Senator Odgen, members of the Finance Committee. Thank you for providing us the opportunity to come here today and testify on behalf of West Texas A&M University. I want also for you to know we recognize this committee has an extremely daunting task – drafting a budget that takes into account the current financial situation.

Since the year 2000, with funding assistance from the State, WT has made significant progress in term of Closing the Gap goals.

- Undergraduate enrollment at WT has grown 16 percent; 13.7 percent alone since Fall 2005. This is in spite of the fact that the Panhandle Region, the Region from whence WT primarily draws, has experienced slower population growth than in the State in general.

  A large proportion of this increase has come from increased enrollment of new first-time freshmen who have taken advantage of Texas Grants and the Buff Promise Program. Additionally, over the past five years, WT has experienced a 29 percent increase in the number of transfer students from two-year colleges. But of greater importance, WT is doing a better job in retaining the students who chose to enroll. This year the first-time, full-time freshman fall to spring persistence rate is at 87.4 percent. Last year, it was 78 percent.

- Also, during this 11 year period, the proportion of Hispanic students enrolled at WTAMU has increased from 9.9 percent to 19.3 percent.
Perhaps the more important results are those associated with the end game – graduation. Over the past decade WT’s four-year graduation rate has increased 11.4 percentage points – an 89 percent increase.

The successes we have had in recruiting, retaining and graduating more students are the results of our offering higher quality academic and academic support programs. One of the more successful of these is our Student Success initiative.

As you know, in the current biennium we have taken a five percent cut in a portion of our GR funding. To deal with this cut we have already eliminated 12 FTE staff positions and 9 faculty positions. The result has been slightly increased class sizes and fewer course offerings. Thus far we have been able to mitigate the negative impact of the cuts by applying incentive funds to hire additional part-time faculty.

The proposed cuts in SB1 will have impacts far deeper than those taken in the current biennium. Most assuredly, personnel at WT and the level of service provided by WT to our student customers will be negatively impacted. My goal, however, is to in spite of the cuts maintain a high level of quality at WT.

I am very concerned that the individuals hardest hit by the budget cuts will be the underserved population – lower income and minority students.

I’m concerned for students like Nataly Gonzalez of Amarillo -- the first in her family to attend college. Without her Texas Grant award, she would not have been able to attend WT. Working with our Student Success Center, she also was able to enhance her math skills so as achieve success in her program of
study. She graduated this past May and is a third grade bilingual education teacher in the Pampa Independent School District.

Nataly and countless others are the future of our region – they are the future of our State. With their college education they will be the drivers of economic development in our region as they earn significantly higher incomes than they would if their education stopped at the high school level. They will be the role models in their extended families and among their friends for others to pursue their dreams through a college education.

I am also concerned that the percentage of the population with baccalaureate degrees in the most populous county in the Panhandle – Potter County is less than 15 percent. For Hispanics, the percentage is approximately 4 percent. These percentages are characteristic of most of the counties in the Panhandle. For the top 26 county region to be competitive in our global economy, we must educate a larger proportion of our population.

We need to do whatever we can at WT to ensure that students like Nataly have the opportunity to receive a quality university education. We need to ensure that the Panhandle Region has an educated population.

I pledge to you, whatever the level of funding we receive, we will provide a quality education to our students. Our offerings may be smaller, our support services may be fewer; but we will continue to provide high quality education to our students. That is my pledge.

Thank you.