

TRANSCRIPT OF TEXAS UNIVERSITY AT QATAR TOWN HALL
FEB. 11, 2024
7 A.M. (CST) / 4 P.M. (GMT+3)

SPEAKERS

- Mark A. Welsh III, Texas A&M University President
- Alan Sams, Executive Vice President, Provost and Chief Academic Officer
- César Malavé, COO and Dean of Texas A&M University at Qatar
- N.K. Anand, Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs

TRANSCRIPT

MALAVÉ:

It has been a challenging start of the week, and I'm grateful that we have this time together.

We know that you have many questions, and we're going to try to answer some of them here today.

I want to thank our guests for joining us early on this Sunday morning to talk about the Board of Regents' decision last week to work towards closing our campus in Qatar.

We're joined this morning by President Mark Welsh, Executive Vice President and Provost Alan Sams, and Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs N.K. Anand.

As you know, President Welsh was named the President of Texas A&M University on December 12 2023, after serving as interim President since July. I'm grateful to him and the rest of the leaders that we have here today for the support of the campus and the support that will come through this transition.

With that, I will hand it over to President Welsh.

WELSH:

Thank you very much, César. And Howdy, everyone. And good afternoon. Thank you for joining us today. This is not how I envisioned introducing myself to you. So for that I apologize.

Also joining us on the call today is Tracy Hammond, the Speaker of our Faculty Senate here in College Station, and Tracy will be a part of the discussion going forward to ensure all faculty issues are properly covered and communicated during the planning for the transition team.

I know the news that you received late Thursday night came as a surprise to most of you, and I'll be honest, although the discussions with the A&M System and the Board of Regents have been ongoing for several months, I think all of us here are also still processing the events of the last couple of days. And in our time today, I wanted to spend just a few minutes talking about what we know now, and also just walk through briefly what we expect to come in the next few weeks and months.

Most of our time will be spent addressing your questions, however, which you can submit through the Q&A function at any time. Before I get into that discussion, I just want to let you know in no uncertain way that this decision is not a reflection of your work at all. Everyone at Texas A&M, every member of our Board of Regents and everybody at the Texas A&M

University System expressed great respect for and thankfulness for the tremendous success story that has been Texas A&M at Qatar over the last 20 years.

The 1,500 Aggie engineers you've graduated, many of whom have gone on to serve in leadership roles and energy companies in Qatar and around the world is a great example of that success. So are the 730 current students and some of those students have joined the call today, I suspect, and I thank you for doing that. There are 600 plus research projects that have been aimed at solving issues around the world that you have accomplished and are still working through that are a great source of pride for Texas A&M. And I just want you to know that for as little effect as it will have on you this morning, I am incredibly proud of what you've done, and I think all of us at Texas A&M are incredibly proud of what you've done over the past 20 years. I'm also incredibly grateful to the Qatar Foundation for their collaboration that brought Aggieland to Education City. You have shaped a legacy over the last 20 years. Some of you have been there the entire time, and I just wanted to offer my personal thanks for that.

As you're aware, on Thursday our Board of Regents voted to notify the Foundation that we were terminating the contract through a voluntary clause in the contract and plan to transition out of our campus there by 2028.

As you can imagine, we are continually assessing the status of programs here at A&M. The status of our satellite campuses, the operations there, the impact they have, etc. And that conversation and assessment has been ongoing with the Board of Regents for several months now.

The one thing I do want to let you know was not part of their decision was the recent disinformation campaign aimed at criticizing the research that's ongoing on the campus there. I think I was very clear in refuting that information when it was first published, and our regents agreed with everything I said. They're very clear in their comments to me that that had no influence whatsoever on this decision. Qatar is our only remote campus outside the United States, and their decision directs us to maintain campuses only in the U.S. I believe they think this will allow us to prioritize the University's land-, sea- and space-grant mission and keep our focus primarily on serving the State of Texas.

It doesn't mean we'll move away from international research collaborations. We continue to do those with 100 different countries, and we won't move away from trying to solve world-class problems. The global exchange of research and education will continue to be an integral part of our campuses. But we won't maintain a campus in Qatar. It's a long way from Texas is the bottom line.

Going forward, I just want you to know that from this second forward, our priority ... the priority of the people sitting here with you this morning ... is you.

