

The University of Texas at El Paso

Fall Convocation

September 10, 1987

Share the dream

During 1987-88, The University of Texas of El Paso will launch the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of its founding in 1913 as the Texas College of Mines and Metallurgy. 75 years of dreams that have become reality! Perhaps more than any other institution in our society, universities are places where dreams do come true. Each of us, students, staff, and faculty, bring our dreams with us to the university, and, with varying degrees of confidence and success, we strive to achieve them. Students and their families dream of the professional careers that lie ahead of graduation;

--- a welder in the Physical Plant with 97 hours toward a degree in Social Work dreams of helping troubled young people;

--- a faculty member from Tecnológico in Chihuahua, who is completing his master's degree, dreams of helping strengthen higher education in Mexico;

--- a secretary dreams of completing her teaching credentials;

--- a faculty member dreams of a scientific breakthrough, of a critically acclaimed book, or of a student's acceptance to a prestigious graduate or professional program.

Anyone who has attended a UTEP commencement cannot help but be moved by the joy and sense of accomplishment apparent on those occasions: the smiles on the faces of the graduates, the cheering of their families and friends, and the pride of the faculty and staff who played a role in their success.

UTEP in many ways represents the American Dream... the conviction that everyone deserves an opportunity --- and a quality opportunity --- to become

educated to the full extent of his or her talents and motivations. For 75 years, this university has been successful in creating educational opportunities and access, while at the same time constantly striving for greater excellence. Striking this balance between institutional quality and accessibility is both UTEP's most significant challenge and its single greatest achievement.

And yet, U.T. El Paso seems to suffer from a lack of self- confidence self- confidence – a collective inferiority complex, if you will – that is both undeserved and unacceptable, if we hope to attain our institutional aspirations. This inferiority complex is perplexing since the evidence doesn't seem to support it. Our faculty includes representation from the most prestigious research universities in the United States: Yale, Harvard, Stanford, Johns Hopkins, Chicago, California-Berkeley, and I could go on. These faculty compete successfully for research contract and grants with colleagues from those major universities. Funding from such sources as the National Science Foundation, NASA, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Institutes of Health, the Meadows and Welch Foundations, and the state-funded Advanced Technology program totaled over \$5.2 million last year... an enormous tribute to both the researchers – Don Moss, Bill Herndon, Eppie Rael, Keith Panell, Don Michie, Art Bronson, Steve Riter, and so many others – whose dedication to the research enterprise leads to both individual and institutional excellence; and to the Sponsored Projects Office, under Harmon Hosch's able leadership, which coordinates and facilitates the researchers' efforts. Other faculty have achieved significant recognition for their work:

--- Ellergy Schalk, whose book on French nobility has achieved international Acclaim;

--- Mimi Gladstein, who was named Steinbeck Teacher of the Decade;

--- Rachelle Thiewes, whose exciting metals pieces are featured at the American Crafts Museum in New York and in major national publications;

and many, many more too numerous to mention here.

Staff member also bring us distinction:

--- Pat Mora and Dale Walker, whose writing has brought them honors, including election to the Texas Institute of Letters;

--- Nancy Wood, whose program is regarded as a model by many other Universities across the country;

--- and Diana Guerrero and Joe Avila, who were recently included in a listing of 100 Most Influential Hispanics in the United States.

And our Students ... enrollment data reveal that we are successfully recruiting not only more students, but also students with stronger academic preparation. Through the dedicated efforts of Beto Lopez and his staff – and with the collaboration of Richard Aranda, Diana Guerrero and many faculty and administrators who work with them – we are recruiting valedictorians and other outstanding students from throughout this region. Our Presidential Scholarship program, with an endowment of over \$5 million, has helped us recruit the brightest and best students. And these students know that, as UTEP undergraduates, they will have opportunities to interact directly with our best research faculty, in Honors classes and in research laboratories, and that their educational experience here is likely to be superior to that at many of the better-known universities which compete for their talents.

