The University of Texas at El Paso will be 100 years old in 2014. Over the course of the past century, nearly everything about the institution has changed. It moved location once, changed names four times, grew from enrolling 27 to more than 22,000 students, and expanded its mission to embrace both educational access and academic excellence. And yet, in the midst of such profound transformations, many things have remained the same. The institution has always been shaped by its geographical location, by wider political and cultural contexts, and by the needs of the residents of the El Paso region.

The story of The University of Texas at El Paso is a story of shared aspirations. Community members, campus leaders, faculty, and students have all brought their hopes and dreams to the campus. Sometimes they transformed the school through conscientious planning and coordinated effort, other times they reacted as best they could to powerful outside influences.

Over the course of several decades these aspirations have accumulated in layers as each new set of goals built on those that came before. Over the course of a century, all of the layers have been built and blended into today’s university. Excavating back through the layers, we observe the way that history has unfolded and how the past is connected to the present. The layers of dreams and aspirations established during the first century of UTEP’s history provide the context for thinking about the next century of the University’s future.
UTEP’s story began at least a decade before the founding of the institution. This early period reveals two influences that would shape the institution over the coming century: the aspirations of El Paso community members for their school and the guidance of state leaders—the school has always been directed by the Board of Regents of The University of Texas and its first three leaders carried the title of “Dean.”

City leaders called for a mining school as early as 1902 but The University of Texas in Austin, which already had mining courses on the books, blocked the request. Thwarted in this attempt, the city worked with Fort Bliss to establish a short-lived Military Institute. In 1913, when UT announced it would no longer enroll students in its mining program, El Paso leaders jumped again at the opportunity. State legislation passed in 1913 authorized the creation of a school—if local leaders would put up the money. In the spring of 1914, the El Paso Chamber of Commerce announced that it had received commitments to the amount of $50,000, enough to purchase the available Military Institute campus and reopen in the fall as the State School of Mines and Metallurgy. Over the coming years they would donate money, land, and time to the success of the school.

Twenty-seven students enrolled to begin classes on September 23, 1914. Tuition was free, but fees were set at $30. After a fire in 1916 destroyed the Main building of the four-structure campus, the school moved to its current location.

Seeing a similarity between El Paso’s foothills and the mountains of Bhutan featured in a National Geographic cover story, Kathleen Worrell urged her husband (Dean S. H. Worrell) to persuade the Regents to build the school in this distinctive style. In 1919, the U.T. System was formally established and the mining school became the first branch in the System. The following year it was renamed the College of Mines and Metallurgy.

Aerial view of campus in 1923.
New aspirations for the tiny mining school surfaced as soon as it opened its Bhutanese doors in the current campus location. Unsatisfied with merely a mining school, El Paso community leaders worked to establish an additional College of the City of El Paso, and the two schools shared the same facilities during the 1917-1918 school year. When leaders in Austin forbade the mining faculty from teaching city college students, the newer college folded in 1920. However, the El Paso School District seized the torch and opened a junior college on the top floor of the new El Paso High School. Eighteen students enrolled in the fall of 1920, followed by 106 in 1921—thirteen more than were then at the Texas College of Mines (as the school was informally known).

In 1923, the Board of Regents considered merging the two schools but could not act without legislative action. Over the next three years, calls for a merger erupted publicly with news stories and letters to the editor circulating as widely and widely as private rumors and criticisms. By the middle of the decade, Austin leaders calculated that they would save about $60,000 per year by moving mining classes back to their main campus and leaving El Pasoans to their own little college. El Paso politicians convinced the Chamber of Commerce to again move in favor of the College of Mines, arguing that a branch of the state university was more valuable than a local junior college.

Early in 1927, state leaders expressed willingness to add more subjects to the College of Mines—particularly teacher training—and in May the junior college held its last commencement and merged into the College of Mines in the fall. In 1931, the college’s head became a “president” and a new “school” of arts and education joined a “school” of mining and metallurgy.

