

Forging a New Direction:

How UTEP Created Its OWN BRAND of EXCELLENCE

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO (UTEP) sits on the border of Mexico and the United States in the middle of the world's largest bi-national metropolitan region. For years, it struggled to compete with top-tier research institutions with far greater resources in a quest to become "Harvard on the Border." In the late 1980s, new president **Diana S. Natalicio** wondered what would happen if her institution stopped trying to be something it wasn't and leveraged its distinctive attributes: a high population of bilingual first-generation college students and strong programs in science and engineering. Armed with a new attitude and vision, UTEP has become a national leader on a number of measures of quality in undergraduate education. Here, **George D. Kuh** talks with President Natalicio about her institution's unique and successful journey.

GEORGE KUH: President Natalicio, by many measures the University of Texas at El Paso is a leader in using effective educational practices in undergraduate education. It's the largest institution in the United States with a majority Mexican-

American student body, ranking second in the country in bachelor's degrees awarded to Hispanic students and twelfth in master's degrees. The National Science Foundation cited UTEP as one of only six Model Institutions for Excellence in science, engineering, and mathematics, and the institution has one of the highest percentages of minority faculty among colleges and universities in the southwestern United States. In 2000, Time magazine featured UTEP for its community outreach programs; faculty from across campus work with your Center for Effective Teaching and Learning to continually improve their instructional methods, and your Undergraduate Learning Center boasts state-of-the-art technology and multimedia resources. Along with all of that, UTEP's University College is a model in the country, with a nationally recognized student success course and, at last count, more than seventy learning communities. This is an impressive list of achievements, and many observers credit you for much of it. Take us back to the beginning, please, and tell us how you found your way here and what the early years were like.

DIANA NATALICIO: A teaching job in linguistics brought me here. I really didn't think I'd stay more than a year; I thought I would be here until I could find something that would be more permanent for me, because my appointment was as a visiting assistant professor.

A conversation with President Diana S. Natalicio

“What I began to realize was that we could play a national leadership role because of the demographic changes occurring here.”

KUH: Why did you stay?

NATALICIO: I found that I liked this place a lot. Looking back, there are probably two reasons for that, which I didn't articulate at the time. One is that I grew up in a blue-collar environment. My parents didn't go to college, and I commuted to St. Louis University as an undergraduate. So I related to what students at UTEP were struggling with to get their education. And I liked the students here a lot, right from the beginning, from the first class I taught. I liked them because they were really earnest. They were not here to be entertained. They were here to get a job done, and they were serious about it, which pretty much mirrored my own university experience. I worked really hard and had a part-time job to pay expenses while going to school. I could see the opportunities the university offered these students and how much getting a college education meant to them, as contrasted with more affluent students in other settings.

The second reason was that I had been a Fulbright student in Brazil and really loved Latin America. I just took very well to this kind of bi-cultural environment of the border. At that time—1971—you could go to Juarez without even batting an eye, because the border wasn't what it is today. Crossing into Mexico wasn't a huge impediment. Living simultaneously in these two worlds, in the U.S. and in Mexico, seemed to me to be fabulous. So, very quickly, I shifted my thinking about the place and began to think much more long-term,

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that this was a place that I'd like to be, and that's how, of course, it's worked out.

KUH: Had the demographics of the UTEP student body already begun to change at that point?

NATALICIO: At that time, the university was still predominantly Anglo and also more residential because we were drawing students from far west Texas. It was a very different kind of place than it is today because of decisions made back then that the institution could be something akin to a “Harvard on the border”—a kind of elite liberal arts environment. One of the immediate problems with implementing that vision was it veered away from the institution's engineering roots. UTEP was founded in 1913 by the Texas legislature as the State School of Mines and Metallurgy. The name was changed in 1949 to Texas Western College and then to UTEP in 1967. Even though we were the first institution of higher education in the state of Texas to admit African Americans—that was in 1955—the institution was very unbalanced in the feeder patterns from high schools. Our strongest presence in the 1970s was in some of the more affluent Anglo high schools, and we had less presence in what were then referred to as the “south of the freeway” high schools, which were predominantly Hispanic. And that continued pretty much until the early 1980s. But what became clear to me early on, with the Hispanic population in the El Paso community growing, was that more and more of the Hispanic students were finishing high school and aspired to attend the university.

