Mississippi University for Women, coeducational since 1982, was established in 1884 as the nation’s first state chartered college for women. Since its inception, The W has been a radical idea, created to provide opportunity for citizens who were denied access simply because of their gender. The university remains true to its original purpose, as today’s student body reflects the rich diversity of our state and region and includes many first generation students.

The W signed on to support Project Degree Completion because the required commitment is consistent with the university’s mission and founding values. The W is proud of its tradition of access and affordability, while providing a high quality education.

For us, the decision makes sense on many levels. Mississippi’s educational attainment lags the United States. In 2011, 30.3 percent of Mississippians held the associate degree or higher, while the U.S. average was 38.7 percent. Statistics are often compelling, but for our state and students, much more is at stake. As educational attainment increases, so will the competitiveness and resilience of our economy. Most importantly, however, earning a college degree changes the trajectory of the lives of our graduates.

Completion has been an area of focus of both the System and Mississippi’s public universities. In 2004, most baccalaureate programs were capped at 124 hours. An organized effort began in earnest in 2007, leading to a 2009 legislative task force including the leaders from the K-12, community college and public university systems. The task force recommended strategies to improve developmental education outcomes, create a seamless transition for community college students, reward retention and graduation, and implement best practices for student success.

The W’s circumstances are no different than those of other universities across the country. Our budget increasingly relies on tuition, and state appropriations haven’t recovered from the Great Recession. Our annual enrollment of 3,200 is increasingly a mix of traditional, online and adult learners. While we experienced an increase in first-time, full time freshman last fall, community college transfers are the majority of our new students, and 25 percent of those enrolled are over the age of 25.

The university responded to these enrollment trends by:

• Developing baccalaureate programs specifically for adults, including “near completers;”
• Streamlining the admissions process for community college transfers;
• Enhancing 2+2 programs specifically to reach place-bound students; and
• Significantly increasing course offerings and degree programs offered online, resulting in online student credit hours increasing from 6 percent in 2007 to 43 percent in 2012.

More work is underway and focused on the redesign of academic advising, aligning remediation as a co-requisite within the existing curriculum, and developing a Center for Teaching and Learning to support both students and faculty as modes of delivery and changing student needs.

For us, Project Degree Completion is a process and not a project. It is also firmly rooted in our founding values. We know this is a long-term effort and requires university-wide attention, new partnerships and an unwavering focus on student success. We also know what is at stake. A brighter future for our students who complete their degrees likewise ensures a brighter future for our university.

Jim Borsig is president of Mississippi University for Women.