It means so much to have my longtime friend Raymund Paredes here today. When I thought about who I might invite as an honored guest, I thought of Raymund. There is no better person in the state of Texas to talk about higher education and about the role of UTSA than Commissioner Paredes.

Raymund, my friend, thank you for your kind words. Thank you for being here. Thank you for all you do to support this university and the cause of higher education in Texas.

Among many mutual interests, Raymund and I share a passion for education. We both know the transformative power education has on individuals and communities. UTSA is a change agent for the state of Texas as we seek to provide access to an excellent education.

I also want to thank our student leaders, the Faculty Senate and the Staff Council for joining me today. I want to recognize the vice presidents, deans and other administrative leaders for their efforts to make UTSA a great university.

Usually when I begin planning for this speech, I start by making a mental list of the accomplishments for the past year — our bragging points, so to speak. We have plenty of them. All of you — through your work, your accomplishments, the honors you bring to UTSA — give us much to be proud of. I am always bragging about UTSA. I am sure my friends in the community are tired of hearing me. They all say, “there’s Ricardo – ready to brag about UTSA – again!”

While we have certainly earned our bragging rights this year, I want to take this time to reflect on the role of a university. In particular, I want to speak about the role of UTSA with regard to our community.
I must say, I am privileged to witness the continuing transformation of UTSA, and I know you share that feeling with me. Great things are happening here. Who would have imagined that just one year after launching our football program, we would be invited to join Conference USA and still be undefeated? Or that we would be attracting new faculty from MIT, Harvard, UC Berkeley, University of Michigan and many other prestigious universities. No one would have guessed that we would be building our third major residence hall, or breaking ground for our new athletic complex at Park West.

We will soon begin construction on a new building alongside the North Paseo. I am very grateful to the UT System Board of Regents for their financial support. This five-story building will provide needed classrooms and research facilities.

We are all part of this great transformation, and we know that there are many more exciting changes to come.

Yet, I am reminded that a university is more than the sum of its parts—much, much more. Today I want to talk about the whole, and what I would characterize about this university as our passion.

More than ever, I am confident about UTSA’s role in the community. More than ever, I am convinced that we have the right people and the right programs in place. When I see our faculty and programs get national recognition, I know we are on the right track. For example, our Academy for Teacher Excellence and our English doctoral programs were recognized last night at an event in Washington D.C. by Excelencia in Education.

What may very well be our biggest accomplishment for 2012 is the launch of the university’s first capital campaign. Our goal is to raise $120 million for student and faculty initiatives across the university. What an inspiring and humbling experience this campaign has been.

In my first three years as president of UTSA, we raised a total of $9 million. That’s $9 million over three years. In the most recent three years, we’ve raised $110 million, including $17 million since we publicly launched the capital campaign in April.
What this says to me is that the community supports us. The community sees this university as a key shareholder in the advancement of our region. People invest in us because they want to make a difference for the future.

People like John Nau. John and Silver Eagle Distributors recently committed one million dollars for scholarships, graduate fellowships and teaching assistantships for history, an area that is very dear to his heart and mine. John is using his philanthropy to advance knowledge in his passion. This is the kind of leadership that is going to take us to Tier One. I appreciate John and the many donors who are investing in UTSA.

Every day we make steady progress toward becoming the university this community needs us to be, a Tier One university.

A university is a place of change. Positive change is happening, and we embrace the change that comes with being a Tier One university.

This year, one of the significant changes has been the reorganization of our research division.

We’ve grown tremendously in the research area — we had a 75 percent increase in funding from 2006 to 2011. That’s phenomenal. We want to continue to accelerate the growth of research at UTSA.

Our primary goal in restructuring our research efforts is to provide better service to our faculty. We are aligning our operations to be more reflective with those of a Tier One research organization. We are creating a climate of quality customer service. We are reviewing our processes and placing personnel within Research Service Centers that are located closer to the colleges, institutes, and faculty. I am establishing the Research Advisory Board, which will be chaired by a faculty member and be composed of faculty researchers. The Board will report directly to me and provide feedback regarding our research efforts.

