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A View from the U.S.-Mexico Border
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Good afternoon! Buenas tardes! I am so pleased to be with all of you here today, and I thank you sincerely for this opportunity to share a few perspectives from my vantage point on the U.S.-Mexico border.

I live and work very happily in El Paso, Texas, a city of 800,000, mostly Mexican-American, people, which together with its sister city across the border, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, whose population exceeds 1.5 million, forms a vibrant bi-national metropolitan area of nearly 3 million residents. From its origins more than four centuries ago, and located equidistant between the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico along what is now the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border, our region has always served as a major migration and trade corridor through the Sierra Madre and Rocky Mountains; El Paso del Norte is literally the Pass of the North.

The university I have been privileged to serve as president for the past nearly 30 years, was established more than 100 years ago as the Texas School of Mines and Metallurgy, to prepare mining engineers for the copper, lead, and zinc mines in both northern Mexico, and southern New Mexico and Arizona. At 4,000 feet in elevation, and more than 600 miles—and a Time Zone—away from our state capital in Austin, we've developed a unique, and some might even say, iconoclastic institutional personality.

Most of us who live in El Paso also find it difficult to understand, and much less accept, the "ground zero" or "war zone" characterization of our border region in the current national narrative. The growing reinforcement of the border physical infrastructure, including the border fence or wall, now serves as a real, highly symbolic and painful daily reminder of that deep disagreement.

It wasn't always like this. When I arrived more than 40 years ago as a new faculty member in linguistics at The University of Texas at El Paso, which we call UTEP, I marveled at being able to "live" in two countries at the same time. I regularly crossed back and forth between El Paso and Juárez, to eat, to shop, to visit friends and attend cultural events, sometimes more than once a day. Longtime residents of our region,

including a large number of today's UTEP students, staff and faculty, have close extended families whose members reside on both sides of the international boundary.

There's a special energy about the confluence of people and cultures in a border region; scientists tell us say that the most interesting work occurs at the interfaces. The mostly first-and second-generation immigrant population in El Paso is high-aspiring, plucky, and industrious. They believe strongly in the American Dream, and most of them have had to fight very hard to gain access to it.

The demographics of UTEP's 25,000 students mirror those of the surrounding El Paso County, from which 84% of them come. 80% are Mexican-American, and another 5% are Mexican nationals, a majority of whom commute to our campus daily, across the international bridge and through Customs and Border Protection. More than half of all these 25,000 students are the first in their families to attend college, and most of their families have extremely modest financial means; 40% of our students report an annual family income of $20,000 or less.

Student demographics have changed significantly since the 1980s, when UTEP was a majority-Anglo university in a majority-Hispanic community. If you assume, as we do that talent crosses all boundaries: gender, ethnicity and race, geography and socioeconomic level, it was easy to see that far too much talent in the Hispanic community was being squandered for lack of opportunities to develop it. So, one of my primary goals upon becoming UTEP's president was to align the university's demographics with those of the surrounding region. This was not at all an easy task. We had to challenge stereotypes as well as widely accepted traditional higher education measures of prestige and exclusivity.

We began by studying feeder patterns into UTEP from area high schools: which high schools were not sending us many—or in some cases, any—of their graduates? Not surprisingly all of the under-delivering high schools were located in the most Hispanic and lowest income zip codes. Principals and teachers often described their students as "not college material," and many parents, and even the students themselves, sometimes agreed. There was a severe collective under-estimation of the potential of low-income Hispanics to perform academically, and an unexpectedly strong conviction that raising young people's expectations would only lead to disappointment and dysfunction. We were warned by many prosperous community leaders—both Anglo and a few Hispanic—that we would have to lower standards if we admitted "those" students, and we would surely "ruin our reputation." (I should probably interject here that upon arriving in El Paso, I had noticed bumper stickers

that referred to UTEP as "Harvard on the Border," a slogan that always struck me as more sad than self-deprecatingly funny. If that was indeed our reputation, I considered it to be quite ready for ruin!)