Penny-pinching and pluck kept the school open during the Great Depression. New Deal money funded Holliday Hall and Kidd Field while a state appropriation brought a new museum; dorms and a library followed. Many of UTEP’s earliest traditions can be traced back to this layer: Homecoming, an annual Sun Bowl football game between the college and El Paso High School (that was later expanded), a mascot, the Gold Diggers performing group, and the rivalry between the colleges of engineering and liberal arts. Enrollment reached 1,000 in 1939, and three years later liberal arts awarded the college’s first graduate degree.
Whereas local and state agendas had blended to create the mining school and stretch it into a city college, national impulses would prove more influential in shaping the institution’s destiny for the next two decades. The onset of World War II cut enrollment from 1,200 to 700, but the G.I. Bill sent veterans to school in record numbers and the student population swelled to more than 2,500 by 1947. These new students tended to be older, married, and more studious. To respond to such rapid growth, college leaders brought in temporary housing and a “Vet Village” sprang up where the Health Sciences and Nursing Building now sits (shown above in the top left).

National stirrings over civil rights likewise reached the campus. In 1954, Thelma White graduated from El Paso’s Douglass High School and applied to colleges in El Paso and Las Cruces. Because African-Americans were prohibited from attending undergraduate programs in Texas, she went to New Mexico, but in the spring of 1955 she filed a lawsuit. While the case worked its way toward victory in the U.S. District Court in El Paso, the Board of Regents voted to admit African-Americans to the El Paso branch of the university. In the fall of 1955, 12 African-American students were admitted to the first college in the state of Texas to desegregate its undergraduate program (UT Austin had previously desegregated its graduate program).

The college responded to external influences by reaching outward to forge partnerships with other institutions in the region and gain recognition throughout the nation. Student publications placed highly in intercollegiate competitions and the ROTC rifle team won the national championship in 1954. Faculty members wrote books about literature and the Southwest, earned recognition for metalwork and sculpture, and hosted an international organization of teachers. Carl Hertzog launched Texas Western Press in 1952 and the following year the Kidd Seismic Observatory joined a network of regional geographic analysis. The establishment of the Schellenger Research Labs in 1953 marked the college’s entrance into research contracting, with projects funded by a government and private industry client list that would grow to include White Sands Missile Range, Asarco, El Paso Natural Gas Company, the U.S. Army, NASA, and the National Science Foundation.

The school acquired a distinctly western feel during this era, though many elements do not remain: Riding stables rose (1945) and fell (1958), new rodeo grounds were later replaced by the Brumbelow Building and a driving range by the Don Haskins Center. Vet Village was dismantled in 1963, the Schellenger Research Labs flourished before fading. However, several campus buildings were constructed: Cotton Memorial, the east end of the Union Building, Magoffin Auditorium, the Science Building (now Psychology), and the lower levels of the Administration Building. In 1949, this regional college received a new name that identified both its emerging regional reach and its physical relationship to the rest of the state–Texas Western College.
Regional University, 1960-

In 1960, a new administration set out to harness the overlapping local, state, and national impulses that had produced a mining school, stretched it into a city college, and pulled it into a regional university. President Joseph M. Ray would lead Texas Western College from 1960 to 1968 on the path, as he later described it, toward “becoming a university.” Celebration of the school’s golden jubilee (50 years) in 1965 produced the institution’s first strategic plan from the Mission ’73 Committee and followed three years after the formation of a faculty council. In 1967, the school was renamed The University of Texas at El Paso.

The regional university achieved success on three very specific goals. First, the University grew immensely. As the baby boom generation came of age, student enrollment rose from 5,000 in 1962 to 10,000 in 1968 to 15,000 in 1977. Campus facilities expanded in fits and starts, with the rapid acquisition of private homes, the construction of new annexes, and the conversion of dorms into office and classroom spaces. Permanent structures arose in the form of a field house (Memorial Gym), liberal arts building, and physical science building in the 1960s; education, fine arts, engineering, nursing, and special events (Haskins Center) facilities in the 1970s; and a business administration building and library in the early 1980s. Students gradually shifted from campus housing residents to commuters.