KUH: When did it occur to you that UTEP could become a national leader in educating Hispanics?

NATALICIO: The vision began to take shape when I became vice president for academic affairs. I began to sense that there was something important going on here in the national context. But I really didn't know enough to be confident about that, so I began to read more and more about these issues. When I became president in 1988, I realized that we had to reposition the institution. We were doing a pretty good job of addressing the needs of the community by reaching out to schools—

not to the extent that we do now, but there were some promising fledgling efforts. But what I began to realize was that we could play a national leadership role because of the demographic changes occurring here and elsewhere, that we had figured some things out that others probably hadn't, and that we should try to think about the ways in which we could leverage that experience, as we were on the cutting edge of the changing demographics of the country.

So I began to articulate a vision of UTEP that was very inclusive and proclaimed our pride in being a Hispanic majority university, which we had just barely become. That vision was initially unsettling to some of our alumni, to our business community, and to many of the faculty. Although the demographics were fairly clear, I was calling for accelerating the university's response to them and speaking proudly about doing that. Some faculty told me directly that being a minority-serving university would not be viewed nationally as a badge of honor. So there was more than a little internal tension at that point. Faculty, as you know, have two allegiances. One is the institution for which they work, and the other is the discipline or profession they identify with. In terms of professional status, many felt that branding UTEP as a minority-serving institution was not going to serve their broader professional stature.

KUH: Such perceptions continue to operate today in many quarters as institutions face the challenges of becoming more diverse. How did you respond to faculty concerns?

NATALICIO: What we had to do was convert what were perceived liabilities into assets—just turn it around. For example, faculty members said they would be disadvantaged in getting grants if UTEP was labeled a Hispanic institution. I made a lot of speeches and went to a lot of college and departmental faculty meetings to talk about the opportunities that being a minority institution presented. I told them that if we continue to try to emulate the big boys—be a “Harvard on the border” or UT Austin or whatever—we would always be second-rate; we would always be in the shadow. But, if we were to forge our own direction and become the most research-

robust majority Hispanic institution, we could put ourselves on the map. We could create, essentially, our own reality. I talked a lot about serving the local population well—which the taxpayers expected us to do—which could also bring us national visibility and recognition. Some of the faculty believed it; some of them didn't.

I was convinced then and remain so today that this was the only way that we could actually catapult ourselves into a different league. We had to break out from where we were: poorly imitating major research universities, whining a lot about how nobody paid any attention to us and we didn't get the grants, and it was always somebody else's fault. I also really, truly believed that we were very fortunate to be at the cutting edge of the demographic change. It was simply a huge asset. I have always tried to be a strong advocate for the less fortunate, and part of what I do must be to make things better for people who don't have as many opportunities as others. So to me, the vision of UTEP becoming a Hispanic university had tremendous appeal. It was something I was passionate about. I converted that passion into tremendous personal effort, traveling to Washington, New York, and L.A. I'd go anywhere where I felt there were people who could help our faculty members make connections and position them and the university to compete successfully.

KUH: How did you find your way into government and foundation offices? Who opened the doors?

NATALICIO: It was mostly trial and error. My predecessors had never gone to Washington to look for money, so there was no pathway. I just kind of had to find my way. After several rounds of brief, introductory meetings, I began to talk to people in NSF [the National Science Foundation] seriously and was asked to serve on an NSF advisory committee at some point. I began to better understand how all this works—not that I fully understand it now, because there are always a few more lessons to be learned. But I was committed to getting UTEP's name and vision in front of people. In about 1988, I went to visit a fellow at the Department of Energy. When I told him I was from UTEP, he said, “UTEP. Didn't you win the NCAA basketball champi-

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onship some years ago?” “Well, yes,” I said, “that was in 1966, but, you know, we’ve been really busy since then.” That was typical. Nobody had heard of us; nobody knew who we were.

