

Texas Monthly

Far From the Madding Crowd

Way out on the edge of Texas, UTEP's Diana Natalicio has been quietly reinventing higher education.

by **Jeff Salamon**

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Natalicio on the UTEP campus on October 23, 2014.
Photograph by Joel Salcido

This academic year, the University of Texas at El Paso is celebrating its centennial, and Diana Natalicio, the school's president, is marking her twenty-sixth anniversary in the school's top job. That's a remarkably long tenure, but even more remarkable are the changes UTEP has undergone during her administration. In 1988 the school offered one doctoral program; today it has twenty. In 1988 annual research expenditures were about \$5 million; last year the number was \$84 million. And for the past two years, *Washington Monthly*, using somewhat unconventional criteria, has named UTEP one of the ten best universities in the country.

Jeff Salamon: The University of Texas at El Paso has gone through some really extraordinary changes during the years you've been president. Among other things, you went from one doctoral program to twenty over the course of your tenure there. I'm sure you could write a book about how that happened, but could you describe one thing you've done that you think made a difference in terms of expanding the school?

Diana Natalicio: When I became president, what I really wanted to do was assess where we were as a public university in a historically undereducated region, and whether we were the university that we need to be to serve this region. I believe very much in public universities and the mission to provide high-quality opportunities for the people who live in the region. I often said in those days, "Play the hand you're dealt, don't ask for a different set of cards." So we did the usual things—we looked at who our students were at that time and we traced all the feeder patterns from the various high schools. More than 80 percent of our students are graduates of regional high schools, but at that time we didn't look like the region. If you believe that talent is everywhere, that it crosses gender and ethnic and geographic and socioeconomic boundaries, and more than 80 percent of your students come from a particular region, your school probably ought to look like the region.

We weren't satisfied with that, so our number one priority was to encourage more young people who were both low income and Hispanic to come to the University of Texas at El Paso. We knew the talent was there; what apparently wasn't there was a pathway from their high schools to the university.

JS: And what was your number two priority?

DN: To ensure that once we created that pathway, the education they would receive would be of high quality and enable them to graduate and compete with more affluent peers in perhaps more prestigious settings. As we thought about how we would achieve that goal, we recognized that we had to increase the research activity on the campus to create a climate of high expectations. That would require recruiting more competitively for faculty, which would require facilities and equipment and more doctoral programs, because the faculty that you would want to recruit would need to have doctoral students to form their research teams.

So the doctoral program agenda became quite critical to us. But we had been told by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board that we would never have more than one doctoral program, that we were to be a feeder institution to other universities in the state, like UT-Austin and Texas A&M. Fortuitously, in the late eighties, just as I had become UTEP's president, a lawsuit was filed by LULAC [League of United Latin American Citizens] and MALDEF [Mexican American Legal and Defense Fund] to challenge the disparity in higher-education funding between the border region and the Metroplex. That lawsuit used doctoral education as one of its key pieces of evidence. Their evidence was that there was one doctoral program—our program, in geology—in the entire border region, whose population was roughly equivalent to the population of the Metroplex, and that the Metroplex had something like 342 doctoral programs.

They filed that lawsuit, and when we heard about it, it caused us to think that maybe we could present a proposal for a second doctoral program or maybe even a second, third, and fourth doctoral program. So we tried to do that. And, indeed, a doctoral program in electrical and computer engineering, which was the second of our doctoral programs, gained approval by the Coordinating Board. There was never any further discussion about us having only a single doctoral program, so we moved forward with the third doctoral program, and on we went.

JS: Whatever happened with that lawsuit?

DN: It knocked around for quite a few years. Decisions were rendered and appealed and so on. It was out there for, I don't know, maybe seven or eight years. Ultimately, the MALDEF/LULAC lawsuit did not prevail. But by that time, we already had probably five or six doctoral programs, and the landscape had changed. So perhaps the lawsuit had achieved its purpose without prevailing in the court.

JS: What you're saying is, the state was kind of spooked by this lawsuit and therefore was more amenable to UTEP growing its doctoral programs?

DN: I don't really know how the state reacted to it. But I think, obviously, as it worked its way through the court system, the context changed. There's still a disparity in the number of doctoral programs, but certainly it's not 1 to 342. I don't really know exactly what happened. I just know that we saw an opportunity to test the system, and it worked.

JS: I want to make sure I understood something you said when you said you spoke to the Higher Education Coordinating Board and they asserted that UTEP was going to have just the one doctoral program. Were they were saying they had no interest in you increasing the number of doctoral programs?

