

Convocation
The University of Texas at El Paso
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President
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A 21st Century University

It was in the depths of the depression, in 1931, when C. L. Sonnichsen arrived on the train from Boston a few days after completing his doctoral exams.

He was to teach English at a mining school that was adding a liberal arts degree. The school was comprised of a cluster of buildings that looked like a monastery plucked from the Himalayas and dropped at the foot of the Franklin Mountains in the Chihuahuan desert, almost a mile and a half north of the city of El Paso.

He didn't initially expect to stay long, but, like Horace Greely, he had gone west and grew up with the country. Eventually, this long-serving English department head wrote the introduction to a book on the pictorial history of this university.

He wrote of that first year, arriving on campus:

*“And yet, there was much to be said for this struggling country college. For one thing, it was desperately needed. El Paso was not yet a city, but it was growing fast. The schools needed teachers. The businessmen needed young men and women with special training. It was 600 miles to Austin – too far for many people to go for an education. **No school was ever prayed for and worked for with greater dedication. The mining school, it should be said, filled a special need.**”*

Teaching

Like most American public universities established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this one began with a strong foundation of teaching a practical subject – mining. The trend toward a new kind of higher education began with the Morrill Land Grant Acts and continued with the post-World War II GI Bill.

Teaching not just the children of the wealthy and privileged to prepare them for the clergy or law or medicine, these new universities were to be “accessible to all, but especially to the sons of toil.” (Senator Justin Smith Morrill of Vermont, 1862)

Higher education is and for over a century has been the single greatest gateway to economic and social mobility in America.

“The businessmen needed young men and women with special training. The schools needed teachers.” (C.L. Sonnichsen)

More than 88 years after Dr. Sonnichsen stepped off the train less than two miles from here, this commitment to excellent teaching – to meeting the educational needs of our community – continues in earnest.

And our faculty continue to be recognized for their excellence in teaching.

More than 70 of our faculty members have been honored for their teaching excellence by the University of Texas Board of Regents since 2009, when the first of the Regents’ Outstanding Teaching Awards was given.

This year, two more faculty members will receive the Board of Regents’ Outstanding Teaching Award, and I would like them to come forward to be recognized for their achievement:

Dr. Martine Ceberio, associate professor of computer science, and Denise Lujan, director of developmental math.

Teaching excellence results in student success, and we see examples of it all across campus.

- Take, for example, the Corporate Academies in the College of Business Administration. Curricula developed in partnership with industry enables students to work and learn, giving them a deeper understanding of industry best practices and a greater advantage in the job market after graduation.
- Engaged learning is also paying off in the College of Science. Last year, nearly 45 percent of science-focused students maintained a GPA of 3.5 or higher. Their average time to degree completion is less than four-and-a-half years, and almost 80 percent of science students who apply to degree programs in graduate schools are accepted.
- And we see student success among our athletes because our coaches want our students to not only compete for and win conference championships as athletes but also to be their best selves in the classroom. Last year, 160 UTEP student-athletes – a school record – were named to the Conference USA Honor Roll with cumulative grade point averages of 3.0 or better.

While UTEP has experienced 21 straight years of growth in enrollment, the world of post-secondary education is changing, and we are meeting new needs in new ways.

- We are expanding opportunities for professional and distance-enabled education. This fall, our English Language Institute (ELI) collaborated with the Center for Instructional Design to develop and offer fully online courses in English grammar, reading, writing, speaking and listening.

- And this year, we welcomed our third cohort of pharmacy students. These 58 future pharmacists will join the more than 90 pharmacy students we enrolled in our first two cohorts - in the only pharmacy school in the country that requires three years of Spanish as well as study in the community.

National Model – National Challenges

While UTEP serves as a national model for excellence in higher education, we must also acknowledge the challenges that we face.

Nationwide, following the 2008 recession, states reduced taxpayer funding for higher education.

For several decades, the cost of public higher education has shifted away from taxpayers and toward financially stretched families. And, in recent years, some in our society have called into question the relevance of higher education, particularly with the burden of debt that can accompany it.

Let us be clear – the world around us is changing. Coming out of the recession, seven out of every 10 new jobs created required some postsecondary education or training. We are in an era of increasingly global, knowledge-based economies, and this change will only accelerate in the coming decades.

The regions of the world that educate people will thrive in the 21st century. Those that don't will be left behind. What was good enough for our parents and our grandparents is not good enough for our children and our grandchildren.

UTEP must take its place as a national leader, a 21st-century university.

Sometimes, people talk about higher education as a service or product that only benefits those who receive it. To be sure, higher education is the ticket to a dream for both individuals and their families.

But that's not all higher education is. We must continue to advocate for taxpayer support of public higher education because the education of others benefits us all.

When our children are sick, we all benefit when there is an educated nurse at urgent care.

When the rains come, we all benefit because an educated civil engineer designed the arroyo that takes water safely through this campus to the Rio Grande below.

When we touch any of a thousand things today – from the cell phone in our pockets to the report on the investments in our retirement account – we all benefit from the education of the person who brought that product or service to us.

Our lives are longer, healthier, safer, more prosperous, and more filled with beauty and joy when we live in an educated community where everyone has developed their gifts to the fullest.

We must continue to make the case for cost-effective, publicly supported higher education in Texas and across this country.

Cost-Effective

And, yes, it must be cost-effective. We are not here to coddle the sons and daughters of privilege.

UTEP provides an excellent education at one of the most reasonable prices for a top tier university in America, and we will continue to do everything we can to control costs and keep college affordable for individuals and their families.