So part of what I was trying to do was convince people that our identity needed to be a combination of Hispanic demographics and cutting-edge engineering and science programs and research. I told everyone that there could be no better investment in a Hispanic institution than UTEP because we were so far ahead of the game in engineering and science and this growing demographic shift. All I was really doing was articulating our assets—our traditional academic strengths and changing demographics—in a way that allowed us to capitalize on them. It was a relentless effort for about five years or so, talking with people and telling them about UTEP and what we could do if we had some resources.

KUH: I’ve been told by faculty and staff here that landing that first NSF Research Improvement in a Minority Institution (RIMI) grant was a turning point in terms of the faculty and staff beginning to understand your vision of what UTEP could become. How did you get that award?

NATALICIO: I learned about the RIMI program around 1987 or 1988. After I confirmed that UTEP was eligible, I had to find a faculty member who was willing to write the proposal. I convinced someone to do it, and I promised I would help put together the boilerplate information and come up with the matching dollars, because NSF always requires a 50–50 equipment match. This was a big piece of equipment we were after. And he got it. That turned the heads of a lot of faculty in science and engineering. All of a sudden, here was this guy with a million-dollar lab and this big, beautiful electron microprobe. How did he manage to get this?

To keep his part of the bargain, the faculty member agreed to encourage others to explore similar opportunities. The word began to spread around the campus, and a lot of the faculty decided to learn more about what we were trying to do. And so there was

more internal interest and buy-in to the vision and what the vision could look like in practice.

KUH: In addition to seeking money to support research, you were working on other initiatives, such as linking the university to the community. One of UTEP’s model programs is a K–16 partnership. How did that come about?

NATALICIO: In response to my bold pronouncements about becoming a leading Hispanic institution, some of the faculty started thinking about how to cope with this demographic tidal wave. Some began talking about changing admission requirements. As is often the case in such conversations, one option was to require the SAT, the idea being if we raised our SAT scores, that might boost our *U.S. News and World Report* ranking. This would have been a huge mistake, because there was no evidence that our students’ performance on the SAT predicted their achievement at UTEP. I thought, “If we go this route, we’re going to deny admission to people on the basis of a test that we can’t possibly put faith in, and how could we dare do that!” The very thought of it was abhorrent.

Just about the time things were getting a little tense, we recruited Arturo Pacheco and his wife, Susana Navarro. We were really fortunate to hire Arturo as dean of education and doubly fortunate to get Susana. Susana is a UTEP grad and worked with Kati Haycock at the Achievement Council in Oakland, California [an independent statewide organization that assists teachers and administrators in low-performing, predominantly minority schools to increase student achievement]. Arturo, now director of our Center for Research on Educational Reform, was at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Susana wanted to take her Oakland experience to a new level.

The K–16 partnership idea was extremely important to me because it enabled us to align what was happening in the school districts from which we draw 80 percent of our students with how we prepare teachers. About 60 percent of the El Paso area teachers are UTEP graduates. This was a pretty tempting opportunity to

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close the loop, so to speak. And it was also a way in which we could be fairer to kids in the local schools with respect to admission to UTEP. The idea was that if the faculty would partner with the local schools to work on improving the precollege preparation of El Paso students, the majority of whom come to UTEP, then they would be investing in the quality of students who would soon be in their university classes.

Susana is smart and tenacious and used her great experience, along with the help of others, to put together a comprehensive plan. Today, the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence is in its fifteenth year. And, as happens with most of those things, the benefits are not usually immediate but begin to show over the long term. You can't turn around low-performing students and schools overnight. Most of these kids suffered from low expectations; they got a lot of discouraging advice from counselors and teachers about their chances of going to college and a lot of misinformation about financial aid. Most really had no idea what college really involves. We've worked really hard on those issues. The fact that we were awarded the biggest Math Science Partnership Grant from NSF is pretty good evidence that we've done a very good job, thanks to Susana and her team.

KUH: At this point, what else can UTEP do to benefit the El Paso community?