We are making these enhancements to strengthen our organization. We want to advance our professors’ aspirations to be productive researchers.

Research continues to be critical to our mission.
Why is research so important to us? A report by the National Research Council of the National Academies says, quote: America is driven by innovation — advances in ideas, products, and processes that create new industries and jobs, spur economic growth and support a high standard of living.

For the past 50 years, research universities have been at the forefront in the creation of new knowledge. The list of major discoveries by university researchers includes the FM radio, laser, MRIs, global positioning systems, bar codes, and DNA fingerprinting.

Furthermore, as my mentor and former AAU President Robert Berdahl said, quote “...the work of research universities enriches teaching and learning at all institutions, creating path-breaking scholarship that expands students’ ability to grapple with the most current and pressing issues.”

I truly believe that the research underway at UTSA enriches our teaching and learning mission. They go hand in hand.

This year, UTSA was included in a list of top universities under 50 years old. We placed sixth among the American universities in this worldwide ranking. This means a great deal to us because it recognizes how far we’ve come in a short time.

Also the Carnegie Foundation recently advanced our classification to a High Research Activity University. We have now joined the ranks of other universities, such as Auburn, Temple and Lehigh. This is a significant accomplishment for a young university. And the ranking was due in large part to the university’s research productivity.

The good news is that we increased our expenditures in restricted research. Our productivity improved as a greater number of faculty received grants. We continue to see great results in the number of invention disclosures and patents awarded to our faculty. We are moving the marker in the right direction.

This environment encourages innovation and a spirit of entrepreneurship for students like Jordan Kauffman to succeed. If you haven’t heard the story
about Jordan, let me tell you about her. If you have, you know it is a great story.

Jordan is a recent graduate of our biomedical engineering doctoral program. She recently won the UT System’s Horizon Fund Competition and received $50,000 in seed funding. She and her advisors designed a stent that can prevent aneurysm leakage following cardiovascular surgery. It has the potential of saving people’s lives. Jordan plans to use the prize money to launch a start-up company to develop and market this new stent. What is so exciting is that Jordan competed against students from all 15 UT System institutions, and won first place.

Another UTSA student, Daniel Mendez, also was a finalist in the competition. Daniel got his bachelors in engineering from UTSA and is now in our MBA program. He has formed a company to make gel-like helmets that helps prevent skull deformations in premature babies. Every year there are one million premature babies who are born and run the risk of having deformations.

It is stories like Jordan’s and Daniel’s that reinforce my confidence that we will reach our Tier One aspirations. In alignment with this commitment, we have to expand our focus on student success and on-time graduation. This supports the vision outlined by UT System Chancellor Cigarroa in the Framework for Advancing Excellence.

During my tenure as president, our student enrollment has grown by 65 percent, from 18,600 in 1999 to the 30,600 students on campus today. And the growing pains of that increase have been evident with packed classrooms, packed parking lots—and no matter how many Starbucks we open, those lines are still long.

We’ve tried to keep pace through the hiring of new faculty. In that same time span, we’ve increased the size of our faculty by 68 percent. We’ve hired an average of 44 tenured and tenure-track faculty each year. But we need to hire even more to decrease our student-faculty ratio which stands at 26 to 1.

We grew at a time when the charge to higher education in Texas was to get more students into college.
We recruited from across the state, in Houston, Austin, South Texas—even from across the nation and the world, including 85 countries. Now, our focus is on helping our students graduate in four years, with a diploma in hand.

This has been an ongoing conversation. In fact in 2006, Commissioner Paredes was the keynote speaker at the Graduation Rates Summit we held at UTSA. That event led to the creation of our Graduation Initiative Office.

We clearly understand that our highest priority has to be improving our graduation and retention rates.

