



State of The University Address

President Diana Natalicio

September 19, 2013

**The University of Texas at El Paso
State of The University Address
September 19, 2013**

A new academic year on university campuses always begins with an air of excitement and optimism, and this fall 2013 semester at UTEP is overflowing with both. Excitement abounds in anticipation of the many events that have been planned to celebrate UTEP's 100th anniversary in 2014. The next 15 months are going to offer all of us on the campus, together with our many alumni, friends and supporters, extraordinary experiences and lifelong memories of being a part of UTEP's Centennial commemoration.

We are filled too with optimism, knowing that UTEP has unprecedented momentum to achieve its goal of sustained national respect and recognition for successfully serving residents of our Paso del Norte region and beyond with balanced commitments to both access and excellence. *Washington Monthly's* 2013 ranking of UTEP as #7 among all U.S. colleges and universities, between #6 Stanford and #8 Harvard, has given national visibility to the transformative work that has been done by dedicated faculty and staff who have creatively and courageously embraced our access and excellence mission and enabled UTEP to become a national leader in redefining public higher education in the United States.

This national recognition reflects the convergence of UTEP's successful transformation into a nationally prominent public research university, and *Washington Monthly's* effort to challenge traditional college and university rankings. Twenty-five years ago, UTEP was at a critical crossroads. There were many on the campus who believed that the single path toward greater glory in higher education would require emulating prestigious research universities, however different their settings, constituencies and missions; some of you may recall "Harvard on the Border" bumper stickers. These misaligned aspirations were reinforced by *U.S. News & World Report*, the only major college rankings at that time, which focused heavily on such prestige factors as alumni giving, endowment size, and number of students denied admission. Not surprisingly, the top ranks consistently went to small private colleges and universities and they still do! *Washington Monthly's* enlightened decision to offer an alternative to *U.S. News* rankings involved the development of new measures of institutional impact, including student social mobility (in which UTEP ranked first among all universities), research and doctoral degrees, and service to a region and the nation. So, while we were working to become the best UTEP we could be, *Washington Monthly*, quite independently, was working to make more meaningful the value proposition in university rankings. The result? UTEP is now proudly not "Harvard on the Border," but we're definitely bordering Harvard in *Washington Monthly's* latest ranking!

During the past year, individual UTEP programs, colleges and faculty members have also received national recognition for their excellence. Among them:

- The College of Business Administration has once again been ranked the #1 Business School nationally by *Hispanic Business* magazine.
- In Engineering, for the 8th consecutive year, *Hispanic Business* has designated UTEP graduate programs among the Top 10; UTEP ranked #3 this year, after traditional powerhouses Georgia Tech and Purdue.
- And in the College of Liberal Arts, Professor Benjamin Alire Saenz received the highly prestigious national literary prize, the PEN-Faulkner Award, for his book, *Everything Begins & Ends at the Kentucky Club*.

Washington Monthly rankings place high value on affordability and access for students, goals to which UTEP has also been strongly committed. In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Education, at \$2,543 per year, UTEP has the lowest net price of attendance of all U.S. research universities.

- With enrollment surpassing 23,000 students for the first time ever this fall, and more than 6% growth in new undergraduate students, UTEP's commitment to access and affordability is clearly resonating with students from this region and beyond, including this area's most successful high school graduates. Nearly two-thirds of the Top Ten Percent high school graduates from this region who attend public universities in Texas choose to enroll at UTEP.
- More than 500 Early College High School graduates from this region enrolled at UTEP this fall. With their Associate's degrees already in hand, UTEP's modest cost will enable them to complete their bachelor's degrees with little or no debt, a rarity in today's national higher education landscape, especially in low-resource settings such as ours.

Still, as I've often said, access without excellence is a promise to be broken. UTEP students' diplomas must enable them to compete with their peers in more affluent settings across the globe, and UTEP faculty and staff work extremely hard to create a broad range of enriched educational experiences—from study abroad, to civic engagement, to internships—to ensure that they're ready to do just that.

- Through the Campus Office of Undergraduate Research Initiatives (or COURI), ably directed by Lourdes Echegoyen, UTEP offers undergraduate students unusually robust research experiences. During the past year, 453 undergraduates were sponsored for participation in research projects across the campus. In addition, 79 UTEP pre-med students were accepted for competitive summer internships in Texas and across the U.S.
- Mentored by UTEP faculty and staff, a UTEP start-up company, American Water Recycling, founded by EVA DEEMER, doctoral student in materials science and engineering, and Business students, DIEGO CAPELETTI and ALEX PASTOR, won

the prestigious \$100,000 UT System Horizon Fund Student Investment Competition prize, and have already attracted substantial investor interest in their technology.

