

**Innovation in Texas transcript, Newsweek magazine, Jan. 6, 2017**  
**Dr. Diana Natalicio, President, The University of Texas at El Paso, interviewed by**  
**Kathleen DeLacy**

*Kathleen DeLacy: UTEP is getting a lot of attention because of honors that are being bestowed on you as a leader in education. Can you explain to us why that is and what is happening?*

Dr. Diana Natalicio: We're at a real crisis in our country with respect to the education of individuals of modest financial means. Baccalaureate degree attainment among the lowest socioeconomic quartile has risen only about 2%--from 6.6% to 8.8%--over the past 40 years; in the highest quartile, it doubled--from 35% to 70% in the same time period. The gap between the college educated and the non-college educated has grown dramatically over the past 40 years. In El Paso, we work very hard to educate many young people in the lowest socioeconomic quartile. Most of our students come from families of very modest means, more than half of them are first in their families to attend college, and about 40% report a family income of \$20,000 a year or less. So we are attempting to provide educational opportunities for students who for the past 40 years have been absent from the pathway to social mobility—higher education.

We took that on as a challenge for our region because it's very clear that if so few of us hold university degrees, then very few of us - through the taxes we pay and activities that we engage in - will carry a heavier burden to compensate for people who don't have the same capacity to contribute. So for our region, increasing higher education participation is critical. I've also always believed that through the success of our work, we can help change the national narrative about public higher education and its critical role in creating the very opportunities that comprise the American dream. Private higher education generally serves a more affluent population, and it enrolls only a small percentage of the U.S. higher education population; nearly 90% of today's young people are enrolled in the broad range of public colleges and universities. If we don't educate the portion of the population at the lowest end of the socioeconomic spectrum, who's going to do it?

In attempting to serve this region well, UTEP has become a national model for success in transforming the profile of a student population. When I became president 28 years ago UTEP's student population did not mirror the ethnic or socioeconomic demographics of the region from which we draw 84% of our students; Hispanics accounted for less than half of UTEP's enrollment. If you believe that talent crosses all boundaries—ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic level—a public university should look like the region from which a majority of its students come, and that's what we've worked so hard to achieve. Today, we are proud that UTEP's 80% Hispanic student body appropriately mirrors the demographics of the El Paso region. What's changed is not that the more affluent or non-Hispanic enrollment has declined, but that our overall enrollment has nearly doubled, and almost all of that growth has been driven by the far greater participation of Hispanic and low-resourced students, largely as a result of our success in building a close partnership with area school districts and the community college. We partner because the young people in this community are our shared responsibility. Rather than spend time blaming each other for low academic aspirations and attainment, we formed the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence to create a PreK-16 educational pathway for all young people in this region. We work closely

together to align expectations, set standards and design curricula, and we closely track data to ensure that we are all successfully contributing to increasing educational aspirations and attainment in this historically underserved region.

*KD: Can you tell the readers more about the makeup of your faculty? When we interact with faculty that has a similar background to us, then we begin to actually see being a university professor as an attainable goal.*

DN: This is a really tough challenge, because the national supply of doctoral-level Hispanic faculty continues to be extremely small. One of the primary reasons that UTEP worked very hard over the past 25 years to gain authorization to offer doctoral programs has been to play a growing role in the preparation of a more diverse future professoriate. Hispanic faculty numbers are extremely low – the percentage of Hispanic faculty in nearly all disciplines at most U.S. research universities are in the low single digits, especially in science and in engineering. UTEP’s traditional strengths in science and engineering and a majority- Hispanic student population clearly offered potentially high yields for investments in building doctoral program capacity, which is what we have done. UTEP now offers 21 doctoral programs and many of our doctoral graduates are going on to successful academic careers at research universities across the country. UTEP’s own Hispanic faculty numbers have grown as well; we are proud to have the largest number of Latino research faculty of any university in the United States. Of a total tenured/tenure-track faculty of 526, nearly 30% are Hispanic, far above the national average. UTEP is not only leading by example, but also creating rich opportunities for Hispanics to pursue academic careers and help change the face of the U.S. professoriate. Very exciting work!

*KD: Are you able to leverage your collaborations with universities in Mexico?*

DN: We do actually enroll more Mexican students—1,100 (or roughly 10% of all Mexican nationals enrolled in U.S. higher education)—than any other U.S. university. Because we are located in a bi-national metropolitan area of 2.5 million residents, a majority of whom reside in our sister city Cd. Juárez, many of our Mexican students commute daily to attend classes at UTEP. After completing their baccalaureate degrees at UTEP, many of those students pursue graduate degrees either at UTEP or another U.S. university, and we hope that some of them who leave will someday return to this region as UTEP faculty members. We also offer opportunities for Mexican university faculty to pursue doctoral degrees at UTEP, which helps build faculty research and academic program capacity at universities in northern Mexico. That’s been very exciting too!