We next studied admissions requirements, including standardized test scores, and learned that although a very high SAT or ACT score might successfully predict academic success at UTEP, a low score didn't predict much of anything, except that standardized test score performance was highly correlated with test preparation courses and tutoring, to which most low-income students didn't have access. So, our focus then shifted to class rank in high school, which turned out to be a slightly more reliable predictor of performance at UTEP. But, since our quest was to ensure that not a single talented and motivated young person would be denied an opportunity, we also created a "provisional" first-semester program which permitted any high school graduates who did not meet our already very relaxed admissions requirements to enroll for one semester under strict guidance so as to demonstrate their capacity and determination to succeed in higher education. (I should mention here that we did a recent post-graduation survey of a group of these so-called "provisionally admitted" students, and we discovered that they include: a Project Engineer at Apple; an Explosives Technologist Specialist at NASA; and a Microbiologist at the US Geological Survey. There's no doubt in my mind that as the only Texas public university within 300 miles, we did exactly the right thing in giving those young people a chance to prove themselves.)

All of this work in the late 1980s was data-driven. We were developing our own very robust set of regional performance metrics, and engaging in highly customized data analysis. The next step was to utilize those data to strengthen the highly interdependent educational ecosystem in our region: more than 80% of UTEP's students are graduates of area high schools in El Paso County, and 75% of the teachers in those high schools earned one or more degrees at UTEP. This "closed loop" offered us exciting opportunities for innovative collaboration, strategic data sharing and analysis, and reciprocal accountability.

In 1992, we established the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence, a systemic reform partnership that included UTEP, all 12 school districts in our County, the El Paso Community College, and regional business and civic leaders, whose primary goal was to ensure a smooth PreK-16 pathway for all young people in our region. Celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, this partnership has gained national recognition for its innovation, success and sustainability.

The outcomes of this systemic reform initiative have been extraordinary. Our historically underserved and low-resourced El Paso region has become one of the top Texas performers in increasing student success at all levels, especially for low-resourced students. The Collaborative's work, and the growing trust it has fostered among educational institutions in the region, have already changed the life prospects for a fast-growing number of talented young people and their families; since 2000, UTEP's enrollment has grown by more than 50%, and degrees awarded annually have more than doubled to 4,500 per year.

Now you may be beginning to wonder why I'm describing to you in detail the region in which I live and the people whose lives touch mine, as well as the University that has been my passion for the past nearly 50 years. Well, it's that very passion that has led me on a quest to share with educated and thoughtful leaders like all of you a story about a region of this country that I don't believe is being fairly told; in fact, my greatest concern now is the growing misrepresentation, even denigration, of the high-aspiring and successful Hispanic population along the historically underserved U.S.-Mexico border, and especially its young people. I earnestly hope that each of you will help me spread the word.

But there's another very compelling reason why I wanted to share this story with you. The low-resourced Hispanic population with which we work at UTEP is not merely a border phenomenon. Demographers tell us that Latinos have been and continue to be the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population, and they live and work just about everywhere across this country today. Wherever they are, they deserve opportunities such as those that we're trying to create at UTEP, and it's in all of our collective and long-term interest to become advocates for such opportunity generation. And the story isn't limited to Latinos either. There are talented and low-resourced young people across this country from a wide range of ethnicities, races and national origins who also deserve opportunities to access the one, most likely, pathway to life success, which is, of course, a high-quality post-secondary education. I have deep feelings about this because, although it was a very long time ago, I was once one of those students, and my guess is that many of you were too.

I grew up in St. Louis, and attended a blue-collar public high school, whose mission was to prepare its male graduates for the workforce, primarily for union apprenticeships as plumbers, electricians, and carpenters at such major industries as Anheuser Busch and Monsanto. The girls were expected to marry those boys, and most of us studied typing and shorthand, just in case we needed to work before those

happy nuptials. No one talked with us about attending college, much less about scholarships or other enabling strategies. So, like nearly all of my fellow high school graduates, I went to work.

I was a 17-year-old switchboard operator at a large industrial company; the Lily Tomlin of Nordberg Manufacturing. After a month of switchboard mastery, I was utterly bored, and truly frightened by what appeared to be my dreadful future. I somehow mustered the courage to go to St. Louis University—there were no public universities in St. Louis at that time—to ask about enrolling. I learned that I would qualify for admission, but that I'd probably have to study very hard to catch up with fellow students who were SLU high school graduates and who had read Dante (a claim I later learned may have been somewhat exaggerated). I assured SLU and convinced myself that my family had taught me to be a hard worker, though I confess that I lived in fear of failure throughout my freshman year...and perhaps even longer.

