Administrators at the University of Houston-Victoria eagerly signed up for Project Degree Completion in 2012 because they knew the importance of increasing the number of U.S. adults with college degrees. Even though I was not yet at UHV then, I support this goal and am proud to say that the university is making progress in this area.

UHV is unique in that it was an upper-level institution, offering classes for transfer and graduate students only, until fall 2010. At that time, UHV began accepting freshmen and sophomores at its Victoria campus in the Coastal Bend Region of South Texas.

This region provides UHV with some challenges in that only 20.2 percent of area residents older than age 24 hold a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared with the state average of 25.8 percent.

UHV was named a Hispanic-Serving Institution in 2013 and has many first-generation and economically disadvantaged students. More than 50 percent of the university’s students start college deficient in either math and/or English. As a public comprehensive university, UHV has an opportunity to impact both the lives of the individuals in the region and the economy of the Coastal Bend Region.

The university started several initiatives to increase the number of graduating students. In fall 2014, UHV began its first four Living and Learning communities. The 20 to 25 freshmen in each residential learning community spend time together taking linked classes, living in the same residence hall, and developing teamwork skills. Students make meaningful connections that are essential to their academic success. As they become more engaged academically and socially, they perform better in their coursework and are more likely to graduate.

A support team for each Living and Learning Community consists of faculty teaching the linked courses, a student success coach, a librarian, and a student life advisor. Students in each community take a core course linked to a First-Year Seminar class. This class helps them strengthen their academic and social skills and introduces them to college life.

Each student also is assigned a student success coach from UHV’s new Student Success Center. These coaches not only provide academic advising to students, but also help students with stress management and goal setting.

UHV’s Living and Learning Commons, constructed inside Jaguar Suites, the university’s newest residence hall, provides a place where students in each residential learning community can meet and hold special events.

This project has been so successful that the number of Living and Learning communities will grow to 10 sections of 20 students each this fall. Initial data from the freshmen enrolled in a Living and Learning Community in fall 2014 show that 65 percent already are registered for classes for fall 2015, compared with 51.6 percent of freshmen who were not enrolled in a residential learning community.

UHV aims to be a student-centered institution. This means that the university is committed to the success of its students, not by lowering or altering academic standards, but by creating high expectations for students and providing the support they need so that they can graduate and make their mark in the world.

Through the Project Degree Completion initiative, nearly 490 four-year public colleges and universities have pledged to boost college completion by 3.8 million students to help the nation reach the goal of 60 percent of adults possessing a college degree by 2025. Participating institutions are members of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU); their membership represents nearly all the four-year public colleges and universities in the country.

R. Vic Morgan is the interim president of the University of Houston-Victoria.