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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

October 20, 1999

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**Higher Education...The Doorway to the Future**

*By Lieutenant Governor Perry*

As we usher in the new millennium, I can think of no more exciting time to be a Texan. Texas is a world leader in economic growth and opportunity. Our economy, founded on cotton, crude and cattle, has diversified into new sectors dominated by the ingenuity of high technology.

But in order for Texans to prosper from the opportunities of the future, they must be ready for them. The key to prosperity for a greater number of our citizens in the 21st Century is a college education. I want Texans to not only dream big dreams, but be equipped with the tools to achieve them.

Recently the Legislature increased higher education funding by close to \$1 billion, and created a new \$100 million scholarship program, the TEXAS Grant program, to make college available to economically disadvantaged Texans.

On November 2, Texas voters will have an opportunity to support Texas colleges and universities by voting on two constitutional amendments, Propositions 13 and 17, making more money available for higher education, including \$400 million for Hinson-Hazelwood student loans.

Those are important steps, but we must do more in a state where only one in five of our citizens has a college or graduate degree.

According to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, Texans who receive an undergraduate degree will earn, on average, \$1.2 million more over their lifetime than Texas high school graduates who do not pursue a college degree. This underscores the significant role higher education plays in determining the prosperity of our citizens and our state.

Texas has not conducted a thorough review of our colleges and universities since the mid-1980s. That group had to contend with a struggling Texas economy, and state leaders were looking for places to cut back.

At the turn of the new century, with Texas experiencing tremendous economic and population growth, it is the perfect time for Texas to take a long-term look at higher education - its mission, its role in the new economy, its accessibility and its affordability.

That is why I recently formed the Special Commission on 21st Century Colleges and Universities. They will ask the tough questions, such as: "How can more citizens with limited economic means have better

access to our colleges and universities?" "How can our community colleges and technical institutions play a more vital role in preparing the workforce?" "What do the changing demographics of our state mean for our higher education system?" "How can we better use technology to advance learning?"

Utilizing new technology is critically important to higher education. Computers and the Internet can make a college degree accessible to an entire group of Texans unable to commute to a campus. With virtual universities, two-way interactive video and Internet classes, Texans who must work during the day, who cannot afford to live away from home, or who are too remote to travel to an institution of higher education will have greater opportunities to pursue coursework.

When I graduated from high school in 1968, my competition was mostly the other 12 students in my class. Seniors in the Class of 2000 will be competing with young men and women graduating from schools in Tokyo, Istanbul and Berlin.

Our colleges and universities currently have close to one million Texans walking their halls, or logging on to their lectures. Those schools are the cornerstone of economic development for those Texans and generations to come. But more than that, those schools are about providing Texans, yearning to be free from the mire of mediocrity, the opportunity to succeed.

The Special Commission on 21st Century Colleges and Universities has its first meeting in the Texas Capitol on October 27. Hearings will soon begin in communities across the state, and members of the commission will chart a bold course based on the input of numerous Texans citizens, business and education leaders. To stay abreast of the Commission's work, write to me at P.O. Box 12068, Austin, Texas 78711-2068, or check out my website at [www.ltgov.state.tx.us](http://www.ltgov.state.tx.us).

Texas has a good higher education system. I want it to be the envy of the nation. Working together we can bolster our 140 institutions of higher education - public and private - and in doing so, bolster the dreams of our citizens and ensure prosperity for our future.