



MASTER OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Capstone Showcase

Fall 2025

Dec. 4th, 2025

6:00 P.M.

Interdisciplinary Research Building
(IDRB 2.204)

Why a Capstone?

The MPA curriculum concludes with a rigorous capstone project where students choose a research area, policy, or program to apply the skills they have learned in data analysis and policy review. The capstone serves as a culminating applied research experience that allows students to integrate the knowledge they have gained throughout their coursework and apply it to real public policy issues.

Our capstone course often involves collaboration with organizations or government agencies, enabling students to fully integrate classroom learning. Under the guidance of Dr. Andonoska, students formulate research, evaluation instruments, and recommendations. We are proud of their work and confident in their potential as future public servants.



How animal welfare organizations can optimize their efforts on social media platforms to increase adoptions: developing an evidence-based strategy

By:Grace Ariola

Abstract

Animal welfare organizations can strengthen public trust and transparency through intentional social media marketing strategies, leading to increased community engagement, organizational support, and higher adoption rates. This study aims to develop an evidence-based framework for animal welfare organizations to use when creating social media content. Using a non-experimental survey design, data were collected from 195 participants regarding their age and region demographics and adoption experiences, focusing on the respondents that adopted their pet after engaging with social media posts. Findings indicate that most respondents adopted their pet after viewing a carousel-style post (multiple photos) accompanied by a medium-length, informative caption. Differences in adopter behavior and engagement motivations were more pronounced across organization types than across generations or regions. The results of this study offer actionable recommendations for animal welfare organizations to optimize their social media strategies, improve adoption outcomes, and build stronger connections with their communities.

Equity at Risk: School Choice and the Future of Public Education in San Antonio

By: Lily Brieno and Sylvia Perez

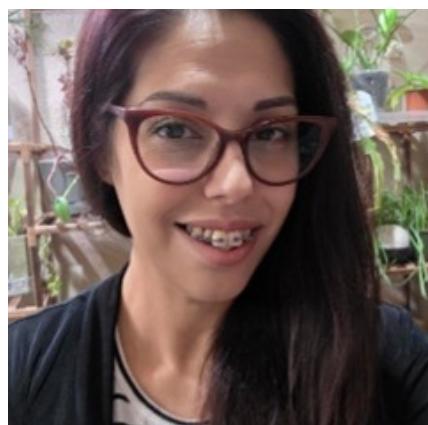
Executive Summary

Texas Senate Bill 2, signed into law on May 3, 2025, marks a pivotal shift in the state's education system by establishing a publicly funded school voucher program. This policy change redirects over \$1 billion in public education funds toward private school tuition subsidies, raising significant concerns about the long-term stability of Texas public schools, particularly in high poverty districts such as San Antonio Independent School District (ISD), and others. While proponents argue that vouchers empower families and increase school competition, evidence suggests the effects may be unevenly felt across socioeconomic groups.

This study examines how school choice and voucher expansion influence educational equity and the future of public education in San Antonio. A review of existing literature highlights concerns about stratification, segregation, and inequitable access, especially for low-income families. Historical patterns of segregation, selective admissions practices, and affordability barriers further complicate equal access to educational choice.

To incorporate community perspectives, an online survey was conducted with 30 respondents from across San Antonio. Results show that while most residents are familiar with the concept of school choice, far fewer understand the specifics of the new voucher law. Concerns about inadequate access to information, financial and transportation barriers, and the potential weakening of public school funding were prominent. Although some respondents believe school choice can coexist with public education, many emphasize the need for strong safeguards to protect public school resources.

Overall, the findings suggest that school choice and voucher expansion may deepen existing inequities unless policymakers address information gaps, strengthen accountability measures, and ensure that funding mechanisms do not compromise the stability of districts serving the highest poverty communities.





Governance and Representation in Unincorporated Santa Teresa, New Mexico

By: Diego Carlos

Abstract

Santa Teresa, New Mexico, is an unincorporated community, positioned at a critical point of economic and geographic importance along the U.S.–Mexico border. Despite its strategic location and industrial expansion surrounding the port of entry, the community lacks a municipal government and relies on Doña Ana County for core services. This has resulted in uneven access to infrastructure, utilities, and representation. Using Growth Machine Theory, this study examines how economic development priorities are shaped in Santa Teresa and how they intersect with governance and service delivery. Semi-structured interviews with regional officials inform the analysis. Findings highlight the tension between regional economic growth and everyday community needs, raising questions about governance models that may better align development with resident well-being.