Second, the Ray administration made the deliberate decision to use athletics to achieve national recognition—a strategy that produced almost immediate results. The construction of a new Sun Bowl stadium (1965) financed by a county bond issue was followed by a television contract with CBS in 1968 and an expansion in 1982. Men’s teams won national championships in basketball (1966), cross country (1969 and through the 1980s), and indoor and outdoor track and field (through the 1970s and 1980s).

Finally, the administration conscientiously focused on and invested in the El Paso border region. The institution created a Bureau of Business and Economic Research (1963), an Inter-American Science Program (1968), a Chicano Studies program (1970), and a Center for Inter-American and Border Studies (1973). The last mining engineering degree was awarded the same year that Coach Don Haskins’ African-American starters won the national basketball championship. UTEP was awarded the same year that Coach Don Haskins’ African-American starters won the national basketball championship. UTEP was awarded the same year that Coach Don Haskins’ African-American starters won the national basketball championship.

1981 First Peace Corps class trained on campus
1982 Enrollment 5,000, Mission ‘73 Committee
1983 Sun Bowl stadium, Bureau of Business and Economic Research
1985 Basketball championship, last mining engineering degree, first African-American faculty member
1987 Renamed The University of Texas at El Paso, School of Arts and Sciences
1988 Enrollment 10,000, Inter-American Science Program
1989 Cross country championship, first African-American president of Student Government Association
1990 Chicano Studies Program
1991 First National Teacher Corps, first (two) African-American cheerleaders, NCHCA
1994 and La Mesa Directiva protest
1995 Cross country championship, last mining engineering degree was awarded the same year that Coach Don Haskins’ African-American starters won the national basketball championship.
1997 Enrollment 15,000, Inter-American Science and Humanities Program
1999 First doctoral degree awarded
2000 First costume mascots “Sweat Pete” and “Sea Horse”
2001 Women’s Studies Program, Honors Program
2002 Sun Bowl addition, first female president of Student Government Association, Business Administration Building
2003 Dinner Theatre
2004 University Library, top producer of Hispanic engineers, Women’s Center
2021 50 percent of students are Hispanic

First female student in the UTEP Women’s Studies Program, 1981.

Students from The Movimiento Estudiantil Chicoano de Aztlan (MEChA) protest the University’s president in his office. The Regents responded by sending a new president, Arleigh B. Templeton, to restore order. He allowed the Chicano Studies program to grow, appointed the first Hispanic dean, and used his political ties in Austin to secure funds to expand the Sun Bowl stadium. The University became the nation’s top producer of Hispanic engineers in 1984, and the following year exactly 50 percent of students were Hispanic.
Public Research University, 1986-

In the second half of the 20th century, many American universities aspired to become public research universities — institutions that could combine nearly universal access to a college education with the highest quality in teaching and research. UTEP’s expanding regional university brought access to the El Paso borderlands, but successfully adding the layer of excellence would require the right context and the right leadership — at the right time.

The context came into place during the 1980s. Economic hard times in the region came into place during the same time. The right context and the right leadership — at the layer of excellence would require the right context and the right leadership — at the same time.

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In the midst of these transitions, the Board of Regents selected Diana Natalicio to lead UTEP — first as interim president in 1987 and then as president in 1988. The first female and first former faculty member to occupy this position, Natalicio immediately articulated a vision for the institution that rejected what she termed a “collective inferiority complex” and sought to make El Paso the center of excellence. Four years later the National Science Foundation designated UTEP as a minority research center of excellence in 1990 as a model institution for excellence in 1996. The Carnegie Foundation reclassified Carnegie designation in 1987 as a leader in U.S.-Mexico study in 1986 as a leader in U.S.-Mexico cooperative research. The next year, the Carnegie Foundation added recognition for UTEP’s community engagement, and the U.S. Department of Defense identified the University’s assets in pursuit of the American Dream of educational opportunity.