We want to continue increasing the number of Hispanic faculty at UTEP—we know it’s important for our students to have these role models. In science and engineering, for example, UTEP’s success in recruiting Hispanic faculty means that every day in their laboratories, our mostly first-generation, Latino undergraduate students see Latino faculty role models, who are accomplished researchers competing successfully for major grants, and they can say to themselves “that could be me.” In the U.S. generally, the number of Hispanic faculty is entirely too small, as is the number of Hispanics who earn doctoral degrees. Improving these numbers must be a high national priority, and UTEP is certainly well positioned to respond.

*KD: It seems that moving people into STEM is also a very important role for you?*

DN: It is critical, and we were of course founded as a mining school.

*KD: Are you leveraging that history?*

DN: Very much so. That is a solid foundation upon which we've been able to build our reputation and our academic and research capacity because we're one of the few universities that combines a majority Hispanic student population with historic strengths in science and engineering. If you examine our doctoral programs, for example, the first to be developed and the majority of those we offer today are in science and engineering fields. At the same time, we have also sought to establish doctoral programs across all UTEP colleges because providing all our students, whatever their special talents and academic interests, with access to high quality undergraduate programs requires us to build graduate programs and research in those areas as well. In sum, what we've tried hard to do is to ensure that in building excellence, we avoid focusing on only one or two areas of strength or centers of excellence. Instead, we seek to assure quality in all academic program areas, which usually requires the presence of research-active faculty and graduate students.

I talk often about UTEP's mission of access and excellence. Access is about being welcoming and affordable, and making sure students are academically well prepared when they arrive on the campus, which obviously involves ensuring college readiness through our collaborative work with schools and the community college. But, access must be accompanied by an equally strong commitment to excellence. Students must be assured that the degree that they worked so hard to earn is going to be valuable to them. Excellence means that when students graduate, they will be fully prepared with the competence and confidence to compete with anybody, anywhere. That must be our promise to all our students, but especially our first-generation, low-resourced students who work so hard, under often highly daunting circumstances, to achieve their aspirations.

*KD: It's been 28 years and in that time UTEP has become one of the top 10 universities in the country while at the same time battling to provide access combined with excellence. How have you managed to direct such progress?*

DN: What we did was to set clear and bold goals, such as reaching \$100 million in annual research expenditures at a time when that total was less than \$10 million. By last year, we had reached \$90 million, and, with a total active grants portfolio of nearly \$320 million, we are well positioned to attain our \$100 million goal very soon. We've been aggressive in pursuing a research agenda, and we've developed successful strategies to build capacity along the way, investing our resources to acquire more equipment, build laboratory space, hire key faculty and staff, write more proposals....we're constantly and highly intentionally growing our research culture. We've recently secured resources to construct another new high-profile research building, which will give us additional space to serve as a platform for more research, more grants and more momentum for future growth.

*KD: But it's organic and it's sustainable. It's not based on one donor.*

DN: Exactly. Relying on one single major funding source would be extremely risky. Here, we're all involved. Faculty, staff and students work very, very hard to keep doing better every year and our capacity continues to grow. It's very exciting work.

*KD: Can you explain to me what kind of an ecosystem exists here for innovation, for these exciting things to take place?*

DN: I think some of the pioneering work in demonstrating the power of collaboration occurred 25 years ago when UTEP, EPCC, school districts and civic leaders came together to increase educational aspirations and attainment across the region. El Paso is very much a closed loop...an ecosystem. What we do at UTEP impacts the entire community, and pulling together with community partners around areas of common interest is the likeliest way to ensure that we all enjoy the benefits. I think although El Paso is a large city, in many ways it operates as a small town where people know and trust each other and work together.

A great example is a partnership with the former Chair of the Texas Transportation Commission, El Pasoan Ted Houghton. For many years, UTEP had very much wanted to eliminate thru-streets and parking lots at the center of our campus, and create a central campus plaza. Our Centennial commemoration seemed to be the time to do it, but we couldn't accomplish that goal without building a major access road and parking garages around the perimeter of the campus. Ted Houghton embraced our plan, which complemented his goals of improving transportation in the increasingly congested areas surrounding the growing UTEP campus, and he led efforts to expedite the required road improvements. Planning and working together, we were able to do what couldn't have been done without close and highly intentional collaboration. The same efforts to identify mutuality of interests occur regularly with other educational, governmental and private sector partners. In the end, it's all based on a sense of shared responsibility and trust.

*KD: How was it when you first reached out to the high schools and the community colleges – were people open to your efforts?*

DN: I would say, generally speaking, it was not impossible because we form a closed loop and many of the teachers and administrators in the schools and at the community college are UTEP graduates, people that we knew. They were our neighbors, friends and acquaintances, so there were points of contact and good will that could be leveraged. Those relationships were a great benefit to us and made our jobs much easier. There was some resistance to be sure. For example, there were some people in the community who thought that fostering more open access to the university, would lead to lowering UTEP's standards. We've done exactly the opposite; today, we're a far more nationally competitive and prominent university than we were 25 years ago. The students who historically didn't enroll at UTEP were not lacking in talent; they were simply not encouraged to consider higher education as a viable option for them. When we visited with high schools in the late 1980s, we'd ask why so few of their graduates were continuing their education at UTEP or elsewhere. The reply was often that the students weren't "college material." Translated, that meant that they lacked financial resources to attend college or needed to get jobs to help support their families. UTEP then worked closely with the schools and

community organizations to emphasize that students' financial challenges shouldn't serve as a barrier to their pursuit of higher education. Their abundant talent, academic success and work ethic should earn them the opportunity to continue their education beyond high school, and UTEP was ready and eager to create a pathway for them to do just that. Little by little, we began to build trust with students, their families and schools, and UTEP now enrolls students from all high schools in the region, students who are highly motivated and understand that higher education is their chance to enhance their and their families' quality of life and contribute to the prosperity of our region. As a result, UTEP's student demographics, both socioeconomic and ethnic, now mirror those of the entire region.

