

January 22, 2020

Sul Ross State University Search Committee
Academic Search

Dear Search Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this cover letter and curriculum vitae. Please consider this my interest in serving as the Vice President for Middle Rio Grande Campuses (MRGC) of Sul Ross State University. The expectations for this position, the commitment to boldly embrace diversity and inclusiveness, inspiring the community and region to engage in philanthropic partnerships, strong financial acumen, and the ability to develop meaningful relationships with partnering high school districts and two-year colleges align perfectly with my experience and background.

I am a woman of faith and purpose with a proud native American heritage. I work daily to balance access with high expectations, ground academic programs and services in relevant and applied learning opportunities, create and sustain partnerships, and strategically advance the university mission and goals. I have made it my mission over the last 15 years to improve the quality of life for students and their families by providing multiple pathways to success. Through teaching in the classroom and online, assessing the quality of academic programs through Quality Matters, mentoring student leaders, coaching new professional faculty and staff, and leading policy change as an administrator, I am confident we can continue the MRGC excellence already established with Southwest Texas Junior College.

Most recently, I have been Vice President for Student Affairs (VPSA) and Executive Director for the Cisneros Institute for Emerging Leaders at Texas A&M University-San Antonio (A&M-SA). I have managed all aspects of enrollment management, university college, experiential learning, student engagement, military affairs, international affairs, and student success. As the inaugural VPSA, I was afforded the opportunity to build a division from the ground up at an upper-division university with services at three off-site locations which ensured student academic success. My focus at A&M-SA has been on enrollment growth, building sustainable student and academic success support structures, and most significantly, co-leading the university comprehensive expansion and launching our five-year strategic plan in collaboration with the provost. Abiding by the principles of shared governance and transparency, community members, faculty, staff, and students participated in various town hall meetings to provide insights and feedback on the mission, core values, and goals which led to a new, meaningful strategic plan (<http://www.tamusa.edu/documents/strategic-plan-2016-2021.pdf>).

Because collaboration is a core tenant of mine, my curriculum vitae will provide examples of direct and indirect responsibilities across a variety of roles. Each role reflects my personal and professional values, commitment to place and leadership style, and are valuable skills for leading MRGC. Let me concentrate on four areas where I focused my efforts to meet strategic goals and objectives: enrollment growth, student success, university and community collaboration, and financial acumen.

First, enrollment growth. Under my leadership, A&M-SA enrollment has grown by 180% in just five years. We aligned academic programs with budget priorities and community needs, grew and stabilized enrollment, implemented a new budget model, and enhanced our high school district relationships while

ensuring our students graduate with marketable skills. While A&M-SA is a state institution, it is very young with very little endowment and reliant on tuition and fee dollars for the majority of its budget. Shortfalls in enrollment projections can have significant impacts on the financial stability of the university. With declining state and federal funding, there is a narrow margin for error. This requires sophisticated enrollment modeling and retention strategies, which I acquired during my last 15 years in higher education.

My career in higher education has focused on supporting students from two-year colleges and aligning them into four-year university programs. The vast majority of students entering A&M-SA are through the Alamo Colleges pathway. It was critical to establish transfer and articulation agreements with our local and regional two-year colleges and align our curriculum with the common core for maximum transferability. This resulted in our joining the Regional Transfer Compact in 2016 (<https://therivardreport.com/15-community-colleges-and-universities-sign-regional-transfer-agreement/>) and we just renewed our commitment to this compact.

Previously, while serving as the associate dean at Northeastern State University (NSU), I had university-wide responsibilities that split my time among all three rural campuses by providing leadership and oversight to all areas of student affairs, most significantly was my oversight of services to the upper-division branch campuses. I was co-chair for the Student Success Team and supported the university-wide implementation of the Enrollment Strategic Plan designed to enhance enrollment growth and student retention. This plan worked in conjunction with the Smart Choice program, which expanded the university's reputation and visibility in the region and throughout Eastern Oklahoma (<https://academics.nsuok.edu/smartchoice/TCC-to-NSU>).