Finally, there's our community. A community that supports us generously – over \$5.5 million in contributions last year – but a community that sometimes finds it hard to believe in us ... perhaps because of our difficulty in believing in ourselves, or perhaps because of its own lack of self-confidence. Why do we find it so difficult to believe that we really can be outstanding?

We are outstanding, not only in terms of achievements to which I have made reference, but because we are regarded nationally as a model institution. Federal agencies and major foundations are eager to learn more about us and help us achieve our goals. When I talk to representatives of these agencies and

foundations in New York and Washington, D.C., they find what we are doing both exciting and important nationally. Case studies are being written about us. What is all the excitement about?

Well, U.T. El Paso is one of only four universities in the continental U.S. with a majority Hispanic student population. (The others are Panamerican, Texas A & I, and New Mexico Highlands, all of which are considerably smaller than UTEP.) Our Hispanic student population, increasing each year, attracts national attention because U.T. El Paso is experiencing in 1987 what many – indeed most – colleges and universities will face by the end of this century. Minority populations are growing in the U.S. at an accelerated rate: half of the children in elementary schools in Texas today are minorities; 71% of the kindergarten children in El Paso are Hispanic. The demographic trends are clear, and UTEP is in the forefront of these trends. We presently graduate more Hispanic engineers than the entire University of California system! We are viewed as a model university, setting a course which other institutions will follow. While flattering, and advantageous from the point of view of funding support – because as a minority institution we are eligible for special programs – such recognition also brings with its special obligations and responsibilities.

First, we must strive to become a model of excellence in all our academic and research programs. Minority institutions, with very few exceptions, have not traditionally been associated with strong graduate programs and research excellence. Of the four Hispanic majority institutions I mentioned earlier, only UTEP is regarded as a serious national contender for research dollars. Minority students, wherever they are enrolled, should be no more satisfied with, nor subjected to, second-class educational experiences, than are majority students. The institutes in which they are concentrated must become increasingly committed to providing an enriched educational environment. UTEP has an obligation to change the stereotype of minority institutions and to set a tone for other universities whose student populations will become increasingly minority.

To achieve this goal, we must first increase the research productivity and competitiveness of our faculty and professional staff; by recruiting and retaining outstanding faculty whose research efforts will bring us both extramural funding support and professional distinction; by strengthening the research infrastructure, increasing Library holdings and computing capabilities, equipping research laboratories with state-of-the-art instrumentation, and by providing incentives such as merit salary increases and teaching load reductions to those whose continued productivity we wish to encourage. And, very importantly, we must gain authorization to offer doctoral programs in selected areas which are supportive of the educational needs of this region and which build upon our institutional strengths. At the present time, those areas include: Applied Psychology, Engineering, and the Chemistry & Physics of Materials. Doctoral programs have obvious links to research excellence; what is perhaps less obvious is that the recruitment and retention of outstanding faculty through the presence of doctoral programs on the campus greatly strengthens our undergraduate programs as well.

The second way in which we must ultimately excel as a model for other institutions is in creating educational opportunities – real educational opportunities – for the large undergraduate student population we serve. UTEP’s students, whether Hispanic or Non-Hispanic, are, for the most part, the first in their families to attend a university. They are employed, either part or full time, and they are commuters. Demographers tell us that such students represent the future of U.S. higher education.

With increases in such “non-traditional” students at American universities, retention has become an issue of growing concern. In fact, the higher education literature is replete with that concern. Institutions and the students they serve appear to be increasingly incompatible. Academic and support programs designed for residential campus populations are often ill-suited to a setting such as ours. Commuting, working class students, often single parents, experience enormous extramural pressures which are unknown in more traditional university settings.

We at UTEP must be prepared to experiment with new approaches and new strategies for creating educational opportunities, even though at times our own backgrounds do not provide experiential analogues. We must be willing to accept the challenges of our student body as it is, not attempt to recast it into a more familiar package. We must do all that we can to create conditions for our students to succeed.