Enhancing Economic Development Incentives in El Paso: A Policy Analysis

By: Jessica Cordova and Jessica Denise Tagle

Abstract

Economic development incentive policies are designed to attract, retain, and expand businesses that will create quality jobs. The City of El Paso's current Economic Development Incentive Policy, while effective in some areas, could be updated to reflect modern industry trends, especially for projects that do not follow traditional processes. It should also address the gaps in incentivizing businesses that are not benefited by traditional incentives, by addressing workforce needs, site readiness, and leasing structures. An evaluation of the effectiveness of existing policy helps identify gaps and enables proposed recommendations for a comprehensive policy designed to improve El Paso's competitiveness in economic development efforts. Findings from case studies, scholarly research, and examples from peer cities highlight the importance of non-tax incentives, the need for flexible policies that better align with evolving business needs. El Paso must diversify incentive tools and adopt adaptive strategies that meet both demands and local economic needs.





Financial Stress and Its Implications on UTEP Students' Academic Performance and Mental Well-being

By: Maria Corella

Abstract

Academic performance and mental and emotional well-being are affected by financial stress. This problem should not be taken lightly, as many college students suffer from financial worries, and it is crucial to address due to its great impact on students' academic performance, mental well-being, and, not less importantly, the organizations and policies of university institutions. In accordance with academic articles and investigative work, evidence was found indicating significant implications that economic stress can have on college students in terms of their academic performance and mental health. Financial stress affects students' academic success directly, including their academic obligations, GPA, graduation outcomes, and financial academic debts in both the short and long term. On the other hand, financial worries also affect students' mental health, causing anxiety, depression, negative judgments about themselves, and worries about their social status. The main focus of this research is to find out how financial stress affects the academic performance and mental well-being of UTEP students, to highlight the experiences students have with financial stress, how it affects their mental health and academic performance, and to make the institution see the importance of providing more support to students.

Findings indicated that the majority of students at the University of Texas at El Paso felt stress about their personal finances. An interesting result from the survey is that 28.1% of students reported not being affected in their ability to concentrate and study by worrying about money and financial responsibilities. In addition, students expressed feelings of anxiety, exhaustion, and hopelessness due to financial stress.



Evaluating the Impact of Trauma-Informed Police Training Mandates on Sexual Assault Case Outcomes in Texas

By: Bernice Gonzalez

Abstract

Each year across Texas, thousands of sexual assault cases are reported each year. Consequently, this staggering number of reported sexual assault cases poses safety and health concerns. Moreover, survivors often face barriers that make it difficult to seek justice or embark on their journey of healing. As a response to this, the Texas House passed the Texas Peace Officer Trauma Informed Training Mandate (S.B. 1402), which went into effect in September 2023.

Practices that encourage systematic change are crucial in improving institutional and societal responses to survivors of sexual assault. The implementation of mandates at any governmental level is imperative to improve investigative practices, interactions, and sexual assault case outcomes. In this study, the researcher will examine the Texas Peace Officer Trauma Informed Training Mandate (S.B. 1402). The study focuses on analyzing the extent to which trauma informed police training mandates in Texas influence sexual assault case outcomes.

For this study a quantitative analysis was conducted using the Texas Department of Public Safety Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) data from 2020-2024 to analyze total reports of sexual assault reported and cases cleared annually to identify any patterns or trends. Key findings indicate an increase in reporting in pre mandate data (2020-2023), while there were fluctuations in case clearance rates. Because post mandate data (2024) is limited to a year's worth of data, this study merely serves as a subsequent baseline for future analysis of the impact of trauma informed mandates in Texas.



Four Day School Week: The future for Clint ISD?

By: Maritza Rodriguez Landess

Executive Summary:

This study examined whether a four-day school week (4DSW) could be a beneficial option for Clint Independent School District by analyzing district-level data from twenty Texas school districts across six academic years (2018–2024). Ten of the districts examined operated on a four-day schedule for at least two of the years studied, and ten continued using a traditional five-day calendar. Using data from TEA PEIMS, TEA TAPR, and the National Center for Education Statistics, the analysis focused on four key outcomes: student attendance, teacher turnover, per-pupil expenditures (PPE), and STAAR composite performance. Descriptive trends and multiple regression models were used to determine whether the four-day schedule was associated with meaningful differences after controlling for economically disadvantaged rates, English learner percentages, and enrollment.

Teacher retention was the most consistent benefit across the dataset. Teacher turnover decreased by roughly five percentage points in four-day districts, and the regression analysis confirmed that the schedule itself contributed to this reduction even after demographic controls were applied. This finding is especially relevant for Clint ISD given its ongoing challenges competing with nearby districts offering higher salaries, more incentives, or stronger recruitment pipelines.