As we develop a transition timeline to execute this withdrawal over the next 4 years, we want to make sure that every student understands that we fully intend for you to graduate with a ring and a degree from Texas A&M University before the 2028 deadline.

We want every faculty member to know that we fully intend to assist you in whatever your desire is for transfer reemployment, helping to find a new job, coming back to campus at Texas A&M if that's in your interest. We are going to talk through this individually with you and help you figure out what the future holds.

We will do the same for every staff member. That's the intent, and that effort starts today.

There's a lot we still don't know about the transition timeline. We still need to talk with the Foundation, for example, and make sure we understand exactly their thoughts on building this timeline. We have to do it in coordination with them. We have to build a detailed teach-out plan in coordination with all of you. And, we need to answer your individual questions about how this affects you, your professional future and your life, and we do understand that.

And because of the disruption this causes, I will apologize for that, because I know it has a big impact on you, and we're committed to making sure we minimize that and mitigate it wherever we possibly can.

Okay, I'm going to stop talking. and we're going to take your questions. Many of the questions won't have answers available to us yet. I think you understand that. But we are going to develop them quickly. Our provost Alan Sams has been tasked now with putting together a transition team, Alan is already well into that task. He has identified members here in College Station. He will identify additional members on campus there, working with César.

And then Dr. N.K. Anand will lead the planning for this transition team and lead that team in development of a timeline, a milestone chart, and an approach to working individual issues with you. As we move forward there will be a robust communication portion of this we owe you periodic and comprehensive communication about this plan. As it's developed, we owe you that same communication in terms of what your individual future will be, and how we can help you.

César has already ensured us that there will be counseling available on campus this week, should you want to take advantage of that.

N.K. will be visiting Qatar soon to start the detailed build of this transition timeline to meet with the foundation, etc., and then we will go from there.

All your questions that we received today and can't answer, we will get answers back to you as part of that communications effort.

Okay, César, I'm going to turn it over to you now to take a few questions that are coming in from the field.

MALAVÉ:

So, thank you, President, thank you. Thank you very much. We have addressed already some of the questions that we had received. There is one here that says: what happens to the faculty positions that we are interviewing as we speak?

WELSH:

Yeah, thank you. I think there are two big questions that we are going to have to answer immediately with this transition team. N.K. is aware of them already. One is exactly the question you're asking, what happens with new hires? Do we continue to hire.? Do we stop the process? And the second one is, do we admit additional students?

Those are the first two questions we have to answer. N.K. is working that, and we will get those answers back to you very quickly.

MALAVÉ:

Thank you, President, thank you. Another question that we received here related to students. Could you share light on whether Texas A&M can provide means to support TAMUQ students if they want to transfer to College Station?

WELSH:

Yeah, thank you another great question again. Details are not available for that yet, but our intent is to try and make that possible. We would very much like to offer that as an alternative for students who would like to continue their education at Texas A&M. Alan, anything else you would add on that one?

SAMS:

Well, I would just say that we always have the opportunity for students from other countries to come here to study, and so the mechanisms certainly exist for that.

MALAVÉ:

Yeah. Thank you. Thank you. So, another question is related to the services that are provided to students. This one is specific to study abroad and the programs that exist at Texas A&M in Qatar. So, will that be affected by this decision?

WELSH:

Well, students on both sides of this will be affected. Clearly, we won't have in the future, after 2028, a campus there that our students can easily go to for study abroad, but the opportunity for students in Qatar from whatever university to come to Texas A&M for a semester abroad will still exist. Yes.

Texas A&M sends more students to study abroad programs than any university in the country, and I don't anticipate that stopping.

MALAVÉ:

So one that just came in is related to the budget. What will our budget look like? And will the Qatar Foundation reduce our budget?

WELSH:

Yeah, thank you. Another great question. Because we have not had a chance to coordinate directly with the Qatar Foundation, yet, we don't know the answer to that. But, listen. They have set a precedent for an inclusive world-class educational program there in Education City. You've been right in the heart of that. I don't think they intend to change from that approach in the future from my brief engagement with Sheikha Hind and Francisco. And so, we will work out the details of the budget with them. But I am confident that both Texas A&M and the Foundation want to continue providing a world-class education as long as A&M is part of that campus, and I don't think they will put that at risk for people they consider their students as well.

