

COMMENTARY JUN 16

How UTEP's president made the university into a national research institute and a model for educating first-generation students



Written by **Alfredo Corchado**

EL PASO — On the table outside her office, limited edition T-shirts and caps with an image of the lady with the bun are on display.

That would be Diana Natalicio, 79, the outgoing president of the University of Texas at El Paso. She's easily recognizable by her iconic updo hairstyle. Asked about the price of the items, which varied from \$5 for T-shirts to \$24 for caps, she quipped: "I want to think I'm worth it."

Around here, most people already think she's priceless.

From the moment she arrived in 1971, the native of St. Louis discovered in her new border city a rough diamond in the desert. Over the past four decades, including 31 years as president, she has shown how education can transform a community from one with an inferiority complex — crippled by low wages and few opportunities — into one that believes in itself and succeeds.

"If you're a public institution, then I think it's your responsibility to serve the public," Natalicio said in a recent interview, recalling her early days as president. "One of the first data points that hit me was the disparity between the ethnic distribution of the El Paso population and the ethnic

distribution of UTEP's population. And the disparity was not explainable by anything except opportunity shortage of students of Hispanic background, or Latino background.”

Inspired by her own modest upbringing, Natalicio used a series of what some call radical experiments to catapult UTEP to a tier-one research university. Her philosophy is simple. She began by ensuring that the student population mirrored the predominantly Hispanic community. Back in the 1970s, most students were Anglos, even though El Paso was more than 80 percent Hispanic.



Diana Natalicio, outgoing president at the University of Texas at El Paso, will be retiring this year after 30 years leading UTEP.

Then she decided that no one would be turned away. She made the university more inclusive, paving a pathway for all area high school students by working closely with schools. She made sure UTEP served as a pipeline for thousands of first-generation El Pasoans, the vast majority of them Hispanics from poor, underrepresented backgrounds.

Natalicio retires this summer, but the lessons she leaves will be far-reaching for generations to come. Her approach offers a potential path for a country that is grappling with demographics changes, experts say.

“What Natalicio did right was providing access to poor students, making UTEP one of the few campuses that admits 100 percent of its applicants,” said Raymond Paredes, the outgoing commissioner of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. “Her message was simple: We believe in you and we believe you can be successful.”

Although enrollment of Latino students at four-year universities has tripled in the last couple of decades, Hispanics are still less likely than other groups to enroll in college, according to a 2016 Census report.

Myriad factors play into this dynamic, but economic hardship is a key reason many drop out early on their college experience.

And for these students, even a minor economic setback could jeopardize their dreams of getting a college degree, Natalicio said during a visit to *The Dallas Morning News* editorial board in February.

UTEP's response was to create support program like one that provides interest-free loans up to \$500 to students facing the dilemma of getting their car brakes fixed or staying in school.

So when a crisis ensues, many who are the breadwinners in their homes and with no cash reserves "start looking into what they have to do [and] school seems to be the only thing that they can say to themselves, 'I'll come back next semester,'" Natalicio said.

The probability of that happening is very low, she added.

That support system, on top of the open-door enrollment plus robust tutoring to complement in-classroom instruction, is what Paredes considers a viable model that other universities in Texas could emulate to educate students of limited means.

Paredes applauded universities from UTEP to other campuses in Georgia and Florida for having success with "at risk students," but singled out UTEP as a national leader in using the so-called "feeder system." That is, forming partnerships with high schools to identify the students with potential but who need intervention to prepare them for college. Paredes said the state and nation need to spend more resources, and not just financial, to emphasize the importance of an education.

"We're not doing that, and we must do better than that because unless we improve success rates for the poor, there will be dire consequences for Texas," he said.

At stake is the 21st century workforce, warned Jamie Merisotis, president of the Lumina Foundation, a private Indianapolis-based foundation with about \$1.4 billion in assets and a mission of expanding education access to students.

In a 2011 speech at UTEP, Merisotis said: “Clearly, the nation’s immigrant population — and in fact, the broader population of all types of 21st century students — represents tremendous potential; it’s a reservoir of talent that is deep, wide and expanding. Our task — really, our duty — is to properly develop that potential, to give these individuals every chance to contribute. And, as I hope I’ve made clear today, that means we need to give these students every chance to succeed in college, which is exactly what you’ve been doing for decades here at UTEP.”

Another fundamental element of Natalicio’s vision was making sure UTEP was more inclusive without lowering its educational standards. She believes that “talent is everywhere and that it crosses gender and ethnic and geographic and socioeconomic boundaries,” including across the border.

