Student Achievement at University of Texas at El Paso

The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) is committed to fostering student success among all students, especially among young people, working adults, returning students, and lifelong learners from socioeconomic groups that have been traditionally under-represented in U.S. higher education. UTEP communicated this vision in the University’s strategic teaching and learning goals for 2008-15, which aimed to enhance students’ progress toward successful degree completion. With continued growth in degree completion, UTEP seeks to advance this vision further through the UTEP Edge, a framework presented in the University’s Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) in 2016. Through coordinated efforts across campus, the UTEP Edge assists students in developing their talents and strengths through high-impact experiences that will prepare them for lifelong success. UTEP’s progress on goals for student success appear below, with performance indicators for each.

Degree Completion

Performance Indicator: Degrees Awarded

- **Total Degrees Awarded (2016-17):** 4,519—increase of 43% since 2007
- **Undergraduate Degrees Awarded (2016-17):** 3,373

UTEP’s key performance indicator for student success is the number of degrees awarded. In Academic Year 2016-17, UTEP awarded a total of 4,519 degrees, with 3,373 degrees awarded to undergraduates. The total reflects an increase of 43% since 2007. The number of degrees awarded alone, however, cannot completely capture the level of success achieved by the institution in supporting success for traditionally under-represented students. Seventy-seven percent of all UTEP graduates are Hispanic, while almost 83% of baccalaureate graduates are Hispanic. In fact, UTEP is ranked eighth in the nation in the number of Hispanic students awarded a baccalaureate degree. Meanwhile, 53.3% of UTEP students who earn a baccalaureate degree are first-generation college graduates, almost 60% are Pell Grant recipients, and more than 51% of the graduates are from families in the lowest income quartile (i.e., an annual household income of less than $38,000). These are remarkable statistics, especially because the likelihood of a student from the lowest income quartile entering college is 59.9%, and only 9.1% for completing a bachelor’s degree.1

Progress toward the institutional goals of providing access and ensuring success for non-traditional students has not been easy. UTEP began this work more than two decades ago, with the establishment of the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence in 1992. The Collaborative brought together school districts, the local community college district, and administrators at UTEP with the region’s business community, political leaders and other stakeholders to raise aspirations, align curricula, and prepare students for college. The impact of these efforts is significant. The El Paso region currently has the highest percentage of students who complete a college-preparatory curriculum in the State (the recommended or advanced curriculum) and the highest percentage of low-income students enrolling in college. In addition, student readiness has increased dramatically; 75% of students from the region who enrolled at UTEP in Fall 2016 were college-ready in Math, compared with 27% in Fall 2004.

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Timely Graduation
Performance Indicator: Time to Degree

- Students graduating in six years or fewer (2016-17): 81%—up from 71% in 2003-04

Another key performance indicator at UTEP is time to degree, which goes beyond the graduation rate measure to track the success of all students within six years of enrollment, regardless of whether students are first-time, transfer, full-time or part-time. Of the 3,373 students who graduated in 2016-17, 81% finished their degree in six years or fewer, an increase from 71% in 2003-04. This increase is remarkable, especially given the non-traditional characteristics of UTEP students. To illustrate, results from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) confirmed that UTEP students have significantly more demands on their time outside of class. This is especially the case for first-year students, as shown by data from the 2017 NSSE report.

On the 2017 NSSE, first-year students at UTEP reported that on average, they work for pay more than 9 hours, commute more than 8 hours, and care for dependents more than 5 hours in a typical 7-day week. These figures are higher than for students at institutions in UTEP’s comparison groups, which include UT System institutions, universities that share UTEP’s Carnegie basic classification of High Research activity, and all 2017 NSSE participants in the United States. On average, first-year UTEP students spend about 23 hours each week on employment, caring for dependents, and commuting, compared with about 18 hours for UT System students, 12 hours for students at High Research institutions, and about 15 hours for students at all NSSE institutions. Effectively, this difference shows that first-year students at UTEP spend the equivalent of more than a full course’s study time on demands outside of class each week.

Because the majority of UTEP students come from low-income households, and more than a third of UTEP’s graduating seniors reported family incomes of $20,000 or less, it is unsurprising that UTEP students have more commitments than those at other institutions. Outside commitments result in students taking fewer courses, working more than 20 hours a week, stopping out, and even swirling between community college and UTEP. The institution has made every effort to reduce time to degree. UTEP has the second lowest net-price of any research institution in the country, and the UTEP Promise program ensures that tuition is covered for students with a family income of $30,000 or less; the estimated average cost for students with financial aid is essentially zero. UTEP has also developed administrative tools and initiatives to closely track term-to-term enrollment, address administrative barriers that may limited re-enrollment, and track student progress to ensure timely graduation.
High Impact Practices

