Sometimes, maybe most times, universities do the right thing because doing the right thing is the right thing to do. Agreeing to participate in Project Degree Completion is the right thing to do for the Rio Grande Valley, for Texas and for the nation.

Three years ago at AASCU’s New Presidents’ Academy, I remember being challenged to define my presidency by writing a purpose statement. We were staying at a hotel in Vermont. I went outside and wrote the following: “At UT Pan American, we have one purpose and one purpose only: to graduate as many students as we can, as quickly as we can, and with the best education that we can provide them.” My cabinet can (and does) repeat that purpose verbatim; so can the deans, members of the faculty senate, and many, many of the faculty at UT Pan American.

When I am talking to funders or legislators about UT Pan American, I often talk about the more than 780 babies who are born each month at a local hospital within sight of the university. I also talk about how, on average, every two months two new elementary schools and a new middle school are built in the Valley. And then I repeat what our purpose is: to graduate as many students as we can, as quickly as we can, and with the best education that we can provide them.

We at Pan Am agreed to participate in Project Degree Completion because if we do not get it right in the Rio Grande Valley, we are not going to get it right in Texas or the nation. The average age in the Valley is under 26. Only 15.2 percent of the population is over age 25 in Hidalgo County, and only 8.2 percent in Starr County have a bachelor’s degree. With our birthrates, yes, we have got to get it right in the Valley, or we will drag the whole nation down.

So we are working very closely with our 19,302 students (89 percent of whom are Hispanic) to see to it that they graduate in a timely fashion. We have centralized our advising system and have cross-trained our advisors. We have put all degree plans online so that students can monitor their own progress and do what-if exercises. We are giving a $500 credit to students who complete 15 hours in the previous semester. We also have a “summer boost” program, where students who have completed 24 hours in the two previous long semesters can receive up to $1,000 toward their summer tuition if they complete six hours. We are establishing a University College for all students without declared majors. And because we know that students do better if they work on campus instead of flipping burgers, we have put into place a student employment office—anyone who wants to hire a direct wage employee who is not a student must justify the hire to a vice president. As we say in the Valley, “Game on.”

Nearly 500 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. Through Project Degree Completion: A Public University Initiative, the institutions will increase the number of college degrees they award from an estimated 14.6 million to 18.4 million over the next 14 years. Collectively, public colleges and universities currently award just over 1 million degrees annually. The 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.

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