- Hundreds of UTEP students participated in Study Abroad programs across the world from Australia, South Korea, Spain, and Qatar, to Indonesia, Italy, Poland, Brazil and China. Twenty-four UTEP vocal and instrumental music students are preparing to depart for Bhutan next week to participate in Opera Bhutan, a once-in-a-lifetime experience for all, and for many, their first airplane flight.

UTEP's #7 national ranking by *Washington Monthly* is also directly responsive to a question that I'm frequently asked about UTEP's progress toward "Tier One," the Texas equivalent of "national research university." In many ways UTEP's inclusion among the *Washington Monthly's* Top Ten national universities, offers the strongest evidence of our remarkable progress toward Tier One. But we're not resting on our laurels. I'm very pleased to report that during the past year we have continued to make great strides, as student, faculty and staff accomplishments collectively contribute to UTEP's progress toward our Tier One goal.

Outstanding teaching and student learning are the foundation upon which every great university rests. UTEP has been successful in recruiting and retaining an uncommonly talented and dedicated faculty who generously devote their time and expertise to creating an exciting learning experience for UTEP students, from entering freshmen to those pursuing doctoral degrees. One visible confirmation of teaching excellence at UTEP over the past several years has been the selection of UTEP faculty members as recipients of the highly competitive UT System Board of Regents' Outstanding Teaching awards, and the \$25,000 prize that accompanies each of them. This competition recognizes faculty teaching excellence across all nine academic institutions in the UT System, and I'm happy to report that each year UTEP faculty are disproportionately represented among the honorees. This year, eight UTEP faculty members were honored with the Board of Regents Outstanding Teaching Award at a dinner last month in Austin, and I am pleased and proud to present them to you today:

- CHARLES BOEHMER, Associate Professor of Political Science
- ANN GABBERT, Associate Director for Student Support, and Lecturer in the Entering Student Program
- GASPARE GENNA, Associate Professor of Political Science
- JOHN HADJIMARCOU, Professor and Chair of Marketing and Management
- DAVE MCINTYRE, Senior Lecturer in Art
- JAMES SALVADOR, Associate Professor of Chemistry
- CIGDEM SIRIN, Assistant Professor of Political Science and
- RON WAGLER, Assistant Professor of Teacher Education

Congratulations, once again, to all of you, and to Dr. Beth Brunk Chavez, a previous recipient of this award, who was invited to be a founding member of the highly prestigious UT System Academy of Distinguished Teaching. Thanks to all of you for serving as outstanding models of UTEP teaching excellence!

Student learning extends well beyond classrooms and laboratories at UTEP, and the Division of Student Affairs, under Gary Edens' leadership, has made major progress this past year in redefining its role as an intentional and authentic contributor to UTEP's access and excellence mission in such areas as student engagement, campus culture and climate, student service and wellbeing, and academic integration.

- A campus-wide student employee training program called "I Work at UTEP" was launched to support the professional development of more than 500 student employees from over 40 UTEP departments, in such key areas as customer service, leadership, professionalism and team-building. Thanks to Louie Rodriguez and Catie McCorry Andalis for their leadership of this effort.
- Reflecting Student Affairs' strong commitment to academic integration, the on-campus student employment program collaborated with COURI to increase the number of research jobs available to UTEP undergraduates. Professional development workshops have been expanded and will be a central element of the undergraduate research experience going forward.

A second major dimension of Tier One attainment is research, scholarship and doctoral education. In 2010, we articulated in UTEP's Strategic Plan for Research our expectations for progress toward Tier One in terms of two primary goals: to reach \$100 million in annual research expenditures, and to confer at least 100 doctoral degrees annually. I'm pleased to report continued progress on both fronts. Research expenditures this past year totaled \$81 million, moving us ever closer to our \$100 million annual expenditures goal. In terms of doctoral degrees awarded, for the first time this year we exceeded our 100 doctoral degrees target; with the conferral of 128 doctoral degrees. Go Miners!

