UTEP’s Image

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This committee was charged with defining UTEP’s image on a local, state,
national and international level. The committee was responsible for providing
recommendations for effectively reaching constituencies and accurately portraying
UTEP’s many successes to the region and the nation.
UTEP’s image is about more than this astonishing silhouette visible at dusk – it’s a complex combination of impressions and attitudes that the public holds about the University.

Introduction

In 1990, UTEP published its Diamond Jubilee Commission Report, which was the product of a group of distinguished citizens celebrating the University’s 75th anniversary and recommending changes for its next 10 years. The report of UTEP’s 2001 Committee on Image discussed challenges faced by the University in creating and maintaining a positive image, in part because its image is integrally related to public images of El Paso. The committee recommended that UTEP:

- Enhance its communication with off-campus constituencies
- Clarify its admissions policy concerning “open admissions”
- Work with other area institutions to address the educational needs of the region
- Give greater visibility to its programs and people who have achieved national prominence
- Develop programs that take advantage of UTEP’s location
- Encourage college-going among its constituents
- Expand doctoral degree program offerings
- Find ways to seek input on a regular basis from community groups and organizations so that UTEP is more responsive to their needs

Now, in 2005, UTEP can report that the University has:
- Improved its communication with multiple constituencies
- Developed an important message that UTEP’s mission embodies both access to and excellence in the education it offers
- Improved its external communication by enhancing the depth and breadth of work undertaken by the University Communications Office
- Developed academic and student support programs that fit its location and demographics
- Improved its recruitment efforts
- Increased the number of doctoral programs it offers
- Continues to create networks of positive relationships with community, discipline-specific, and national foundations and corporations.

The 2005 Centennial Commission Committee on Image, therefore, found an improved image of UTEP as perceived by alumni, community leaders, and academic organizations at regional and national levels. Just as UTEP is moving to higher-level stature as a research and teaching university, so too must its efforts to create and sustain an improved organizational image move to a higher level of quality.

Scope of the Committee’s Work

The Centennial Commission Committee on UTEP’s Image collected and reviewed information about the University’s self-image and perceptions of the University held at the local, state, national, and international levels. The Committee:
- Reviewed promotional materials used by UTEP in general and by Intercollegiate Athletics in particular.
- Heard a presentation by President Diana Natalicio about UTEP’s contemporary image, based on its vision, mission, and institutional goals.
Committee members learned how impressions and attitudes toward the university are formed through personal experience and interpersonal and mediated communication.

The Notion of Image

An organization’s image is a complex combination of impressions and attitudes that people have about the organization. Even though an organization like UTEP may develop a coherent vision, mission, and goals, it is difficult to control all the experiences, impressions, and attitudes that a wide variety of people will have about the institution. The image of UTEP held by many alumni is driven by their experiences in a particular major, by their past and current interest in the football or basketball programs, or by whether they live in El Paso or another city. UTEP’s image among people in the El Paso community who never attended the University may be affected by the graduates they have hired, their own collegiate experiences at other universities, their neighbors who may work at or attend UTEP, or other factors. Among UTEP students, the University’s image is affected by which major they are pursuing and their interactions with faculty, staff, and other students. Among faculty, images are affected by their perceptions of UTEP compared to other universities where they have taught and where they earned their advanced degrees. How UTEP is perceived by El Paso area high school teachers and counselors is affected by their interactions with UTEP recruiters and admissions personnel, whether or not they attended UTEP, the perceived quality of people they know who graduated from UTEP, etc.

Accordingly, there is no single image of UTEP or any other university, even though the institution may work diligently to advertise its achievements, publicize its philosophy, and inform high school students, teachers, and counselors about its fine faculty and facilities. Nevertheless, UTEP can develop a consistent message, a thread or theme that runs through its stated mission, values, and goals, that can capture the essence of the University.

