

Luis M. Salinas  
Department of Educational Leadership  
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi  
EDLD 6306: Higher Education in a Democratic Society  
Dr. Kevin J. Bazner  
November 19, 2025

### **Purpose of Interview**

I am conducting this interview as part of a research project examining the establishment and development of the Texas A&M University Higher Education Center at McAllen. The purpose is to gain insight into the campus's origins, the lived experiences of its founding leadership, and its impact on the Rio Grande Valley.

**Interviewee:** Manny Vela, first Associate Vice President & Chief Operation Officer of the Texas A&M University Higher Education Center at McAllen.

### **Interview Questions**

1. Could you describe the origins of the Texas A&M University Higher Education Center at McAllen? What factors or needs led to its establishment, and what were some of the key challenges and objectives during the initial planning and development stages?

*Texas A&M has been present in the Rio Grande Valley for over a hundred years. Initially in the agriculture arena but most recently in regards to the health and wellness of our communities through the Colonia Program, the A&M School of Medicine, School of Public Health, Veterinary Program, amongst others.*

*HECM was the dream of former Chancellor John Sharp and various community leaders created in an effort to further grow A&M's presence in the RGV. Chancellor Sharp is from South Texas and has long held the position that as goes the Valley will go the State of Texas. He has asserted for years that creating educational opportunities in the RGV will build the foundation for success.*

*The two major challenges in establishing a branch campus in the RGV were the financial commitment to doing so and the land on which the campus would be built. The financial commitment came from the Texas A&M System, and the land was donated by the City of McAllen. Awareness of the campus continues to grow and has been well received and supported since its' inception.*



*The primary objective has been to offer programs that are based on community and industry need in the RGV so that degrees from HECM are a bridge to a job, etc. In addition, the goal is to build a campus where the students live and feel the Aggie spirit. A campus that grows based on the needs of the students.*

2. As the first person to serve in your role at the HECM campus, what was it like to help build something so new from the ground up? How did you navigate setting the tone, culture, and identity of this campus within the larger Texas A&M system?

*I was actually hired after the campus had been in existence for four years. The primary reason for creating the position of VP/COO at HECM was to increase community awareness of the educational opportunities and build facilities to enhance the student's experience. I believe we made positive steps in regards to both goals during my two-year tenure.*

*A major focus during my two years at HECM was ensuring that all folks on the campus adhered to and were motivated by the Aggie value system. I believe the staff at HECM had done a great job of ensuring the students learned about Aggie history and culture. They also did a great job of setting expectations for our students that they live, work and play within those cultural parameters.*

*The focus during my tenure was to ensure that all faculty and staff understood clearly that the same expectation existed for them as well. I consistently reminded the faculty and staff that it was our responsibility to lead by example, noting that the students were watching. I believe we made some positive progress regarding the culture but believe it should be an ongoing focus as the team continues to grow.*

*One of the main reasons for our success during my tenure at HECM was building a true bridge with the folks in College Station. This was accomplished by consistent outreach and sincere appreciation for the time, attention and support HECM was receiving. From the Chancellor to the President, to every member of the President's cabinet, there was a true alignment in regards to growing the A&M presence in the RGV, thereby greatly enhancing the chances of HECM's success. It was much easier to align since HECM is a true "branch" campus and we were treated as such.*



3. From your perspective, how has the McAllen campus contributed to higher education access and regional development in the Rio Grande Valley? Looking ahead, what do you envision for the campus's continued growth and its role in advancing educational and economic opportunities in the region?

*I believe HECM/A&M have done a great job of offering another layer of educational opportunities in the RGV, many of which did not exist before the establishment of HECM. I give credit to every single institution creating educational opportunities in the RGV and strongly believe it is time to collaborate and coordinate to ensure that we are truly meeting the needs of our communities and industries by offering new programs or supplementing existing programs. I believe HECM has made a major impact by offering our folks the opportunity to attend a Tier 1 institution in our very own back yard, thereby offering a world-class education at a much-reduced cost.*

*I am confident that HECM will continue to grow from both an enrollment and bricks and mortar perspective. My hope is that the growth will be very strategic in nature and continue to be based on community and industry needs. As a reminder, as goes the RGV will go Texas so it behooves A&M to continue its' growth and support in the RGV.*

**Interviewee:** Rick Margo, first Executive Director of the Texas A&M University Higher Education Center at McAllen.

1. Could you describe the origins of the Texas A&M University Higher Education Center at McAllen? What factors or needs led to its establishment, and what were some of the key challenges and objectives during the initial planning and development stages?

*In early 2015, it is my understanding that former City of McAllen Mayor Jim Darling, State Senator Chuy Hinojosa, former Hidalgo County Judge Ramón Garcia, and local businessman Alonzo Cantu met to discuss the possibility of having Texas A&M University establish a permanent campus in the Rio Grande Valley. After this initial meeting, the group met with former TAMU System Chancellor John Sharp to pitch the idea.*

*The Chancellor, a huge fan and strong proponent of the Rio Grande Valley, was enthusiastically in favor of the idea. His approval set in motion the entire start up*



*process—from finding a suitable location to agreeing on academic offerings and working through countless planning details, requirements, and compliance steps. The fact that this influential group of local leaders came together and generously offered their support was the key to the establishment of the Texas A&M University Higher Education Center at McAllen. (HECM).*

2. As the first person to serve in your role at the HECM campus, what was it like to help build something so new from the ground up? How did you navigate setting the tone, culture, and identity of this campus within the larger Texas A&M system?

*In the summer of 2016, I was asked to become the “Interim Director” of the new Texas A&M University HECM. Up until then, I was the Director of the Office of Admissions Rio Grande Valley Prospective Student Center (PSC), Texas A&M University. For nearly two years, I held the interim position while also fulfilling my duties at the PSC. During this time, I was tasked with recruiting the first-ever HECM class, hiring new staff, and working closely with the construction company completing the initial building to name just a few of my new duties!*

*To say I was overwhelmed with responsibilities would be an understatement! With the help of many individuals on the main campus in College Station, I began to understand the many different departments/divisions involved in establishing a new campus. From academic and student affairs to facility and building management, the list of duties seemed endless. I quickly realized that I could not do everything on my own—I needed help.*

*Fortunately, the new HECM staff and faculty were hardworking, dedicated, and passionate individuals to whom I owe so much. We worked well as a team with a shared mission of establishing, maintaining, and growing the Texas A&M University footprint in the Rio Grande Valley. As with any startup—whether a business or a school—there were many challenges. However, I would always remind the staff and faculty that we were working for the students who placed their trust in us and who deserved a first-class education. It was up to us to promote the Aggie Core Values and to make sure every student knew they were Aggies 100%.*

3. From your perspective, how has the McAllen campus contributed to higher education access and regional development in the Rio Grande Valley? Looking ahead, what do you envision for the campus’s continued growth and its role in advancing educational and economic opportunities in the region?

*The Texas A&M University HECM was established to offer students in south Texas the choice to attend a large, reputable, state, and federally Tier 1–designated university close to home. Texas A&M University is committed to providing the entire*



*state with educational opportunities, and the establishment of this campus is the beginning of a very bright future—not only for students, but for the entire region. Texas A&M University is committed to not only making a difference but making a lasting impact in the Rio Grande Valley.*