UTEP's research achievements reveal increasing competitiveness, innovation and excellence across the campus. To cite just a few examples:

- With support from NIH, biological sciences professor, IGOR ALMEIDA has developed a vaccine against an often fatal disease called Chagas, a parasite infecting millions and recently called the "new AIDS of the Americas." The vaccine being developed at UTEP promises to save thousands of lives every year.
- Professor THOMAS BOLAND, Director of UTEP's Biomedical Engineering programs, partnered with UTEP engineering graduate and 2013 Gold Nugget, LAURA BOSWORTH BUCHER, to found TEVIDO BIO-DEVICES, a tissue engineering company that utilizes 3-D printing to produce skin cells for reconstructive surgeries.
- Dr. Ann Gates, Professor and Chair of Computer Science, received a \$5 million NSF grant renewal for the Cyber-ShARE Center of Excellence she directs, and partnered with Education faculty Song An and Daniel Tillman on an NSF grant to enhance the participation of Latino students in STEM careers.

- Professor AHSAN CHOUDHURI and his team celebrated the grand opening of their Center for Space Exploration Technology Research (cSETR) and are working with Kyushu Institute of Technology to build an unmanned suborbital vehicle that Japan ultimately hopes will lead to commercial space travel.
- And speaking of space travel, UTEP was very pleased to welcome former NASA Astronaut and UTEP Distinguished Alumnus DANNY OLIVAS back to our campus as Director of the new Center for the Advancement of Space Safety and Mission Assurance Research.

In addition to surpassing UTEP's goal of awarding 100 doctoral degrees per year, individual graduate programs at UTEP continued to grow and mature. Among milestones achieved this past year:

- The Doctor of Nursing Practice program celebrated its first 8 graduates, enrolled its second and third cohorts of 14 students last year and 23 more this year, thereby contributing significantly to building greater regional healthcare capacity.
- Two new professional master's degree programs, in Public Health and Social Work, successfully met all requirements for national accreditation. These and other graduate programs in Health Sciences have increased enrollment by 77% since 2010, and reaffirmed UTEP's commitment to meet the health professions workforce needs of our region.
- The Ph.D. program in Teaching, Learning and Culture awarded its first two doctoral degrees.
- Both the Doctor of Pharmacy and the Doctor of Education in Leadership and Administration programs awarded their 100th degrees.
- UTEP's 20th doctoral program, in biomedical engineering, was formally approved by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, with commendations from the external review team for the program's "strong mission that lies in its unique service to its region and its citizens."

Tier One has been very much on our minds in terms of UTEP's campus climate, as we planned the conversion of the central core of the campus into a vehicle-free, pedestrian space with walkways and bikeways, native-plant shaded gathering spaces and restored arroyos. Many of you have seen beautiful drawings of the completed Centennial Plaza but, so far, the work underway on the campus bears little resemblance to those drawings. Instead, it's focused on the "underground transformation" of our utility infrastructure that will become invisible once fully installed.

This Campus Transformation initiative reminds us that much of the University's critically important work goes on behind the scenes by unsung staff members in departments across

the campus—facilities services, information technology, special events, campus police, parking and transportation, purchasing, financial services, and environmental health and safety—whose expertise and strong commitment to quality ensures a safe, productive, efficient and attractive workplace for all of us.

- Jorge Villalobos and his team in Facilities Services successfully manage an ever-growing and increasingly complex portfolio of responsibilities, which now includes the huge campus transformation project. Despite these many pressures, they never lose sight of their longer-term responsibilities to support UTEP's Tier One goals, by improving processes and achieving efficiencies, such as their recent successful efforts to conserve energy.
- The Information Technology team led by José Huerta has dealt with its share of excitement over the past year, including the demolition of City Hall, in the basement of which was located much of UTEP's critical internet connectivity. The success of the switchover process they managed was imperceptible to all of us....just the way they intended it to be!
- Parking and Transportation has also been especially challenged, not only by UTEP's continued growth on all fronts, but the additional demands of recent campus transformation disruptions. Special thanks to the campus-wide "UTEP On the Move" communication team, for their creative efforts to help us all find our way through the many surprises in navigating the campus during this construction spree.

UTEP's achievements also extend well beyond the perimeter of the campus, as we work to contribute to the prosperity and quality of life of the surrounding region. A recent study revealed that UTEP's economic impact on El Paso County amounts to \$1.3 billion per year through the productivity of alumni, campus payroll, operational expenditures and spending by out-of-town students and visitors. And our impact goes well beyond economics, as we offer our community a broad range of special programs and events on the campus, and partner with school districts, EPCC, and organizations such as the Housing Authority, Workforce Solutions and the YWCA to increase opportunities for area residents.