“UTEP students have freely crossed the Mexican border daily for decades, but the financial burden for those seeking a better life has climbed through the years,” said Lily Limon, a first-generation university student and former El Paso city representative. “Dr. Natalicio's greatest gift to this community was recognizing those challenges and forging relationships across the border to provide access for all students.

“I've mentored students who would not have been able to earn degrees and contribute to our community without the scholarships for Mexican residents Dr. Natalicio helped secure. She spoke Spanish and shared the values of education for students on both sides of the border, making them proud to be Miners.”

Today, UTEP, known for its distinctive Bhutanese architecture and the first all-African American starting team that won the 1966 NCAA men’s basketball tournament, has gone from offering one doctoral program to 22. It’s also seen its annual research expenditures rise to more than \$94 million from just \$2.6 million in 1988. The student population has grown to 25,000

students from 14,000 then. In 2014, *Washington Monthly* named UTEP one of the 10 best universities in the country.

In January, Natalicio's long-awaited goal became a reality. UTEP became an R1 doctoral university for its "highest research activity," a designation attained by less than 5 percent of the nation's institutes of higher education.

"We did it in a relatively small period of time, about 30 years," she said, with a smile. "It's really terrific to see how many students, regardless of racial or economic background. For many of them, for most of them, this represents their only opportunity."

It's not hard for Natalicio to empathize with the students in the region. They mirror her own background back in St. Louis, where she attended public schools. She was the first in her family to attend college and once worked part time as a telephone operator. She earned a bachelor's degree in Spanish from St. Louis University. She later studied Portuguese in Brazil on a Fulbright scholarship and received a master's in Portuguese and a doctorate in linguistics from the University of Texas at Austin.

Perhaps "becoming the first female president of UTEP was a natural step for her," said Victor Arias, a graduate of El Paso's Cathedral High School who received a Distinguished UTEP Alumni Award. He went on to Stanford University and now works as managing director at RSR Partners, an executive recruiting firm in Dallas.

"In her own highly influential manner, she made limonada from what she inherited at UTEP," said Arias. "She took what were constantly looked at as negatives and turned them into incredible positives."

Arias, 62, son of a railroad worker who toiled the graveyard shift and rose to a top furniture salesman, added that it was Natalicio's vision and "quite frankly, her courage and foresight to weave the truthful value that is uniquely El Paso, Juarez and UTEP," he said. "In today's bifurcated political environment where false impressions of a border community like El Paso-Juarez are totally untrue, it is absolutely critical to keep the achievements and the story of UTEP in the forefront."

In more than 30 years, Natalicio has, of course, faced many challenges and even fierce pushback. In 2011, members of the community marched to the president's office demanding she reinstate César Chavez Day in honor of the revered labor union leader. The holiday was removed to meet a requirement by the state Legislature that mandated schools to choose 12 staff holidays per academic year. One irate community leader, Pete Duarte, even returned his Gold Nugget award in protest. Under pressure, Natalicio reinstated the date.

Limon observed: "Three winners emerged from this encounter. Pete Duarte stood firm in his beliefs and respect for the Chicano culture. Dr. Natalicio was gracious under this trying circumstance and saw to it that the holiday was restored. The third winner was our community that was enriched by the celebrations centered around César Chávez."

Ironically, as Natalicio steps down, there's a sense of nervousness in the community over protecting her legacy of inclusiveness. Natalicio will be replaced by Heather Wilson, former Secretary of the U.S. Air Force under President Donald Trump. She's also a former president of South Dakota School of Mines and Technology.

In 1998, Wilson became the first female military veteran elected to a full term in Congress, representing New Mexico until 2009. Her naming to the post by the board of regents of the University of Texas System has generated controversy that shows little sign of diminishing anytime soon. Many have questioned her voting record on LGBTQ issues. Thousands signed an online petition asking the board to find a new candidate.

"Sadly, Diana will leave an incredible void and I am very concerned about the next president," said Arias. "I hope she can push aside the very same false impressions foisted by members of her political party — including the president — off the table and attempt to build on the solid foundation that President Natalicio has built."

Asked about her successor, Natalicio said she "prefers not to comment." Instead she waxes poetically about her time at UTEP, her binational community and how she got here.

“I knew the importance of a higher education from my own life,” she said. “It totally changed my life, as I went from being a switchboard operator. ... I felt diminished and unprepared. I understood the anxieties, I knew the importance of an education. I loved the mission at UTEP and the fact that we were able to do so much. It’s been such a privilege.”

Alfredo Corchado covers the U.S. Mexico border for The Dallas Morning News. He is a 1987 UTEP graduate, the first in his family to attend college, and a 2009 Gold Nugget Award recipient.

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