DN: What they said was that they had a category of institutions at that time that they created called Single Doctoral Granting. That was us.

JS: So at some point you were relieved of that designation?

DN: I don't recall exactly what happened but I don't recall any formal action. I just recall that our second doctoral program was approved, which moved us out of the Single Doctoral Granting category.

JS: You've said that when you arrived, UTEP had a defeatist attitude, and you made it your mission to make the school feel prouder. How does one make a school feel prouder?

DN: I began teaching at UTEP in 1971, so I'd been on the campus seventeen years before I became president. I knew the institution well because I'd been on faculty, been a department chair, dean of liberal arts, vice president, so I knew the culture, I knew the climate on the campus. The expressions that I would hear were always expressions like "Oh, we can't do that," or "They'll never let us do that." Always talking ourselves out of having big ambitions or high

aspirations. I tend to be an optimist and I tend to have high aspirations. Constantly undermining our own aspirations seemed to me to be a recipe for failure.

When I became president, I had a chance to try to articulate that in a variety of ways. There are a lot of things I think you can do. One, I think you can challenge people when they engage in that kind of self-deprecating behavior or when they undermine their own aspirations and opportunities. So I challenged people. One thing I did was make an active effort to convert what a lot of people considered to be liabilities—the border, our low-income student population, a lot of things like that—into assets. You can live in two countries at once when you're in El Paso. We're at the cutting edge of a demographic shift in the United States—we're at the forefront, not in the background.

JS: One thing I noticed looking at the offerings of the school, of the twenty doctoral programs, only three are in the liberal arts—history, psychology, and rhetoric and composition. Would you have any interest in seeing that change, that there be more liberal arts offerings at the doctoral level?

DN: As a matter of fact, one of the programs that we have coming along in the pathway toward review is a program in communication. We're hopeful that one will maybe be authorized next.

JS: The UT System's flagship school, in Austin, made a lot of headlines this past year, and not the sort of headlines anyone would want to make. How have you managed to stay out of the crosshairs of the education reform movement?

DN: Well, I could joke and say we're six hundred miles away, so we're just not in the bull's-eye as much. But honestly, look at what UTEP has accomplished. We have the lowest net price of any research university in the United States. We're already working hard at creating new models of higher education and working with a socioeconomically challenged student population—about 40 percent of our students report a family income of \$20,000 a year or less. We've worked hard on ensuring that students have access to higher education through affordability and accessibility, and we are doing a tremendous amount of work with El Paso Community College so that students transfer with great frequency. I think 75 percent of our students transfer with at least some community college credit—most of our students are not starting at UTEP as first-time, full-time freshmen. We've tried to adapt to our surroundings, and our surroundings have created a mandate for us to do many things that are of interest to those who would like to see higher-education reform. I think we're an institution that is trying hard to be responsive to the national narrative about social mobility, about affordability, about all of the issues that have come up recently that are very much in the public eye. Out here, far away from some of the major conversations, we've been quietly doing this work.

JS: Do you think that other Texas public universities could take a page from what you've done?

DN: We're very data-driven, so we have a lot of evidence and we share it readily. In our society today, about 8.5 percent of low-income students complete bachelor's degrees. It's just an unacceptable statistic. There's talent that's clearly being squandered, and public universities have

a responsibility to encourage those young people in every way we can. We're passionate about this and are happy to share any pages out of our book.

JS: I've heard you talk in other venues about the fact that you spend a lot of time talking to the superintendents of the local public school system, the high school system, and people in the community college. It would be sort of impossible to imagine a president of a University of California, Berkeley, or a UT-Austin or Texas A&M doing that. Did people think that this was a crazy idea, to engage with institutions that are sort of lower on the totem pole?

DN: If you think they're lower on the totem pole, maybe so. But we stand on their shoulders. One of the reasons for our recent success over the past 25 years is the strong performance of the school district. We owe the community college and the school district a great deal, because the better work they do, the better work we do. We prepare most of the teachers who are in those schools, and the principals, and the counselors. It's a closed loop. If we spend our time blaming each other for inadequacy, rather than looking for ways in which we can work more effectively together, then shame on us. We understand the interdependency very clearly, and perhaps that's one of the advantages that we have—we can see that very clearly because there's not a lot of noise. There's one community college, there's one university, and there's a lot of schools. We understand that helping any of the others of us is going to pay off richly for all of us. That's the excitement about working in an environment like this.