An organization’s image is formed through personal experience; interpersonal communication, such as conversations with friends; and mediated communication, such as TV news reports, brochures, and website information. Creating or modifying an organizational image is a long-term project. It can be done by creating and controlling the amount and type of information disseminated about an organization. It is important to understand that while mass media may be effective in creating awareness of and knowledge about an organization (e.g., UTEP has a good football program), interpersonal communication is more effective in persuading people to give money to or enroll in the University.

In order to assess UTEP’s image in 2005, the committee took note of several dimensions of organizational image:

- The degree to which an organization is responsive to its community
- The quality of an organization’s employees
- The quality of an organization’s management
- The quality of an organization’s products
- Customer satisfaction
- The degree to which an organization is innovative
- The degree to which an organization’s constituents are confident about its future
- The degree of clarity in an organization’s internal and external communications
- The degree of clarity in an organization’s mission and goals

Members of the committee assessed many dimensions of UTEP’s image, including:

- The responsiveness of its curriculum to El Paso’s goals for economic development
- The preparedness of its graduates to succeed in their chosen fields
- The adequacy of its facilities
- The degree to which it compares favorably with other universities
- The degree to which it is perceived as an exceptional university within its community and region and on a national and international basis
- The degree to which its graduates are prepared to compete effectively in the global marketplace

Present Efforts to Improve UTEP’s Image

Before seeking comments about UTEP’s image from a variety of constituencies, the committee reviewed current
attempts to support and enhance a positive image for the University, including:

- Increased advertising in major publications such as *U.S. News and World Report* and *Texas Monthly* magazines
- Creative advertising in El Paso movie theaters, on bus wraps, and in the nation’s largest guide to universities
- Use of Internet advertising, especially development of UTEP’s website to provide multiple kinds of information to prospective students and their parents
- Billboard campaigns, newspaper and television ads, including the campaign celebrating UTEP’s 90th anniversary
- Media guides and website promotion of UTEP athletics
- An increase in the number of news releases on faculty, student, and organizational accomplishments

The committee also requested a meeting with Dr. Natalicio to elicit her thoughts about UTEP’s image. Among the observations she shared with the committee were the following:

- Because most UTEP students come from El Paso County, the image of UTEP within its own region is critical.
- The distribution of UTEP alumni is diffuse—high concentrations are found in Houston, Dallas, and Austin, and in several cities outside of Texas. UTEP has attempted to build visibility among alumni through NOVA.
- The decision to join Conference USA will have a positive impact on UTEP’s image in Texas. More individuals throughout the state will begin to learn about UTEP and El Paso.
- The best vehicle for creating a positive image of UTEP among students is the Internet. Improving UTEP’s websites is critical in the future—they must be easily navigated and “updatable.”
- The biggest challenge to UTEP as it creates its public image is its location in El Paso. The city and UTEP must work together to improve El Paso’s image. The city should promote UTEP as a “quality institution serving the next generation of leaders.” The University is one of the city’s most important assets. Increasingly, UTEP’s graduates will be educated professionals and members of commissions, boards, and other groups supporting and contributing to the community.
- UTEP’s image should emphasize its value as a source of Hispanic engineers and other professionals in a variety of fields. Many companies and corporations are searching for the bicultural and often bilingual perspectives these individuals can offer.
- Based on an excellent faculty recruited from across the nation, an increasing number of doctoral degrees, and improved facilities, prospective students should perceive UTEP as an institution of choice, not as a “fallback alternative” to universities outside the region.
- In many respects, UTEP has a more positive image outside of El Paso than inside the city. This is a common notion found in many parts of the country: “if it’s local, it can’t be good.”
- UTEP cannot be immodest as it continues to develop and sustain its image as a high quality university.

**Assessment of Image: Results of a Preliminary Survey**

The committee believes that assessing UTEP’s image should be an ongoing affair. To begin this effort, a survey was developed by committee members and posted on UTEP’s website. Committee members contacted small groups of individuals (alumni, high school teachers, business people, professionals, etc.), asking them to access and complete the survey. As of March 2005, more than 100 individuals had responded to the survey.