Secondly, student success. A&M-SA serves a student demographic where over two-thirds of the students identify as Hispanic or Latino and 78% of enrolled students report that they are the first in their families to attend college. As you can see, I have worked in Hispanic serving and Native American serving (NSU) institutions and celebrate the energy, creativity and strength they bring. However, serving historically under-represented populations has unique challenges and require significant resources to support student academic success. An example of this support is my creation of the Student Academic Success Center (SASC), which centralized academic support for students. This center has proven to be a tremendous benefit to our students and the retention rates continue to be above the national average, especially with the high number of Dreamers and first-generation students we serve. During my tenure at NSU, the creation of the Student Academic Success Center (SASC) was realized as well. The center was established from a five-year Title III grant, which supplied federal funds through the Department of Education.

Thirdly, collaboration. I have already given several powerful examples of collaboration with community partners and across divisions on campus but the most significant one was our comprehensive expansion in 2015-16 (<http://www.tamusa.edu/comprehensive-expansion/index.html>). I was part of the team working tirelessly, with the support of our Bexar County Delegation, to secure funding from the Texas Legislature which resulted in \$11 million for comprehensive expansion. The Provost and I managed this huge undertaking from plan to execution in just one year, including the core curriculum development and the first-year experience curriculum. A&M-SA was approved for expansion to lower-division students in June 2015 and we welcomed our first freshman class of 504 students in August 2016. The success of this expansion was a result of collaboration from across campus in all divisions.

Another shining example of community and campus collaboration is the Mays Center for Experiential Learning and Community Engagement (<http://www.tamusa.edu/mays/>). We designed this center to incorporate career services, community engagement, service learning and internships. The creation of the Mays Center was made possible by a generous gift of \$5 million dollars from the Mays Family Foundation who saw the value of an experiential education. The Mays Center is especially effective in helping our military students connect their service experience into relevant marketable skills, which equates to jobs! As the wife of a distinguished veteran, it is of high importance to me that our military students are valued and receive the support needed to transition into the workforce after their tremendous sacrifice of service for our county. I contracted with Texas Workforce Commission's (TWC) College Credit for Heroes (CCH) at A&M-San Antonio to utilize military training in lieu of up to 42 semester credit hours of electives, which allows a veteran to complete a bachelor's degree in as little as two-and-a-half years instead of four years.

I also saw the need to help expand support for our early college high school (ECHS) students. I wrote and secured a grant for \$1.4 million dollars to support the establishment of an early college high school office with significant scholarships towards degree attainment in three years for these students. The grant was awarded by the Greater Texas Foundation. This is a wonderful collaboration with our state agencies and local high schools and district office. We have seen a significant increase in the enrollment of our ECHS students over the past two years due to our partnerships.

Lastly, financial acumen. As an accountant and controller for the first half of my career, it has afforded me the skills and knowledge to understand many funding and accounting models. Working with the Texas Legislature over the past six years has expanded my legislative work. Recently, I authored the A&M-SA portion of a joint legislative appropriation for \$3.5 million dollars to establish the Bexar County Fostering Youth Pilot Program. This innovative project is the first in the nation to include higher education institutions, state agencies and the court system to improve the college graduation rates of youth with a history of foster care. <https://therivardreport.com/3-5m-partnership-benefits-foster-care-youth-enrolled-in-san-antonio-public-colleges/>.

There are universal issues with profound implications influencing higher education today. It requires administration to live democratic values of inclusiveness and transparency at the university. I immerse myself in the campus and community regardless of role and geography. I will continue to do that at MRGC, working with the campus community, community leaders, and anyone needed to move the university toward regional and national prominence.

There is an opportunity to build upon the past, set future priorities, and engage with dedicated professionals to move forward. A letter such as this cannot capture everything, and I would welcome an opportunity to talk with committee members about why I want to dedicate my career to MRGC.

Sincerely,



Melissa K. Mahan, Ph. D.