NATALICIO: The major challenge is economic development. This is a community that is transforming itself racially, ethnically, socially, culturally, and educationally. But one of the negatives is that we don't have an economy that allows many of UTEP's best and brightest graduates to stay and live and work nearby. As a result, some of our most talented homegrown people, especially from the Hispanic community, go to Dallas, Seattle, all over, to do good things in their professions and for their communities. I see them all the time at alumni

events. It's difficult for us to change the faulty perceptions of people in our community of how talent is distributed in our society when we can't keep more dynamic young people here—to be leaders, to be on the school boards, and to be in the business community. This is especially problematic for engineers, products of one of our largest, most effective, and most successful programs. Companies throughout the country are benefiting enormously from the talent pool we're developing; unfortunately, El Paso has not benefited as much as it could. So, I'm working hard now to try to move this thinking along, to move people from seeing El Paso as having a low-wage, poorly skilled workforce and to sell as a major asset to companies the talent pool we have in UTEP graduates, many of whom would stay here if they could find a good job after college.

KUH: In addition to attracting external grants and partnerships with El Paso and the region, UTEP has been out in front in a number of efforts to improve student learning. The campus is known for its effective use of active and collaborative learning techniques and for its innovative first-year student programs, among other things. When did you get a sense that these various efforts were starting to pay dividends?

NATALICIO: Sometime around 1994, we saw a shift in the effects of our various efforts from incremental to nonlinear. You could almost feel the traction kick in. By that time, we had invested enough time in getting UTEP's philosophy understood and on people's radar screens. We had toughened up ourselves and enhanced our ability to compete for resources; we saw the positive effects of our programs and services on our students, all of which led us to become a much more confident institution. In retrospect, it's interesting that at the time we were posturing about being “Harvard on the border” we were among the least confident of insti-

tutions. But by the time we could finally risk being authentic, we suddenly were quite confident, and we felt like we could do anything. Back in 1988, we submitted very few grant proposals, and, of course, we didn't get much funding. Today, we write a lot of proposals, and we take criticisms of those proposals in our stride, dust ourselves off, revise them, and send them back out for another competition. We've recruited highly qualified people who know what we're about, what we value, and where we are headed.

I'm especially proud that our faculty and staff are living out the student-centric model we want to be. Redesigning the first-year experience is a good example [see box for one facet of the redesign]. Some of our folks got involved with John Gardner and Betsy Barefoot at the Policy Center for the First Year of College in Brevard, North Carolina, and began to talk about what we could do differently to help our students.

All in all, we have much healthier attitudes today about ourselves and our students, our role here, our mission. UTEP is an institution that understands itself really well now. If you talk to people on visiting teams—accreditors and so forth—it's clear that they discover very quickly why we're here and what we're trying to accomplish.

Not everybody agrees with every aspect of what we do, but I have to say morale is pretty high and people generally take pride in what they're doing, feel like they're doing important work and that they're having a positive impact.

KUH: What are some of the issues you and your colleagues worry about and are working on now to enhance student success at UTEP?

NATALICIO: My current priority is “throughput,” figuring out how to help students succeed and graduate from UTEP. I'm very concerned about persistence to graduation and how to help students think differently about how they approach their education. We're looking carefully at how to help our students pay for college and succeed, during and after college. I'm very eager for students to learn more about personal financial management. Even though tuition is rising, so is our ability to provide financial aid. However, too many students make short-term financial decisions about stopping out for semesters at a time to help pay for their education. They take a minimum-wage job and may postpone their time to degree by as much as three or four years—if they finish at all. They might be far better off if they took out a student loan for two or more semesters, completed their degree, and then went out into the college-educated workforce. The longer you stop out of school, the more you increase the risk that life will take a turn, and you won't finish. Trying to help students understand that kind of long-term planning is a challenge.

Cash flow is a real-time financial problem for our students, many of whom are from the lowest income groups. The cost of textbooks, for example, is a hurdle that many can't figure out how to manage. It's a bigger problem than most of us realize. Think about it: most

University 1301: Seminar in Critical Inquiry

UNIV 1301 IS A CORE curriculum course “designed to engage entering students intellectually in an academic topic of their choice” and “to acquaint students with the UTEP campus in a number of ways.” The course goals are to strengthen students' academic performance and ease their transition to UTEP; enhance students' essential academic skills (critical thinking, oral and written communication skills); increase student interaction with faculty members and fellow students; encourage student self-assessment and goal clarification; and increase students' involvement in campus activities and use of university resources.