Thirty-five percent of the respondents were between the ages of 35 and 55; 21 percent were between the ages of 26 and 34; 13 percent were between 56 and 65 years of age. Fifty-two percent of the respondents were male; 45 percent were female. Fifty-three percent of the respondents were Anglo; 35 percent were Hispanic; 2 percent were African-American, and the rest did not answer this question. Sixty-four percent of the respondents live in El Paso, while 20 percent reside elsewhere in Texas. Other respondents lived in a variety of other states, including New Mexico, California, Colorado, Illinois, and New York. The professional groups represented in the survey were mainly in accounting, law, banking, insurance, and marketing. Retired individuals and students also were responders. Sixty-eight percent of the respondents were not enrolled in an educational institution when completing the survey, but 51 percent had baccalaureate degrees and 18 percent had master’s degrees.

Thirteen percent of the respondents had attended college for some period of time. Fifty-four percent of the respondents did not graduate from UTEP, while 43 percent were UTEP graduates. However, 60 percent had attended UTEP at some point. Eighty-six percent had never served in the military.

The following statements were included in the survey to assess respondents’ images of UTEP:

- “I would send my child to UTEP.” (67% agreed or strongly agreed; 16% disagreed.)
- “UTEF is my first choice/recommendation as a university.” (31% agreed or strongly agreed; 40% disagreed or strongly disagreed; 26% did not answer or had no opinion.)
- “I would hire a UTEP graduate.” (89% agreed or strongly agreed.)
- “UTEF receives the same level of funding for its students as do all universities in the University of Texas System.” (53% disagreed or strongly disagreed; 14% agreed; 29% had no opinion.)
- “UTEF is a good community partner.” (78% agreed or strongly agreed; 16% had no opinion.)
- “Athletics is an important part of UTEF’s image.” (86% agreed or strongly agreed.)
- “UTEF’s curriculum is responsive to the local community’s goals for economic development.” (51% agreed or strongly agreed; 34% had no opinion.)
- “UTEF has an experienced, tenured faculty committed to education and research.” (59% agreed or strongly agreed; 32% had no opinion.)
- “Students who attend UTEF primarily represent the El Paso
region." (83% agreed or strongly agreed; 10% had no opinion.)

• “Students choose to attend UTEP for these reasons. . . .” (Respondents were asked to choose two reasons—46% gave “location” as their answer; 38% responded with “financial” reasons; 7% gave “course of study” as their answer.)

• “UTEP graduates are well prepared to succeed in their chosen field.” (71% agreed or strongly agreed; 20% had no opinion.)

• “UTEP’s facilities are adequate for its programs.” (61% agreed or strongly agreed; 25% had no opinion; 10% disagreed or strongly disagreed.)

• “UTEP compares favorably to other institutions of higher learning.” (59% agreed or strongly agreed; 23% disagreed or strongly disagreed; 14% had no opinion.)

• “I participate in UTEP or UTEP alumni-sponsored events.” (54% agreed or strongly agreed; 27% disagreed or strongly disagreed; 11% had no opinion.)

• “UTEP is viewed as an exceptional educational institution in the local community.” (63% agreed or strongly agreed; 17% disagreed; 15% had no opinion.)

• “UTEP is viewed as an exceptional educational institution in the region.” (56% agreed or strongly agreed; 23% disagreed; 17% had no opinion.)

• “UTEP is viewed as an exceptional educational institution nationally.” (59% disagreed or strongly disagreed; 19% agreed or strongly agreed; 18% had no opinion.)

• “UTEP is viewed as an exceptional educational institution internationally.” (36% had no opinion; 40% disagreed or strongly disagreed; 17% agreed or strongly agreed.)

• “UTEP is a source of pride for me.” (66% agreed or strongly agreed; 20% had no opinion; 9% disagreed or strongly disagree.)