In that regard, I wanted to personally thank the 45 faculty members who stepped forward to work with Information Technology and Library staff to help UTEP make the shift to low-cost or no-cost textbooks – particularly for freshman and sophomore core courses.

Our early efforts will focus on the largest of those courses like Physics, where the textbook costs over \$300. Three-hundred-dollars is a week's worth of work for a student making a bit more than minimum wage.

We will keep college affordable for the “sons – and daughters – of toil.”

Exclusion is Not Excellence

But there is another trend in higher education that UTEP must continue to counter.

Too many universities have lost their way and bought in to national ratings lists that claim exclusivity as a virtue.

Do we think a restaurant is the best in the country because it closes the door on 90 percent of the people who are hungry?

UTEP chooses to be part of a core group of exceptional universities that will not be judged by whom we exclude, but by whom we include and their success.

Exclusivity doesn't define excellence. Success defines excellence.

UTEP will . . .

- advocate for continued public support for higher education,
- keep the cost of a college degree affordable,
- be judged by the success of the students whom we include, and
- be a leader among 21st-century universities.

Research – Advancing Discovery of Public Value

*“There was much to be said about this struggling country college.”
(C.L. Sonnichsen)*

Of the many struggles faced by the College of Mines in 1931, the most pressing for the faculty was their purpose. President Dossie Wiggins, who succeeded UTEP’s first president, John Barry, told his faculty that they were there to teach – period.

President Wiggins even went so far as to tell his faculty that they were hired much in the same way Wiggins bought his mules – and he intended to get as much mule as he could for his money. “Dossie’s Mules,” the faculty called themselves, but they knew they had more to offer.

They knew, Dr. Sonnichsen explained, that they were there to acquire, record and disseminate knowledge. So, Dr. Sonnichsen added, the new Ph.D. faculty began doing research on the region. One among them chronicled botany up to the Mescalero Reservation in New Mexico, and another produced a definitive study of the geology of the Franklin Mountains. They dug up fossils and set students to work writing theses on Mexican novelists. They took students to Mexico every summer to study art, and they studied Texas fiction and folklore.

They did the work that came to hand.

This comprehensive public research university with a strong sense of place and engagement in the region grew from the seed they planted.

Imagine what Dr. Sonnichsen and his faculty peers would think of us now.

- UTEP boasts ninety-one million dollars in research expenditures and a portfolio of 353 research awards that total more than \$272 million in committed external funding.
- Our Border Biomedical Research Center engages over 80 health care and science faculty and is driving discoveries that will address health disparities in cancer, diabetes and other diseases. It was recently awarded another \$19.2 million from the National Institutes of Health to expand their research.
- We have developed expertise in space vehicle materials derived from studying the debris of the Shuttle Columbia that fell from the sky over Texas, and we are one of the best in the world at the neuroscience of bilingualism, in water desalination and in understanding patterns of migration.

We don’t just transmit knowledge at UTEP; we create it.

Engaged scholarship – the scholarship of place – has defined this campus from our beginning, and it continues to drive us today.

Impact

Dr. Sonnichsen’s story begins in 1931, but our history of meeting the educational needs of our community dates back to our earliest days in 1914. For over a century, UTEP has been supported by and supportive of the region in which we live.

Every day in the brief month since I arrived in El Paso, I have met accountants, marketing managers, lab technicians, high school coaches, musicians, builders, physical therapists, engineers, law enforcement officers, and even a few lawyers – who are all UTEP alumni.

And, more than 8,500 teachers in schools across the El Paso area are UTEP graduates.

But impact is more than the work our graduates are doing. It is also how we, as a university, engage with our community.

- Thirty-three thousand people enjoyed a college football game in a stadium carved into a mountain two weeks ago, and others listened to a stunningly beautiful cello concert at the Fox Fine Arts Center.
- We share our expertise with the city to reduce and reuse precious groundwater and to support continuing education and quality improvement for small businesses throughout Texas.
- Our students run free speech-therapy clinics for those without insurance, and our faculty and students not only analyze economic trends in the region, they build businesses to grow the economy and create jobs.

UTEP positively impacts the health, culture, education, and economy of the community we serve.

Over the coming months, we will review and seek to revitalize our connections to community, our understanding of the needs of the region, so that we continue to provide what is “*desperately needed*” in our time.

A Woven Figure

History is a woven figure.

In the north of Chihuahua, Spanish explorers found two mountain ranges that rose from the high desert. The gap between them was El Paso del Norte – the gateway to the north. It was the gateway for not only passage but also opportunity.

For four hundred years, this region has been the route of trade and the meeting point of cultures and governments. Who we are and what we do as a university is connected by web and weft to those who have traveled these routes and settled this place long before us.

We are intrinsically connected to those early faculty who started on that first day of class in 1914 and to those first doctoral faculty in the 1930s who chose to advance knowledge by studying and engaging with this region.

Texas International

In the late 1920s, a state legislator from El Paso named Adrian Pool created what Dr. Sonnichsen described as “great clouds of dust” in the Texas Legislature for supporting the College of Mines.

Representative Pool believed that this “struggling country college” could become a great international university.

The pictorial history of UTEP was published in 1989 for our Diamond Jubilee. Reflecting on Adrian Pool’s advocacy, Dr. Sonnichsen said:

“The University of Texas at El Paso, seventy-five years after its birth, has grown from a small regional college to an important meeting place of cultures. It is, in fact, if not in name, Texas International.”

We are that and so much more.

UTEP is a comprehensive public research university that is increasing access to excellent higher education. We advance discovery of public value and positively impact the health, culture, education, and economy of the community we serve.

We are a 21st-century university. That is our mission.

No school will be prayed for or worked for with greater dedication, and I am honored to be a part of it.