MALAVÉ:

Thank you. Thank you, President. Another question that just came in is: Will Texas A&M at Qatar accept more students or will no more admissions will take place?

WELSH:

Yeah, as I mentioned, this is one of the first two questions we have to answer. I don't know the answer yet. We're looking at options from stopping admission to continuing to admit maybe a

reduced size class in the freshman class of this next year. The question is, can we teach that class out by 2028? And so more discussion on this one, but Dr. Anand knows this is a very, very high priority question to get answered as he forms his team.

MALAVÉ:

Thank you. Thank you, President. So a question that came and you addressed already, but it's related to the students that will graduate during this period: I'm currently a student and expected to graduate in 2027. Am I on track to graduate? And I believe that you address that already.

WELSH:

Yes, sir, absolutely. Yeah. We have every intention of you graduating as a proud Aggie and will be awfully proud to have you in the Aggie Network.

MALAVÉ:

There is one question related here to research of the faculty. As you know, the faculty at Texas A&M Qatar received a lot of support from the Qatar National fund, and they had a question that this decision might affect the research program. And what are the plans so the faculty can continue with the research programs during the transition.

WELSH:

Yeah, again, no answers yet only because we haven't spoken with the Foundation about this topic. Dr. Anand spent more time with the Provost talking about this particular question yesterday than anything else. And so again, it's one of the priority questions we have to answer. We certainly don't want to impact research at all if we can avoid it. But we'll have to talk to the foundation about their intent going forward. We just don't yet know.

MALAVÉ:

Thank you. This question is a little bit more specific on the employment. We have a number of employees that came from main campus and went to the campus there. Some of them are in TRS, the retirement program, and they are asking questions. Will there be an opportunity for them to continue to be employed at Texas here and in past 2028, so that they will not lose their benefits from their retirement?

WELSH:

Yeah, great question. And I can't answer it for each individual case. As I mentioned before, though our intent is to do everything we can to mitigate the impact of this decision on individuals who are affected, and so we will look at each individual option and try and do what's best for you, if it's at all possible.

MALAVÉ:

Thank you, President. There is one here related to the relationship with the Qatar Foundation, and they ask if you have spoken to the Qatar Foundation so that we can continue to manage the relationship that we have had with the Qatar Foundation for 20 years.

MALAVÉ:

Yes, sir. Before the Regents meeting, as these discussions have continued, I did speak with Sheikha Hind to make sure that Her Excellency knew that these conversations were continuing, and that I wasn't sure of what the end result would be so she was aware of that. Immediately after the meeting last week, where the vote was taken by the Regents, I also called the Foundation. I called Francisco to inform him of the outcome of the vote, so he would be aware. I

felt bad bothering him early in the morning, but I thought it was important that I tell him directly what had happened.

Since then we have not done detailed communication with the foundation on the planned way ahead. I will also attempt – we are attempting to schedule a phone call, so I can follow up with, Sheikha Hind early this week to try and make sure she doesn't have any additional questions I can answer for her. The rest of the communication in terms of the transition, timeline, we believe, needs to be face to face so that we can start working details with them and get you the answers you need to these questions.

MALAVÉ:

Thank you, President, thank you. A question just came in, related to graduate students. As you know, Texas A&M Qatar has a large number of graduate students, and the question is related to a lot of them in a funded project. And, should I expect a cut in the funding that I use to support the graduate students?

WELSH:

The Provost was talking about this one as well with Dr. Anand. So, I'm going to let Alan answer this one.

SAMS:

Yeah, I think it is like some of the other topics that it's tied to research funding and uncertainty about that until we know more detail from the Qatar Foundation about the future of that and any impacts that might be there. It's hard to predict what's going to happen to graduate student funding. And then also so many, each project is different and each student is different in where they are in their in their program and their funding, so that's a real high priority to figure out for the transition team very early on in the process.

MALAVÉ:

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, Alan. This question is related to the services that are needed during the teach out. There is a concern that many faculty might decide to leave, you know, during the transition. And how can we ensure that we'll have the staff and the faculty necessary to provide all the services during the transition?