Class sizes of the eighty-three sections offered in fall 2003 ranged from twenty-five to thirty-five. Each class has three co-instructors—a faculty member, a librarian, and a peer leader. Course sections have intriguing topics such as Chicano Litera-

ture, Entrepreneurship and Opportunity Evaluation, Fictional Women Detectives, Writers, Artists, and Places on the Rio Grande, and Government Information: What's in It for You? A College of Education faculty member teaches her Service Learning for Future Teachers course in a downtown El Paso library. Some UNIV 1301 courses are taught primarily in Spanish.

Instructors are required to attend an orientation and professional development workshop each semester. Student peer leaders also undergo formal training throughout the academic year, attending biweekly workshops on topics such as introduction to active learning and practice teaching, academic dishonesty, asking questions effectively, learning styles, working effectively with instructors, and student development theory.

students at the beginning of the semester do not have \$500 to lay out for the books for their courses. They don't have that kind of money sitting in a checking account. If they have a credit card and charge the books, they'll be paying a hefty interest rate, get further into debt, and so on. So one of the things that we are going to do is expand our emergency book loan fund. Right now, the maximum loan is \$100, which is inadequate. We're going to greatly increase that revolving loan fund to allow a student to pay for their books over the course of the semester. At the end of the day, more students are going to enroll for more hours if they can afford to pay for their books.

There are a lot of these little issues that bring us to a greater awareness of the challenges low-income students face and how we, as an institution, can help students deal with them or work around them. Taking these steps is not rocket science. It's just paying attention.

So we've been analyzing the factors that affect throughput and trying to distinguish those over which we have no control, which we too often point to—people get sick, or they move—from those over which we *do* have some control, and then doing something about those. What are they? How can we address them? Things like class scheduling, book loans, course prerequisites. For example, we've got a group of students that I call "stalled seniors" who are within a handful of hours of graduation but cannot get the courses they need when they need them. We're working really hard right now to identify these factors so we can address them.

KUH: I heard the word *throughput* several times when talking with some of your deans. What led you to focus on this concept?

NATALICIO: In part, the inspiration is from *Moneyball*, Michael Lewis's book about the Oakland Athletics baseball team. *Moneyball* challenges the folk wisdom of how to win major league baseball games. Baseball announcers, agents, managers, scouts, and so on share a common lore about what matters—how important home runs and stolen bases are. For many years, a fellow named Bill James analyzed baseball statistics in his house in Kansas. Later, with the aid of technology, he did some pretty sophisticated statistical analyses and identified the factors that predicted what was really important to winning baseball games. And the surprise is that many of

them are not the things that everybody thinks and talks about. And so the book is about how the Oakland A's took the information from Bill James's analyses and began to scout and draft players based on a different set of criteria. One of the attractive features of the approach is that the A's don't necessarily have to compete financially with the Yankees and George Steinbrenner and other organizations that have more money to spend. They don't have to, because they're not looking for the guys who look good or who run ninety feet at whatever speed most "experts" say is desirable. They are looking at other characteristics. As a result, the A's now have one of the most successful major league franchises in terms of going to the playoffs and one of the lowest payrolls.

Setting aside for the moment that I'm a big baseball fan, this alternative "thinking outside the box" approach is an appropriate metaphor for UTEP. Like the A's, we have one of the lowest budgets of all the franchises competing in the big leagues. So I've asked the deans to think about what constitutes "winning," or student success in our league, our type of institution. Certainly, throughput, or helping students succeed and graduate from UTEP, is one important indicator of a winning strategy. What are the characteristics of institutions that win at the throughput game? What kind of players do we need in order to achieve these goals? Do we need one or more big sluggers? A player who strikes out as often as he hits a home run or the player with a high on-base percentage?

KUH: Is it fair to assume that your administrative cabinet members have all read *Moneyball*?

NATALICIO: Well, there's been a big run.

KUH: Can you be appointed a dean at UTEP without having read *Moneyball*?

NATALICIO: Well, you better not *not* have read it!

KUH: Dr. Diana Natalicio, thank you for sharing with us your vision for UTEP and higher education in the twenty-first century.

NOTE

Lewis, M. *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2003.

