



CASE STUDY

The University of Texas El Paso Helps “First-in-Family” Students Succeed

Background

Founded more than a century ago in 1914, the University of Texas El Paso (UTEP) is a public university, part of the University of Texas system, offering associate, bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (NCES), of the 23,000 students enrolled at UTEP, 19,000 are undergraduates, 54 percent female, and 82 percent Hispanic/Latino, and 85 percent receive financial aid.

UTEP is considered a [Hispanic-Serving Institution \(HSI\)](#): one of more than 400 colleges and universities “committed to Hispanic higher education success in the U.S.” as described by the [Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities](#).

According to the report [Student Achievement at the University of Texas at El Paso](#), more than 50 percent of UTEP’s graduates were the first in their families to earn a bachelor’s degree. Associate Vice President for Student Engagement and Dean of Students Catherine McCorry-Andalis, Ed.D., acknowledges the special considerations serving a first-generation student population: “We’re trying very hard to work with students before they come here to college because so many, as first-in-family, don’t have anyone at home who can lend that knowledge of where to go to get support. The way in which we interact with these students and their families is very different than at a traditional campus and yet this is the wave of our future here in the U.S.”

Preparing First-in-Family Students and English Language Learners

To prepare the first-in-family college students, many of whom are English Learners, UTEP works to ease the transition between K–12 and college by participating in El Paso’s *Collaborative for Academic Excellence* and its own [Pre-K-16 Educational Collaboration Committee](#), both of which help UTEP students prepare for and succeed at the postsecondary level. [Biculturalism](#) is another way UTEP helps with the acclimation process. According to McCorry-Andalis, “Part of that involves embracing the culture that we have here at the border [with Mexico], understanding that the majority of our students do speak Spanish. There is strong support to speak to our students in Spanish and have members on our team who are fluent in Spanish. Our publications are also bilingual.”

A Safe and Supportive Environment for Student Success

UTEP employs a variety of policies and programs in pursuit of its university-wide commitment to student success. “We do believe in being educational in everything that we do,” says Assistant Vice President for Student Support Ryan Holmes, Ed.D. “When it comes to student conduct, we emphasize that behavior must comply with the standards of the campus and also local, state, and federal law. We let students know that disruption, threats, and harassment will not be tolerated. We communicate these policies beginning with orientation presentations to let them know that since they have come to the campus, our campus has been forever changed for the better. Our policies convey how to be collaborative, how to engage in partnership

with other students, faculty and staff, to ensure that everyone can enjoy a safe campus environment.”

To further promote student success, UTEP formed its [Community of Care Program](#), which encompasses policies and resources to promote civility and mutual respect—including [violence intervention](#), [alcohol education](#), [Title IX](#), and [wellness](#).

[Do One Thing](#), a bystander intervention initiative, is one of the Community of Care components. Holmes explains, “Bystander intervention can actually stop behaviors before they turn into a policy violation or before someone’s harmed. We just trained about 45 individuals to be certified trainers, including faculty members.”

Where students reside is also a factor in promoting student wellbeing. The vast majority of UTEP’s student body lives off-campus, most with their families in their own homes, and many have full-time jobs and are married with children—very different from traditional four-year colleges.

“Our approach when it comes to safety and success is not solely focused here on campus,” says McCorry-Andalis. “We constantly push out information to students so that they understand that safety education doesn’t only apply when they are on our campus, it applies in the off-campus home environment. We very much try to be inclusive in our approach to safety and overall prevention to include their children and families.”

Commitment to “Customer Service”

At UTEP, the concept of [customer service is campus-wide](#), and its leaders view students, staff, and faculty as “customers.” To ensure UTEP is meeting its customers’ needs, the campus website offers a feedback [feature](#) for students, faculty, staff, or visitors to register concerns, complaints, or compliments.

The commitment to customer service extends to keeping the campus safe. Campus Police Chief Cliff Walsh explains, “At the police department, we work very, very hard to promote a sense of customer service because when you’re providing excellent customer service, you are making the campus safer by reaching out to your customers. The real challenge for policing is to reach out and engage customers and identify with them so that they can help us make their education experience a very productive and safe one.”

To this end, UTEP’s police department created the *Meet and Greet* program. As Campus Police Chief Walsh describes, “The Meet and Greet initiative involves officers on daily patrol reaching out to engage students, staff, and faculty by conversation about any topic, academics, safety, services. This activity is performed on a daily basis as part of our ongoing customer service efforts to promote campus safety.”

Engaging Students, Faculty, and Administration in Policy Compliance

UTEP utilizes various avenues to engage the campus community in policy compliance, the chief of which is open communication. “We spend a lot of time promoting communication and the need to inform others of issues or concerns, all in an effort to help students before things become problematic,” explains McCorry-Andalis. “We have a faculty grievance committee and a welfare committee through our Faculty Senate that addresses everything from students who may need an accommodation due to a disability to how often the shuttles are going around our campus to childcare issues. There are both structured and informal ways in which we connect.”