WELSH:

Well, I think this is part of the face to face discussion that has to happen when Dr. Anand comes to visit and has a chance to sit down with you and your representatives on this transition team and talk details of the plan. I think we have to, first of all. I know how professional you are, and I know that we will be able to figure out a way to take care of our students, to graduate them and keep them on track, which is our number one priority all the time at Texas A&M, so they can go chase their dreams. And, we can do that while also working plans for transition of staff members and faculty members that make sense and that appropriately recognize the impact you have on the program there.

Nobody's job is at risk immediately. There are no particular job titles that are not needed right now. For example, there can be an assumption that we, if we don't bring more students in, then we don't need admissions staff right now. Well, actually, we do, because we need to continue to figure out how to take that group and use them if we bring in a new class. So that decision has to be made pretty quickly, and then we need to decide quickly, how do we help them transition to whatever it is they want to do next over the next four years and not have you feeling like there is an immediate need for people to leave.

I don't believe that's the case, and I think we can work through all that. Just give us a little bit of time to get there and have this conversation face to face with you.

SAMS:

Thank you. Thank you, President, just to add one thing on to that. As far as students, I mean, just like the employees, the students will graduate. That's part of the plan. We have to figure out how to make that happen and funding is part of that, personnel is part of that, faculty is part of that. But our commitment is to have the students actually graduate undergraduates and graduate students.

MALAVÉ:

Thank you. This question is related to the transition team, and the question says, Can TAMUQ faculty have a say in the transition team formation?

WELSH:

Absolutely, and I'll turn this one over to Dr. Anand. Dr. Anand is already thinking through, has already identified potential needs to be part of the team here and will be working with you, César, to figure out the names on the other end. The provost is overseeing this activity. So, I'll let them talk about the team composition. But I think clearly the intent is to have input from all the people who should be connected to this. One of the reasons Dr. Hammond joined us today is to ensure that the Faculty Senate is engaged and involved in this work as well.

ANAND:

Yeah, you know, it is a transition team. So we will listen to; we will get input from all the constituents, students, staff, and faculty. The team itself is based on the functionalities like HR, Student Affairs, Faculty Affairs, and those kind of things. So absolutely. We will see, talk to everybody whom we need to talk to, and our goal is to make this transition as smooth as possible and as effective as possible.

SAMS:

I think, earlier one of the questions dealt with the continuity of employment and impact on benefits and things like that. Those are reasons that we have, we will have human resources professionals on there, both from the Qatar campus, but also from main campus, to know what resources, what procedures are options and allow us to help keep the employees as our first priority, and in making sure they're taken care of and students graduated, etc. So, like N.K. said, it's functionalities. Then those functional areas will need to be in close contact in consultation with the various constituencies involved in that like the faculty and staff and students.

MALAVÉ:

Thank you. This question is related to the former students. The question says that after 2028, how are we going to continue to stay connected to our former students that will be there in Qatar?

WELSH:

Yeah, aggressively, is how we'll try and stay connected. The Association of Former Students has not been brought into the detailed planning yet, but they will be. Porter Garner is aware of the decision, and he has done this in the past for different types of organizations. But we will work a solution where there is a chapter or have a group connection to the Association of Former Students that specifically recognizes former students from Texas A&M Qatar, so that

you will be connected to the Association of Former Students for life. That will not change. The details of how that's done will work out, but we won't lose the connection.

MALAVÉ:

Thank you. This question is related to safety. It says that several people have expressed concern about our safety. And how can we ensure the safety of our people there in TAMUQ during the transition?

WELSH:

Yeah. Well, I think the immediate concern that we have is anytime there's a major decision about a site related to Texas A&M, our emergency management team immediately reaches out to the emergency management teams at that location. And that happened the other day between emergency management here and emergency management there. And there were no significant concerns expressed at that time.

I think, in coordination with the Qatar Foundation, I think we continue to worry about this, and we have to through the end of the transition timeline. They worry about this full time. And so, I don't think this is a new concern. It's not a new area of cooperation. We've been doing this for a while, and we just have to continue to pay attention to it.

MALAVÉ:

This one President Welsh is related, it comes from the students, and they say, how will this decision affect the degree we take, considering that we are graduating with a degree from a university that doesn't exist anymore.

You know I can. I can at least say that the degree is coming from Texas A&M.