*KD: How is the DNA of El Paso changing? What will El Paso be like moving toward?*

DN: I think we're becoming a more confident and more competitive community. Unfortunately, there's been a tendency toward engaging in wishful thinking—wishing El Paso could be like San Diego or San Antonio, or that UTEP could be like Harvard or UT Austin—but there was usually no thought given to how we might actually be able to get there from here or whether that would actually be the right model for this setting. Wishful thinking is too often accompanied by a feeling of helplessness and defeat. What's really changed in El Paso—and I think UTEP deserves some credit for leading the way—is that we've begun to think seriously about how to define ourselves rather than allow others to define us, to convert our perceived liabilities into assets and to be authentic. That's exactly what UTEP did in transforming itself. All of us at UTEP know and are proud to be exactly who we are and whom we serve. We have set ambitious but realistic goals and we've strategically and very intentionally created pathways to achieve them. We're confident that we can achieve whatever goal we may set for ourselves and that no aspiration is too high as long as you have identified a way of getting there. There will always be naysayers who will doubt, fear, disagree and criticize, but with every step you take toward your goal, you grow more confident and ready for the next step, and momentum finally begins to build. It's contagious. I think that's exactly what's happening in El Paso.

*KD: Earlier In our conversation you indicated the importance of incremental wins in efforts to make progress.*

DN: Exactly right. So I think this community for a long time has suffered from low self-esteem, a reluctance to be boldly ambitious. What we finally seem to be learning is that if we're not going to take the lead in helping ourselves achieve big goals for our community, no one else is going to say, "Oh, we forgot El Paso, let's bring them along." That's not likely to happen. Who best can define the advantages of being on the U.S.-Mexico border than those of us who live here? We know that there are many benefits in living in two countries at the same time. It's really a great privilege. Unfortunately, there are many people across this country today who think that the border is a dangerous, unpleasant place. It's up to us to disabuse them of that characterization, so that we can continue to work successfully to leverage the border as an asset.

*KD: And there's a can-do attitude as a result because you have to fix things yourselves.*

DN: Right. When I'm traveling, and mention that I live in El Paso, I sometimes get comments or questions about the border and/or hot weather. As a lifelong teacher, I think it's my responsibility to help everyone learn that this is one of the most beautiful regions on the planet. I love to walk, and I've hiked for many years across this region, so I know just how absolutely glorious it is, with something for everyone: mountains, deserts, forests, vineyards, vast vistas, archeological sites, and, nearby, Carlsbad Caverns, Marfa, Big Ben National Park, the Gila Wilderness, and the Lincoln National Forest. If you add to all this natural beauty the opportunity to live in two countries at once, what more could you want?

*KD: Why do you think that you're getting so much attention this year?*

DN: I think general awareness of the growth in the Hispanic population at the national level is part of the explanation for recent attention that UTEP has received. When I first became president 28 years ago, the Hispanic population growth trends were very clear to me. But, I don't think that word spread quickly because most of the country was focused on many other issues. More recently, there has been growing awareness that the U.S. population is becoming more Hispanic, and questions have arisen among employers and graduate/professional schools about where this Latino population is being educated. Such publications as *Diversity in Higher Education*, which ranks universities by their percentage of Latino graduates, are increasingly consulted by those organizations interested in increasing their own diversity by identifying those institutions that offer both a reputation for quality educational programs in a range of academic disciplines and a high concentration of Hispanic graduates. UTEP immediately pops onto their radar screens, and they begin to learn more about us.

Ultimately, it's actually our students themselves who have brought increased national attention to UTEP. As they enroll in increasing numbers, entrusting us with their dreams and aspirations and succeeding academically in meeting our high standards, they bring us increased national attention. Once that initial attention is attracted and recruiters step onto the UTEP campus for the first time, our students quickly demonstrate to them that they've come to the right place. And what's even more important is that once they are hired or admitted to professional/graduate schools, UTEP graduates excel. They're very talented, highly motivated, and hardworking, they've received outstanding preparation at UTEP, and they succeed in their careers. Their success then motivates major corporations and prestigious medical and law schools to recruit more UTEP graduates. So, it's fair to say that UTEP's growing national and international visibility is primarily driven and most convincingly validated by our students. From the time they step on our campus as first-time students to their performance as UTEP alumni in professional schools and workplaces, they are the best!

***Thank you***