During the past 25 years, UTEP has developed simultaneously along several important lines. Partnerships with K-12 education and higher education. The state has increased its funding higher education.

Recognition of UTEP’s achievements has come from many sources. The National Science Foundation designated UTEP as a minority research center of excellence in 1988 and as a model institution for excellence in 1996. Four years later the Carnegie Foundation reclassified UTEP as a doctoral/research intensive institution. In 2008, the state of Texas named UTEP as one of several (now eight) emerging Tier One universities. In 2011, the Carnegie Foundation added recognition for UTEP’s community engagement, and the U.S. Department of Defense identified the institution as military friendly. At the end of the first decade of the 21 century, annual research expenditures have reached $70 million and UTEP faculty have become recognized leaders in many fields. Student enrollment has pushed beyond 22,000 – 75 percent of UTEP students are Hispanic and 55 percent are female.

Majority Hispanic student population, 1986-

In 1986, the University’s growing student body had been gradually shifting to reflect the region’s racial and socioeconomic demographics, and in 1986 Hispanic students became the majority. That same year, the state legislature approved the PASE Program, an initiative that permitted students from Mexico to pay in-state tuition. All three developments that permitted students from Mexico to pay in-state tuition. All three developments that permitted students from Mexico to pay in-state tuition. All three developments that permitted students from Mexico to pay in-state tuition. All three developments that permitted students from Mexico to pay in-state tuition. All three developments that permitted students from Mexico to pay in-state tuition. All three developments that permitted students from Mexico to pay in-state tuition. All three developments that permitted students from Mexico to pay in-state tuition. All three developments that permitted students from Mexico to pay in-state tuition.
The Paso del Norte Community

The transformation of a mining school into a research university occurred in collaboration with the community of the Paso del Norte region. Over the past century the University has enjoyed local support, generally avoiding both the town-and-gown rivalry that emerges in some small communities and the disconnect that arises in large urban environments. Business and civic leaders in the region opened their pocketbooks to support the school. After the state legislature authorized a mining school in El Paso, the Chamber of Commerce came through with the $50,000 needed to make the proposal a reality. When a fire at the original location rendered the facilities unusable in 1916, five El Paso residents came forward to donate additional land for a fresh start in a new location. During the next 25 years, ASARCO donated 150 acres of land, and since then hundreds of individuals and businesses have contributed to the University’s programs, scholarships, construction projects, and fundraising campaigns ranging from the Excellence Fund of the 1960s to the Legacy Campaign of the 1990s to the Centennial Campaign of the 21st century. The El Paso community also came through on many occasions when a lack of funding or an excess of bureaucracy in Austin threatened the school’s existence. A friends group and women’s auxiliary were organized in the 1920s to raise money and promote the school. During the Great Depression, El Paso High School loaned biology equipment, chairs, desks, and blackboards. On at least two occasions, local citizens put up money to pay faculty salaries so that classes could resume in the fall. In the 1960s, a handful of businessmen negotiated property acquisitions on behalf of the University, sometimes closing delicate deals with their own funds when formal processes moved too slowly.