• “UTEP is poised to compete globally in the 21st century.” (42% had no opinion; 35% agreed or strongly agreed; 19% disagreed or strongly disagreed.)

• “UTEP prepares its graduates to compete effectively in the global marketplace.” (32% had no opinion; 36% agreed or strongly agreed; 21% did not respond to this question; 8% disagreed.)

The survey also included open-ended questions. These questions and a sample of responses are provided below.

• “UTEP is best known for these academic areas: (Please name two).” The two most frequent responses were business and engineering.

• “UTEP is not well known for these academic areas: (Please name two.)” Several disciplines were listed by respondents, but the most frequent response was “No Response.”

• “When you think of UTEP, what is the first image, word, or phrase that comes to mind?” The most frequent responses were basketball, El Paso, and No Response.

• “What kinds of outreach programs should UTEP offer to high school students?” Sample responses include:
  • Academic fairs
  • Alumni presentations on campus and off
  • Camps for visiting high school students
  • Classes in the high schools taught by UTEP professors
  • Financial aid workshops
  • Math and science

• “What kinds of outreach programs should UTEP offer to individuals pursuing graduate degrees?” Sample responses include:
  • Career fairs
  • Intern programs in local businesses
  • Online degrees
  • Fellowships

• “Any additional comments or suggestions.” Sample responses include:

UTEP’s ties to the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan are visible in more than its architecture, including these ceremonial flags on the lawn of the Centennial Museum.
• I am indeed proud to be a UTEP graduate.
• I am completely unfamiliar with your school.
• I think the students need more of a campus life.
• Outside of El Paso, UTEP needs to do much more to advance its image—academically.

To a certain extent, the survey results reflect the ambivalence felt toward UTEP by some of its constituents. For instance, a large majority of respondents (67%) said they would send their child to UTEP. However, 40 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that UTEP is their first choice as a university compared to 31 percent who indicated it would be their first choice. Eighty-nine percent said they would hire a UTEP graduate, but the respondents indicated that the University is viewed locally and regionally as an exceptional educational institution, but not nationally or internationally. The two main reasons that respondents gave for attending UTEP were its location and its perceived financial value, not because of the courses of study it offers. Yet 59 percent indicated that UTEP compares favorably with other institutions of higher education. Forty-two percent of respondents gave no opinion as to whether UTEP is poised to compete globally in the 21st century; 54 percent had no opinion or did not respond to the statement “UTEP prepares its graduates to compete effectively in the global marketplace.” In some respects, therefore, the negative or unclear image of UTEP as a major, respected university at the national level still outweighs the positive image of UTEP as the source of excellent graduates. Negative perceptions are still influential, even when positive realities are experienced by those familiar with UTEP.

It should be noted that the survey respondents were not, in the main, UTEP graduates, faculty, or current students. As is indicated in the recommendations provided below, a more extensive series of image assessments should be conducted by UTEP during the next few years.

