

Texas 2036 Interview: A Conversation About Higher Education With Chancellor J. B. Milliken

The interview has been edited for clarity, brevity and key highlights.

Margaret Spellings: You all have just finished, at your 14 institutions, a very unusual semester of learning. As you reflect on that now just a few days since the conclusion of it, how do you think you all handled it? And what have you learned in this recent past?

J.B. Milliken: I think one of the most remarkable things that I've seen in 30 years of higher education is how quickly faculty and students across the country pivoted to online. I'm very proud of what our presidents, their teams, our faculty, and students did. As you well know, there's been resistance to this for years. Most faculty had not taught online in any form. And I'm not saying we did a fabulous job of it across higher education. We have a lot to learn. But the fact we were able to finish and keep those students who are going to graduate this May on track to graduate is pretty remarkable in the history of higher education.

Margaret Spellings: As you think about the new normal and online learning, what are the things you're going to do to help faculty do their jobs or provide the necessary infrastructure for students? What needs to be done in the aftermath of this?

J.B. Milliken: I'm not sure we're in the aftermath. We're online completely this summer. Everybody in the country is focused on the fall. There are lots of things we've learned, but now we've got challenges with broadband access. Not necessarily so much the reach of the utility, but the ability of people to hook up. Whether it's low income or rural, we've got a significant gap in the people that have access to it. If we're going to have resilient institutions that can make this kind of pivot and expand education to all Texans interested, then that's the first place to start.

We may double in population in 30 years, and as you know, we are undereducated. The education attainment in Texas is too low. We don't have enough students going on to college now. We aren't graduating enough students to make sure that we are a leader in a knowledge-based economy in the 21st century. For some time, we've been challenged with trying to develop strategies that provide access and success to a much larger number of Texas students than we're serving now. It's not going to be by creating a bunch of new, expensive physical institutions. If we double in size in the state, I can guarantee you the University of Texas System will not have 28 institutions that look like our 14 do today. Online education, the ability to work closely with K-12 and community colleges, people progressing in a lifelong education... this is the predicted change; the disruptive event in higher education. I think it's been either promised or threatened, depending on your perspective, for a long time. Now it's

smacked us in the face, and we have been forced to deal with it, but there's opportunity here. And I think there's a real opportunity for Texas in particular.

Margaret Spellings: Talk about the fall and students going back to our schools and colleges and universities. What you all are thinking about in terms of the safety of not only the students, but your faculty, and staff.

J.B. Milliken: I participate daily in talks with our presidents, presidents across the country, and other health experts about what can and should be done in the fall. I think most institutions, despite the headlines, are in the same place. Everybody realizes this fall isn't going to look like last fall, but we all hope it won't look like this spring either. It'll be somewhere in between. We won't have the same kinds of large lecture halls. We will have online learning. Laboratories will be open. We'll be doing social distancing. When we start will be an important question. We'll take all the advice from health experts, and work closely with the Governor and his team, the strike force, to reopen Texas and the Higher Education Coordinating Board.

What we're looking at now is does it make sense to start earlier? Start earlier and finish earlier in case there is some resurgence of COVID in the winter? Maybe we start in the middle of August and we end after the Thanksgiving break or finish online. No decisions have been made on this, except for us to say that we plan to have our campuses open. We're going to do everything we can to follow health advice, and to keep people as safe as possible.

Margaret Spellings: One of the things people don't necessarily know or appreciate about a system like the University of Texas System is the incredible juggernaut it is, in terms of public health, workforce, and public health expertise. Talk about that dimension of UT and what it's bringing to this crisis.

J.B. Milliken: There's a story released today that UTMB, Galveston National Labs, Stanford, and the Army Medical Research have had positive results with an antibody therapeutic for COVID. Now it's still early on, but that's a really exciting, promising prospect. We've got 350 research activities going on right now across the university system. Maybe 40 or so on vaccines, 140 or so dealing with therapeutics, and a lot on technology. Building respirators, building shields, doing other kinds of things in the engineering programs, in addition to the health programs, to try to respond to this. We've done thousands and thousands of tests – I think 75,000 tests now. We've treated over 300 COVID patients at our institutions. We're a huge part of the infrastructure in the state that's addressing this.

Margaret Spellings: Let's talk about the future of education. And how we're going to grow another 10 million people in the next 16 years by our bicentennial in 2036. People are still coming to Texas to seek opportunity. How should we think about affordable, aligned, relevant, high wage pathways, and a retooling of American higher education in this moment?

J.B. Milliken: You start with some great advantages in Texas. I wouldn't want to be any other place at this moment because as you say, we're going to grow enormously and we're the second youngest state in the country. It's a lot easier to educate and keep younger people on a pathway to continuing to a degree than it is older people. It's a great opportunity for us, and we've got a great natural resource. We know the kinds of jobs that are being created. It isn't going to be very long before we say 100% of all new jobs require education beyond high school as we think of it today. It doesn't mean a four-year education. It doesn't even necessarily mean a two-year education. But it could be certificates, it could be some kinds of re-skilling programs. I saw a poll the other day that said 30% of millennials think that they will need to go back to school now to get a job in this new post-COVID economy. That's an enormous array of the population that we're going to have to address in ways that we haven't done effectively before.

Before we even start talking about formal education and birth to career education, we've got to do a better job of getting people early, to level the playing field. An unfortunate reality of educational achievement is that the people who have the best opportunity to go to college and get a great career are highly correlated with wealth. The way we address that is by early on providing the same kinds of educational opportunities across the board. We've got to do a better job in Texas with that. We've got to do a better job of getting more college into high school. There are several different ways to do that, and all kinds of reasons. We know that if you've taken even one college course in high school, you're more likely to enroll and graduate in college. It also drives the cost down and you have a much better chance of graduating in a timely way. It's a question of will and getting the right people together to make sure it happens.

Margaret Spellings: Talk about ways to better engage with the employer community than we have been. How do we do that in a more fulsome platform where employers and potential employees plug together?

J.B. Milliken: There are a lot of really interesting programs. One that was started in New York, P-TECH at CUNY has now expanded to Texas. These programs combine a community college and a high school, or a college and a community college and an employer. They are working together early on, on the curriculum, on the needs of the employer. They're first in line for jobs and internships as they go through the experience.

I was in a classroom the other day with Michael Dell. We talked a little bit about what they look for at Dell in terms of people coming out of college, what happens to them once they're there, and what kind of skills they're looking for. That kind of thing needs to be happening all the time in a very systematic way. There are some great partnerships around the country. It's clear we not only need a better connection between high school, community college, and senior colleges, but we also need a better connection at the career end of that. Part of the challenge is that we've

undervalued career offices and placements, and the whole infrastructure that is designed to help students find their path.

Margaret Spellings: You're hearing a lot of families and students contemplate gap years or stepping out, and how to think about higher education. Obviously, this is a tough job market to be entering. What advice do you have as a higher ed leader about how to think about learning and perseverance in these challenging days?

J.B. Milliken: Data tells us that if students step out or don't start, they aren't going to get back on the path in education. While a gap year may be a great experience for some, I think it's really important that we stay focused. For most of the people we're talking about, the best thing is to try to keep them on path so they don't get off.

Margaret Spellings: I like to say it's never a bad time to invest in your future. No one can take education away from you, so we ought to be leaning in. J.B., thank you for being with us. You have an interesting hand to play, to be in this enterprise that affects so many people and the future of our state. Thank you for your service.