There are those who argue that making such efforts requires lowering academic standards. I think not. Standards are set by faculty in their classes, and there should obviously be no compromise there. First-generation and minority students have a right to the best quality education. Lowering academic standards would deny them the very opportunity we are attempting to create. This is, among other reasons, why it is important that our programs meet the stringent standards set by accrediting bodies, such as the one that will soon review our College of Business Administration. This is also why we are so pleased when our students perform well on standardized achievement tests, such as the recent 95% pass rate achieved by our Nursing students on the State Board examinations. These achievements assure us and others that our standards are in no way compromised by our efforts to create educational opportunities.

The recently established Advising Center and Academic Services Building in which it is housed represent efforts to maximize student success. Because our students are the first in their families to go to college, and because most of them live at home rather than in dormitories or sorority or fraternity houses, they do not have a support structure on which they can lean for information and advice. The faculty members who together with Bob Webking have created the Advising Center worked hard to understand UTEP's student body and their role in attempting to meet its special needs. The Academic Services Building brings together many other student support services and offers extended operating hours so that evening students' needs can also be met.

--- We hope soon to review the scheduling of evening classes in various areas to ensure that educational programs are not needlessly compromised by inaccessible schedules.

--- We will soon move toward a greater emphasis on developmental and career counseling.

- We are exploring ways to strengthen the links between programs in Study Skills and Tutorial Services and those in academic areas for which they provide support.
- We are increasing our collaboration with the El Paso community College to broaden the base of educational opportunities for El Pasoans.
- We are endeavoring to recruit women and Hispanic faculty and administrators in areas of traditional underrepresentation to assure that our majority-female, majority-Hispanic student body has role models.
- Finally, we have just established a Retention Council which will attempt to coordinate many of these ongoing retention activities.

Ultimately, however, we are all part of the retention effort.

Everyone with whom students come into contact plays a role in retention:

- a sophomore who stops to help a confused freshman find his classroom;
- a secretary who patiently explains to a student how to do drop-add, even though this is the 82nd such explanation she's given that day;
- the faculty member who takes a few moments after class to clarify a point, answer a question, or provide some words of encouragement;
- the faculty member, who through the excellence of his or her teaching, instills a lifelong love of learning;
- the staff member in Student Affairs or the faculty member in the Advising Center who takes extra time to restore shattered confidence or help resolve serious personal problems;
- the custodian who creates an attractive working environment;
- the Financial Aid or Scholarship officer who expends extra effort to find funds to enable a deserving student to continue her education;
- the football coach whose team gives us all a psychological and image boost by decisively beating NMSU ...

we all contribute to what UTEP is and how we are perceived. It is our commitment to excellence, our pride in ourselves and in UTEP that will ultimately determine our success.

To be sure, UTEP has not yet achieved its full promise, and self-criticism is essential to maintain perspective. It is particularly important on a university campus. But, self-criticism can also be self-destructive. We can dwell on our shortcomings and convert minor weakness into major institutional paralysis. Negative thinking should not be permitted to control us and our futures. Instead, I'd like to propose that we choose to capitalize on our many assets, while at the same time working to strengthen ourselves where we are not all that we want or need to be.

UTEP benefits from enormous institutional assets. Our participation in the U.T. System is one. The recent faculty salary increases, which average 10%, was made possible by the legislature and the commitment of U.T. System PUF funds to augment our and other System Institutions 1987-88 budgets. Faculty at non-U.T. System Institutions did not fare nearly so well. PUF funds have also supported the construction of the most major facilities on this campus, and, since Proposition 2, they have provided for more than \$1.2 million in research and instructional equipment and library materials, with an additional \$850,000 anticipated this year.

Another major asset is our surrounding community. Their generosity and support is well-known and greatly appreciated.

But, ultimately, our greatest institutional asset is you: UTEP's faculty, staff, and students. We are UTEP. We have invested far more than dollars in this institution; we have invested our lives. We care more than anyone else possibly can about what happens here. So, it's up to us to chart our future course and to work toward attaining our goals. Together we can achieve our dreams, both individual and collective, and together we can help make each other's dreams come true.

Believe in yourself and in your dreams. Believe in UTEP and its aspirations. Share the dream!