raise money in an amount that will probably be more than two billion dollars. The specifics of this effort to seek funds from the private sector will soon be announced. There’s more, though.

“We intend to work with the Legislature for more support,” said Powers. He’s talking about state appropriations that have been a dwindling percentage of the total university budget. He also wants the Legislature when it convenes January 2009 to **continue the UTSysstem Board of Regents’ control over setting tuition,** rather than have control revert to the House and Senate members.

The greater the university, the better for Austin’s economy. High tech jobs would not be in Austin if not for UTAustin. Many companies have spun out of UTAustin’s research. There are countless other examples to illustrate UTAustin’s economic value. As UTAustin grows in stature, the economic benefits for all who live and work here are significant.

When it comes to energy generation Texas, long the US oil field leader, is now the top wind farm state. As a result, oil derricks and water-pumping wind mills are now losing their dominance on the state's horizon to giant, propeller-driven wind energy turbines.

Out west, Texans long-ago grew accustomed to a pumping sound, as oil was pulled out of the ground, and a clacking of windmills as water was pumped out of the ground. **Now a new whirring sound has joined the cacophony and all these sounds mean money.** The sights of structures piercing the sky and constant sounds from these machines are re-making Texas.

While still not as pervasive as oil rigs and wind mills, these wind turbines are growing in number and their size alone is amazing. **Some of these wind machines are twice as tall as the Statue of Liberty and their blades have a span as wide as the wingspan of a jumbo jet.** They are huge, and larger versions are on drawing boards. By and large, landowners – especially in hardscrabble West Texas — are welcoming them with open arms.

The math certainly works for them. **Wind energy companies pay the landowner about \$500 a month for each structure.** One rancher, near Sweetwater, has allowed 78 to be built on a dusty, barren plateau populated by rattlesnakes and cactus, and is pulling down \$39,000 a month, each month.

He's contracted for 76 more and when they are built, **he will be drawing down a total of \$77,000 a month or an annual fee of \$924,000.** What do you bet he'll enjoy sitting in a rockin' chair on the porch, sipping a bourbon and branch water, listening to the whirring sound of money!

Even with Texas leading the nation in wind farms, it's still early in the development of wind energy. The City of Austin is contracting for electricity generated by wind. But it is still a small fraction of electrical usage. However, **Texas is ideal for wind-power development (no, not because we're a bunch of blowhards!)** due to the availability of land for wind farms. The Gulf of Mexico may also be the site of wind power, much like the oil derricks sited offshore. So, look for more of these 20-story structures with blades longer than a football field to pop up.

The employment picture in Austin and throughout Texas has been an economic bright spot. To realize how good it is, all you have to do is look at what's happening to jobs in California.

The latest California figures released last week are simply staggering. **The state lost 20,300 jobs in January**, according to *The Los Angeles Times*. To put this in perspective, this is **more than the other 49 states combined** for the month. California's job losses swept across several sectors, with construction, information (this includes the film industry that was hard hit by the well-publicized writer's strike) and financial services. The state's unemployment rate held at 5.9% — much worse than the nation's average of 4.9% in January.

The Austin area is in dire need of a general aviation airport. This is the claim of a man who is trying to do something about it.

“General Aviation” is the term applied to private aircraft – those generally smaller planes, owned by individuals and corporations that have very different needs from the huge commercial airliners that fly on regular schedules. With the construction of Austin-Bergstrom International Airport and the de-activation of Robert Mueller Municipal Airport, **those involved with general aviation have been grumbling they got the short end of the stick.**

A Houston man is riding (flying?) to the rescue. Houston Executive Airport backer **Ron Henriksen** purchased the Bird’s Nest Airport on Austin’s outskirts in October. The Houston businessman is now upgrading the facility. **“I am looking forward to making Bird’s Nest a destination for pilots in the Austin area who otherwise would have few options,”** he told the *Houston Business Journal*.

The Bird’s Nest’s 2,750-foot runway has already been re-paved. Henriksen is also **planning a new longer runway and paving an area with aircraft tie-downs.** He also wants to build additional T-hangars, install airport lighting and a fuel facility.

And to make it more accessible to private aircraft owners who value their time, **he is planning a new entry road to the recently-constructed State Highway 130.**

Speaking of a Houston-Austin connection, former UTAustin president Larry Faulkner has been named, as one of 13, to the board of directors of ExxonMobil. Faulkner retired from UTAustin in 2006 and took over as president of the private philanthropic organization, Houston Endowment. He is on the boards of Austin-based Temple-Inland and Guaranty Financial Group.

Noting the controversy swirling around pitcher Roger Clemens, **Dr. Louis Overholster** says that, at Clemens advancing age, the only performance-enhancing drug he should be tested for is Viagra!

Sincerely



Editor/Publisher