JS: We're going to have a new legislative session in January. What are you hoping to see happen in terms of your school's needs?

DN: I would love to see a restoration of the formula funding, the appropriations for public universities. When you work with a student population like ours, you absolutely cannot raise tuition to make up the difference between what used to be appropriated and what's appropriated now. Students can't afford it. Even with their Pell Grants. They're all working jobs; they're doing everything they can think of to afford to go to college. They don't take anything for granted.

If you have an income of \$20,000 a year or less and you're trying to better yourself and your quality of life, you cannot pay the cost of tuition that's charged at many, many institutions in Texas and elsewhere. You just can't do it. Private institutions are prohibitively expensive for our students.

I believe very much in public education, and I believe that it requires public support. We see transformed lives every day, young people who go from working-class families to professionals in the time it takes to get a degree. We see the jobs that they're getting and the salaries that they're being paid, and the way in which that helps turn around the lives of their younger brothers and sisters and transform their family. If Texas hopes to be competitive in the twenty-first century, we can't afford not to invest in public schools at all levels.

JS: How likely is it that you'll get what you want from the Lege?

DN: I'm an optimist. I'm going to believe that it's going to happen.

JS: Though your school hasn't been the subject of scary newspaper stories, the region where you're located certainly has. How has the violence across the border affected UTEP?

DN: We have a lot of Mexican students enrolled at UTEP who, for the most part, cross the border daily. Our Mexican student enrollment did decline—it went from about 1,800 to 1,100. And now it's around, I think, 1,250. [*UTEP's total enrollment is about 23,000.*] A lot of that decline was not so much because of the violence per se but the conditions that surrounded it. Although we're told that most of the violence was cartel-related, many people who had nothing to do with that were impacted because there were criminal elements who recognized that the rule of law was not working, so there was extortion and other problems. Many of our Mexican students are sons and daughters of small-business people who couldn't afford to stay in business. I had some heartfelt messages from these parents—they were moving to Guadalajara or someplace else to try to do business there.

JS: So it wasn't really so much that people were physically afraid of crossing back and forth across the border every day?

DN: No, though crossing over was slow and difficult, obviously. But the violence has subsided considerably since then, and the economy in Juárez is picking up. There is a lot that's changed. I'm hopeful that we're going to see more students coming to UTEP to pursue their degrees. When you live in a binational metro area of 2.5 million people and two thirds of those people are on the Mexican side, it's not realistic to think that you can have economic development on just one side of the border. It's all connected. There are some great universities in northern Mexico, and they all have a role to play, but there are some students who wish to pursue certain degrees or to pursue a degree at a U.S. institution in English, and we create those opportunities for them. They're great young people, they're very talented, and they go on to some wonderful jobs, mostly in Mexico—many of them are helping to build northern Mexico. Some of these doctoral degrees we talked about earlier are drawing faculty members from universities in northern Mexico who are getting their doctoral degrees and going back to their institutions to teach in programs that are far more robust today because of the doctoral program opportunities we offer. It's a bilateral higher-education development.

JS: I read a news story in the El Paso newspaper that, as part of your 100th anniversary, the Mexican ambassador came and gave a talk at the University. He talked about a plan the government has called "Proyecto 100,000," which aims to have 100,000 Mexican students study in the United States by 2018, which would be a more than seven-fold increase from the current 14,000. Is this something you know about? Is it even remotely plausible that you could have that sort of leap over the next four years?

DN: I think it's a stretch, but I think it's a very important goal to set. I think that Mexico is an extraordinarily important part of the future of the US, and I think that education is absolutely critical to Mexico's future. Education, lack of education, is a drag on their development, a huge drag. The large number of unemployed youth without education, that's just not a sustainable situation for Mexico. We have many Mexican students on our campus, we have the largest enrollment of Mexican students at any university in the US, but that's primarily because of our location and our accessibility. We've worked hard to ensure that Mexican students know that

they're welcome here, but it would be wonderful to see a much stronger flow of Mexican students into the US. I think that builds ties, it builds the relationships, it builds all sorts of opportunities for the kind of economic integration that I think is so critical.

JS: One of the big movements in Texas right now is to increase the number of Tier One universities we have. Just a few years ago, there were three that were considered Tier One, and now the University of Houston is considered a fourth. I know that Tier One is not a formal designation and these things are subject to interpretation, but your school was one of seven that I believe Texas House Bill 51 named as one of the schools that could make that leap. Is it your intent to try and turn UTEP into a Tier One school?

