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Building Community at a Commuter Campus

The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) serves the urban border region of El Paso/Juarez (population 2+ million) where 60 to 70% of the population on the U.S. side speaks Spanish at home. UTEP is a commuter campus with most undergraduates holding one or more jobs to support their education. Thus it takes an average of 6 years to complete their BS degree and over 50% of students are the first in their family to graduate from college.

UTEP was originally established as a college of mines and metallurgy to train mining engineers primarily for work in Mexico. Thus geology classes have been taught at the university since its founding over 90 years ago. The Department of Geological Sciences was the first program at the university approved to offer a doctoral degree. The original program was geared to the oil industry, with a practical internship required; however these conditions were dropped in the mid-1980's. Thus the University looked toward our department for advice when it began to propose and develop other doctoral programs in the late 1980's and early 1990's. UTEP has also repeatedly recognized the teaching and research accomplishments of the department and individual faculty members.

The Department of Geological Sciences offers BS and MS degrees in geology and geophysics and a Ph.D. in geological sciences. In addition, we teach an earth science sequence required of most students receiving teaching certification, and are participating in an MS in teaching program with the first life/earth science cohort beginning their studies in fall 2005. We participate in interdisciplinary BS and MS degree programs in Environmental Science and a PhD program in Environmental Science and Engineering through teaching, research and student mentoring activities.

The department has involved undergraduate students in research projects for over 15 years, with considerable effort spent in the past 5 years to increase funding opportunities for these students. We have found that once students can be supported on research within the department they are able to spend more time on campus, they interact with faculty and other students on a more regular basis and feel part of the department's culture. Our recent analysis suggests undergraduate students who are able to engage in research are able to raise their grade points by an average of 0.5 and are able to shorten their time to graduation by at least 1 to 2 semesters.

In addition to research assistantships for undergraduates, we cultivate a close student community by promoting student professional organizations and other social interactions. Activities include outreach (e.g. celebration of Earth Science week with a department open house, participation in science fairs, visits to local K-12 schools), workshops and orientations (e.g. a pre-academic year orientation for graduate students, workshops on resume writing and life after college), professional development (support of student travel to regional and national meetings, especially when they are within a day's drive of El Paso) and purely fun events (the first week of the semester work afternoon/ice breaker, the end of spring department picnic).

The highlight of our yearly activities is a student run research colloquium that is now in its 19th year. This day-long event is organized and conducted by students as a professional forum to showcase their research. Students submit abstracts, produce an abstract volume, present papers or posters on their research, invite a guest speaker, plan coffee breaks and meals, and invite geoscience professionals from the oil, environmental and mining industry to serve as judges. Industry support has helped provide generous monetary awards to best student papers and helped defray the costs of meals. A Saturday field trip usually follows the colloquium. Not only do students have the opportunity to present research in a professional setting that is less intimidating to them, but they have the chance to interact with professionals throughout the day. Several oil company representatives that were invited have been so impressed with our students that they made it a point to add UTEP to the group of campuses that they recruited from in subsequent years. This year we are holding the colloquium early enough to use it as a recruiting tool for prospective graduate students, since we feel it is an excellent way for these prospective students to see what kind of research our students are conducting, to gauge student satisfaction, and to easily locate and interact with faculty, since all geology classes are cancelled the day of the colloquium.

Faculty within the department share a strong commitment to these activities that help bring our department together. Several run weekly research groups (which include both graduate and undergraduate students and even the occasional high school student who may work in the summer). Others teach workshops, host social events, and serve as field trip leaders, club advisors or advisors for colloquium.