

University of Texas at El Paso

Rationale for UTEP's Entering Student Program: Approach to the First Year of College

The rationale for UTEP's approach to the first year of college was driven by student demographic data and institutional mission, as well as an institutional concern for first-year student retention and success. UTEP is a Hispanic-majority (71% in Fall 2001), non-residential research-intensive institution located on the U.S.-Mexico border. El Paso is an economically disadvantaged city, with fewer than 40% of its residents having a high school diploma. UTEP's nontraditional population is characterized by an average undergraduate age of 26, many of whom have family support responsibilities and are the first in their families to attend college.

Research figures in 1998 indicated that UTEP's first-year retention rate was 62% and dropped to 45% for the second year retention rate. In that context, UTEP developed a rationale for an Entering Student Program (ESP) to address the first year of college. Inaugurated as a matrix-management model partnering departments across campus, today the ESP is administered through a University College (UC) administrative structure. The goal was to draw together and develop a set of services to form a comprehensive approach to the first year of college for UTEP students. We realized that our students faced transition demands that were simultaneously academic, personal, social, and intellectual. While UTEP students come with high expectations, many come with limited academic proficiency; limited academic, social, and college survival skills; and few role models. Our plan was to create the environment in which they would learn how to succeed at being a college student.

Comprehensive of the Entering Student Program

The ESP comprises several initiatives that we believe enhance students' likelihood of succeeding in their transition to college. This strategy now encompasses processes for enrollment as well as substantial content-based programs. The UTEP programs directed at student success are briefly described below.

First-year Seminar: The first-year seminar, "Seminar in Critical Inquiry," is a content-based theme-driven course that is part of UTEP's core curriculum. It is administered by a steering committee of university representatives from each of the academic colleges, student affairs departments, and financial affairs. A committee evaluates course proposals for their design to reach a set of common goals that address academic, social, intellectual, and personal transition themes and academic content. Once the proposal is accepted, each instructor is paired with a peer leader (a successful upper-division student) and a librarian to form an instructional team. All members of the team attend training events focused on pedagogy for first-year seminars. All students will take the Seminar within their first two semesters of college. Students give the Seminar high marks on evaluations, and the retention rate and GPAs of seminar completers are higher than for those who have not taken the course.

Learning Communities: The success of learning communities in science and engineering prompted UTEP to hire a Coordinator of Learning Communities to develop this component of the program for first-year students institution-wide. Over the past two years, pilot learning

communities have been offered for UTEP's developmental students. Beginning in Fall 2002, learning communities will be expanding to include a broader set of interdisciplinary offerings with the first-year Seminar as the hub. An instructional team that includes a peer leader will teach the learning community courses. These teams will be receiving focused instruction in learning community philosophy and pedagogy.

Student Leadership Institute (SLI): In its second year, the SLI prepares students for on campus employment and leadership roles. Up to 75 students each year may participate in this course-based institute that includes internship-like experiences in a variety of departments. Participants earn a modest stipend. At the completion of the institute, students are offered employment, with priority placement given to the Seminar.

Developmental Academic Advising: With the development of the Entering Student Program, UTEP's Academic Advising Center now specializes in developmental advising, using a caseload approach. In addition, peer advisors are used extensively in partnership with the advisors. For the fall of 2001, four advisor-lecturer positions were added (made possible through grant funds). These four people teach the Seminar and serve as academic advisors.

Tutoring and Learning Center (TLC): In addition to offering individualized and small group tutoring and study skills opportunities, the TLC employs many students in peer tutor roles. Supplemental Instruction (SI) has expanded to include many more opportunities for additional instruction in high-risk courses.

Student Employment: Because of our students must work, a campus job keeps them on campus, tends to solidify their relationship with the campus, serves as a retention tool, and enables them to serve as role models for our new students. Student employees help other students find their way to campus resources. We have found that student rely on and trust one another more readily than they do campus officials.

Assessment/Effectiveness of Various Initiatives

The University College/Entering Student Program has a close working relationship with UTEP's Center for Institutional Evaluation, Research, and Planning (CIERP), and it provides the salary for a research associate who has responsibility for assessment activities for the first-year program. CIERP conducts surveys of the seminar at the conclusion of each semester, querying faculty, peer leaders, and students about the course. A multi-method design of data collection and analysis addresses the goals, implementation objectives, and student-progress indicators for the ESP. Collecting and analyzing reliable quantifiable indicators of student performance and satisfaction is a major focus of the ESP's evaluation plan. We believe that understanding clearly the many dimensions of entering students' characteristics, academic progress, and feeling about their campus experience is the foundation of program improvement and strategic planning. A variety of qualitative data is used to understand and interpret the quantitative indicators. Emphasis is on documenting student perspectives and the factors that influence their decisions to persist or leave UTEP.

Breadth of Impact Including Special Sub-Populations of Students

The Entering Student Program on the UTEP campus touches the life of each student. Focused programs exist for entering students who know with some certainty that they will major in science, engineering, or education. In addition, special focus is given to UTEP's provisional students who have been placed in learning communities for two years. This summer, new provisional students are being offered an opportunity to participate in a new residential bridge program.