

# Student Achievement at University of Texas at El Paso

The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) promotes lifelong success among all students, including young people, working adults, returning students, and lifelong learners from socioeconomic groups that have been traditionally under-represented in U.S. higher education. UTEP communicates this vision in strategic teaching and learning goals that aim to enhance students' progress toward successful degree completion and post-degree pursuits. 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) five years ago in 2016. Through coordinated efforts across campus since its implementation, 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 student success goals appears below, with performance indicators for each.

## Degree Completion

### Performance Indicator: Degrees Awarded

- **Total Degrees Awarded (2019-20):** **5,049 – increase of 32% since 2009-10**
- **Undergraduate Degrees Awarded (2019-20):** **3,708**

UTEP's key performance indicator for student success is the number of degrees awarded. In Academic Year 2019-20, UTEP awarded a total of 5,049 degrees, with 3,708 degrees awarded to undergraduates. The total reflects an increase of 32% since 2009-10. 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-six percent of all UTEP graduates and 82% of baccalaureate graduates are Hispanic. In fact, UTEP is ranked eighth in the nation in the number of baccalaureate degrees awarded to Hispanic students. Furthermore, 50% of UTEP students who earn a baccalaureate degree are first-generation college graduates, 70% are Pell Grant recipients, and 50% of the graduates are from families in the lowest income quartile (i.e., an annual household income of less than \$35,677.60). These are remarkable statistics, especially because the likelihood of a high school graduate from the lowest income quartile entering college is 63%, and only 13% for completing a bachelor's degree<sup>1</sup>.

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 system, 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 has been significant. Student readiness has increased dramatically; 75% of students from the region who enrolled at UTEP in Fall 2019 were college-ready in Math, compared with 27% in Fall 2004. The El Paso region also has the highest percentage of low-income students in Texas who enroll in college.

## Timely Graduation

### Performance Indicator: Time to Degree

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<sup>1</sup> Source: The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, 2019.

- **Students graduating in six years or fewer (2019-20): 81%—up from 71% in 2003-04**

Another key performance indicator at UTEP is time to degree among graduates, 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 3,708 students who graduated in 2019-20, 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. For comparison, the IPEDS six-year graduation rate of first-time, full-time degree-seeking undergraduates in 2019-20 was 39%; however, this figure reflects just one-third of all baccalaureate degrees awarded by UTEP in 2019-20 and excludes, for example, students who entered UTEP as transfer students, began college during a spring semester, or started UTEP on a part-time basis.

UTEP students succeed in degree completion while managing considerable demands on their time. To illustrate, results from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) show that UTEP students generally have more demands on their time outside of class compared with their peers at other institutions in the U.S. On the 2020 NSSE, first-year students at UTEP reported that on average, they spend a total of about 20 hours each week working for pay, caring for dependents, and commuting, compared with about 12 hours as reported by students in R1 institutions and 15 hours among students across the U.S. Effectively, 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 lowest net-price of any R1 research institution in the country, and the Paydirt Promise program ensures that tuition and mandatory fees are covered for students with a family income of \$50,000 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 limit re-enrollment, and track student progress to ensure timely graduation. These efforts to ensure success are imperative in light of challenges wrought by COVID on students, their families, and the community at-large.

## High Impact Practices

### Performance Indicator: Participation in High Impact Practices

#### Participation in at least one HIP (2020 NSSE)

- **First-Year Students:** 69%
- **Senior Students:** 80%

#### Participation in two or more HIPs (2020 NSSE)

- **First-Year Students:** 10%
- **Senior Students:** 49%

### **Significantly higher participation than peers in the R1 comparison group (2020 NSSE)**

- **First-Year Students:** **Service Learning**
- **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. In general, HIPs demand considerable time and effort, facilitate learning outside of the classroom, require meaningful interactions with faculty and other students, encourage collaboration with others, and provide frequent and substantive feedback.

In 2020, 69% of first-year students and 80% of seniors at UTEP reported participation in at least one HIP. In addition, 10% of first-year students and 49% of seniors reported participation in two or more HIPs. First-year students at UTEP reported significantly higher levels of participation in HIP’s than their peers at R1 institutions, UT System, and U.S. institutions in 2020; service-learning was the most frequently reported activity. UTEP seniors reported significantly higher levels of participation in research with faculty members than their peers at UT System and U.S. institutions, and higher levels of participation in service-learning than their peers at UT System and R1 institutions.

UTEP’s efforts to promote success for all students through innovative programs have been widely recognized by many experts and organizations. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NAEM) recognized UTEP for its contributions in preparing underrepresented students for the STEM workforce through a number of integrated education and research opportunities. Dr. George Kuh (Project DEEP/ NSSE), the National Science Foundation (Minority Institutions of Excellence), and Excelencia for Education have also cited UTEP for its achievements in student success. 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.

UTEP places a special emphasis on undergraduate research, for example, 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 multi-million dollar grant from the National Institutes of Health to support UTEP’s BUILDing SCHOLARS Center for undergraduate research training, followed by continued funding in 2019 for Phase II. The project aims to develop the next generation of biomedical researchers from traditionally underrepresented groups through enhanced institutional and faculty resources that will support research training and mentoring.

## Post-Graduation Success

### Performance Indicators: Employment and graduate school attendance

- **Students who are employed within one year of graduation, 2019 (THECB)** **67%**
- **Students who enrolled in graduate school within one year of graduation (National Student Clearinghouse and UTEP):** **17%**
- **Students who enrolled in graduate school within three years of graduation (National Student Clearinghouse and UTEP):** **30%**

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 and does not have salary information for all majors. 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. Nonetheless, 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 67% of UTEP graduates are employed in the same year after graduation, while 8% are enrolled in graduate school in Texas. Data provided by the National Student Clearinghouse also show that 17% of UTEP students are enrolled in graduate school one year after graduation, and 30% are enrolled in graduate schools across the nation within three years of graduation.

SeekUT data on salaries earned by UTEP graduates with a baccalaureate degree also demonstrate post-graduation success. The median annual salary in Texas for UTEP graduates five years after earning a baccalaureate degree is approximately \$49,000. The highest median income in Texas for graduates who earned a degree five years prior was in metallurgical engineering (\$77,700). For comparison, median earnings five years after graduation in Texas were \$41,200 for graduates with a Political Science degree, \$57,000 for those with a degree in Biochemistry, and \$73,000 for nursing graduates. The earnings data confirm the importance of UTEP's mission to serve the region, 50% of UTEP graduates are from families from the lowest income quartile (i.e., annual household income of less than \$35,667.60).