The other major challenge that I faced was how to finance my education, primarily, St. Louis University's tuition, which at the time was $375 per semester. With SLU's help, I found a half-time secretarial job at a small construction company near the campus, and with that and a tutoring job on Saturdays, I managed to fully cover my investment in tuition, books, and transportation. Like many UTEP students, I lived at home.

Although there are parallels between UTEP students' and my own shaky start at SLU 50+ years ago, the higher education landscape has obviously changed. With a half-time job, I could fund the full costs of my high-quality education. That isn't possible today, even at a relatively low-cost public university like UTEP with tuition at $3,700 per semester. When, earlier this year, I was honored to be invited to speak at SLU's commencement, the thrill of returning to the launch pad that propelled me through a life filled with so many rich opportunities was incredibly moving for me. But, I also have to confess that my joy was tempered by the realization that what SLU did for me, and many other blue-collar students like me 50 years ago, is rare today. Higher education costs have escalated in both private and public sectors, and financial aid doesn't come close to covering them.

Data on the growing disparity over the past 50 years in U.S. baccalaureate degree attainment between students in the lowest and highest socioeconomic quartiles are extremely sobering. In the 1970s, 6.6% of young people in the lowest socioeconomic quartile completed bachelor's degrees, compared with over 36% in the highest quartile; 40 years later, in 2010, the lowest quartile bachelor's degree

attainment rate had risen by only 2% to 8.8%, while the highest quartile had doubled to more than 70%. Unless we believe that all talent is concentrated in the wealthiest segment of the U.S. population, this trend should alarm us all.

And the future seems far from rosy. Appropriations for education are declining in many states, including my own, and tuition and fee costs and student debt have been steadily rising. The challenges we face in attempting to execute UTEP's "access and excellence" mission grow more daunting by the day, and the policy context, at both federal and state levels, is increasingly ominous. So, whenever possible, I commit to sharing UTEP's social justice model and advocating across the country for strategies to increase educational opportunities for talented young people of modest financial means through such initiatives as enhanced financial aid and scholarships, and work-study, exchange, dual credit and early college high school programs that eliminate duplication and inefficient use of time and financial resources. Although we certainly seek to achieve social justice, we know too that this nation's global competitiveness is also at stake. It will depend on our success developing these young people's abundant talent, starting with assuring them access to a quality higher education.

I'm often asked why I chose to stay at UTEP rather than move to a larger or "more prestigious" university. By now, that should be as obvious to you as it is to me. I am passionate about being able to pay back—systemically and at scale—through my work at UTEP the incredible opportunity that the Jesuits at St. Louis University offered me: a high-quality education at an affordable cost. UTEP is a place where the impact of such pay-back is palpable every single day, not only on such special occasions as awards ceremonies and graduations. What's been especially exciting for me too is that so many of UTEP's most accomplished faculty and staff share this same passion to pay back their own opportunities through their work with UTEP students. I can't think of an accomplishment that has given my UTEP colleagues and me greater satisfaction than a recent Brookings study which ranked UTEP #1 among all U.S. research universities in fostering student social mobility. Why? Because unlike *US News & World Report*, whose wealth and prestige-driven measures are poorly aligned with UTEP and the students we serve, this Brookings study attempted to capture exactly what we have dedicated ourselves to deliver for UTEP's 25,000 students over the past 30 years: social mobility through quality higher education. By challenging traditional policies, procedures and metrics, UTEP has been successful in creating amazing opportunities for large numbers of students who at another place or time, might not have access to them.

Although Georgetown and UTEP are worlds apart on the higher education landscape, I know from working with President DeGioia and others here today that many of you share this passion. We know we are privileged to work with talented and high-aspiring young people whose bright futures we are helping to shape. For them, we must be optimists, despite the extremely competitive and often discouraging higher education climate. There's too much at stake....too much important work to be done to ensure that we leave this world a better and more equitable place for them than it is for so many young people in the U.S. today. Educators play an especially essential role in ensuring that this critically important work gets done, and all of us have accepted this major responsibility.

Thanks to each and every one of you for all you have done and will continue to do....and thank you so much for this opportunity to be with all of you today.