Findings and Recommendations

Based on the responses to the survey and information provided to the committee during its deliberations, it offers the following major findings:
• UTEP has increased its public awareness and improved its public image in the past 10 years. The University is using multiple media forums to promote the institution and its programs.
• UTEP’s public image is more positive today than it was 10 years ago, due to a number of factors including a better understanding and use of print and electronic media (including the Internet); development of a variety of media products (e.g., brochures, videos, websites); and the dedicated efforts of Dr. Natalicio to improve and expand UTEP’s educational offerings, her tireless work and involvement in high-profile groups such as the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Science Board, and her unwavering commitment to UTEP’s mission of accessibility and quality in higher education.
• UTEP’s public image continues to be tied very closely to El Paso’s public image.
• A number of factors affect UTEP’s image to external audiences: the success of its sports teams; student/faculty accomplishments; perceptions held by and the comments of local, state, and federal officials; its relationship with the University of Texas System; graduation rates; time taken by students to complete baccalaureate degrees; and local media coverage, particularly by the El Paso Times. Such factors can be both positive and negative influences; they can be altered so that negative factors become positive ones for the University’s image.
• UTEP needs to do a better job communicating information about its individual colleges and departments. Alumni and students will often identify with a department or college before they identify with the University in general.
• UTEP’s Athletics Department, specifically its football and basketball programs, have been excellent sources of a positive image for the University.
• Many students in El Paso go away for a college education because they want the independence that comes from living away from home. Their choices are not necessarily related to the perceived quality of UTEP as an institution of higher education.
• Some residents of El Paso and Texas still equate UTEP with low academic standards and with being solely a “border school” and a commuter school, all of which are negative aspects of its public image.
• Alumni have a significant influence on UTEP’s image, particularly outside of El Paso.
• Within its own community and region, several of UTEP’s special programs have enhanced its image, e.g., Mother-Daughter Program, Law School Preparation Institute.
• UTEP’s faculty, staff, and students are all potential ambassadors for UTEP, through their actions and comments at conferences and conventions and their participation in community organizations.
• While there may be a variety of images about UTEP held by its various constituencies, the institution must have an overall theme that communicates its “unique selling point.”
• One positive public image of UTEP is that it is a unique university offering a bicultural, metropolitan educational experience that affords access and excellence simultaneously.

Finally, in response to its findings, the committee offers the following recommendations to improve UTEP’s public image—internally and externally—as it prepares for its Centennial:
• UTEP should conduct an in-depth analysis of its external and internal image through surveys and focus groups comprising its major constituencies, e.g., high school teachers and counselors; high school students; UTEP faculty, staff, and students; employers of UTEP graduates; members of the El Paso business, legal, and medical communities; and alumni. This assessment will be beneficial to University departments charged with promoting UTEP and its colleges.
and departments, including University Communications, University Relations, Alumni Relations, Development, and others.

• UTEP’s attempts to create a positive image should be guided by the notion that image matters—it provides a sense of pride, belonging, progress, and success.
• UTEP should develop a clear and consistent message that encapsulates its vision, mission, and key goals. This message should be communicated through integrated marketing.
• UTEP should create an image-making strategy that considers:
  • The rapid and increased growth of the Hispanic population along the Texas/Mexico border, and
  • The influence of Spanish-language and Hispanic media and marketing in Texas, along the border, and in major media markets throughout the U.S.
• UTEP should develop an advertising theme/slogan that reflects the institution’s unique location, demography, and potential to educate the next generation of bilingual/bicultural leaders in the U.S.
• UTEP should develop a strategic plan to guide outreach to its alumni throughout the United States, Mexico, and Latin America.
• UTEP should develop or contract to provide advanced continuing education programs for professionals, including accountants, engineers, educators, etc.
• UTEP’s academic departments should develop outreach programs to appropriate external constituencies, e.g., high school teachers, media professionals, accountants, engineers, criminal justice personnel, etc.
• UTEP should investigate the possibility of purchasing advertising banners on selected, high-profile websites.
• UTEP should take advantage of its new membership in Conference USA by aligning some of its public relations and promotional activities with media exposure at Conference USA game sites.
• UTEP should continue to develop specialized programs for different constituencies, such as the Law School Preparation Institute.
• UTEP should create an “El Paso Day” and other activities designed to bring members of the community to campus to see cultural and educational exhibits and demonstrations.
• UTEP should continue to develop a comprehensive database of all UTEP alumni and consider the creation of a “centennial project” through which alumni can be excellent ambassadors for the University.

UTEP has increased in enrollment, extramural funding, and academic stature during the past 10 years. It will continue to grow in all of these areas. Change is UTEP’s destiny, and its greatest challenge is its greatest opportunity. It must share its many stories with regional and national audiences, and it must do so aggressively. The University now enjoys a window of opportunity to become a preeminent bicultural, metropolitan research university. That is UTEP’s most important story, and it must be communicated clearly and strategically without delay.

The quality of the University is measured by its graduates – alumni who in turn can become excellent ambassadors for UTEP.