Performance Indicator: Participation in High Impact Practices

Participation in at least one HIP (2017 NSSE)
- First-Year Students: 66%
- Senior Students: 83%

Participation in two or more HIPs (2017 NSSE)
- First Year Students: 10%
- Senior Students: 49%

Significantly higher participation than all three comparison groups (2017 NSSE)
- First Year Students: Service-Learning, Research with Faculty
- Senior Students: Service-Learning

Student participation in high-impact experiences is an important part of UTEP’s coordinated efforts to enhance success. High-impact experiences contribute to the development of skills that prepare students for lifelong success. Since 2013, UTEP has used the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to track first-year and senior students’ participation in High-Impact Practices (HIPs). HIPs include learning communities, service-learning, research with faculty, internships, study abroad, and culminating senior experiences. NSSE notes that HIPs are positively associated with student learning and retention, and share several traits: they demand considerable time and effort, facilitate learning outside of the classroom, require meaningful interactions with faculty and students, encourage collaboration with diverse others, and provide frequent and substantive feedback.

In 2017, 66% of first-year students and 83% of seniors at UTEP reported participation in at least one HIP. Meanwhile, 10% of first-year students and 49% of seniors reported participation in two or more HIPs. In the 2017 NSSE, first-year students at UTEP reported significantly higher levels of participation in service-learning and research with faculty than those in the three comparison groups, while UTEP seniors reported significantly higher levels of participation in service-learning than their peers.

More broadly, UTEP’s efforts to foster success for all students have been widely recognized by many experts and organizations. These include Dr. George Kuh (Project DEEP / NSSE), the National Science Foundation (Minority Institutions of Excellence), Excelencia for Education, and Hispanic Business magazine. Many offices and departments across campus, including the Campus Office of Undergraduate Research Initiatives (COURI), the Center for Civic Engagement, and the Division of Student Affairs coordinate activities and opportunities that enhance the undergraduate educational experience.

As one example, UTEP places a special emphasis on undergraduate research because it correlates with student learning, retention, graduation rates, graduate school attendance, job placement, and career success. UTEP’s Campus Office of Undergraduate Research Initiatives (COURI) was formed in 2010 to expand and centralize these educational experiences. COURI helps secure external funding, works with faculty to integrate research into coursework, offers professional development, advises students on choosing mentors and applying to external programs, funds student travel to present at conferences, coordinates funded research programs, collaborates with other institutions for research student exchanges, and organizes a biannual showcase of student work. In 2014, UTEP received a $22.6 million
grant from National Institute of Health to support UTEP’s BUILDing SCHOLARS Center for undergraduate research training. Students from traditionally underrepresented groups in biomedical sciences and engineering collaborate with faculty members and receive mentoring on projects in critical areas related to health on the US-Mexico border.

Post-Graduation Success

Performance Indicators: Employment and graduate school attendance

- Students who are employed within one year of graduation, 2016 (THECB): 66%
- Students who enrolled in graduate school within one year of graduation (Nat’l Student Clearinghouse and UTEP): 16%
- Students enrolled in graduate school within three years (Nat’l Student Clearinghouse and UTEP): 31%

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) tracks employment and the enrollment status of students within Texas by the fourth quarter (last three months) in the year they graduated. Similarly, the University of Texas System (UT System) tracks long-term employment, salary, and graduate school attendance from alumni through the SeekUT online tool. Both of these measures have limitations. The THECB only tracks students who are employed in Texas and excludes students who work for small firms or firms that do not submit payroll information to the federal government. SeekUT does not include information about graduates who enroll in graduate programs outside of the US. Notably, both sources do not include information about graduates who work in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, a very large metropolitan area within commuting distance of El Paso.

Finding comprehensive, reliable employment alumni data is difficult. As such, the THECB and UT System data, in addition to UTEP data, provide an impressive picture of post-graduation success of UTEP students. The THECB data show that 66% of UTEP graduates are employed in the same year after graduation, while 6% are enrolled in graduate school in Texas. Data provided by the National Student Clearinghouse also show that 16% of UTEP students are enrolled in graduate school one year after graduation, and 31% are enrolled in graduate schools across the nation within three years of graduation.

SeekUT data on salaries earned by UTEP graduates also demonstrate post-graduation success. The median salary for UTEP students five years after graduation was over $51,000, with the highest earnings associated with graduates from Metallurgical Engineering. Meanwhile, median earnings are $46,000 for Political Science graduates, $58,000 for Computer and Information Systems graduates, and $72,000 for nursing graduates five years after graduation. The earnings data confirm the importance of UTEP’s mission to serve the region, where more than 50% of UTEP graduates are from families from the lowest income quartile (i.e., annual household income of less than $38,000).