Faculty members also play a role in student engagement, specifically with student conduct. The college selects hearing officers who are tenured faculty members. The Faculty Senate includes a student conduct committee so faculty can understand what’s happening on the campus regarding conduct, accusations, and whether and how the students were held accountable.

Another avenue for student engagement is UTEP’s [Behavioral Assessment Team](#), which is made up of a five-member core team—two of whom are faculty members—that provides resources for students who are experiencing stress, distress, or other situations that may affect their academic performance.

Local, State, and National Collaborations

UTEP offices and departments are committed to collaboration with local, state, and national colleagues to better support student success. Specifically, administrators maintain affiliations with affinity organizations to foster professional competency and exchange ideas that can serve its mission.

- The Collaborative for Academic Excellence focuses on student safety and success and, in turn, enhances the knowledge and skills of UTEP personnel.
- The Police Department maintains regular contact with the [Texas Department of Transportation](#), [El Paso City Police](#), the [Texas Alcohol Beverage Commission](#), and other state and federal law enforcement agencies.
- As a part of the [University of Texas System](#), UTEP staff engages with colleagues throughout the system on a host of common issues, such as student safety measures, sexual assault prevention, and Title IX compliance.
- Holmes, past president for the [Association for Student Conduct Administrators](#), has participated in the annual [ASCA Gehring Academy](#) for many years. As a result, UTEP benefits from learning about latest practice regarding conflict resolution, Title IX concerns, restorative justice, and other student conduct concerns.

Evaluating the Impact of UTEP’s Policies and Programs

UTEP takes evaluation and continuous quality improvement seriously. For example, the campus conducts an [annual student satisfaction survey](#). Survey findings have been positive, especially regarding perceptions of safety, with more than 90 percent of UTEP students responding that they feel “very safe” on campus, and only about three percent saying they don’t feel safe.

Students responding “very safe” cited as examples: “UTEP Police officers are always visible in and out of the school campus. I feel that they can always be located which makes the campus feel safe,” and, “Police services were very informative.” Students who said they didn’t feel safe mentioned, “The parking lots have very dim lights, and sometimes only a few individuals are around,” and “I would like to see an increased presence by the UTEP PD in certain areas of the campus.”

The campus police department adjusts its operations based on the survey results. According to Chief Walsh, the campus police department has implemented the following changes as a direct result of survey responses:

- Police services are now promoted on a continuous basis via different outlets to include: new employee and student orientations, the UTEP Today campus monitors, University 1301 class presentations, University newspaper *The Prospector*, social media, and University campus labs. This change has increased awareness of police services and use of police services, as demonstrated in the 2016 Student Satisfaction Survey.

- The university has installed additional lighting and is transitioning to light-emitting diode (LED) light fixtures campus wide.
- University Police increased their presence in areas where students responded that they would like to see increased presence of UTEP PD.

The Office of Student Engagement also assesses learning outcomes through a learning outcomes framework called *Six Pillars*. McCorry-Andais explains, “The Pillars include everything from a global perspective to leadership development to a student’s personal responsibility. One learning outcome is to understand the importance of following policies and procedures as campus and community citizens. It’s preparing them for the world they’re going to live in and that their actions affect not only them, but their community as well.

“For each event or activity, there’s an assessment resulting in an impact report addressing learning objectives,” she continues. “Outcomes and assessments are incredibly important. We have specific teams that meet on a quarterly basis to look at the data, ask where we are falling short, and implement best practices.”

UTEP also provides assessment tools for students to chart progress toward their future using [Mine Tracker](#), a co-curricular program developed in collaboration by UTEP faculty, staff, and students. Registered students can access activities related to career development, civic engagement, global perspective, and personal enrichment that complement their classroom learning.

Conclusion

UTEP’s holistic approach to helping first-in-family college students has not gone unrecognized. *Washington Monthly* has [repeatedly commended](#) UTEP for its mission of access and excellence, and *iExcellencia in Education!* identified the [El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence](#)—made up of UTEP, El Paso Community College, and school districts in El Paso County—as one of the strongest models of collaboration between K–12 feeder schools, a community college, and a university partner.

HSI Resources

[Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities](#)
[iExcellencia in Education!](#)
[Alliance of Hispanic Serving Institution Educators](#)

This case study was developed and disseminated under contracts from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Healthy Students to American Institutes for Research, Inc. contract numbers ED-ESE-16-A-0002/0001 and ED-ESE-12-O-0035.

This edition of the Higher Education Update is a revision based on the original *Prevention Update* series previously funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Higher Education Center for Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Violence Prevention. Contents have been updated and edited to reflect current research and evidence-based approaches. The contents of this *Higher Education Update* do not necessarily represent the policy or views of the U.S. Department of Education, nor do they imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education.

December 2017