This is not to say that the community and University have not experienced friction. Mining prospectors worried that student assaying services would provide unfair competition. Residents objected to the large “M” on the Franklin Mountains (it was moved in 1967) and accused faculty members of being communists. Some alumni of the regional college era struggled to accept the demographic changes that began during the 1960s. Eyebrows raised in tandem with the Golddiggers’ hemlines. Students complained of poor campus food and customer service; some publicly criticized professors who taught in Spanish or heavily-accented English. In many ways, however, the community and University are deeply entwined. Citizen committees in the 1960s provided strategic planning advice for development, athletics, engineering, and land acquisition. In recent years this process has been extended to long-term planning for the University and for various colleges and departments. The community’s signature Sun Bowl game and attending activities occur in the Sun Bowl Stadium through the long-term collaboration of the Sun Bowl Association, city and county governments and voters, the University, the Board of Regents, CBS, corporate sponsors, local businesses, and fans from throughout the region. Students become alumni who find jobs in the region and raise children who choose to become students at the University. The University of Texas at El Paso simply could not exist without the community at the pass.
The campus of The University of Texas at El Paso has grown extensively over the past century. After a fire destroyed its original site, the school moved to its current location where it has grown from five buildings in 1917 to more than seventy today. Nearly all of the buildings have incorporated Bhutanese architectural elements—massive sloping walls, high inset windows, overhanging roofs, and dark bands of brick inset with mosaic-tiled mandalas. Bhutanese tapestries, wood carvings, and flags decorate the campus. From humble origins in Old Main to the most recent $69.2 million Chemistry and Computer Science Building, The University of Texas at El Paso is truly a campus like no other in the world.

UTEP Now

22,640
students

1,241
faculty

79 master’s
70 bachelor’s
19 doctoral degrees

$404.6 million operating budget, nearly $70 million in annual research, alumni in 80 countries around the world.

Painting by Adan Contreras.
Layers Past and Future

After a century, all of the layers of aspirations that have shaped UTEP remain present in some form. No longer a little mining school, it is home of the Miner Nation and Paydirt Pete and a top engineering school for Hispanics (seven years running); no longer just a city college, it continues to host numerous partnerships with El Paso schools and businesses; no longer a regional college or regional university, it looks outward from the borderlands to cultivate international exchange programs and internationally renowned research projects. Arts and culture, science and business, education and health now form part of an institution that connects past and present, city and region, student and faculty, nation and world.

The transformations at The University of Texas at El Paso form part of a larger story of societal change throughout the 20th century. Founded during the Mexican Revolution, the school has participated in the century’s other revolutions, from expanded access to higher education after World War II, to increased civil rights for ethnic minorities and women during the 1960s and 1970s, to changed demographic realities since the 1980s. UTEP’s layered past provides the prologue for its second century.

Note on Sources

Four essential books cover the first 75 years of UTEP’s history. The occasion of the school’s 50th anniversary prompted Francis L. Fugate’s Frontier College: Texas Western at El Paso, The First Fifty Years (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1964) and President Joseph M. Ray’s On Becoming a University: Report on an Octennium of Texas Western Press, 1968). The occasion of the 75th anniversary produced Nancy Hamilton’s UTEP: A Pictorial History of The University of Texas at El Paso (El Paso: Diamond Jubilee, 1964-1989 (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1989) and Diamond Days: An Oral History of the University of Texas at El Paso (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1991), compiled by Charles H. Martin and Rebecca McDowell Crozer. President Diana Natalicio’s annual convocation addresses document UTEP’s history over the past 25 years, while significant archival collections are maintained by the C. L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department of the University Library, the Heritage House, the Institute of Oral History, and University Communications. Ongoing explorations of UTEP’s history are under way at the Transformations history blog (http://transformations.utep.edu).

About the Author

Keith A. Erekson is an assistant professor of history at The University of Texas at El Paso and founder and director of the Center for History Teaching & Learning. In 2011, the Board of Regents of The University of Texas System awarded him its prestigious Outstanding Teaching Award. He is the author of Everybody’s History: Indiana’s Lincoln Inquiry and the Quest to Proclaim a President’s Past (University of Massachusetts Press, 2012) and the editor of Politics and the History Curriculum: The Struggle over Standards in Texas and the Nation (Praeger Macmillan, 2010).

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Throughout 2014, The University of Texas at El Paso will celebrate its past accomplishments, showcase its present strengths, and look forward to the future. We aim to involve students, alumni, faculty, staff, and friends in a University wide effort to reinvigorate and establish traditions, foster pride, and develop national and international recognition of UTEP’s academic and research excellence.