WELSH:

Yeah, exactly. I'm sorry. But you're an Aggie for life. We're not going to let go of you.

MALAVÉ:

There is a question related to will there be a possibility of an early retirement or a retirement incentive for faculty who are close to retirement?

WELSH:

Yeah, another great question. And I think that has to be a consideration. As we look at transition plans for faculty members, but again, too early for details. But I think that has to be part of our discussion as we build this plan

MALAVÉ:

Very good. So, one question, said the morale of many of the employees very low with this decision, and there will be motivation issues. And what if anything will the University do to assist with this?

Well, as I mentioned, César, you've already arranged for counseling this week services on campus. I think it's also going to be important, that rather than me, just saying, we actually are going to try and work your individual plan with you, that we actually do that. Talk is cheap.

Now we need to prove to you that that's our intent and that that's what will happen. And I think that will also help relieve a lot of your concerns and your fears. If you know that we're not just saying we care. We are going to work hard to prove that we care and to do what's right for you

as you move forward professionally, and I think that's the only way we have to approach it right now.

MALAVÉ:

Correct. Thank you. There is a question. This is related to a specific student program that is called the Undergraduate Research Program. They have a trip plan to come here next week. And this question is related to will all these programs continue?

WELSH:

Yeah, my view is this program should continue until you complete your studies and get your degree. Now, the funding for some of these things – we have not had a chance to sit with the foundation. I don't know where all the funding for this particular program comes from, but near term, I wouldn't expect that to be impacted at all, and if it does, we'll look at other sources. But, we want you to continue your education in the most meaningful way we can provide. That won't change.

MALAVÉ:

There is a question related to the team and specifically about Dr. Anand asking: Will he spend time in Doha while working this transition?

ANAND:

Yes, the answer is yes, but you know it could be May it could be... We have to figure out the exact timing. The first meeting we have with Dr. Francisco is tomorrow, and we'll get some, you know, idea of what the timeline is. Yes, the answer is yes. But when is the question that we are trying to decide.

MALAVÉ:

There is one question just came in related to what we're doing today is: would you host future town halls like this one in the future to address some of the questions that faculty, students and staff might have.

WELSH:

Yeah, absolutely. I think we have to. In my head as I envision the team putting together the communication plan. I think it should have several components. One is a routine periodic update to the faculty, staff and students there, and the faculty here who are engaged with activity in Qatar, saying: Here's what is happening now. You know, this could be every 2 or 3 weeks, whatever it is. In addition to that, there should be periodic opportunities for people there to express concerns and ask additional questions with the team itself. And then, I think we need less frequent but continued periodic engagement from university leadership, from the Provost and I to sit and hear how you think it's going and what are we missing as the team does its work, so I promise you we will communicate with you.

But, again, I've got to prove it to you. So, you hold me to that promise.

MALAVÉ:

So this is probably, President Welsh, the last question that we can take now and it says: what if the Qatar Foundation refuses to continue until 2028?

WELSH:

Well, I can't speak for the Qatar Foundation, and my experience with them, which is very limited so far, has been that they're a very professional student-focused organization. When it comes to

Education City, they may make other decisions. We can't control that. And if they do, we'll do everything possible to again to take care of each of you. I can't control every variable here, but I don't think they would do something that would dramatically impact the students and Education City. I just I don't believe that's who they are.

MALAVÉ:

Thank you, President Welsh. So, we will not take any more questions today because of time. But, as President Welsh mentioned, this is the first of many of these kind of meetings that we're going to have to provide updates to the campus.

Thank you. Thank you to all of you for being here. And President Welsh, I'll pass it back to you for closing, remarks.

WELSH:

César, I just wanted to offer one other comment, two comments, actually. The first one is how much I appreciate the leadership and the grace shown by your Dean over the last several days. César has been a very honest, very direct spokesman for all of you, and I appreciated that very much as did everyone else here. Brady is here with him, and Brady was also spectacular in helping us work through the details, setting up the communication this morning, etc. So my thanks to Brady, and finally, my thanks to each of you for building the legacy that is Texas A&M Qatar and to the foundation for making it a possibility. I sincerely appreciate everything you've done, and I look forward to talking with you more about your future and how we help you get there.

Thanks for your time. Thank you.

MALAVÉ:

Thank you.