That’s why, late last year, we developed the Graduation Rate Improvement Plan — or the GRIP. The GRIP is the most comprehensive, the most collaborative initiative we have ever produced.

It touches every facet of the university. It addresses every stage of a student’s career.

Through the GRIP, we’ve set forth new initiatives to make sure that students who want to come to UTSA are prepared for the rigors of college. This year we are piloting the UTSA Ready Program, where we are working with students in targeted San Antonio high schools. We are helping them become college-ready so that they don’t spend their freshman year taking developmental courses.

Academic Affairs and Student Affairs are working together on our Top Scholars program, to recruit the most academically talented students in our community. In fact, this year 50 percent of our entering freshman class comes from the top quartile.

Last month, we officially inaugurated the University College, which two years from now will be the starting point for all UTSA freshmen. Through the University College and a renewed focus on the student’s first year, we will transform the freshman experience.

We are examining the curriculum in every degree program to ensure that it is streamlined. We are making sure every student at UTSA has a four-year degree plan so that they are on the path to a timely graduation.
To encourage students to graduate in four years, we are going to provide a financial incentive to juniors and seniors who are on track. We want them to successfully finish on time.

I have only told you about a couple of strategies in the GRIP because I have less than a half hour with you today. The GRIP Strategy Team, on the other hand, is working on this everyday. They are making sure that no stone is left unturned.

The task ahead of them – ahead of all of us - is a big one.

We will need everyone to contribute to realize our goals for student success at UTSA.

It’s going to take a sustained effort to see the changes we want. But we will see improvement in UTSA’s graduation rates, and we will meet our targets. There’s a spirit of cooperation across the campus. There is a determination that our students deserve all the time and resources we’re putting behind this plan.

It’s as simple as this: If we admit them, we are going to graduate them.

*If we admit them, we will graduate them* — ready to enter the workforce and to become tomorrow’s business, civic, scientific and community leaders.

We produce about 5,000 graduates a year, and around 4,000 stay to work in this region. We are fulfilling UTSA’s leadership role to build the San Antonio economy with higher-skill and higher-paid jobs. Mayor Castro wants to elevate San Antonio’s leadership and prosperity. UTSA is the area’s top contributor of human capital talent.

Mayor Castro has told me that this city and this state need our graduates. H-E-B needs our graduates. Southwest Research Institute needs our graduates. CPS Energy needs our graduates, as do Valero and Rackspace. USAA, Toyota, NuStar, the school districts, the healthcare systems, the non-profits— they all need UTSA graduates.

They need them sooner rather than later.
It is our responsibility to help them get there. It is what becoming a Tier One university is all about.

This past year I have been serving on the commission for the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics. We have been engaged in the discussion of college affordability. We have been studying the insurmountable hurdle it can be for Latino students, for all students, to afford college.

I am proud that two of our education faculty members, Laura Rendon and Amaury Nora, were invited by the White House Commission to collaborate with a scholar from USC on a paper on college affordability. It is an outstanding piece of scholarly work.

As we bring this discussion to UTSA, we are focusing on ways to make college more affordable for our students. We are making great efforts to be efficient and cost conscious.

I realize that there’s still much to be done. Yet, I enjoy being here because it is a challenge and it motivates us to find the best solutions. It keeps me energized. I see that in the students, the staff and the faculty whom I work alongside every day. It’s a passion we have. We have a passion for our community, and a passion for higher education.

More than ever, we understand the importance of the work we're doing. We understand the value - the critical value - of education.

In this tough job market, some people are asking questions about the value of a college diploma, even for more affordable schools such as ours. When you have fewer dollars, you make more careful choices about how you spend them. What’s the return on investment on a bachelor’s degree?

It’s a fair question.

I believe that especially now, a college degree is more valuable than ever. Times are tough, but, trust me, they’re a lot tougher for people who don't have a college degree. The current unemployment rate for those who have a bachelor's degree or higher is 4.1 percent, compared to 8.8 percent for those
who have only a high school diploma.