DN: We think that's pretty much what we've done, though I guess it depends on what your criteria are. We set two goals for our Tier One quest. One of those was \$100 million in annual research expenditures, and the other was to grant one hundred doctoral degrees annually—we're getting ready to celebrate our one hundredth anniversary, so the number one hundred is really special to us. We've gone from about \$5 million a year in research expenditures to \$84 million, so we're well on our way to \$100 million. We've already gotten past one hundred doctoral degrees awarded, so we think that we're making good progress in becoming the UTEP that we have the capacity to be and should've been a long time before.

The important thing about our quest for Tier One is that our primary reason for wanting to be a Tier One university is not status and prestige, it is to be the best UTEP we can be for the young people of this region. We want them to be able to come to a university whose programs, whose research, whose campus all reflect the highest expectations and standards in public higher education. For example, in our research quest, we have created something like 2,500 jobs [for students] on the campus, most of which are paid for through research dollars. Which means that students are employed—which [for economic reasons] they have to be anyway—in productive and very exciting contexts where they're learning as they're earning. Our quest for Tier One is really grounded in a commitment to serve our undergraduate students with the best possible UTEP education we can provide. I never want people in our region to think that becoming a Tier One university means we're going to become an ivory tower in a border community—that's not our goal at all.

JS: Do you worry that all the things that come with being a Tier One university would make UTEP so expensive to students that you would have trouble serving that population?

DN: We can't allow that to happen. We can't price ourselves away from our constituents. That would be absolutely violating the public university mandate in my view.

JS: The University of Houston made the leap to Tier One recently, and some alumni, some people in Houston, accused the university of not doing a good job of staying true to its roots as a commuter school, as a school that serves a different population than most universities do. Have you observed what's gone on there, and has that served as a cautionary example at all?

DN: I haven't really been paying that close attention, but I do think it's a delicate balance. One thing that was an unforgettable moment for me, that really underscored the importance of this for me, was I was in an Albertsons supermarket one day, which is where I have a lot of contact with people in the community. I don't go there that often, but when I do go, they come up to me, they talk to me, and I get a lot of hugs. It's all good, it's really good. There was a grandmother who came up to me shortly after the big hoopla about us possibly becoming Tier One, and she said, "Oh, Tier One, I'm so excited, Tier One." And I said, "We're all excited." Then she said, "But when you become Tier One, will my grandson still be able to go to UTEP?" That's the key. She hit it exactly right. We should never, as public universities, become totally disconnected from the region surrounding us. We're here for a purpose, and I really strongly believe in that. I think it's worked well for us. Obviously, there are institutions that aren't as regionally focused as we are. UT-Austin and A&M draw students from across the state. But most of the rest of the institutions are pretty regionally populated. I think that the whole idea of public universities is to serve the population of the region. I hold fast to that and I think it's worked well for us.

JS: For the past two years, *Washington Monthly* has named UTEP one of the ten best universities in the country, using very different criteria than the *U.S. News and World Report* does for its famous college rankings. Has that changed the school's profile nationally at all?

DN: I think it has. I applaud *Washington Monthly*, not only because they discovered UTEP as one of the top ten institutions in their ranking but because they have taken on what I think is a seriously flawed *U.S. News and World Report* ranking, which tends to focus primarily on factors that are associated with private higher education. I have no problem with private universities—there are many very, very fine private universities—but I do think that criteria like size and endowment and that sort of thing really don't get at the kind of thing that I think is of interest to public universities, which is impact and value added. I think, frankly, our being on *Washington Monthly*'s list has stimulated some dialogue, like, "What are they doing there?" And that's good, that's good. I think being a disruptive force is a good thing—changing the narrative a bit, trying to get people to think hard about what higher education is trying to do.

JS: I know you've been gone from your native St. Louis for many decades, but you've also remained a die-hard Cardinals fan. As of very recently, El Paso now has its own minor-league baseball team. Do you go out to see the Chihuahuas very often?

DN: I have been to see the Chihuahuas. I love the ballpark, I love having a triple-A team in El Paso, I love watching baseball. I think it's a great game, it's a game that I grew up with, and so I'm just thrilled that we have the El Paso Chihuahuas. I think they brought a lot of joy to this community over the past year.

JS: Every time I've seen you interviewed, the interviewer says that you've had an unusually long tenure for a university president and asks if you have any plans to step down. And you say no, that you love what you do. If I were to ask you that question, would I get a different answer than everyone else has gotten?

DN: No, you wouldn't. I really do love what I do.