The Undergraduate Education Committee was charged with developing recommendations for specific actions to improve the quality of undergraduate education at UTEP. Members were asked to review and propose strategies to improve and strengthen existing initiatives in the following focus areas: access and admissions; developmental education; partnerships with the El Paso Community College; programs for honor students and high achievers; tuition, fees, financial aid and scholarships; student success and graduation rates; curriculum/program development; and technology and alternative educational delivery systems.
Introduction

The Undergraduate Education Committee focused on three main areas: (1) Student Access, (2) Curriculum, and (3) Student Success. The committee quickly discovered that these areas commonly overlap, allowing committee members to revisit ideas from multiple perspectives. Recurrent ideas are represented in the committee’s final report.

The committee reviewed a large number of documents provided by the UTEP Office of Admissions, Entering Student Program, Center for Institutional Evaluation, Research and Planning (CIERP), and other units on campus. The purpose of this review was to determine what current efforts to improve undergraduate education are occurring and where opportunities exist for additional and continued pursuit of excellence. Members of the committee organized a fact-finding visit to campus to learn firsthand about students’ undergraduate academic and extracurricular experiences. This visit included a tour of Miner Village and recreational facilities, followed by interviews with students in leadership roles on campus. On a second visit, committee members interviewed a cross section of UTEP faculty members, selected for their interest in and commitment to undergraduate education.

Recommendations

The committee generated a large number of recommendations in all three areas listed above. Over the course of discussion, four areas emerged as of highest priority for UTEP during the coming decade: (1) expanding student access through new models for course delivery; (2) creating or expanding opportunities for high achieving students; (3) increasing financial aid programs to support student success; and (4) developing connections to encourage students’ transition to the University.

• Expanding student access through new models for course delivery—Up to the present, UTEP has relied largely on traditional delivery methods for nearly all its undergraduate academic programs. But this strategy may be creating barriers to student success. The committee discussed at length alternatives to the current course and program formats and agreed unanimously that UTEP would benefit from creative and strategic thinking about how courses and curricula should be scheduled and delivered.

• The expansion of El Paso to the east and northeast creates a challenge and an opportunity for UTEP. To promote access, the committee recommends the creation of one or more satellite locations to serve students who do not attend UTEP because of driving distance. These campuses could be modest at first, starting in meeting rooms in public libraries, at Fort Bliss, in space borrowed or rented from EPCC, or in under-used commercial space. For reasons of scheduling and driving distance, it may become feasible to purchase or lease more permanent space to create a presence in east or northeast El Paso. EPCC may serve as both a model for and a partner in this expansion. An alternative to satellite campuses would be the development of a mass transit system that would connect the main campus and the Texas Tech medical
Satellite classrooms, condensed courses and instructional technology are among traditional learning alternatives recommended by the Undergraduate Education Committee.

• To attract students who work and have families (as is the case with many university stop-outs in El Paso), the committee recommends the development of courses and eventually entire programs that can be completed without disrupting students’ other life commitments. For example, short, compressed courses taught in the evening over three to six weeks rather than 15 weeks would serve this purpose. Summer, weekend, or evening programs would also provide greater flexibility. The committee further suggests that if these courses and programs have higher costs, higher tuition and fees might be appropriate for them.

• The committee recommends more focused use of instructional technology to extend the reach and increase the flexibility of academic programs. Achieving this goal will require improving students’ off-campus access to technology, a task that could be accomplished through satellite computer centers created in partnership with public libraries, EPCC, or Fort Bliss as well as through computer loan-out or rental programs. Funding could be sought from large foundations committed to the expanded use of technology.

• Creating or expanding opportunities for high achieving students—The committee dealt early and at length with developmental and transitional issues and learned that UTEP is making visible progress in meeting the needs of students who enter college with skill deficits and other barriers to their success. Transitional programs to help move students into university-level work are having a positive impact on success rates during students’ first year of study. However, the committee recommends increasing opportunities for those who have fewer starting deficits and could thus advance more quickly. To expand the appeal of UTEP to high achievers, the University should create additional programs that serve the specific needs of such students.

• The committee recommends that UTEP introduce an “accelerated curriculum” that would enable a student to finish an undergraduate degree in three years or less. This could be a powerful recruiting tool, allowing UTEP to build a new relationship with local educational entities and work with high school counselors to attract the top 10 percent of students who might otherwise choose to attend other universities. The accelerated program could be marketed as a “preparatory” curriculum for graduate study. Students could develop a personalized road map that incorporates UTEP’s accelerated curriculum into plans for post-graduate study. Incentives could be aligned with this curriculum, so that students would be eligible for scholarships and other benefits tied to their progress toward degree completion at an accelerated rate.

• The committee recommends that UTEP expand undergraduate research opportunities, enabling high achieving students to engage in research and in close collaboration with faculty at or near the beginning of their studies in their major field. Faculty will be expected to seek funding for such research experiences from public and private sources, enabling both faculty and students to receive financial rewards for work that is completed.

• Increasing financial aid programs to support student success—The committee recognized that academic success is not based solely on student intellect or ability. Given the
socio-economic status of the El Paso region from which UTEP draws the majority of its students, the committee recommends the creation of new and the expansion of existing programs that assist with students’ financial needs. These programs could remove some obstacles that might otherwise delay or prevent students’ completion of college.

• The committee recommends the creation of a scholarship program that encourages students to earn their degrees “on time.” Students who participate in this program would receive financial incentives to complete their degree within the time period deemed appropriate for that degree, without penalty for participation in cooperative or internship programs. This scholarship program would encourage, support, and reward students’ timely completion of degrees.

• Recognizing that the majority of UTEP students work, the committee recommends that UTEP expand opportunities for meaningful student employment on campus. In addition to providing financial support, on-campus employment of students in paraprofessional positions (e.g., undergraduate researchers, peer leaders, peer advisors, tutors) also facilitates the development of their leadership skills and connection to campus. The more flexible on-campus work schedule will support rather than impede students’ academic progress.

• In order to attract and assist students with children, the committee recommends additional support for on-campus childcare, increasing student access to childcare by expanding program capacity and subsidizing childcare costs for students who demonstrate financial need. The committee recommends exploring a programmatic link between on-campus childcare and the Early Childhood Program in the College of Education to see if this connection could assist with program expansion and cost.

• Developing connections to encourage students’ transition to the University—Recognizing that developmental issues are largely community-based, the committee recommends that UTEP further develop its external and internal connections to help students transition to the University.

• The committee recommends that UTEP strengthen outreach to middle, high school, and EPCC students and their parents to prepare students to transition to the University. Recommendations include (1) expanding efforts to invite students to the UTEP campus; (2) providing programs that advise students and their parents about course requirements and academic expectations; and (3) providing placement test workshops and content review to help increase student performance on college placement tests. In addition, prospective students and their parents should be advised about scholarships and other forms of financial aid, so they can know how they are going to pay for college. High school guidance counselors also need to be involved in these efforts.

• The committee recommends that UTEP expand its partnerships with high schools and EPCC to address developmental issues prior to students’ enrollment at UTEP. Co-enrollment opportunities with EPCC should be expanded for students requiring additional developmental coursework.

• The committee recommends that UTEP expand the number of university seminars and learning communities to help students transition to college and promote student, faculty, and curricular connections.