Student attendance also improved under the four-day schedule. On average, attendance increased from about 94.8% to 95.5%, a 0.7-point increase supported by both descriptive and regression findings. Because attendance directly influences state funding, even small improvements can result in several hundred thousand dollars in additional annual revenue for a district the size of Clint ISD.



Sharing the Unified Load: The Good, the Bad, and the Complexities of Joint Military Bases

By: Crista Mary Mack

Abstract

Fifteen years ago, twenty-six U.S. military installations were combined into twelve. The merger of these bases was congressionally mandated by the 2005 Commission of Base Realignment and Closures. This case study design investigates one of these joint bases, Joint Base Langley-Eustis (JBLE), Virginia, to evaluate the post-merging of U.S. Air Force Base and U.S. Army Base and assesses what improvements can be applied to the challenges of joint basing from this example. The case includes an Analytical Framework and Literature Review connecting research from existing studies on joint basing, comparative joint base studies, and mergers and acquisitions. The paper then details how various methodologies were used to research the topic, followed by a comprehensive discussion detailing how data was collected to arrive at the findings. Interviews from both the Air Force and Army contribute to the findings significantly, showing unanimously all interviewees, employees of JBLE themselves, to find joint basing not necessarily the utopian concept postulated by the BRAC, but nevertheless a necessary mission. Although it may be financially more feasible in certain aspects, this research shows a far more complicated and often separated realm at JBLE than intended. As showcased in this case study, despite the cultural barriers each military branch may have, a third culture, the part of the joint workforce that connects, is the solution. Training personnel in the realm of their joint brethren is one way to bridge this barrier. By documenting enablers and barriers, this paper helps to plan and guide future plans and considerations for existing and future Department of Defense joint installations.

El Paso, TX: A Descriptive Study



By: Joseph V. Pawloski

Executive Summary

This research will describe trends in recreational marijuana use in El Paso, Texas, from 2019 to 2024, by using law enforcement statistics from the El Paso Police Department (EPPD), El Paso Independent School District Police Department (EPISD), and the Socorro Independent School District Police Department (SISD).

Since 2022, each sample of the population showed a statistically significant increase in both the number and frequency of illicit substance arrests and marijuana violations. For example, EPPD data revealed the emergence of a new substance arrests hotspot from 79924-Northeast area to 79912-West area of El Paso, TX. Additionally, there was an exponential increase in the number of marijuana violations within both EPISD and SISD, with both surpassing the number of violations reported by EPPD in terms of both rate and frequency.

These findings demonstrate a significant change in marijuana use in El Paso, TX. Notably, the samples of the population most impacted by current trends were adolescents and young adults (AYA). Unfortunately, the AYA demographic is also the most affected by the negative physiological and psychological effects of regular marijuana use.

It is strongly recommended that researchers use experimental research designs to determine whether New Mexico's 2022 recreational marijuana legislation (RML) has resulted in policy spillover effect in El Paso, Texas. If confirmed, state legislatures can be petitioned to enter interstate compacts to mitigate potential impacts, authorize local governments to implement RML frameworks sensitive to local priorities, and enable school administrators to use evidence-based drug awareness programs to educate their students and families (Hao & Cowan, 2020; Payan et.al., 2021; Cerdá et al., 2017).



Federal Policy, Local Practice: Examining the Influence of ESSA and GEAR UP on Educational Equity and College Readiness

By:Gianna Triplett

Abstract

The U.S. educational system had been plagued with persistent inequities in educational opportunity and college readiness, despite federal efforts to promote reform and accountability. This study will examine the intersection of two major federal initiatives- Every Student Succeeds Act and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs GEAR UP. - to access how successful, they have been in increasing equity and opportunity for at risk students. By utilizing national policy research and qualitative interviews with four school administrators from public schools in diverse communities, this paper will explore how local leaders interpret and implement federal policy goals under constrained resources and competing mandates. Finding three overarching themes: (1) accountability pressures frequently overshadow readiness building supports, (2) inconsistency in funding and resource allocation limits policy impact, and (3) relational and culturally responsive supports- not standardized metrics- are the true drivers of college readiness. This study will highlight ongoing tensions between ESSA's accountability framework and GEAR UP's developmental support model, suggesting that effective equity reform requires both system-level accountability and sustained student-centered investment. Recommendations include strengthening state-level implementation support, stabilizing funding, and improving equity-focused resource distribution across districts

**Congratulations to Dr. Andonoska and
all PAD 5367 students on a job well
done!**

**To those in attendance this evening,
thank you all for your support towards
our students!**