- Responding to the growth at Ft. Bliss, we established an expanded Military Student Success Center in the Library to better serve military students' needs on our campus, and thanks to new leadership from Mike Smith and support from partners at Ft. Bliss, we've been able to strengthen UTEP's presence there. With a grant from the Kresge Foundation and spearheaded by Donna Ekal, UTEP has taken the lead in building a national network of universities which, like UTEP, are located adjacent to major military bases, with a goal of easing transferability of courses for highly mobile military personnel and their dependents.
- UTEP is fulfilling its commitment to increase the number of programs, certificates and courses offered in blended and online learning formats to enhance access, reduce time to degree completion and increase the number of degrees awarded. Online enrollments have tripled over the past five years to more than 13,400.

- UTEP's outreach to area school districts and EPCC has been re-energized under the able leadership of Armando Aguirre and the robust data support of Roy Mathew and the Center for Institutional Evaluation, Research and Planning. This collaboration with K-12 schools and EPCC will be further strengthened as we engage them in commemorating UTEP's Centennial over next year.

As we continue to celebrate all the exciting achievements of the past year and the progress being made toward reaching our Tier One goals, we are also keenly focused on the year ahead. On Monday, September 23, our students will lead the 100-day countdown to the commemoration of UTEP's 100th anniversary in 2014.

The yearlong Centennial celebration is not only a commemoration of the past, but the start of a new era as UTEP becomes the first national research university with a 21st century student demographic. Reaching our #7 national ranking after 25 years of steady progress toward successful self-definition, UTEP now stands at another crossroads which will require us to sustain the yields on our substantial investments. Sustainability will require the support of our many friends, partners and alumni to successfully reach—and, we trust, exceed—our \$200 million Centennial Campaign goal, to build our endowment, provide financial support for students, and enhance excellence in academic and research programs across the campus. Campaign funds raised to date total more than \$190 million (95% of our goal), and we are deeply grateful to those of you who have already generously participated. Although we're closing in on our \$200 million Campaign goal, I hope you're ready to join me in stepping on the accelerator once more to capitalize on our momentum and zoom past it.Do I recall that Russ Vandenburg, Chair of the Campaign Leadership Council, talked about hitting \$214 million? That seems to have a nice ring, no?

I hope that some of you will have a special interest in contributing to the campus transformation initiative that is now underway. This project will complement the recent \$300 million investment that we've made in new campus buildings, create a continuous pedestrian environment and more inviting outdoor spaces for studying, collaborating and relaxing, and promote a strong sense of community by encouraging students to remain on campus longer and increase their level of engagement. Most important of all, it will enhance the quality of life for students, faculty, staff and residents of the surrounding region.

The University of Texas System Board of Regents and the Texas Department of Transportation have committed \$18 million to this initiative, and UTEP alumni and friends have already designated philanthropic gifts toward our \$25 million total cost to complete it. A number of special features of this project will lend themselves to naming opportunities and become part of UTEP's Centennial legacy.

Among them will be permanently installed and highly visible public artworks, which include the "Mining Minds" sculpture that was provided by the Texas Department of Transportation, and the beautiful *lhakhang* donated by the people of Bhutan. We look forward to talking with many of you and others for whom this region's quality of life is a priority, about

acquiring visually stimulating and appealing works of outdoor art to commemorate UTEP's Centennial.

As headquarters for our Centennial celebration, the Centennial Museum and its new Welcome Center will be the site of one of these outdoor installations, whose construction is already underway, as you will soon see.

Before we begin walking to the front of the Centennial Museum where this program will resume, I am delighted to introduce its new director, proud UTEP alumna Maribel Villalva. Maribel earned her bachelor's degree in print media from UTEP, and for more than 15 years, was the arts writer and multimedia reporter for the *El Paso Times*. In 2008, she changed career paths and became Executive Director of the El Paso Holocaust Museum and Study Center. Earlier this year, Maribel returned to her alma mater to become the Director of the Centennial Museum and Chihuahuan Desert Gardens.

Please join Maribel and me for the short walk to the front of the museum, where we will reconvene for the continuation of today's program. Thank you again for joining us for this special Centennial celebration....and Go Miners!