

The University of Texas at El Paso
A Binational University

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The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) is located in the largest urban settlement on a land border in the world. El Paso, Texas, USA and Cd. Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, have a combined population of 2.1 million. Linked by history, commerce, culture, and family, they function in many ways as one city, despite the national border that divides them and the distinct national systems that govern them. The University of Texas at El Paso reflects the binational character of the urban environment. Since its founding in 1914 as the School of Mines of the University of Texas, it has enrolled both US and Mexican citizens. From one student in the original class of 17 (all mining engineers), UTEP now enrolls some 1,900 Mexican citizens among its 19,000 students, nearly 15% of all Mexican citizens in US universities. These students cross the international border every day to attend classes.

This paper will describe the mechanisms through which UTEP has become a significantly binational university, and those which both broaden and deepen its connections with Mexico and Mexican institutions. One of these includes acceptance of Mexican students with little or no English. Such students take 1-2 “content” courses in Spanish during their first 2-4 semesters while they are taking ESOL courses, and then make the transition to content courses in English. Another mechanism is the PASE program, which, with the authorization of the Texas State Legislature, allows Mexican citizens who meet certain criteria of need, to enroll at UTEP at the tuition rate charged to Texas residents.

The long-standing traditions of Mexican students at UTEP (some are the third generation of their families to attend the institution) plus an additional 70% of the student body which is of Mexican ancestry (though US citizens) gives the university a distinctly Latino character. Spanish is used on campus equally with English, and cultural practices mix Mexican and American elements. Although the majority of content courses are given in English, the University is now taking steps to link itself more tightly to Mexico.

A project entitled “Building Higher Education on the US-Mexican Border” (supported by the Coca Cola Foundation) is in the process of making it possible for UTEP students and faculty to exchange courses with the Universidad Autónoma de Cd. Juárez, located a short distance away (but in Mexico). The major elements of this program are the harmonization of practices for course validation in the Registrar’s offices, the creation of course transfer guides in each corresponding academic program, regular meetings of departmental faculties, and the creation of a council of Presidents/Rectors to discuss problems, successes, and future projects.

UTEP has made significant progress toward becoming both a bilingual university and a binational one. To our knowledge, it is one of the few in the Americas to have taken these steps, and its experience will be of interest to other institutions.

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