We don’t just give students the training and skills to pursue a single career. We teach them critical thinking and analytical skills. We give them a thirst for knowledge that will serve them their entire lives. UTSA prepares them to adapt as the economy changes, as technology changes, as our world changes.

College isn’t just an investment for four years down the road. It’s an investment for a lifetime. We know that college graduates earn more over their careers than high school graduates. One study released last year put that number at 84 percent. Because children of college graduates are more likely to go to college themselves, it’s an investment in their children and in their grandchildren.

Yet, a college education has benefits far beyond the monetary.

A college education broadens you in ways far beyond your profession.

People come to college and discover new passions by virtue of their experiences. Where else does that happen but at a university? The years a student spends at UTSA are transformative.

We help people find their passion. We do. I think each one of us here could tell a personal story about that. I can.

Aside from my passion for education, one of my other passions is art. I collect art. I read about art. I think about art. One of my wishes on my bucket list was to see the Van Gogh Museum in the Netherlands, which I did this summer. I’ve never in my life prepared myself for something as I did for the Van Gogh Museum. I started last year reading about Van Gogh—I read 15 books about him and another five about the Impressionists—so that when I went to the museum, I would know what I was looking at. When I walked in the museum, it was like walking into my own house. I knew those paintings as well as I know the ones on my own walls.

But I knew nothing about art before I went to college. I took an art class, and that planted the seed. Shortly after we were married, Harriett and I worked as teachers in inner city Los Angeles. We took a trip to Europe, and while in Paris, we came up to a gallery on the Left Bank. We mentioned that we were
interested in Mexican art and asked if they had any pieces. The man said, “I have some pieces that I think are Mexican, but they’re not signed.” I looked at them and definitively knew they were Mexican, so we bought them for five dollars each. They turned out to be by a very famous artist, Rufino Tamayo. I have been collecting art ever since.

Most recently, our passion for art has taken an incredible new direction. Harriett and I have collected art pieces from many aspiring Chicano and Latino artists over the years. Recently we donated 200 pieces to the McNay Museum, showcasing the work of 44 Chicano and Latino artists from California and Texas.

About a week ago, we celebrated the opening of the exhibit “Estampas de la Raza” at the McNay. Harriett and I are humbled that, in our own way, we are sharing these exceptional artists with a broader audience, and opening new pathways for them. We believe that our San Antonio community will enjoy learning about the rich Latino culture, and what better way than through art.

This is the difference taking one art class in college had on my life.

In a similar way, people come to UTSA to learn. People come here to expand their knowledge, and to prepare for a career. In the process, they learn other interesting things. They learn about themselves.

We don’t know what passions will evolve. But it’s fun to see, and it happens at a university. We help people find the intersection of their skills, their interests, and their passions. In the end, we produce engaged citizens who are more likely to vote and to participate in our democratic society. We are building the future leaders of our city, our state, and our nation.

When I speak about finding your passion, I want you to know that it is not meant just for our students, but for all of us at UTSA. Our faculty finds their passion in teaching and research, whether in the classroom or in the fields or jungles in South America. Our staff finds their passion in working with pre-college students, or as they take our UTSA message overseas to Brazil, China or Malawi.

I want all of us to focus on our passion – especially our passion for higher education. Everyone who arrives on our doorsteps - whether a student or
faculty or staff member—should be transformed by what they do here. UTSA is a place that comes alive as we pursue our passions.

Together let’s be on this quest to transform UTSA into a Tier One university.

I know you share this dream - alumni, business leaders, community leaders such as Commissioner Paredes, Mayor Castro, and many more...all as Roadrunner Champions.

Let's use the power of education and research to transform lives.... for our community of students, for San Antonio and for Texas.

Let’s continue working together to fulfill our dream of building a Tier One public research university right here in San Antonio!

Thank you for listening today, and thank you for all you do for UTSA.